

Philosophical and Political Landscapes:
A Case Study of Rhode Island Forests

Abstract

I use the post-European contact history of Rhode Island's forested landscape to examine the extent to which forest conservation policy has been shaped by changing cultural attitudes toward nature. I also examine a spectrum of modern conservation techniques to identify the type of nature that each is best-suited to protect. Part I introduces the concepts of "nature" and "wilderness" as part physical reality and part social construction. William Cronon's critique of how the environmental movement and popular culture have constructed wilderness is then explicated and placed against the backdrop of related scholarship. Cronon suggests a "reinvention" of our idea of wilderness that avoids the "troublesome habits of thinking" that follow from how the concept is most commonly used. He argues that the wilderness ideology creates a duality between humans and nature that may lead to irresponsible action toward the non-human natural world. A "spectrum of naturalness" is proposed as an alternative to a bipolar scale of "natural" and "unnatural."

Part II sketches the history of Rhode Island's forested landscape, as well as the history of the State's interest in conserving its forests. Cronon's critique is then assessed for its relevance to Rhode Island's unique history and landscape. The Rhode Island history reveals a "troublesome" dualism, but it is argued that the effects of this dualism may be mitigated by the lessons learned from the history itself: most importantly, that Rhode Island's natural landscape is largely a cultural one as well. The history of a people and the history of their land are inextricably tied together. Part III explores the implications of Cronon's critique for Rhode Island forest conservation policy. I conclude that different policy tools are better suited to protect different natures as they occur across the "spectrum of naturalness" in Rhode Island.

Introduction:

The Physical Reality and Social Construction of Nature

In book VII of "The Prelude," William Wordsworth chronicles his visit to London during the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. His vivid description of this journey into a fragmented urban landscape, represents a prototypical description of modern alienation, where he is all but lost in a crowd of "faceless" individuals. Amidst his fear and disillusionment with urban industrial life, where does the poet turn for moral truth, or for poetic inspiration? To nature of course, and to the natural world. He must leave the city to regain his sensibilities. Only in nature was Wordsworth to find "the anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, the guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul, of all my moral being."¹

Wordsworth was certainly not alone in his frequent invocation of nature. He and his Romantic contemporaries, dating as far back as Jean-Jacques Rousseau², were constantly figuring concepts of nature into their writing. A detached reader might conceivably wonder, what was the appeal? Why turn to nature? One answer lies in the fact that most of the Romantic poets were in a position of critically analyzing the existing social structure of their society. The works of these cultural spokesmen resonated with deeply-felt societal ambivalence toward Europe's new industrial age, which in the wake of the French Revolution, seemed to have lost its moral compass. Under these circumstances, the most logical choice for poetic consolation as well as moral grounding, was that very area that had been *least* contaminated by the disturbing forces of social convention. That realm, of course, was the realm of nature.

There is something deeply problematic, I suggest, in this Romantic invocation of nature as epistemologically grounding, as divinely inspired, or as an implicit departure from the unstable, fragmented social norms and conventions of their day. Far from being a stable source for our value formation, far from being a place where we can encounter the world authentically, "nature" is a deeply human creation. It is as much a function of a particular history and cultural conditions at a given time as it is a description of an objective reality divorced from human

¹Wordsworth, William: "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey" 108-11

²Rousseau's *Emile* is a treatise on education in which he venerates the "natural man" or "noble savage." Rousseau one was of the first European thinkers to espouse a doctrine of primitivism.

norms. Recent humanities scholarship has highlighted the ways in which our “nature” is much less natural than we ever thought. The first portion of this paper will be devoted to reviewing and exploring these seemingly counter-intuitive claims, and sketching the “philosophical landscape” or greater context within which I will situate my case study. If contemporary cultural historians and philosophers are correct, the Romantic project of turning towards nature as a world devoid of human contamination, does become wrought with paradox. More importantly, however, observing the ways in which “nature” is a cultural phenomenon, may turn out to provide a powerful and important tool in understanding our current environment, as well as our present day environmentalism. The second portion of this paper will be devoted to applying the explicated scholarship to a case study of Rhode Island’s forests. Part one of the case study will focus on the history of the forests and the evolving public interest in their conservation. Part two will situate present day forest conservation policy against the backdrop of the “philosophical landscape.” Any discussion of these “culturalized” conceptions of nature must be prefaced or counter-balanced with a plea for the physical reality of nature. As I will explore in the proceeding section, nature serves as a mirror for human ideas and values, but this mirror is only one part of the non-human world. I say this partly to avoid dangerous misunderstandings or misapplications of the line of thinking pursued by many post-modern environmental authors.³ To claim that humans construct nature may at first seem a ridiculous, hubristic statement. If there is any thing that the species *Homo sapiens* have not produced, it is the marvels of the natural world. No environmental authors to my knowledge have tried to deny these irrefutable facts. Quite to the contrary, certain environmental ethicists have highlighted the value in recognizing the inhabitants of the natural world as distinctly “Other” or separate from our human existences.⁴ Indeed, it is nature’s twin functioning as physical reality, and as social construction that will frame both the critique explored and the specific case studied in this paper.

³For further discussion and criticism of advances in this area of scholarship, see *Reinventing Nature?: Responses to Post-Modern Deconstruction*. eds. Michael Soulé and Gary Lease (Washington: Island Press, 1995)

⁴For further discussion of ethics based on recognition of the “otherness” of the natural world, see Paul Taylor, “The Ethics of Respect for Nature,” *Environmental Ethics*, 3 (Fall 1981), 197-218; and Karen

In stating that part of “nature” is a human creation, the recent scholarship has sought simply to acknowledge the deeply mediated ways in which we experience and interact with the world around us. One of the fundamental premises of almost all philosophical scholarship since the time of Kant has been that we can never fully step outside of ourselves, our unique cultures and our particular histories, to view our surroundings. If we wish to understand the true reality of what is “out there,” we must strive to understand the very lens through which we receive and process our data. Similarly, these same assumptions about the mediated processes through which we know the world, apply to our ways of knowing nature. As the environmental historian William Cronon writes, “the way we describe and understand [the] world is so entangled with our own values and assumption, that the two can never be fully separated.”⁵ To say that words like “nature” and “wilderness” are human creations, is simply to say that they cannot be fully understood without reference to the highly evolved primates who themselves invented these ambiguous names.

These notions of the mediated dimensions of our knowledge of the world are not new. It is, however, only recently that cultural historians and philosophers have begun to think through the full implications of these ideas on our understandings of nature. As Cronon notes, the particularly vexing problem with the word “nature,” is that its popular usage implies a privileged position completely divorced from our own human ideas or values. To say that a certain characteristic is in an object’s nature is to say that it is inherent or innate. It is to say that the characteristic has nothing to do with the object’s particular surroundings or context. This attribute of “nature” becomes convenient when nature is used as a standard or norm in an argument. It requires only a very small leap of logic to bless what is empirically taken to be. In other words, arguments often take the form that if our object *is* a certain way “by nature,” then it *should* be that way. The empirical statement becomes normative, and it is partly through these very means that the environmentalists’ rhetoric has acquired the charged sense of moral urgency

Warren, “The Power and Promise of Ecological Feminism,” *Environmental Ethics*, 12, No. 2 (Summer 1990), 125-146

⁵William Cronon, “In Search of Nature” in *Uncommon Ground: Towards Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 26

that it so often displays⁶. That very moral authority however, comes from the illusion that nature is a non-human, external entity against which we measure our own distinctly human values.

Cronon brings these issues into focus with his articulation of the following question:

Can our concern for the environment survive our realization that its authority flows as much from human values as from anything in nature that might ground those values? If the answer to this last question is yes – as it surely must be – than how can a more self-critical understanding of what we mean by nature enhance our efforts to protect the environment in ways that are both sustainable and humane?⁷

“What we mean by nature” is indeed one crucial question in understanding the lenses through which we are viewing the world. To the extent to which this lens colors and shapes the reality that we experience, it behooves us to examine it critically. After exploring these more philosophical and cultural issues, I will proceed to apply these concepts to a case study of Rhode Island’s forested environment, its history and present day management issues.

⁶For an expanded discussion of this topic see J. Baird Callicott *In Defense of the Land Ethic* (Albany: SUNY, 1989), 117-127. In contrast to Cronon’s claims, Callicott defends the viability of normative claims based on empirical descriptions. His argument centers on Hume’s interpretations of the is/ought dichotomy as well as Hume’s theory of the “moral sentiments.” Also, Neil Evernden, in chapter 1 of *The Social Creation of Nature*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1992), elaborates on this explanation of the means through which environmental claims acquire their sense of moral urgency. He attempts to demonstrate that often times a seemingly “scientific” disagreement about acceptable pollution levels serves merely as staging ground for an underlying ideological debate.

⁷Cronon, 26

Part I:

Social Construction and the Cultural History of Wilderness

The cultural constructions of nature are most profoundly illustrated in the evolution of the concept of wilderness. Drawing on an emerging rich line of historical scholarship, as well as on my own observations, I will briefly sketch this unique history of wilderness, both as physical reality and as social construction.⁸ This history of wilderness will then provide a springboard for explicating William Cronon's recent cultural critique.

The preservation of wilderness areas has long served as one of the cornerstones of the environmental movement's agenda. Environmentalists' rhetoric, as well as popular social conceptions, center around wilderness as a timeless vestige of the world as it once was, before being tainted by western civilization and the unbridled march of human technological domination. Yet in spite of these modern day tendencies to regard wilderness as removed from human culture and history, wilderness is in fact a product of that very culture, as Cronon and other historians have suggested. Indeed, the very phenomenon of wilderness appreciation is an extremely modern one. As the environmental historian Roderick Nash writes, "today's appreciation of wilderness represents one of the remarkable intellectual revolutions in the history of human thought about land."⁹ Before the advent of agriculture, before humans started thinking of themselves as separate from the land, there was no duality between people and nature. It was only when humans began to control the land and the animals on it for their own benefit that, as Nash points out, the word "wilderness" came about to describe those areas that were not under human control.

⁸For other scholars who have explored the conceptual history of wilderness, see Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) ; Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991) ; and Neil Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1992)

⁹Nash, Roderick: *Wilderness and the American Mind*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), xii

Wilderness in this pre-modern sense, however, was still nothing to venerate in the ways to which we are so accustomed today. On the contrary, wilderness was a place of implacable darkness and savage beasts, a place of moral evil and temptation, a place where God was not.¹⁰ In the biblical tale of the Fall, when Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden by God, they are forced out into a harsh, barren wilderness. To the extent that Eden embodied all good things, physically and spiritually pure, so did wilderness embody their opposites. It was a force that must be cleared away to usher in the guiding light of societal virtue. We find this conception of the corrupting influences of wilderness in colonial New England exemplified in the writing of J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur. In his 1782 essay entitled “What is an American?”¹¹ de Crevecoeur applauds the new American society where immigrants from the different European countries can come and thrive in a virtuous life-style, centered around the values of industriousness, good living, and just reward for a man’s toils. De Crevecoeur, however, also comments on the “hideous parts of our [American] society” that do not conform to these norms. The members of this base, amoral sector of society are of course the pioneers, whose life on the frontier has cut them off from the redeeming beneficence of the religious, refined aspects of social convention. These frontiersman serve to pave the way for “a second or better class” to make their way on the new continent.

The societal concern in relation to this sixteenth and seventeenth century New England wilderness was not limited to its ability to produce “hideous” savages. Direct biblical imagery and scripture were often invoked to justify the transformation of wild areas. Not only was such a taming of the lands a requisite element of colonial agricultural expansion, it was a biblically mandated decree. John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony wrote in 1629 that “the whole earth is the Lord’s garden, and he has given it to the sons of man upon a condition (Genesis 1:28): Increase and multiply, replenish the earth and subdue it. . . . Why, then, should we stay here striving for places to live. . . and meanwhile allow a whole continent . . . to lie empty

¹⁰ibid., 13-22

¹¹J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, *Letters from an American Farmer* (Gloucester, Mass.: P. Smith, 1968)

and unimproved?"¹² Only a few years previous to Winthrop's writing, William Bradford, governor of Plymouth colony was writing of "a hideous, desolate wilderness full of wild beasts and wild men."

Yet fantastically enough, by the beginning of the twentieth century, the very religious language and imagery used to inculcate wilderness and justify its domestication, was completely inverted. John Muir wrote of wilderness as a cathedral upon which human desecration must be considered sacrilegious. He single-handedly led one of the environmental movement's most historic battles against the damming of the Tuolumne River in Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy valley, attacking the developers as being "temple destroyers. . . instead of lifting their eyes to the God of the mountains, [they] lift them to the Almighty Dollar." The very religious notions which had mandated the transformation and "improvement" of the "hideous" wilderness had now been reversed to accuse and attack these "devotees of ravaging commercialism." Indeed, as Cronon writes, "Satan's home had become God's own temple."¹³ The key question for our purposes is, how could such a revolutionary shift occur in the attitudes of a culture? Surely the causal agent could not be the wilderness itself, for wild nature cannot simply decide to make itself holy. The change occurred rather, in the beholders of that wilderness and in the larger cultural context of which they were a part.¹⁴

Cronon identifies two major cultural constructs which have served to raise wilderness to its present day, exalted status: the Romantic concept of the sublime, and the myth of the frontier. The "sublime" was a concept championed by Wordsworth and other Romantic thinkers. God was closest to humans in these raw, beautiful, and sometimes frightening places, and sublime nature was capable of inspiring both awe and fear in the heart of its viewer. This dual-positioned role of nature's sublime presence is well-exemplified in one particular stanza of Wordsworth's

¹²Withrop, John: "Conclusions for the Plantation in New England," *Old South Leaflets*, no. 50 (1629). Boston: Directors of the Old South Work, 1897, pp. 4-5

¹³Cronon, 72

¹⁴The references to the writings of Muir and de Crevecoeur are simply meant to delineate two opposing extremes on a complex spectrum of cultural attitudes towards nature. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, as I do not treat some of the most important nature writers of 18th and 19th centuries such as Thoreau, Emerson, Cooper or many others.

autobiographical poem, "the Prelude." In it, the poet recalls one of his childhood adventures, scurrying amidst slick mountain rocks. Suddenly losing his footing, the young Wordsworth slips and finds himself precariously suspended on a cliff.

Oh! When I have hung
Above the Raven's nest, by knots of grass
And half-inch fissures in the slippery rock
But ill-sustained; and almost (so it seemed)
Suspended by the blast that blew amain,
Shouldering the naked crag; Oh, at that time,
While on the perilous ridge I hung alone,
With what strange utterance did the loud dry wind
Blow through my ears! The sky seemed not a sky
Of earth, and with what motion moved the clouds!¹⁵

Wordsworth finds himself being simultaneously both suspended, and nearly blown to his death, by the strong wind. This image is a symbolic one, encapsulating the essence of the tension between the beautiful and the fearsome masks of nature's sublime. We may also note the description of the otherworldly sky that watched over this scene, hinting at the divine presence accompanying this poetic experience of the sublime. Transcendentalist writers such as Thoreau, and eventually John Muir, also figured the sublime heavily into their writing, albeit in different ways. It is also noteworthy that the appreciation and enjoyment of wilderness as sublime began in the circles of literary gentility, not in the rugged bosoms of the pioneers whose lives were spent battling with and transforming "wild" nature.

Also instrumental in the "great revolution" of wilderness appreciation, was the myth of the frontier. As Nash points out, after the country won its independence, it struggled for an identity that was special and distinct from that of its previous old world rulers. The concept of wilderness evolved to fill this niche. Not only was it wilderness, but it was *American* wilderness, a natural endowment to which Europe had no significant counterpart. Furthermore, if divine truths were more accessible in these locales of wild nature, then a country with as much wilderness as America, was in this limited sense, a morally superior one.

¹⁵William Wordsworth, "The Prelude," bk. 6, in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (New York: Norton, 1962), 235

The frontier life was also associated with a certain rugged individualism which came to be one hallmark of the American spirit. The frontier came to symbolize not just the boundary between the civilized world and the wild nature, but also a certain approach to life. It was a simpler, harder, more honest way of life that had transformed this land into the home it had become for millions of immigrants. There was a great deal of nostalgia for this fleeting way of life, as symbolized by the image of the lone cowboy, riding proudly across the horizon, silhouetted against the liquid sky. Cronon establishes a direct causal link between the closing of the American frontier and the beginnings of the wilderness preservation movement in this country. Indeed, as Cronon writes, "to protect wilderness was in a very real sense to protect the nation's most sacred myth of origin."¹⁶

It was thus through these cultural constructs of primitivism, the Romantic sublime, and nostalgia for the fleeting American frontier, that wilderness was able to ascend to its "revolutionary" heights. The history of social conceptions of wilderness recounted in this way, may serve to demonstrate the ways in which such an entity is a human creation. Wilderness advocates of today may appeal to wilderness as a transcendent, timeless presence, and indeed the wild nature which partly embodies wilderness may be exactly that. What I have attempted to demonstrate, however, is that wilderness is also much more than this wild nature. We may also note that the American Indians needed to be removed in order to create a "pristine, virgin" wilderness. This fact alone should serve as an important indication of the profoundly constructed nature of this "natural" entity.

The 'Great Divide' of Humans and Nature: Construction and Critiques

In the recently published volume, Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature, William Cronon and his colleagues offer a unique interpretation of our "environmental crisis," focusing on its cultural and historical roots. As Cronon suggests in his introduction, the

¹⁶ibid, 77

recognition of a socially constructed element within the natural world, need not serve exclusively to unsettle and disorient us. Rather than mourn the loss of an unchanging external source for the grounding of our values, we may also acknowledge our recognition as a form of empowerment. Understanding the historic origins of our ideas of nature liberates us to rethink our human relationships toward a dynamic natural world in radical ways that may not have been apparent previously. Indeed, once we concede that “nature” is deeply influenced by human culture, and as such is already “tarnished” with our own conceptual fingerprints, then why not proceed with this shaping in a more self-conscious manner?

Cronon himself brings these ideas to bear in his essay entitled “The Trouble with Wilderness, or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.”¹⁷ His article begins with an interpretation of the cultural history of “wilderness” that is not outstandingly unique from that of other environmental historians. Where he departs from other environmental historians is in his critique of the ways in which humans have created wilderness, and the “habits of thinking” that follow from this particular creation. “The trouble” with the idea of wilderness has to do with how our culture has constructed the term. As Cronon demonstrates, our own peculiar creation of wilderness has engendered a vision of nature that we ourselves cannot inhabit. The “wilderness” we have culturally created, by definition, does not allow for the presence of humans, the ones who themselves loaded the term with such spiritual and moral authority. For example, the Wilderness Act, passed by Congress in 1964, perfectly illustrates this notion of an untouched nature of which humans are not a part. The Act defines wilderness as a place “untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”¹⁸ Cronon’s contentions are not with the geographical areas of wild nature that this Act has successfully served to protect. The physical reality of wilderness is still unquestionably deserving of our care. The problem is that these most sublime places, are truly not the only examples of nature. By teaching us to fetishize

¹⁷in *Uncommon Ground: Towards Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon(New York: W.W. Norton, 1995), 69-90

¹⁸78 Stat. 890 (1964), 16 U.S.C.

these most “untouched,” “untamed” places, and by setting too high a standard for what qualifies as “natural,” wilderness threatens to blind us to the importance of more ordinary natures.¹⁹

In realizing the peculiar cultural constructions of wilderness, we may come to a better understanding of that which we had taken to be so unquestionably natural and outside of our contact. Appreciating the parts of wilderness that are constructed by human culture can allow us to begin understanding that wilderness is only one end on a spectrum of naturalness, as opposed to its sole and categorical exemplar. If, in contrast, we let ourselves think that true “nature” is only *out there*, in the most wild places, than we give ourselves license to ignore the nature around us, closer to the places where we really do live, closer to our homes. The more we envision ourselves as outside of nature, the more easily we may resort to irresponsible actions. A distant, wild nature that is far away from our homes does not require our daily consideration and respect. The reality is that all natures have elements that are largely of our making, and all are dependent on us for our care.²⁰

At the crux of Cronon’s critique lies a deep distrust of the “troublesome” dualism that wilderness ideology helps to create, a dualism which sets humans apart from nature. This dualism, when followed through, has rather disturbing implications. If humans by their very presence in nature make it “unnatural” and tarnished, then our environmentalism, it seems, has little hope of discovering the right way for humans to coexist with, or relate to the non-human world.

Cronon also traces the implications of this dualism within our present day environmental discourse. He suggests that much of current day environmental debate is based implicitly on this

¹⁹For a related critique of the environmental movement’s construction of “wilderness” see William Tucker, *Progress and Privilege: America in the Age of Environmentalism* (New York: Doubleday, 1982), 128-152. Tucker identifies the same human/nature dualism implicit in the wilderness ideology, and explicates its problematic and “elitist” implications. His critique differs from Cronon’s in its heavy emphasis on issues of class, as well as in its explicit justification of a pro-resource extraction policy position.

²⁰The normative concept of human beings recognizing that they are members of a natural community or “citizens of the land,” is of course not an idea that is unique to Cronon. The ethical implications of acknowledging humans as part of nature go back at least as far as the writings of Aldo Leopold. See Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation from Round River* (New York: Balantine Books, 1966) and J. Baird Callicott “The Conceptual Foundations of the Land Ethic” in *Companion to A Sand County Almanac: Interpretive and Critical Essays*, ed. J. Baird Callicott (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1987) 186-214

wilderness duality and leaves no place for humans to make their homes in the land. The wilderness ideology “tends to cast any use as *ab-use*, and thereby denies us a middle ground in which responsible use and non-use might attain some kind of balanced, sustainable relationship.”²¹ Present day anti-environmental groups such as the “wise-use” movement have been so successful in attacking and undermining environmental politics largely because environmentalists have often left little place for use in nature. Richard White writes, “in failing to examine and claim work within nature, environmentalists have ceded to the so-called wise-use movement valuable cultural terrain.”²² Indeed, it is environmentalists that should be the proponents of “wise-use” of our natural resources. Instead, reactionary “property-rights” groups have appropriated the term “wise-use,” seeking under its guise to privatize federal lands and exploit them for short term economic gain.

In summary, Cronon and his colleagues are arguing for a conception of nature that admits degrees of naturalness. The “wrong nature” for Cronon, is a nature that becomes “unnatural” upon contact with humans, and he argues that this is precisely the conception of nature that follows from the way we have societally evolved to regard wilderness. Wild nature is important and deserving of our protection, yet it is dangerous to the extent that we allow it to blind us to the wildness and to the nature that surrounds us much closer to the places where we really do live. Wildness, he suggests, is truly a state of mind that can be found in all places. It seems that a responsible and humane environmentalism, in Cronon’s eyes, must include a focus on our urban lives and all of our daily contacts with the natural world, in the myriad forms that they take place.

Other authors have also commented extensively on the above mentioned dualism which sets human beings apart from nature. Among them, J. Baird Callicott has written provocatively about the dualism, labeling it the “Great Divide” implicit in our wilderness ideology. He describes its religious roots in the Bible as well as its philosophical roots in the writings of

²¹Cronon, 85 italics his

²²Richard White, “‘Are You an Environmentalist or do You Work for a Living?’: Work and Nature” in *Uncommon Ground* (New York: W.W. Norton Inc., 1995) p.172

Aristotle. Most notably, he criticizes the wilderness dualism as an ethnocentric one in its treatment of aboriginal peoples.²³ He notes that popular culture and even academic historians have envisioned the pilgrims stepping off the Mayflower into a gigantic expanse of “pristine, virgin” wilderness. Such a conception ignores a continent full of Indian tribes who had, in many cases, widely transformed the landscape as well. By thinking of the continent as pristine and virgin, we deprive these Native Americans and other aboriginal peoples, any sense of agency or transformative presence. They have thus been historically identified as falling on the nature side of the fictional human/nature dualism and are thereby implicitly regarded as less human than “modern man.”

Neil Evernden has commented on some of the epistemological implications of maintaining the human/nature dualism. The realm of empirical science, which has been our accepted means for knowing the natural world, has partly helped to perpetuate the dualism. With the subject/object dichotomy at the heart of the scientific method, humans are considered the only beings who possess subjectivity or teleology, whereas the natural world becomes a realm of law-abiding matter which we may study. When those very scientific tools of inquiry are turned on ourselves, however, we reveal a picture that “all life is organically related... through the linkage of evolution, [and] humanity is literally a part of nature... Not figuratively, not poetically, but literally an object like all other natural objects.”²⁴ Science then, having served as the very epistemological tool that reinforced the dualism, betrays its masters, by revealing to us the very fictitiousness of our own implicit operating assumptions.

Contrasting Cultural Identities of Nature

The peculiar cultural history of wilderness is but one example of this socially constructed identity of nature. Although I will be focusing on Cronon’s critique in my case study, it is

²³See J. Baird Callicott, “The Wilderness Idea Revisited: The Sustainable Development Alternative,” *The Environmental Professional*, 13 (1991) 236-45

²⁴Neil Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1992), 93

important to recognize that this is not the only possible conclusion to draw from examining the ways in which our present day nature carries a strong cultural legacy. Simon Schama for example, in his recent book entitled *Landscape and Memory*, explores the myths and parables that form the backdrop of our Western cultural imaginations. Schama suggests that we encounter the natural world in our everyday lives against this backdrop. Such an exploration into what Schama calls our “cultural memory,” represents one further attempt to re-envision our environmental predicament. He writes,

If the entire history of landscape in the West is indeed just a mindless race toward a machine-driven universe, uncomplicated by myth, metaphor, and allegory, where measurement not memory, is the absolute arbiter of value, where our ingenuity is our tragedy, then we are indeed strapped in the engine of our own self-destruction.²⁵

Schama suggests that instead, our histories and our present day realities are richly colored and informed by myth and cultural memory. Rather than these cultural histories serving to ensnare us in socially dangerous dualisms and unsustainable environmentalisms, as Cronon’s critique would suggest, Schama sees our cultural legacies as “a cause for . . . celebration.”²⁶ Both authors start from the same premise of a nature that is largely cultural, but arrive at very different interpretations of the value or implications of nature’s cultural legacy.

In a manner similar to that of Schama, Robert Harrison has traced the role that forests in particular have played in the history of the Western cultural imagination. He follows the presence of forests from the myths of ancient Greece to the literature of twentieth century existentialist philosophers. In so doing, he offers a unique articulation of what we in fact stand to lose with the continuing threat of global de-forestation. Forests, in the language of the conservationists, are often valued for their “ecosystem functioning” (such as providing clean air, clean water and habitat for biologically diverse species) as well as their economic benefits in producing timber for both primary and secondary wood products. To this traditional list, Harrison argues that forests can be valued for their larger, cultural significance. His vivid literary history depicts the ways in which humans have engaged in a metaphorical dialogue with forests

²⁵Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, (New York: Knopf, inc., 1992) 14

²⁶ibid. pg 9

for centuries. This dialogue constitutes such a rich portion of the history of our cultural imagination, that when society envisions a world without forests, we lose a fundamental conception of our own peculiar pasts, as well as our uniquely situated present.

Forests as such, constitute much of our civilization's geographic and conceptual boundaries. Literally as well as metaphorically, we have made our human institutions by clearing portions of the forest. Our clearings, however, eventually reach "an edge of opacity where history meets the earth."²⁷ These edges are the forests, and somehow these boundaries remain fundamentally important to us. As Harrison writes of our present day environmental concern,

we call it the loss of nature, or the loss of wildlife habitat, or the loss of biodiversity, but underlying the ecological concern is perhaps a much deeper apprehension about the disappearance of boundaries, without which the human abode loses its grounding. . . Without such outside domains, there is no inside in which to dwell.²⁸

Forests, for Harrison, thus have an important symbolic significance. In losing forests, we lose much more than large stands of trees. We lose our knowledge of what Harrison calls "an ecology of finitude," or the ability to live within boundaries and to know our location through reference to those boundaries. Finally, when we lose forests, we lose our access to a place onto which we can project our own deepest imaginings and fears.

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It is my hope that this synthesis, if nothing else, has revealed that nature is not as simple as the word itself might have one believe. "Wilderness," "forests," and "nature" are each words whose ambiguity houses much that is human along with that which is "natural." Up to this point, my intention has not been to determine whether the history of our cultural constructions of nature are a cause for "celebration," as Schama has described, or the perpetrators of dangerous, unhealthy habits of thinking that must be "reinvented," as Cronon suggests. Instead, I have sought to provide the conceptual tools for rethinking our own histories of interaction with the natural world as well as our policy debates. In the following section, I will attempt to apply some

²⁷Robert Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 245

²⁸Harrison, 247.

of Cronon's ideas to the case of Rhode Island to observe how such philosophical thinking maps onto the history of a specific place. In what ways is Cronon's critique relevant to Rhode Island's past, present, and future approaches towards its natural resources?

Part II:

Rhode Island Forests: a Cultural and Natural History

The story of Rhode Island's forests has been a story in which human and natural history are inextricably linked. As such, it presents substantial corroborative evidence for the type of narrative told by historians like Cronon and Nash; that is, a narrative through which cultural forces and philosophies weigh equally with natural processes in the shaping of a present day landscape. Rhode Island's particular story, however, is also important for the ways it differs from Cronon's critique, as well as the potentially instructive lessons that emerge from its telling.

Beginning with the colonial period, the Euro-American inhabitants of southern New England engaged in a large scale clearing of the forest.²⁹ Selective trees were logged and then sold, the most well-known example of which was the white pine. These strong, towering trees were considered ideally suited to serve as ship masts and they thus quickly assumed a high market value.³⁰ Logging techniques were extremely wasteful, and the colonists often destroyed the less valuable trees while felling a larger, more valuable tree.³¹ After several preliminary attempts, one of the first official conservation measures in the "New World" was taken with the White Pine Act of 1722 whereby the King reserved for the Royal Navy all white pines in New England and New Jersey, outside the bounds of the particular townships.³² These white pine laws came to be known as "the broad arrow policy," for the distinguishing mark placed on the reserved pines.

²⁹Michael Williams, *Americans and their Forests: A Historical Geography* (New York: Cambridge, 1989), 53-81

³⁰Samuel Manning, *New England Masts and the King's Broad Arrow*, (Kennebunk, Me: Thomas Murphy, 1979), 23-32

³¹William Cronon, *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 111

³²Williams, *Americans and their Forests*, 92; for an expanded account of conservation measures driven by maritime concern, see Paul Gates, "A History of Public Land Law Development" (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1968), 532-534

Lacking adequate enforcement measures, the white pine laws were widely violated by the colonists. Their profligate practices persisted, and wood persisted as the first crop exported by New England. The assault on the forest, however, was not limited to the wasteful logging practices of the early Euro-American settlers. In fact, the colonial farmer proved a much more destructive force than the early loggers. Farmers could burn vast areas of forest and then sell or use the remaining potash as fertilizer. The cleared land would provide amply for new crops, and the abundance of forests encouraged perpetual expansion as well as the continued promise of economic rewards.³³

The most destructive use of the forest, however, did not result from the cutting of trees for lumber, or the clearing of woodlands for agriculture. It was the felling of trees for fuel that became, by far, the most devastating use of the forested lands.³⁴ Inefficient, open fireplaces as well as the sheer abundance of supply, led to levels of firewood consumption unheard of in the largely deforested England. During the colonial period, an average household might consume up to 30 or 40 cords of wood in a single year. In the year 1800 alone, the amount of wood burned for fuel exceeded the amount cut for lumber by eighteen times.³⁵ It was thus a combination of lumber uses, agricultural clearing, and burning for fuel that resulted in the widespread destruction of New England forests. Specifically in Rhode Island, between the years of 1620 and 1850, the amount of forest coverage fell from 95 percent to 32 percent of the total land mass. The clearing occurred at similar magnitudes and rates in the other New England states. (See Figure 1)

³³Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 118

³⁴Williams, *Americans and their Forests*, 81; Gordon Whitney, *From Coastal Wilderness to Fruited Plain: A History of Environmental Change in Temperate North America* (New York: Cambridge, 1994), 209

³⁵Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 121

Figure 1: Estimated Percentage of Forest Area in Each New England State, 1620-1865.³⁶ Source: Ronald M. Harper, "Changes in the Forest Area of New England in Three Centuries," *Journal of Forestry* 16, 4 (1918), 447

Such a drastic drop in forest coverage precipitated a host of environmental consequences. In the places where forests remained, their species compositions had been vastly transformed. Commercially valuable species such as the white pines, white oaks, and white cedars were present in much less abundance. In addition, the large, edge-dwelling mammalian species, the wolves, cougars, moose and deer, vanished along with the forests in which they had made their homes. The destruction of the forests even affected local climate, as the temperature became hotter in the summer and cooler in the winter. Similarly, soil runoff increased as did the frequency of flooding.³⁷

By the middle of the nineteenth century, however, the logging industry had begun a westward expansion away from the forests of Northern New England.³⁸ The virgin forests of Michigan, Wisconsin, and to the south, Pennsylvania and Louisiana, offered promising rewards of economic profit, and it was simply cheaper for industry to relocate than it was to stay and

³⁶from Carolyn Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions: Nature, Gender, and Science in New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1989), 225

³⁷Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions*, 226; Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 126. Both Cronon and Merchant base their accounts of the ecological effects of deforestation on historical records, as well as on contemporary studies of forest ecosystems. Cronon cites the climatological experiments performed by Samuel Williams in the early 1800s which documented the increased soil temperatures and evaporation rates within deforested areas.

³⁸Merchant, *Ecological Revolutions*, 229

replant their lands.³⁹ Comparative statistics of regional lumber production also illustrate this trend of industrial migration. In 1869, for example, New England produced 11 percent of the nation's lumber supply. In 1970, by contrast, that number was down to only 2.1 percent.⁴⁰ Similarly, the Industrial Revolution precipitated a national expansion in agriculture. New railroad lines and canals provided access for New England cities to the meat and grain-producing industries of the mid-west.⁴¹ These new sources of food helped accelerate the decline in farming in southern New England, and the eventual abandonment of much of the agricultural land. By 1935, 31 % of the Rhode Island farmland once cleared for agricultural use had been abandoned and allowed to return to forest.⁴²

These massive changes in the landscape of Rhode Island and southern New England, as well as their attendant environmental consequences, were by no means an accidental occurrence or unintended side effect of a rapidly expanding population. Instead, these changes were viewed as a forward march of the spirit of the age by all except a few anachronistic figures. As explored in previous sections, the early colonists had an attitude toward "the desolate wilderness" informed by biblical scripture. Wilderness was a force that needed to be subdued to provide for the guiding light of societal virtue. It was, however, not exclusively these religious associations that guided the seventeenth and eighteenth century clearing of the forested land; other cultural factors were at work as well.

For the Native Americans, the patchwork of agricultural land that replaced the pristine forests most certainly represented a vast ecological transformation. For the colonists, however, the resulting environment resembled much more closely the familiar landscapes of "Old England." In clearing the forests, the colonists were simply re-creating the very pastoral landscape to which they had formerly been accustomed. Indeed, for the colonists, the newly

³⁹Thomas Cox, Robert Maxwell, Phillip Thomas, Joseph Malone, *This Well-Wooded Land: Americans and their Forests from Colonial Times to the Present* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1985), 155

⁴⁰calculated from United States Forest Service 1869-1970, *Lumber Production in the United States*, Miscellaneous Publication No. 669

⁴¹Cronon, *Changes in the Land*, 156

⁴²Roland Ferguson and John McGuire *The Timber Resources of Rhode Island* (U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, 1957), 6

cleared landscape seemed much more suited to human habitation than did the “barren” wilderness that had confronted the early Puritans and Pilgrims. Sanctioned by biblical decree, they managed to turn sections of the forests into “a second England for fertility” within a single generation.

The same vision of pastoralism that helped fuel the continued forest clearing also translated into the political realm, manifesting itself in Jefferson’s agrarian philosophy.⁴³ One cultural historian, Leo Marx, went so far as to say that up until the beginning of the nineteenth century, “Americans, in so far as they shared an idea of what they were doing as a people, actually saw themselves creating a society in the image of a garden.”⁴⁴ This pastoral, garden image continued to inform American conceptions of nature into the nineteenth century and beyond. When Frederick Law Olmstead, for example, designed Central Park in New York City, he did not attempt to recapture the rugged wilderness that had been cleared centuries earlier for the establishment of the city. Instead, he tried to create an idealized, rural landscape in the middle of the urban metropolis.⁴⁵

The religious scripture and the political and historic drives toward agrarianism thus provided the cultural sanctioning for such a wide scale destruction of the forest environment in New England. At the same time, technological advances provided more efficient ways for felling and processing the trees themselves. In Rhode Island, water-driven sawmills had been in operation since before 1700. With the advent of the steam engine shortly after the Civil War, sawmilling technologies quickly advanced. Beginning in 1870, for example, the use of the steam-powered portable saw mill accelerated the trend of injudicious cutting in Rhode Island.⁴⁶

⁴³Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford, University Press, 1964), 142

⁴⁴ibid. 143. Also see Carolyn Merchant “Reinventing Eden: Western Culture as Recovery Narrative” in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1995), 140-144. Merchant describes the Colonial clearing of the forests as a “recovery narrative” in which a fallen Adam, the Euro-American man, metaphorically attempts to ascend back to the Garden of Eden.

⁴⁵Cox, et al. *This Well-Wooded Land*, 137. Also see Anne Spirn “Constructing Nature: The Legacy of Frederick Law Olmstead” in *Uncommon Ground*, 91-113. Spirn explores Olmstead’s role in culturally constructing and defining nature through his landscape architecture work with urban parks as well as in the development of Yosemite National Park.

⁴⁶Roland Ferguson and John McGuire *The Timber Resources of Rhode Island* (U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, 1957), 7; Thomas Williams Bicknell *The History of the State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations* (New York: American Historical Society, 1920), 52

Loggers clearcut entire wooded tracts, oftentimes leaving not a single white pine standing. By 1909, lumber production had reached its apex, with 25.5 million board feet produced within the State.⁴⁷ The new logging technologies, coupled with the devastating influence of extensive fires, significantly altered the range and species composition of the State's forests into the twentieth century.⁴⁸

As the advances in science helped develop new mechanical ways for humans to alter and transform the natural world, science was also shedding light on the value of forests to ecosystems.⁴⁹ In one 1878 lecture delivered to a farmer's club in Princeton, Massachusetts, Charles Parsons explained the many important functions that the forests assumed: "They affect the temperature, the movements of the air-currents, the character and succession of the seasons, the amount of rain, and the rapidity, force or gentleness of its fall, as well as its action for good or for harm on the soil."⁵⁰ Although Parsons' science may not have been completely accurate,⁵¹ his message was clear: "Either by legislation or by enterprise of its citizens, [the State] must see that the heritage of the age is not squandered, and the balances of nature are not disturbed, in the eager search for immediate profit."⁵²

Calls to action like that of Parsons, the growing discontentment with the economically mismanaged state of the woodlands, as well as simple resource scarcity, led to the first display of public interest for conserving forests in Rhode Island. This display of public interest, in the final decades of the nineteenth century, coincided precisely with the emergence of the national

⁴⁷State Commissioner of Agriculture, *Plan for State Forest Acquisition*, (State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1933), 8

⁴⁸James Brown, Jr. "The Role of Fire in Altering the Species Composition of Forests in Rhode Island" *Ecology* 41, 2 (1964) 310-315

⁴⁹for a documentation of the role of scientific concern in the early conservation movement, see Donald Pisani, "Forests and Conservation, 1865-1890" *Journal of American History*, 72, 2 (1985), 340-359. Pisani and others have attributed the emergence of this early forest conservation movement largely to the accomplishments of George Perkins Marsh. Marsh's seminal work *Man and Nature; or Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (New York: Scribner, 1864) challenged traditional notions of the exhaustibility of resources, and argued for a vision of a delicately balanced nature which included, not excluded humans.

⁵⁰Charles Parsons, *Forests: Their Influence on Climate and Soil* (Providence: Reid Printers, 1878), 5

⁵¹Many scientists during this time period incorrectly believed that forests could increase rainfall. It is speculated that this empirical observation was a result not of the effects of afforestation, but possibly of an upswing of climate in the region's normal climatic cycle. see Cox, et al. *This Well-Wooded Land*, 148

⁵²*ibid.*, 19

conservation movement. The national movement, however, was emerging not as a unified front, but as a movement with a deep and increasingly bitter schism between the two ideologically distinct conservation branches: those favoring the “wise-use” of natural resources, led by Gifford Pinchot, and those favoring preservation of wilderness based on its aesthetic and spiritual values, led by John Muir.⁵³

Also on the national front, a growing trend toward “monumentalism” was beginning to inform the emerging conservation consciousness. Inspired by the Romantic and Transcendentalist movements and their doctrine of the sublime, monumentalism suggested that if wild nature was the place where God was closer to humans, then the most wild and scenic sights must be the locales where God was closest of all. Such a movement, although it animated the early preservationist cause, did little to inspire protection of the less sublime nature that may have been present in the remaining woodlands of southern New England. As one author has commented, “Mere forests were transient. Except perhaps for the redwoods and giant sequoias of California, forests spoke of lesser things when they spoke at all.”⁵⁴ (Incidentally, this phenomenon of a perceived sublime nature’s blinding one’s eyes to the nature closer to our homes, forms the exact locus of Cronon’s critique.)

As a whole, the emerging forest conservation movement in Rhode Island was more closely aligned with Pinchot’s utilitarian wing of the national conservation movement than with its preservationist wing. Quite simply put, at the turn of the nineteenth century, there were no places in the Rhode Island’s forested environment “completely untrammelled by man,” no pristine, virgin nature. As one 1887 Bureau of Forestry report wrote, “Forests in the strict sense of the word can hardly be said to exist in Rhode Island.”⁵⁵

In 1875, the Rhode Island Agricultural Experiment Station was established at the College of Agriculture and Mechanical Arts. Its duties included assessments of the State’s forest lands

⁵³Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University, 1967), 129-140

⁵⁴Cox et al, *This Well-Wooded Land*, 137

⁵⁵Bernard Fernow, United States Forest Service, as quoted in National Association of State Foresters, *Forests and Forestry in the American States: A Reference Anthology*, ed. Ralph Widner, (Washington D.C., 1968), 138

and prescriptions for their improvement.⁵⁶ Again, this early public interest was not in the form of an aesthetic appreciation or romantic attraction to “virgin, pristine” forest landscape. In fact, when the Agricultural Experiment Station defined “the forestry problem” in 1902, it first took pause to dispel potentially damaging misconceptions about the nature of forestry. The Bulletin stated

Forestry has been greatly misunderstood in the past. Many people have felt that it meant little else than an attempt on the part of well-meaning but sentimental people to prevent all cutting of timber. It is not strange that this opinion should have gained ground, when it is remembered that a great state like New York actually established a forestry reservation upon this basis. Practically speaking, forestry simply means the management of woodland in such a way as to secure from it the greatest possible timber return.⁵⁷

Interestingly, the New York forestry reservation that the Bulletin alludes to – the Adirondack State Park – was not established principally on “sentimental” grounds. With the heavy logging in the north of the State, New York in 1894 had acted primarily to protect the watershed, which in turn protected the quality of the State’s drinking water and the navigability of its water ways.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the setting aside of 715,000 acres, an area roughly the size of Connecticut, was indeed an historic action during the dawn of the conservation movement. Although the watershed argument that had carried the day in creating the Adirondacks Park was a utilitarian one, the issue had also uncovered much newly found aesthetic appreciation for the beautiful terrain within the borders of the proposed park.⁵⁹ It is clear that the writers of the Rhode Island bulletin were eager not to be misconstrued as appealing to those same wilderness sentiments, and thus took special effort to clarify their own utilitarian motivation in caring for Rhode Island’s forested land.

Similarly, the State’s first legislative action taken to address directly Rhode Island’s “forestry problem,” was not an act setting aside or protecting nature in its pristine form. It was instead, an act to reconstitute an already fallen nature. This 1878 Act “Concerning the Planting of

⁵⁶ibid. 137

⁵⁷Rhode Island Agricultural Experiment Station, bulletin no. 88, (Providence: Freeman and Sons, 1902), 13

⁵⁸Cox et al, *This Well-Wooded Land*, 148. For a more elaborate account of this history, see Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 116-121

⁵⁹Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 116-121

Trees and the Taxes Thereon” encouraged private owners to replant their land, after which they would receive tax exemption on that acreage for a period of fifteen years.⁶⁰ The act had no provisions for tax exemptions on naturally occurring woodlands that did not require replanting. The utilitarian and economic concerns of the State were further manifest in the early arguments for the establishment of an official Bureau of Forestry. A bureau was needed, it was claimed, to answer some of the questions about the influences of forests on the local climate. As written in one early bulletin, however, “the primary question is an economic one. Will it pay in dollars and cents to foster the forests?”⁶¹

In 1906, the State finally took action and created the Rhode Island Forest Commission by act of the General Assembly. Jesse Mowry was appointed as the first Forest Commissioner in 1907, and he served as an active advocate for the development of the State’s forest resources until 1925. In his earliest years, he secured amendments to the tax laws on forests, and introduced legislation providing for greater fire monitoring.⁶² Forest fires during that period posed such a serious threat to the commercial viability of the forests that Massachusetts passed a law giving local fire wardens the authority “to call upon all male persons over eighteen years of age to assist them, and to impress such property as horses, wagons, etc., for the use in fighting fires.”⁶³ Mowry hoped to secure at least as much protection for the forests within his own State. Indeed, these high profile forest fires not only deeply scarred the land, but also served to galvanize public interest in the State’s forest resources, in the form of expenditures on fire towers. Most of the fires in Mowry’s time were caused by burning trash carelessly left unattended.⁶⁴

⁶⁰Rhode Island Public Laws, Chapter 663 §1, January, 1878

⁶¹Rhode Island Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin No. 88, 1902: 25 Interestingly enough, one resident of Smithfield, Rhode Island named Zachariah Allen had wrestled with this very question 80 years earlier. In 1820, Allen took on what is believed to be the country’s first extensive experiment in silviculture. Allen managed a 40 acre plot for timber production over the course of 57 years and succeeded in accumulating a profit of \$2,500. See Monterey Holst, “Zachariah Allen, Pioneer in Applied Silviculture” *Journal of Forestry*, 44, No. 7 (July 1946), 507-508. Allen’s plot is now commemorated in the Lincoln Woods State Park.

⁶²National Association of State Foresters *Forests and Forestry in the American States*, 138-9

⁶³Rhode Island Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin No. 88: 21-22

⁶⁴Thomas Dupree, Chief of R.I. Department of Environmental Management, Division of Forest Environment, Personal Communication.

Meanwhile, on the national forest conservation front Gifford Pinchot had been working closely with President Theodore Roosevelt to strengthen the national forest system. In 1905, one year before the Rhode Island commission was enacted, Congress transferred 85.6 million acres of forest reserves to the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Forestry.⁶⁵ Pinchot had convinced Roosevelt that the only way to save the nation's timberlands was to withdraw as much land as possible from public domain. In 1909, no doubt influenced by these national developments, Mowry began to rally support for a law which would enable Rhode Island to purchase its own state forest reserves. The State, however, was not ready to assume the responsibilities of land stewardship, and Mowry retired in 1925 with Rhode Island still not in possession of a single state forest.⁶⁶

Concern regarding the condition of the State's forests continued. Finally, in 1932 the State received gifts from two private organizations: the Edgewood Women's Club, donating what became the George Washington State Forest; and the Wickaboxet Farm, donating what became the Wickaboxet State Forest. These two gifts of 225 and 260 acres respectively became the first two state forest reserves.⁶⁷ At approximately the same time, the General Assembly was taking the first proactive steps in authorizing the State's Department of Agriculture to purchase its own reserves. In addition, the concerns of the Assembly had evolved to become more multiple use oriented; they reflected a wider appreciation of the different values a forested landscape could offer than did earlier articulations of state concern for forests. As one state representative explained the rationale for the new legislation,

Our forests are of vital importance to the welfare of the entire community, providing, *when properly developed*, added conservation of water supplies, better protection of wildlife, unusual scenic and recreational privileges, and a substantial increase in the taxable values

⁶⁵Glen Robinson, *The Forest Service: a Study in Public Land Management* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1975), 8

⁶⁶Municipal governments, however, had expressed interest in forests prior to 1925. Their concerns were solely utilitarian, as they sought to purchase land to insure the quality of their own water supply, or to provide space for local reservoirs. As early as 1885, the city of Pawtucket acquired land at Diamond Hill in northern Cumberland for its reservoir.

⁶⁷State Commissioner of Agriculture, *Plan for State Forest Acquisition*, (State of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1933), 15

of the state... and Our normal requirements for forest products are more than double the possible sustained yield for our entire potential forest areas.⁶⁸

As demonstrated by this House Resolution, Rhode Island's interest in its forest resources was no longer exclusively limited to their timber production potential. Recall that the State had labeled these same non-commodity forest values as "sentimentalized" a mere thirty years earlier.

And yet, the emphasis is still on a developed, managed rural landscape. Forested land may be managed for more values than just silvicultural production, but it is still to be managed. There are no hints here of a "fetishized" forested landscape, or an interest in protecting a pristine nature. In the way of forested land, there was simply not much pristine acreage to protect. As one 1933 state plan described, "the present condition of much of the woodland in Rhode Island is deplorable. Exhaustive cuttings and forest fires have greatly depleted forest growth."⁶⁹

The State, as the plan explained, was taking interest in Rhode Island's forests to demonstrate the ways in which they could be used responsibly and profitably. To this end, the 1933 plan recommended that the State purchase lands contiguous to major highways, to allow farmers and other landowners to educate themselves conveniently as to proper woodland management techniques.⁷⁰ As a whole, the 1933 plan articulated a need to manage and steward Rhode Island's forest resources more intensively than had been done up to that point. Furthermore, the State argued that the public would simply be a superior steward of the land than would be the private owner. As explained by the plan,

The active life of an individual is relatively short. Before he appreciates the value of maintaining continuous tree growth he has generally reached an age when the time is too short for him to initiate, carry through and benefit from proper forestry practices. Even when an owner does attempt to improve his woodland there is no assurance that the succeeding owner will continue the same plan.⁷¹

The 1930s, in general, were a time of expanded state and federal interest in Rhode Island woodlands. The United States Department of Agriculture purchased sizable amounts of forested area in western Rhode Island. Important laws were passed in 1935 as the State prepared for the

⁶⁸Rhode Island General Assembly, House Resolution 832, Rep. Henry, March 15, 1932, italics mine

⁶⁹State Commissioner of Agriculture, *Plan for State Forest Acquisition*, 1933, 6

⁷⁰*ibid.*, 21

⁷¹*ibid.*, 17

work-conservation assistance of the Civilian Conservation Corps (C.C.C.)⁷² The State also passed provisions allowing for the eventual transfer of forested land from the federal government back to the State. To assist with this process, the General Assembly created a “state forestry fund” within which revenues generated by forest products would accrue, until the State could afford to purchase the lands back from the federal government.⁷³ Among the areas that were affected by this process was the present day Arcadia State Forest, which was owned by the federal government between 1935 and 1943. During those years, the C.C.C. played a large role in cutting trails and fire roads, building bridges, and constructing recreational facilities to improve the public’s access to these lands.⁷⁴ Arcadia was later to be managed for multiple uses: silvicultural production and technical demonstration, watershed and wildlife protection, as well as recreation including hunting.

During that same period, the State almost committed to a purchase that would have increased its holdings of forested land by tenfold. In an attempt to benefit from the work relief programs offered by the Roosevelt administration, the Governor of Rhode Island, Theodore Francis Green proposed a major forest land acquisition. He sought to purchase 80,000 acres of forested land on the western border of the State. This area roughly approximated one third of the land area of each of five townships located on the State’s western border, and a total land area one-eighth the size of all of Rhode Island. Green attempted to sell the measure for its value to the State’s struggling economy. The costly purchase was to be subsidized by the federal government, thus proving a bargain for Rhode Island. In addition, the task of “improving” the purchased land could provide jobs for 5000 unemployed men.⁷⁵ Indeed, the impetus for this large scale proposal was not, in any way, protection of this forested land; job creation was as its heart. As the Governor declared, “The main purpose [of this program] is to provide employment, and the secondary purpose is to make possible further progress for the State.”⁷⁶

⁷²Rhode Island Public Laws, chapter 2218 §10, January 1935

⁷³Rhode Island Public Laws, chapter 2262 §9, May 1935

⁷⁴National Association of State Foresters, *Forests and Forestry in the American States*, 221

⁷⁵Providence Journal, July 10, 1935: “Green Reveals Plans for State Forests, Parks”

⁷⁶Providence Journal, July 10, 1935: “Green Reveals Plans for State Forests, Parks”

The governor also cited the improved recreational benefits that might be afforded the State's citizens with their new forest and park land. This defense of the planned purchase was criticized harshly. The land itself was deemed of "sub-marginal" condition, and offered little in the way of "sublime" nature. The public sentiment was clear in one Gloucester resident's caustic comment. Referring to the State and Federal team sent to survey the proposed land, the Gloucester man said, "At this very moment the Governor and his party may still be in Gloucester, somewhere near Durfee Hill, killing mosquitoes and getting scratched and torn as they try to push their way through the brambles and underbrush of the forest and park paradise they are trying to locate here."⁷⁷ The public, in the end, did not back Green's proposed plan, and it was dropped after an August referendum of that same year. Instead the State's 32,000 acres of publicly owned forest would be acquired more gradually, as land re-purchased from the federal government and from private land owners during the 1940s and 50s.

The 1980s witnessed an upswelling of preservationist sentiment in Rhode Island. In just over two years, the Rhode Island raised \$151 million in State and local bond acts. New York, by comparison, with a population seventeen times as large as Rhode Island's, raised just \$100 million above Rhode Island's figure.⁷⁸ This push towards setting aside open space and rural land was largely driven by a perception of scarcity. The 1980s had also witnessed a great development boom which threatened environmentally sensitive areas, and often occurred without regard for "traditional patterns and scales of community organization."⁷⁹ As Robert Bendick, the Director of the Department of Environmental Management, told the media in one 1987 press conference on the suburbanization of South County, "We have five years to save all the lands in Rhode Island that are important to save."⁸⁰ Bendick's statement illustrates, however, that even these preservationist impulses were a reaction to a perceived scarcity more than a romanticization of an untouched nature.

⁷⁷Providence Journal, July 14, 1935: "Town of Gloucester Joins Forest, Parks Protest"

⁷⁸Tony Hiss, *The Experience of Place* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 145-146

⁷⁹Rhode Island Division of Planning, "A Greener Path: Greenspace and Greenways for Rhode Island's Future," State Guide Plan Element 155, 1994, 2.5

⁸⁰quoted in Hiss, *The Experience of Place*, 148

The present day land area of Rhode Island is 60 percent forested, with 353,115 acres classified as commercial forest land. Of those acres, 88 percent are privately owned with only 1 percent owned by the timber industry.⁸¹ Logging on public lands accounts for only about 5 percent of the total timber harvest. The State's forests are managed for multiple uses, including recreation, wildlife values, and watershed protection. They are logged only to improve stand quality, for development of wildlife habitat, for protection against disease, and occasionally as demonstration programs for private land owners.⁸² Rhode Island remains the country's only state with no Federal ownership of commercial forest land.⁸³

In summary, the forested landscape of Rhode Island has been influenced through the years by many forces— both anthropogenic and natural. The combined effects of the hurricane of 1938 as well as the human-caused, raging fires of 1942 decimated much of the merchantable timber stock, but the forest has also been cleared largely for agricultural purposes, allowed to regrow in many areas, and managed for silvicultural production. Indeed, forestry by its very definition, relies on a managed woodlands. Forest management thereby constitutes a blurring of the conceptual boundaries between a “natural” and “unnatural” landscape.⁸⁴

Lest there be any doubt that the norms of management for silvicultural production represent a departure from a forest in its “natural” state, one may consider the following quotation from an early forestry bulletin: “As a rule, the forests seem to show too few trees on the

⁸¹“Rhode Island Rural Development Needs Assessment through Forestry,” Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, Division of Forest Environment, 1991. It is also important to note that this total forest area has fallen 7 percent since a 1972 survey. Another disturbing trend has been forest fragmentation. In 1972, Rhode Island's forest was owned by 14,200 private landowners with 6700 parcels measuring less than 10 acres in size. In 1985, however, there were 32,800 owners with 26,200 tracts less than 10 acres in size. See David Dickson and Carol McAfee *Forest Statistics for Rhode Island—1972 and 1985* (U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Resource Bulletin NE-104)

⁸²Thomas Dupree, Chief of R.I. Department of Environmental Management, Division of Forest Environment, Personal Communication.

⁸³Susan Remington, Paul Sendak and David Schumann, *Rhode Island's Timber Economy: A Review of the Statistics*, USDA Forest Service, Northeastern Forest Experiment Station, 1985

⁸⁴See Nancy Langston, *Forest Dreams, Forest Nightmares: The Paradox of Old Growth in the Inland West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996) Langston's case study focuses on the Blue Mountains of the Pacific Northwest. She presents a provocative history of the ecological disasters that has ensued in the wake of Forest Service timber management policy in the Blues. She also exposes the faulty assumptions of the professional foresters who tried to restore a “natural” stability to a highly dynamic ecosystem. She argues for an ethic of forest management that acknowledges the history of individual ecosystems, as well as the dynamic human cultures with which they have interacted.

ground, the growth being, in consequence, too broad, with too large branches. This means that too great a proportion of the tree's growth is found in parts of little value."⁸⁵ Such a diagnosis is used as a justification for the proper thinning of timber lands. We may note as well, that the norms and values of forest management are relevant with both State and privately owned land. The Rhode Island Farm, Forest and Open Space Act, for example stipulates that for privately owned land to be classified as "forest land," and thus be eligible a lower tax assessment, the owner must have a working forest management plan.⁸⁶

As such, the present forest in Rhode Island has been altered greatly by human culture, human economic needs, human carelessness, and human management. The present day age and spatial distribution, as well as species composition, reflect those alterations. Rhode Island forests represent, in many ways, not only a natural landscape but also a cultural one.

Rhode Island's Landscape and History in the Context of Cronon's Critique

As the history of Rhode Island's forests illustrates, the State's emerging public interest in forests has been less affected by the cultural forces Cronon critiques. Rhode Island forests were not set aside as samples of pristine, untrammelled nature, or subject to a problematic romanticization that encourages the out-of-nature thinking Cronon finds so potentially destructive. I will return to comment on this departure from his critique. There are still, however, several lessons to be learned from this history. The cultural narrative of the State's forests is a rich one, and everywhere one looks, one is reminded that history of nature and the history of people are necessarily linked together. As such, the story of Rhode Island forests serves as an important corrective to the trends that Cronon and others have identified as dangerous in our society. This is true in a number of ways I will describe.

⁸⁵Rhode Island Agricultural Experiment Station, Bulletin No. 88, 26

⁸⁶Stephen Morin and Jacqueline McGrath, *A Citizen's Guide: Farm, Forest, and Open Space Act*, Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, 1981

Figure 2: Major contiguous forest tracts (≥ 300 acres): deciduous, evergreen and mixed types.⁸⁷

To what extent is there a problematic duality between people and nature in the State of Rhode Island? The GIS picture (Figure 2) of forest coverage may be interpreted as presenting evidence of that very geographic separation between humans and natural environment in this State. The greater metropolitan Providence area, where nearly two-thirds of the State's population lives, is almost completely unshaded.⁸⁸ Cronon's critique, if taken to heart, gives us great cause to worry about such a duality. And yet, after understanding the history of the State's forests, one sees that nature and humans do not exist in a bifurcated reality. Everywhere one

⁸⁷Rhode Island Division of Planning, "A Greener Path: Greenspace and Greenways for Rhode Island's Future," State Guide Plan Element 155, 1994

⁸⁸United States Dept. of Commerce, 1990 Census of Population and Housing. It is important to note, however, that course grain resolution of this GIS graphic may exaggerate the starkness of the duality.

looks in the present day densely forested landscape, one sees both nature, as well as “the projected ideas of men.”⁸⁹ Indeed, as the story illustrates, today’s landscape is a result of non-human ecological processes, anthropogenic and natural disturbances, as well as the evolving beliefs of a culture whose relationships with the natural world have been as dynamic as the changes in the landscape themselves. No forests in present day Rhode Island stand “untainted” by human presence. Seen in this way, the history may serve to blur the conceptual boundaries in the pernicious human/nature duality, that might otherwise be reinforced by the very geography and population distribution of a state like Rhode Island, or by the more general cultural ubiquity of the wilderness ideology.

The landscape of Rhode Island and its history, in light of Cronon’s critique, are instructive in a second way as well. They may be used to help one reconceptualize one’s own relationship with nature in Rhode Island. The critique, as a whole, strives to open our eyes to our dual positions as human beings, both inside and outside of nature. “The trouble with wilderness” for Cronon is that when pristine nature is so narrowly defined, too many places become less wild, less natural, and less deserving of our care. Rhode Island, with its humble landscape, its gentle hills, and its modest woodlots can remind us that wildness, like nature itself, can exist on a relative scale. Wildness, also like nature, has much to do with our own particular state of mind. Thoreau, reflecting on this very phenomena within the New England landscape wrote that

it is in vain to dream of a wildness distant from ourselves. There is none such. It is the bog in our brains and bowels, the primitive vigor of Nature in us, that inspires that dream. I shall never find in the wilds of Labrador any greater wildness than in some recess of Concord, i.e.. that I import to it.⁹⁰

Rhode Island’s landscape does not tempt us into the troublesome thinking that nature only exists in its most obvious, sublime spaces. The State, after all, lacks any land that qualifies as wilderness according to Congress’s rather narrow definition.

⁸⁹Raymond Williams, “Ideas of Nature,” in *Problems in Materialism and Culture* (New York: Verso, 1980) 82

⁹⁰Robert Rothwell, ed. *Henry David Thoreau: An American Landscape* (New York, 1991), 126-7

The patchwork of densely forested land, both commercial and non-commercial, can remind us that our domination of nature is not complete. The present day young forests in different succession stages bespeak of a story of transitions, and in many ways resilience, as the State now ranks among the top twelve most forested states in the country.⁹¹ The stone walls that we find running through these forests, artifacts of an abandoned agricultural past, remind us that farming has always been economically and environmentally difficult. These walls themselves illustrate that figuratively, as well as quite literally, the story of a landscape and the story of its people are fundamentally linked. As the historian Raymond Williams once commented, “we have mixed our labor with the earth, our forces with its forces too deeply to be able to draw back and separate either out.”⁹²

Lastly, I suggest that the history of Rhode Island's interest in its forests may shed some light on Cronon's critique itself. As previously described, Rhode Island's conservation history did not display a predominance of the “problematic habits of thinking” that follow from the wilderness ideology. In noting this deviation, one becomes aware of how Rhode Island's environmentalism has a markedly different history from other state's, perhaps such as California, where forests and “nature” can be seen as existing in their most “sublime” form. Indeed, the preservation history of the Giant Sequoias of the Sierra Nevadas no doubt differs greatly from the history recounted in the preceding pages. Why is this the case?

This is the case, I suggest, for some the simple reason I have repeatedly returned to: Rhode Island's nature is simply not like California's forests. The physical reality of Arcadia Management Area is quite different from the physical reality of Yosemite's Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias. Acknowledging these rather mundane facts allows one to approach Cronon's ideas with a slightly more critical eye. The problem with Cronon's wilderness is that the causation, or the paths of construction, follow too much in one direction: that is, from our perceiving minds to the natural world. Observing Rhode Island's particular conservation history, the largely utilitarian grounds for forest preservation, as well as the late onset of any

⁹¹“The American Forest:Facts and Figures 1991,” The American Forest Council, Washington D.C., 1991

⁹²Raymond Williams, *Ideas of Nature*, 83

preservationist tendencies, suggests that *both* the forests in Rhode Island and the cultural beliefs of the time substantially shaped Rhode Islanders attitudes to them. And yet, Cronon seems to leave little room in his theories of causation for this type of feedback loop between the object of perception and the perceiver herself.

The philosopher Mark Sagoff approaches these questions in a manner similar to that of Cronon, yet Sagoff structures his theory of causation in a more nuanced and perhaps plausible manner. Like Cronon, he identifies “nature” as playing a largely symbolic role in our cultural history, often times assuming our projected ideas and imaginings. And at the same time, Sagoff recognizes these natural symbols as significant beyond their constructed meanings. He writes,

The choice comes down to this: not what ideals we shall serve, because we know these—freedom, integrity, justice, intelligence, power— but what we shall mean by them. And this question is answered in our symbols. The paradigm, the symbol if you will, of freedom has been the wilderness, a deer, a bear, an eagle, a rapid river. It could be a washing machine, a coffee percolator, a breakfast food... [but these] will change our understanding of what freedom is.⁹³

The symbol, according to Sagoff, is important both for what we project onto it, but also for the meaning inherent in its own physical reality. Cronon’s critique, I suggest, could benefit from a more textured, multi-dimensional treatment of the causation and perception processes.

⁹³Mark Sagoff, *The Economy of The Earth: Philosophy, Law and the Environment*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 145

Part III

Returning to the case study, note that Rhode Island must make natural resource management decisions every day. The preservation of open space, the combating of forest fragmentation, and the proper management of wetlands, for example, are each policy issues with which public and private sector representatives currently struggle. Can Cronon's critique tell us anything important about our different policy approaches to these natural management issues? I believe that it can, and in the following section, I suggest ways in which the preceding historical and philosophical discussions can inform one's thinking about natural resource policy as applied to forests. In continuation of my case study, I focus my analysis on some of the tools currently used in State-wide forest conservation efforts.

Overlapping Spectrums: The Tools of Forest Conservation and the Variegated Degrees of Nature

In *Uncommon Ground*, Cronon, Merchant, Spirn, Slader, and other authors whose work I have explicitly or implicitly discussed, provide a strong argument for a cultural conception of nature that admits degrees of naturalness. Cronon, in particular, asks us to abandon our "bipolar moral scales in which the human and the non-human, the unnatural and the natural, the fallen and the unfallen, serve as our conceptual map for understanding and valuing the world."⁹⁴ All landscapes— be they the wild and sublime mountains, the rural and pastoral hills, the suburban woodlots and fields, or the urban parks and gardens— are natural to some degree. And yet all are perceived and understood only through the lenses of our unique cultural histories.

If we accept Cronon's argument, and we feel that forests, or nature more generally, are important and deserving of our care, then this care must also occur across the spectrum of naturalness. To care exclusively for our most wild places, even in a state like Rhode Island,

⁹⁴Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 89

would be to fall victim to the very cultural trends Cronon finds so troublesome. So how do we best care for all of our different natures? I suggest that we are already partially equipped to do so. In the case of Rhode Island forests, there is a collection of distinct tools in the conservation toolbox. One may observe that different tools, when properly used, are each better suited to preserving different natures.

One tool or method for preservation that has been largely successful in Rhode Island has been private sector land conservation. For a more specific example, I will describe the largest private land trust in Rhode Island, the Nature Conservancy. Having been part of Rhode Island's conservation community since the 1960s, the Nature Conservancy has protected over 8,000 acres of Rhode Island's land, both forested and otherwise.⁹⁵ Land protection, however, is not the primary mission of the Nature Conservancy as a national not-for-profit organization. Land, or habitat protection serves simply as an effective means to a larger end: the protection of "the diversity of life on earth."⁹⁶ Or, as the title of one publication colorfully elaborated, the Conservancy works toward "Preserving Eden."⁹⁷

In practice, the organization prioritizes the unprotected land it seeks to acquire based on biological information provided by the cooperative "natural heritage" programs in different states. These informational databases help the Conservancy locate critical habitat for endangered or otherwise unprotected plant and animal species. After identifying their prioritized habitats, the Conservancy then works towards protecting this land either through fee simple acquisition or through purchase of conservation easements.⁹⁸ Their preserves in Rhode Island range from pristine marsh land and coastal habitats to woodlands and freshwater ecosystems.

The Nature Conservancy's biocentric approach to land protection is thus well adapted to preserving the most traditionally wild parts of nature. As both their promotional literature and their edenic references make clear, the Conservancy strives to preserve the places most

⁹⁵The Nature Conservancy, *Rhode Island Preserves*, ed. Kyra Butzel, 2

⁹⁶The Nature Conservancy, *Fact sheet: Background Information*, "Mission Statement"

⁹⁷Noel Grove and Stephen Krasemann, *Preserving Eden: The Nature Conservancy* (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1992)

⁹⁸Blair, W. D., jr., "The Nature Conservancy: Conservation Through Cooperation," *Journal of Forest History*, 30 (January 1986), 37-41

untrammelled. As Cronon points out, concerns for biological diversity and “untouched” ecosystems are often driven by the same wilderness ideology cast in more “scientific” terms.⁹⁹ This recognition, however, should not invalidate the Nature Conservancy’s approach. Untouched habitats or endangered species are unquestionably deserving of our care. Fortunately, several of Rhode Island’s most pristine coastal habitats are currently under the Conservancy’s protection. One must be wary, however, to the extent that these exotic locations prevent us from caring for the places closer to where we do live. Fortunately in Rhode Island, other forest conservation tools are better suited to do just that.

A second tool is tax policy. Heavy taxation of forested land has long been considered a detriment to private owner conservation. As early as 1902, a Rhode Island agricultural bulletin labeled taxation one of the great “enemies of the forest,” second only to fire.¹⁰⁰ As the State’s first forest commissioner explained, “The taxing of [forests] in the same way that other property yielding a regular annual income is taxed, is plainly wrong in principle; furthermore, the forest because of its public benefit in its influence on climate, stream-flow, soil fertility, and recreation, is entitled to be the object of a special form of taxation.”¹⁰¹ In other words, based on the nature of the deferred return on forest investments, private land owners often cannot afford to pay property taxes on forested land assessed at its “highest and best use,” and economic incentives therefore exist to sell or develop the land. “Use-value” taxation schemes, in contrast, assess privately held land at its current use rather than at its highest potential use, which is usually regarded as residential or commercial development. Through these differential property tax assessment rates, a town can lift some of the tax burden from their residents’ undeveloped land and thereby increase incentives toward conservation.¹⁰²

⁹⁹William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness, Or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature” in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1995), 81

¹⁰⁰Rhode Island Agricultural Experiment Station, bulletin no. 88 (1902), 22

¹⁰¹State of Rhode Island, Office of Commissioner of Forestry, “Forest Taxation,” Leaflet no. 3, 1911

¹⁰²Rural towns sometimes oppose current-use taxation programs, since they erode the town’s tax base. It is often correspondingly argued that a rural town needs more commercial or residential land use if it wishes to increase its tax base. In an attempt to disprove this argument, a number of studies have been commissioned to review the cost of community services, and thus evaluate the respective fiscal contributions of farm land, forest and open space. Two such studies were recently performed in southern New England: “The Cost of Community Services in Southern New England,” commissioned by the Southern New England Forest

A well-adjusted current-use taxation policy provides an especially important conservation tool in a state like Rhode Island, where 88 percent of the State's 353,115 acres of commercial forested land is privately owned. Therefore in 1968, in accordance with the above stated rationale, the State passed its own current-use tax law entitled the "Farm, Forest and Open Space Act." I suggest that this Act, with its incentives pitched at private land owners, provides the tool best-suited to preserve Rhode Island's rural and pastoral nature, as situated on Cronon's spectrum of naturalness.¹⁰³

Indeed, the language of the statute itself positions it accordingly on the spectrum of naturalness. The statute intends neither to preserve the especially wild parts of Rhode Island, nor examples of urban nature. Instead, the Act is intended "to encourage the preservation of farm, forest, and open space in order to maintain a readily available source of food and farm products close to the metropolitan areas of the State, to conserve the State's natural resources, and to provide for the welfare and happiness of the State's inhabitants."¹⁰⁴ We may also note that under this Act, the benefits or positive externalities of conserving this pastoral nature accrue to the local inhabitants of the town. In economic terms, since property taxes are assessed on a municipal level, it is the very residents of the rural town that are also paying to offset the decrease in their tax base resulting from the current-use taxation. This is in contrast to the

Consortium, 1995; and "The Effects of Development and Land Conservation on Property Taxes in Connecticut Towns," commissioned by the Trust for Public Land, 1995. These studies found that the tax revenue generated by farm, forest, and open space lands more than offset the costs of community services assessed these lands. In other words, in opposition to the first argument, these undeveloped lands more than pay for themselves. It is thus not advisable for a town to develop its open space or forested land based on financial considerations alone. For further discussion of the justification for and effectiveness of current-use policies, see Jane Malme "Preferential Property Tax Treatment of Land," (Cambridge: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 1993)

¹⁰³Another important tool not explicitly treated in this review is estate planning. Surveys conducted of southern New England woodland owners identify the majority of private land owners as over 60 years of age. Recent trends have also shown that estate taxes pose an increasing burden on the inheritors of land. Heirs increasingly find themselves forced to sell their inherited land to developers in order to pay the estate taxes. Education, for land owners and the legal community, on estate planning and the use of conservation easements has thus emerged as an effective tool for combating trend towards forest fragmentation. Based on the age-of-owner data reviewed, the estate tax problem will only increase in the years to come. See Stephen Broderick, Kenneth Hadden and Brian Heninger "The Next Generation's Forest: Woodland Owners' Attitudes Toward Estate Planning and Land Preservation in Connecticut" *Northern Journal of Applied Forestry*, 11, 2 (June 1994), 47-52. See also "Your Family Lands: Legacy or Memory," Southern New England Forest Consortium, Inc., 1996

¹⁰⁴Rhode Island General Laws, Chapter 44-27-1

economic structure of the Nature Conservancy approach, where a charitable contribution from a resident living in a wooded town in western Rhode Island may very well go towards purchase of a pristine salt water marsh area on the east side of Naragansett Bay. In other words, the nature “saved” by an organization like the Conservancy, is a nature potentially much further away from places we really do live. This is an aspect of preservation that Cronon’s critique encourages us to be wary of.¹⁰⁵

The third tool is outright public ownership. State or federal ownership of land can indeed be an important means for preserving nature all the way throughout the spectrum. I suggest that, of the three tools, it is the most well-suited to fostering the nature in our urban landscapes. Indeed, the greater Providence area is where most Rhode Islanders do live. A responsible environmentalism, in Cronon’s eyes, must refocus its attention towards our urban lives and all of our daily contacts with urban nature, in the myriad forms that they take place. Western Rhode Island may possess more “wild” nature on a relative scale, but as I have shown, neither of these “natures” is “pure.” Urban nature, in light of Cronon’s critique becomes increasingly important for its democratic value, in that it is experienced by many more people. It is closer to the places that where most Rhode Islanders make their homes.

The State has been best positioned to provide for this nature, and has historically recognized this responsibility. As one report of the Metropolitan Parks Commission observed as early as 1905 , “places of beauty still remain as oases in the desert of houses, and their

¹⁰⁵Proper functioning as a policy tool is unfortunately prerequisite to this statute’s effective preservation of any of the enumerated natures. Although it was revised in 1980, the Farm, Forest, and Open Space Act is still in need of further improvement before functioning optimally. A full review of its shortcomings exceeds the scope of this paper, but it may be pointed out that Rhode Island currently lacks a state wide plan for standardizing the statute’s application, as has been adopted both in Massachusetts and Connecticut. Instead, assessment rates are established by individual tax assessors and thus vary enormously from town to town, as presumably does the Act’s effectiveness in preserving land. The town of Lincoln for example, assesses forest land as high as \$3000 per acre while West Greenwich assesses forested land at only \$200 per acre. Additionally, the land use change tax, or the penalty for development is not severe enough to deter landowners from speculative pre-development use of the program. Others have further suggested the addition of a “right to first refusal” clause for the individual towns. If a landowner planned on selling her undeveloped land, the town would be notified and could conceivably act first to protect the land, if it so desired. In 1995, the Rhode Island General Assembly assigned a commission to study and revise the Farm, Forest and Open Space Act. As of May, 1996 that committee had not been formed.

preservation means more than we can realize to the character of a people.”¹⁰⁶ Urban greenspace and urban trees, however, can provide more than just “oases of beauty.” They may provide important ecosystem functions as well as natural filtration of air and ground pollutants, thermal buffering, and shade.¹⁰⁷ The value of urban trees, however, is believed by some to go even beyond these aesthetic and ecosystem benefits. Robert Bendick, the former Director of Rhode Island’s Department of Environmental Management, commented that

Aside from objective measures of why trees are good, such as mitigating non-point source pollution, recreational spaces, etc. urban wild spaces also give an anchor to people. They give them a sense of place and belonging. They make them feel like part of a grounded community rather than adrift in a sea of spaceless sprawl.¹⁰⁸

Bendick’s words echo the earlier sentiments of Robert Harrison, who emphasized the necessity of natural boundaries in the “anchoring” of a cultural identity.

Forests and urban nature may be best provided for by state or municipal governments. They have the jurisdiction and potentially the resources to protect and foster urban forests. In addition, while street trees and urban parks are important examples of urban nature, equally important are larger wooded areas accessible to an urban population. In Rhode Island, Lincoln Woods, Roger Williams Park, and Goddard State Park may fill this niche. Wherever the particular location, urban nature is the area of the spectrum with which most of us will have the most daily contact. Lastly, note that the current state management areas are multiple-use oriented, reminding us that we may use nature responsibly while valuing it for other purposes as well.

¹⁰⁶Metropolitan Parks Commission “A Metropolitan Park System: Report Upon a System of Public Reservations for the Metropolitan District of Providence Plantations,” (1905), 20 This quotation’s implicit reference to natural beauty’s power to educate the “character of an [urban] people” was a trend of the time that may appear patronizing to a modern reader. Frederick Law Olmstead drew on a similar argument to justify the setting aside of Yosemite National Park. See Laura Roper, “The Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Trees: A Preliminary Report (1865) by Frederick Law Olmstead,” *Landscape Architecture* 43 (1952), 20-1

¹⁰⁷For documentation of the contributions of urban forests to urban ecosystems, see Gregory McPherson, David Nowak, and Rowan Rowntree, *Chicago’s Urban Forest Ecosystem: Results of the Chicago Urban Forest Climate Project* (Randor, PA: United States Forest Service), 1994; also for a description of more qualitative benefits of urban forests, see Herbert Schroeder and Paul Gobster, “The Deep Significance of Urban Trees and Forest,” in *The Ecological City: Preserving and Restoring Urban Diversity*, eds Rutherford Platt, Rowan Rowntree, Pamela Muick (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 1994), 137

¹⁰⁸Robert Bendick, personal communication

Toward a Conclusion

The specific uses and boundaries of the different tools discussed are not strictly delineated. Often times, they may be used in concert with effective results. The Nature Conservancy, for example, has assisted the State with many of its recent purchases.¹⁰⁹ The Farm, Forest and Open Space Act may also be conceivably linked to the State's plan for achieving its Greenway.¹¹⁰ The use of the tools, however, may be linked in a more conceptual ways as well. Again referring back to Cronon's critique, wilderness, or what it has come to represent, is only problematic to the extent that it blinds us from seeing the wildness in the nature closer to the places where we actually do live. One can, however, begin to make wilderness part of the solution. When one visits the Nature Conservancy's preserve on Block Island, or when one takes a hike through the dramatic preservation area at Elle Pond, one can be thinking back to the urban trees in Roger Williams Park, to the nature closer to our homes.

Or when one "gets away" to the scenic White Mountains of New Hampshire, or as far North as the wilds of Maine, one can still fully appreciate those landscapes with all their majesty and grandeur. But, as Cronon notes, the special power of the wilderness is that "it can teach us to recognize the wildness we did not see in the tree we planted in our own backyard. By seeing the otherness in that which is most unfamiliar, we can learn to see it too in that which at first seemed merely ordinary."¹¹¹ Rhode Island, after all, is a small state where the different natures are never geographically or conceptually too far apart, and yet each—as we have seen—is only part natural, and part cultural. Nevertheless, all the different natures can be found in Rhode Island,

¹⁰⁹For an expanded account of the benefits of state and non-profit agency relationships, see Land Conservation Through Public/Private Partnerships, ed. Eve Endicott (Washington D.C.: Island Press, 1993), 17-42

¹¹⁰The greenways movement, as a whole, represents a phenomenon in preservation unlike efforts of the past. The movement centers around the idea of recreating vegetated corridors of urban nature. These corridors are designed for transportation (i.e. on bike paths) as well as for wildlife. They are intended to play a highly interactive role in the lives of urban residents. This seems to be the sort of environmentalism that Cronon identifies as an important counterbalance to an exclusive focus on a wilderness preservation agenda.

¹¹¹Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 88

and elements of “wildness” pervade across the spectrum if one only has eyes to see them. One is reminded of the story Aristotle once told a class of his biology students. A group of visitors, Aristotle recounted, once journeyed to meet the great philosopher Heraclitus. Upon entering the home of the philosopher, the students saw the large man warming himself by the stove. They were apparently taken aback, as perhaps they had expected to find the famous thinker out contemplating the stars in the heavens, or pondering silently the mysteries of the universe -- anything but this commonplace activity. “Come in,” Heraclitus reassured them. “Do not be afraid. There are Gods here too.”¹¹²

As both the general cultural history of the idea of wilderness, as well as the particular story of Rhode Island’s forests have shown, the option to leave nature completely “untouched” is no longer ours. Indeed, the principle question may no longer be whether or not we should change or alter nature. Instead we must re-cast our thinking and begin to ask how we can control and manage our changes both responsibly and effectively. Furthermore, our task must now include the management of changes not only in the geophysical or biological properties of the non-human world, but also in its conceptual construction. In this way, Cronon’s critique is timely and important. Its implications are numerous not just for how we conceptualize the natural world, but also for how we should best go about caring for that world. Among the many lessons that follow from his critique, Cronon urges us to abandon the false sense of peace afforded us by appealing to a misconceived purity in our ideas of nature and wilderness. We must not celebrate wilderness in

such a way that we prevent ourselves from recognizing and taking responsibility for the sacred in our everyday lives and landscapes. If we wish to preserve wild nature, then we must first permit ourselves to imagine a way of living in nature that can use and protect it at the same time. Otherwise, we will keep reproducing the very contradiction which has too often made modern humanity such a devastating presence on the planet.¹¹³

¹¹²Aristotle, *De parte animalium* I., 5.645a.17 in *A New Aristotle Reader*, ed. J.L. Ackrill (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 227

¹¹³William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness: A Response” *Environmental History*, 1, No. 1 (January 1996), 55

This paper has represented but a single exploration and application of these ideas. The ground, so to speak, is fertile for a continued investigation. It is my sincere hope that future investigations in this area will strive to make their findings directly relevant to the politics and policies of the environmental movement, and that policy-makers in turn, will be receptive to the new ways of thinking that may emerge. Nothing less can be expected, I suggest, if we wish to understand and make practical policy out of two complexly interrelated phenomena: human beings existing in nature while imagining themselves outside of it, and the paired physical reality and social construction of the natural world.