

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

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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.

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