

# Recreation in a Natural Heritage Setting<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** Recreation in wild and semi-wild environments is often the manifestation of people attempting to get back to the land. In all societies of western civilization, most people live and work in urban areas referred to by some ecologists as *fabricated* landscapes. However, societies of places like the Americas, South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia have relatively recently evolved out of wilderness frontiers (*natural* landscapes), and very recently from being characterized as largely agrarian on *developed* landscapes that may be semi-wild. Perhaps it is because of the recentness of leaving our ancestral homes that something lingers within us and calls us back to those things that members of our families sought to escape.

Woven into the fabric of the wild and semi-wild stages for human re-creation are cultural and natural heritages that are inextricably intertwined. In terms of Leopoldian<sup>2</sup> thinking, cultures are artifacts chiseled and hewn from the lands of their origin. How do we escape our origins? Why should we even want to?

Recreation in a natural heritage setting celebrates our origins. When we appropriately and thoughtfully recreate on the land, we remind ourselves of where we came from, deepen our perspectives of the meaning of contemporary societies, and face the reality that we as individuals, and probably even as a species, are neither the beginning nor the end, but a link in a chain of events of unknown and unknowable proportions from the past to the future.

The natural heritage setting for our recreation provides us with the opportunity to see ourselves as a part of the ecosystem, i.e., *Homo sapiens* as ecosystem component and human activities as ecosystem processes. It provides us with the opportunity to marvel that of all the caravans of species that have preceded us in 3.7 billion years of organic evolution, we are the only one with the capacity for an ecological, as well as, a social conscience to guide our behavior with fellow species, as well as fellow humans.

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<sup>1</sup> A keynote presentation at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Track and Trails Conference 2004, October 18, 2004, Adelaide, South Australia, Australia.

<sup>2</sup> Aldo Leopold's (1887-1948) book *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (Balantine Books, New York, New York, USA ISBN 0-345-24505-3) is considered the cornerstone of the environmental movement. He is also considered to be the father of American wildlife management, and the USDA-Forest Service considers him to be the father of wilderness preservation.

In a natural heritage setting devoid of the confines of concrete, asphalt and steel and the behavioral interactions of people living in high densities we can escape to thoughts, even fantasies, that renew and re-create us.

### Introduction

Possibly the ultimate accomplishment in recreational activity is to be at once renewed physically, mentally, and spiritually. Outdoor settings, particularly wildland settings, may be the richest in opportunities for these accomplishments. And yet, the number of opportunities and the size of the array of possibilities may have at least as much to do with values and perceptions by the recreationist as it does with the characteristics of the landscape.

In his essay “Conservation Esthetic,”<sup>3</sup> Aldo Leopold wrote in the 1940s a characterization of outdoor recreation and the recreationists who pursued it.

“Barring love and war, few enterprises are undertaken with such abandon, or by such diverse individuals, or with so paradoxical a mixture of appetite and altruism, as that group of avocations known as outdoor recreation. It is, by common consent, a good thing for people to get back to nature. But wherein lies the goodness, and what can be done to encourage its pursuit? On these questions there is confusion of counsel, and only the most uncritical minds are free from doubt.”

In this one paragraph, Leopold captured the essence of the vast issues faced by those who manage landscapes, in whole or in part, for recreational activities, as well as the array of interactions of people who visit these landscapes for recreational purposes. In the end, the final questions become:

1. Why do we seek to recreate on natural landscapes?
2. What are the recreational values that we seek on natural landscapes?

### Types of Landscapes

In his text *Ecology and Our Endangered Life Support System*<sup>4</sup> Odum (1993) offered a practical classification of landscapes as:

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<sup>3</sup> pages 280-295 in Leopold, A. 1949. *A Sand County Almanac*. Ballantine Books, New York, New York ISBN 0-345-34505-3.

<sup>4</sup> Odum, E.P., 1993. Sinauer Assoc., Inc. Sunderland Massachusetts, USA 301 pages 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. ISBN0-87893-634-3.

1. *Fabricated* – These landscapes are the cities and associated urban areas. They are heterotrophic in nature. That is, they depend on developed and natural landscapes for food, water, the raw materials for clothing and shelter, and the renovation of air and water. Humans and human activity, including the construction of the landscape, are the total scene and experience. In the United States, 80% of the human population lives and works in these ecosystems.
2. *Developed* – Those landscapes that humans have altered in the process of channeling energy, nutrients, and genetic materials into plants and animals that will feed, clothe, and shelter the people living in fabricated systems. These are agricultural areas and intensively managed forests.
3. *Natural* – Those landscapes that either have not been altered by modern human activities or in which the modifications have left the components and processes of the natural ecosystem largely intact. These natural landscapes and their ecosystem dynamics are our *natural heritage*.

The trend of an increasing demand for outdoor recreation on natural landscapes has been obvious for over one hundred years. People living in high densities and in habitats composed of steel, concrete and asphalt often seek to escape to the developed and natural landscapes. Moving from the fabricated to the developed landscape offers an important “change of scene” aspect of the recreational experience. The developed landscape also offers an opportunity for people to consider the origins of the basic necessities for life. The idealism of the vision of harmonious pastoral settings dates to the mythology of ancient Greece.

However, it may be that the developed landscape primarily offers a respite from fabricated environments, and that the sense of true escape to a place for re-creation might be most fully realized on natural landscapes. In fact, even the people living on developed landscapes frequently seek to escape to their natural heritage.

### **The Value of the Natural Heritage in Recreation**

A sense of change is often critical to the recreational experience. People would undoubtedly obtain a sense of change if they journeyed from Sidney to New York to London to Paris to Moscow, but fundamentally they would remain in fabricated landscapes that primarily changed to some extent in architecture and cultural habits of the people. However, they would remain in systems of high human densities and that are dominated by human

activities. Possibly a greater sense of change could be obtained for say a New York City resident who traveled a couple hundred miles to the wilderness areas of Maine and Vermont than if the same person traveled several thousands of miles to Paris.

While there are substantial similarities in the habitats of the world's major cities, there are no similarities between any of these cities and natural landscapes that are near to or far away from them. Therefore, the impact of the change of scene aspect of recreation would seem to be greatest when the inhabitants of fabricated landscapes go to their natural heritage. It is likely that the roots of eco-tourism lie in this theory.

A second value for the natural heritage setting for recreation is in a sense of re-creating history. In all areas of the world that were invaded by Western Civilization during the last few hundred years, our ancestors invaded natural landscapes. They coped with wildness and survived to produce us and the foundations upon which our modern societies, including our fabricated landscapes, are based.

T.K Whipple eloquently captured the sense of value of reenactments of history in the natural heritage setting when in his book of essays *Study Out the Land*<sup>5</sup> he wrote:

“All America lies at the end of the wilderness road. Our past is not a dead past, but still lives within us. Our forefathers had civilization inside themselves, the wild outside. We live in the civilization they created, but within us the wilderness still lingers. What we live, they dreamed. What they lived, we dream.”<sup>6</sup>

A third value of recreation in the natural heritage setting is the value of natural beauty. This beauty is first the aesthetic perceived by the physical senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. This sense of beauty ranges from the perceptions of magnificent waterfalls to wildflowers to wild animals. Yet, there is more here than the obvious physical senses of beauty of ecosystem components. Leopold (1949) wrote in his essay “Marshland Elegy:”<sup>7</sup>

“Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language.”

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<sup>5</sup> Whipple, T.K. 1943. *Study Out the Land*. University of California Press. Berkeley, California, USA 215 pages.

<sup>6</sup> Frontispiece in McMurtry, L. 1985. *Lonesome Dove*. Simon and Schuster, New York, New York, USA 945 pages. ISBN 0-671-68390-X

<sup>7</sup> page 102 op. cit.

He then wrote further about the appreciation of this beauty in his essay “Song of the Gavilan.”<sup>8</sup>

“Then on a still night, when the campfire has burned low and Pleiades have climbed over rimrocks, sit quietly and listen for a wolf to howl, and think hard of everything that you have seen and tried to understand. Then you may hear it – a vast pulsing harmony – its score inscribed on a thousand hills [the geological record], its notes the lives and deaths of plants and animals [ecological processes transferring energy, nutrients, and genetic material], its rhythms spanning the seconds and the centuries [the time scales of evolution and the ecosystem dynamic driving it].”

The recreation here is not in accomplishing full understanding, but rather in the striving to learn, and learning to love and respect our natural heritage.

The fourth value in our natural heritage as the stage for our recreational experience is in the aspect of spirituality. All religions seem to have some aspect that relates to nature. Some even center on the worship of nature. Even in the Christian Bible, often thought to be largely devoid of concerns for wild things, Jesus Christ exclaims:

“See the lilies of the field, they neither toil nor spin. And yet, Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed as even one of these.”<sup>9</sup>

Humans find in their natural heritage wonders they can not, and can never, fully explain. They often find a sense of a god, or the gods, offering them something beyond the “modern miracles” created by the science and technology of contemporary cultures. The derivation of value of the gift is beyond our economic concepts.

It is often that the human experience in these settings is one of reception of a personal gift from a higher power. And if not a sense of a higher power, then a sense of amazement at such beauty derived in the process of an improbable accident. Even the most hardened against a sense of spirituality has to be somehow uplifted by the wonder of it all.

**Our Reaction to the Natural Heritage**

Recreational value is not a quality inherent to our natural heritage. *The recreational value lies in our reaction to things that are naturally wild and living in the freedom of wildness.* Not everyone will find recreational value in the natural heritage setting. In fact, to some people natural heritage settings are so foreign that they find no redeeming values in them. While most people want to know that there is a natural heritage being preserved at various locations on the planet, many, if not most of these people, are unprepared to

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<sup>8</sup> page158 op. cit.

<sup>9</sup> Holy Bible, New Testament. Mathew 2:28-29.

cope with the realities of cold and heat, wetness and dryness, plants that scratch and tear and cause allergic reactions, invertebrates that sting, bite and suck blood from vertebrates, and reptiles and mammals that can pose a threat to human wellbeing. However, in reality, these are all aspects of our natural heritage. Now that we face the realities of discomforts in the natural heritage setting, how do we react to it?

Our reaction is likely first governed by our desires and abilities to “love what once was.” Our intellectual capacity captures a vision of human history in the setting of the natural landscape. In a world that seems driven by science and technology to geometric rates of change in human activity, and that concomitantly seems to dictate changing values, an almost primordial instinct urges many of us to reach back to where we came from, to escape the rush into an uncertain future, to return to the basis of our being – the natural landscape, our natural heritage.

But the immersion of ourselves in the natural heritage setting has physical, intellectual, and emotional challenges. For instance, in the designated Wilderness areas of the USA, no modern means of travel can be used. The recreationist must travel on foot, by non-motorized watercraft, or by horse or mule. Substantial levels of knowledge of how to survive remote from human communities must be achieved. And an emotional condition must be achieved that does not need contact with the human community for stability. This challenge and our abilities to meet it in part govern our reaction to the natural heritage.

Finally, our reaction to our natural heritage is in part governed by our knowledge of it. To what depth do we perceive the array of ecosystem components and the uniqueness of each of them? To what degree do we sense the full ecosystem dynamic involving the transfer of energy, nutrients, and genetic material across space and time? No one can ever know all there is to know, but knowing and the desire to know more results in deepening love and respect for the natural heritage.

And Where Is the “Goodness?”

Leopold’s initial questions were: “But wherein lies the goodness, and what can be done to encourage its [the goodness] pursuit?” In sum, does our species derive benefits towards wellbeing from recreation in the natural heritage setting?

First, there is no evidence that there has ever existed in 3.5 billion years of organic evolution any species except *Homo sapiens* that has had the ability to contemplate its past to find lessons to guide how it might attempt to consciously shape its future. Physically and mentally moving ourselves back to the natural landscape for experiences that were common to our ancestors

**gives us perspective of who we are, where we came from, and what the term “future” means.**

**Second, by experiencing the natural landscape we begin to learn about the fragility of human life, the universe operating without humans at its center or ultimate goal, and what a relationship with things naturally wild in wild places really means.**

**Third, recreation in the natural heritage setting provides a sense of romance that many of us need. The romance of aloneness; the romance of solitude; the romance of a fantasized past and of what might have been if we had been there; and the romance of loving what can never be yours. To love something living that can not love back is a phenomenon that is rapidly disappearing from the psyche of modern societies.**

**Fourth, the richness of recreational experiences in natural heritage settings leads to love and respect for them. Love and respect stimulates a desire to behave ethically. Ethics are about guidance towards stable, productive relationships. Our natural heritage is a part of the ecosystems upon which we as a species depend for wellbeing. A stable relationship with these systems tends toward the maintenance of our wellbeing.**

**And finally, perhaps it is in the natural heritage setting that our search for re-creation can be best enhanced by considering the great questions of philosophy:**

**What is the nature of the world we live in?**

**What does it mean to be human?**

**What is an appropriate relationship between humans and the ecosystems upon which we depend?**