

# A Christmas Letter

By Roger Kaye

*Yes Virginia, there is Wilderness*

Virginia asks:

*Some academics, even some conservationists now, say that there is no real Wilderness. They support protecting some natural areas, but argue that the ideas and ideals associated with Wilderness are just “ideology” and not a real part of these areas’ function, value, or character. Please tell me, is there really wilderness?*

Virginia, these people deny Wilderness because they don’t realize the varied purposes wilderness areas were intended to serve. They haven’t come to understand the underlying meaning of the wilderness concept, or the deeper intent of the Wilderness Act’s prescription to preserve wilderness character. Afflicted by the skepticism and pragmatism of a materialistic age, their understanding has been limited to the physical attributes of a landscape that can be counted, measured, plotted on a graph, or programmed into the latest computer model. They don’t realize how the tangible qualities of an area set apart to remain natural, wild, and free converge with the meanings humans find in it to shape its wilderness character.

Yes Virginia, Wilderness is real, as a physical environment and, importantly, as a symbolic landscape—a touchstone to the natural world of our origin, our embedded membership, and our obligation. Its reality transcends a designated landscape’s scenic condition, its service as a repository of wildlife habitat, clean water, biodiversity, natural processes, and its opportunities for adventurous recreation, inspiration, and restorative experiences.

Consider how the Wilderness Act defines Wilderness: “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man.” The Act’s scholarly author, Howard Zahniser, purposely chose the uncommon keyword *untrammelled* because it best conveyed the notion of an area left wild. That is, left free from the human propensity to control, alter, and manipulate nature to serve our utilitarian purposes. Foremost, Wilderness was intended to be free—not just for the tangible benefits it provides us, but also for how an area we allow to be there for itself might enable us to see ourselves. The very existence of some areas that are allowed this freedom, Zahniser believed, would serve an increasingly important human need. “The need,” he wrote, is for “areas of wild nature in which we sense ourselves to be . . . dependent members of an interdependent community of living creatures . . .”

“To know the wilderness,” Zahniser eloquently explained, “is to know a profound humility, to recognize one’s littleness, to sense dependence and interdependence, indebtedness, and responsibility.” To elicit this humbling recognition, to awaken this

sense of relation, and evoke this feeling of obligation is an underlying purpose of Wilderness; its capacity to do so is a function of its character.

I was reminded of how easily we can lose sight of such fundamental purposes last December while attending a Christmas Eve play at my hometown church.

The setting was a busy shopping mall. A young girl and her mother were walking down the glittered halls, caught up in the hubbub of holiday buying. All around them, signs screamed “Christmas Sale!” Laden with packages, they passed a long line of impatient children waiting to give Santa their orders. They slowed to watch an amusing display of animated elves making presents. They almost missed the nativity scene off to the side. Curious about this incongruity, a poor couple from the backwaters of Galilee with their baby in a dingy manger, the little girl paused, then pointed. “Mommy, what’s *that* got to do with Christmas?”

Mom was at a loss for words. She’d forgotten—and her daughter had never really learned—the original meaning of the holiday. Christmas, remember, was a day set aside to celebrate the humble arrival of a social reformer who, after wandering the desert wilderness for 40 days, returned with a mission: to remind us of our need to rise above the narrow confines of self interest and to tell us that the greater meaning of our life is only to be found in its relation to the larger community.

This, Virginia, is the core, not just of Christianity, but of all spiritual traditions. And it’s implicit in the wilderness concept. As a place symbolically set apart from, and in contrast to, our individualistic, commodity-driven culture, Wilderness opens the receptive mind to, as Zahniser summarized, “an awareness of our human existence as spiritual creatures nurtured and sustained by and from the great community of life that comprises the universe, of which we ourselves are a part.”

It’s revealing that the Wilderness Act’s author was neither a backcountry adventurer nor a scientist. The son of a minister whose four brothers were ministers, and the father of two ministers, Zahniser was grounded in this spiritual origin and vital force of the early wilderness movement.

He was an ardent student of Henry David Thoreau who found that being in wilderness enabled him to “cast off the baggage of civilization,” and come to the humbling recognition that we are “an inhabitant, or part and parcel of nature.” He earnestly studied the writings of John Muir who preached that wilderness enables “over-civilized” Americans to see themselves as not the purpose of this planet, but as “a small part of the one great union of creation.”

In crafting the Wilderness Act, Zahniser also drew upon the insights of his biologist friends. One was Sigurd Olson, also the son of a minister who, foremost, saw wilderness as providing man with a “sense of close relationship, belonging, and animal oneness with the earth and the life around him.” Another was Aldo Leopold, who described the wilderness idea as “an intelligent humility towards man’s place in nature.” A seminal influence was Zahniser’s co-director at the Wilderness Society, Olaus Murie, who emphasized that wilderness served “our mental and spiritual needs—hard to define but of greatest importance.”

The founders of the wilderness movement and framers of the Wilderness Act acknowledged that these innate components of our humanity defy ready definition. But they become more apprehensible through the medium of landscapes we dedicate to nature's freedom. Those few places defined by what *we refrain* from doing. Those places whose character, like that of a church or cathedral or temple to which Wilderness is so often compared, derives from the meaning we imbue to them and thus, the values they come to embody.

You see, Virginia, the character of wilderness is, ultimately, a reflection of our character. Its an expression of our willingness to yield our uses, conveniences, and profits to something beyond human utility. It reveals that better part of ourselves willing to subordinate our immediate interests to those of other species and future generations of our own.

“Humans realize their best welfare,” Zahniser paraphrased Jesus, “by losing sight of themselves.” Therein lies a paradox underpinning the wilderness concept, and, in fact, the wisdom of all spiritual traditions: In realizing our insignificance, we find greater significance. Humility is ennobling. When primacy of the self gives way to a sense of being part of a larger whole, a more purposeful, strengthened sense of self emerges.

The great prophets, and visionaries across cultures and throughout time, went to the wilds to penetrate this transcendent truth. But you needn't venture into the Wilderness to find meaning in what it represents. Wilderness is also there for you as a symbol. Call it, as some do, the embodiment of an ideology or, as Wallace Stegner preferred, as our “geography of hope,” Wilderness is there to serve, as all symbolic places do, as a touchstone to our ideals and aspirations.

And if our nation truly aspires to provide for an undiminished future, then Wilderness is there as a point of reference. It is there as an encouraging reminder of our capacity to limit our effect upon the natural world. It's there as an inspiring demonstration of our willingness to accept restraint. Wilderness is there as a legacy, as a precedent for placing the notion of environmental humility in law. Limitation, restraint, and humility—they've never come easily to distracted Americans. But never has our need for them been greater. Never before has it been so imperative that we, as individuals and as a nation, rethink our relationship with the biosphere we jointly inhabit.

“Perhaps, indeed, this is the distinctive ministration of wilderness to modern man,” Zahniser concluded, “the characteristic effect of an area which we most deeply need to provide for in our preservation programs.” If you can see why Zahniser chose the word *ministration*, meaning to minister to, to serve ultimate needs, then you will understand why the mandate to preserve wilderness character resonates through the Wilderness Act.

So Virginia, don't let the wilderness skeptics and secularists convince you to replace *Wilderness* with sterile terms that strip these designated—consecrated—areas of their central symbolism. Don't let them distract you from understanding that the concept of Wilderness, like the real message of Christmas, was born of the universal human need for meaning outside and beyond our individual selves.

Don't let the forces working to commercialize and commodify either obscure their common, profound purpose. Caught up in the rush toward more and more consumption and an ever, ever higher standard of living, we need these affirmations of our capacity to rise above the materialism that rules the major part of our lives. At a time when our profligacy is fundamentally altering this shared planet, we need places and times to remind us that, as Zahniser said, "the real source of all our life is not in ourselves . . . we live only as members of a community."

Yes Virginia, Wilderness is real. Wilderness exists as certainly as those remnants of natural beauty and wholeness its designation protects, and as certainly as the altruism and hope for the future its character embodies.

So this holiday season, stand back for a moment and consider the common message of Christmas and Wilderness, the time and the place set apart to enlarge our perspective. Each, so understood, offers some much needed Joy to the *world*, (not just to us), Peace on *Earth*, and Goodwill to *all*—those people and creatures, of the present and future—with whom we share this conflicted globe.

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