

Passion to Nature

Voices of Environmental Literature

by Scott Slovic

During the second half of the 20th century, and particularly since the late 1960s, the relationship between humans and their natural surroundings has been articulated in a surge of literature. In the United States, literature about the environment began in earnest with explorers writing of their experiences in the New World, was solidified by the work of transcendentalists such as

Henry David Thoreau, and modernists such as John Muir. It is presently experiencing a new wave of popularity. The genre, known as "nature writing" or "environmental literature" has become an important facet in the ever-expanding field of environmental studies.

Contemporary environmental writers in the United States are not an isolated group, nor is their influence limited to the American

literary community. The texts commonly thought of as classics in the field are being coupled with new and unique perspectives from around the globe. Distinguished writers such as Homero Aridjis of Mexico, who is the founder of an environmental protection society known as El Grupo de los Cien (The Group of 100), and Michiko Ishimure of Japan, who writes of the Kyushu villages affected by Minamata disease as a result of industrial pollution, add to the fresh array of voices at work. (The box on this page shows an

annotated list of current environmental texts and old favorites.) This article follows the history of environmental writing in the United States and introduces several important thematic trends that this literature encapsulates.¹

The term *nature writing* generally refers to nonfiction prose that explores the relationship between human culture (or the individual) and nature. *Natural history writing* is a branch of nature writing that typically emphasizes patterns or problems in the physical environment, other

nature writing examines the human psychological response to experiences in nature; and the bulk of the genre falls somewhere in between these extremes. The phrase *environmental literature* is commonly used today to describe all literary forms (oral, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and drama) that investigate the human-nature relationship. Environmental literature, however, should be categorized separately from environmentalist propaganda and from nonliterary writing on environmental topics.

American Environmental Literature:

Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire* (1968) A combination of celebratory narratives and political diatribes, this complex and beautiful book about American wilderness in general and the Utah canyonlands in particular is one of the cornerstones of the contemporary renaissance of environmental writing.

Rudolfo Anaya, *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972, fiction) The classic bestseller about a childhood in rural New Mexico with a *curandera*, a woman who heals with herbs and magic, written by one of the leading contemporary Chicano authors.

Mary Austin, *The Land of Little Rain* (1903) A lyrical celebration and examination of the desert and the foothills between Death Valley and the High Sierras.

Rick Bass, *The Book of Yaak* (1996) With the exception of John Muir's *The Yosemite* (1911), this collection of essays about a valley in northwest Montana may be the most explicit attempt by an American author to save a particular place through the sheer force of words.

Wendell Berry, *Home Economics* (1987) The author, a Kentucky farmer, has published more than thirty books including essays, fiction, and poetry, exploring what it means to live a responsible life in the late 20th century. This collection of fourteen essays shows his adept use of social criticism and eloquent advocacy.

Henry Beston, *The Outermost House* (1928) This chronicle of a solitary year

spent living on a Cape Cod beach has long been recognized as one of the classics of American nature writing.

Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (1962) This lucid and beautifully crafted exposé of the dangers of pesticides, especially DDT, is the book that did the most to help launch the modern environmental movement in the United States.

Susan Fenimore Cooper, *Rural Hours* (1850) Written by the daughter of best-selling American historical novelist James Fenimore Cooper, this book of essays offers a woman naturalist's perspective on the need to appreciate and preserve the vanishing wilderness of the mid-19th-century American frontier.

Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974) This Pulitzer Prize-winning book of essays offers a series of mystical reflections on nature in suburban Virginia and the effects of the nonhuman world upon the human imagination.

Marjory Stoneman Douglas, *The Everglades* (1947) This has long been regarded as the book on the Florida Everglades, and its author became a legendary defender of the natural world in south Florida before her recent death at the age of 108.

Gretel Ehrlich, *The Solace of Open Spaces* (1985) This collection of ruminations on life and landscape on Wyoming's high plains is one of the best examples of the extraordinary lyrical richness—the

almost cinematographic vividness—that recent nature writing has achieved.

Loren Eiseley, *The Immense Journey* (1957) One of the pivotal antecedents to the contemporary wave of nature writing, Eiseley helped to resurrect the "personal essay" as an important mode of expression by writing about his own life and the phenomenon of evolution.

John Graves, *Goodbye to a River* (1960) Based upon the author's three-week, solo canoe trip down a stretch of the Brazos River near Fort Worth, Texas, shortly before the completion of a dam, this meditative book explores the intersections of one man's life, the human and natural history of his place, and the implications of land development.

John Hay, *A Beginner's Faith in Things Unseen* (1995) At the age of eighty, the distinguished East Coast nature writer offers a miscellany of precise, elegant essays on everything from baby birds to the human yearning for power and domination.

Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) This book, which includes such essays as "Thinking Like a Mountain" and "The Land Ethic," is perhaps the most obvious forerunner to the examination of ethical issues in contemporary nature writing.

Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams* (1986) This masterful braiding together of natural history and the history of human activity in the far North, which received the American

American Environmental Literature—Past and Present

Since its emergence, environmental literature on the North American continent has emphasized the phenomenon of the individual engaging with the physical landscape, with plants and animals, and with new cultures. Although many readers think of Henry David Thoreau in the mid-19th century as the progenitor of environmental writing in the United States, the tradition is much older than that. It can be

traced as far back as 1527–37 when Cabeza de Vaca explored what later became Florida, Texas, and New Mexico and described his experiences in a volume published in 1542, later translated as *Adventures in the Unknown Interior of America*. American literature in general has rooted itself in the idea that the most fundamental of human relationships is the relationship between human beings and the natural world. This is true of colonial American literature, from William Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation: 1620–1647*

(published 1856) to Anne Bradstreet's *The Tenth Muse, Lately Sprung Up in America* (1650), and later exploration narratives and nationalistic landscape appreciations such as Hector St. John de Crevecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), and William Bartram's *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida* (1791).

The tradition of American environmental literature did not begin with Thoreau, but Thoreau nevertheless

Selected Classics and Recent Favorites

Book Award for nonfiction, helped to establish Barry Lopez as one of the central voices in contemporary American nature writing.

Peter Matthiessen, *The Snow Leopard* (1978) Using the chance to accompany renowned naturalist George Schaller on an expedition to the Himalayas as the occasion for a personal spiritual quest, the author of this Pulitzer Prize-winning book has created one of the most vibrant and suspenseful examples of this genre.

John Muir, *The Mountains of California* (1894) Inspired by the words and ideas of such transcendentalist authors as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, the author—who was also the founder of the Sierra Club—offers a sublime vision of the High Sierras.

Gary Paul Nabhan, *The Desert Smells Like Rain* (1982) Nature writing is not only an examination of nonhuman nature, but in many cases it is a reflection on how human communities interact with specific places, as shown by this vivid and humorous account of southern Arizona's Papago Indians.

Richard K. Nelson, *The Island Within* (1989) The author is an anthropologist who has spent several decades living with and studying native Alaskans and this poetic series of essays reflects the point of view of a Euro-American whose sensibility has been profoundly altered by his contact with native cultures.

John Nichols, *The Milagro Beanfield War* (1974, fiction) This dark comic novel is one of the best evocations of the widespread struggle over the use of natural resources throughout the world, although the specific context of this story is northern New Mexico.

Robert Michael Pyle, *Wintergreen* (1986) This is the story of an author's love for the logged-over hills of his home in southwestern Washington State, offering a remarkable convergence of human history and natural history.

David Quammen, *The Song of the Dodo* (1996) This monumental work tells the story of the entire discipline of "island biogeography" in a poetic and engaging way, emphasizing the ominous implications of extinction and loss of biodiversity.

Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony* (1977, fiction) One of the major works of late-20th-century American fiction, this book focuses on issues of personal identity and sense of place.

Scott Russell Sanders, *Staying Put* (1993) This series of personal essays provides a moving account of the value of putting down roots, a complex and provocative issue in the context of transient American culture.

Gary Snyder, *Turtle Island* (1974, poetry) The author of this Pulitzer Prize-winning collection of poetry is widely regarded as one of our most eloquent and insightful contemporary writers on issues of community and environment.

Wallace Stegner, *The Sound of Mountain Water* (1969) In this book of nonfiction essays, the author helps to define the very meaning of wild places in American society and in doing so explains the potential meaning of wildness to all industrialized cultures.

Henry David Thoreau, *Walden* (1854) Although scholars are beginning to realize that important environmental writing in North America predates *Walden*—an account of the author's experiment with meditative and simple living by the shore of a New England pond—this book continues to be celebrated as the principal progenitor of American nature writing for the past century and a half.

Terry Tempest Williams, *Refuge* (1991) This lyrical story of a Utah "down-winder's" struggle with nuclear testing on the health of women in her family is one of the major works of contemporary feminist nature writing.

Edward O. Wilson, *Naturalist* (1994) One of the world's foremost entomologists tells the story of how he became interested in science and in the process reveals the importance of the natural world for all human beings.

Ann Zwinger, *Downcanyon* (1995) Combining the perspectives of a visual artist with the knowledge of a team of scientists, this dazzling narrative shows the intrinsic interdisciplinary nature of contemporary environmental writing.

crystallized and articulated some of the traits that have since been recognized as hallmarks of this tradition. One of these is the idea of kinship to the nonhuman world. An important statement about this subject appears in the chapter "Solitude" from *Walden* (1854):

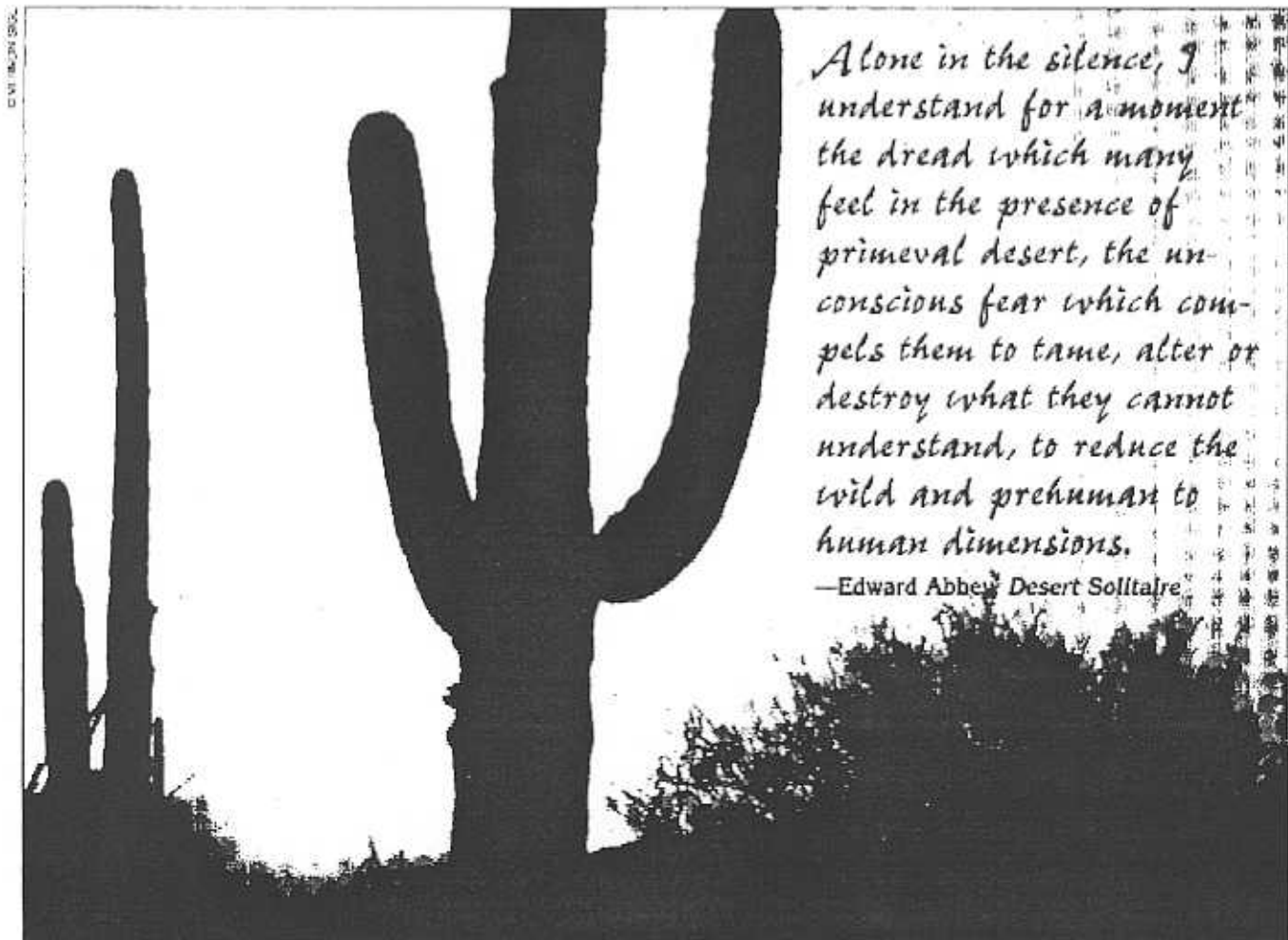
I experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object, even for the poor misanthrope and most melancholy man. . . . I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once, and that was a few weeks after I came to the woods, when, for an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life. To be alone was something unpleasant. But I was at the same time conscious of a slight insanity in my mood, and seemed to foresee my recovery. In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and benef-

icent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at once like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant, and I have never thought of them since. Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary.²

This famous passage emphasizes not the misanthropy that is sometimes ascribed to Thoreau, but rather the positive sense of attachment to nature that makes this one of the fundamental texts of the movement to expand ethical and legal consideration to animals and other natural phenomena.

Thoreau, who resided along with Ralph Waldo Emerson in Concord,

Massachusetts, is generally singled out as the most important forerunner of the contemporary American nature writers—in fact, he's often called the father of the American environmental movement. Fourteen years younger than Emerson, Thoreau (who lived from 1817 to 1862) was still a student at Harvard College when Emerson published his book *Nature* in 1836. A year later, after Thoreau had graduated from college and was searching for a productive way to spend his time, Emerson suggested that he begin keeping a private journal of his experiences wandering around the woods and fields near Concord, and Thoreau did just that. Today scholars are coming to believe that this immense journal, recorded almost daily between 1837 and 1861, was Thoreau's main project as a writer. Thoreau anticipated many



Alone in the silence, I understand for a moment the dread which many feel in the presence of primeval desert, the unconscious fear which compels them to tame, alter or destroy what they cannot understand, to reduce the wild and prehuman to human dimensions.

—Edward Abbey *Desert Solitaire*

of the important strands that are routinely observed in American nature writing of the past half century: concern about the effect of industry and technology on the natural world ("the machine in the garden," to use noted scholar Leo Marx's phrase); fascination with the relationship between the human mind and inhuman nature; celebration of the local instead of the distant and exotic; appreciation of simplicity in nature and human life; and profound attentiveness to the minute details of nature, but almost always with a desire to understand the human significance of natural observations.

Important nature writing also appeared during the years between Thoreau's death and the current rebirth of environmental literature. From the 1870s through the first two decades of the 20th century, John Burroughs and John Muir were the most prolific and impressive practitioners of American nature writing; Burroughs focused on rural nature in upstate New York and Muir achieved fame through his many volumes about wilderness in the American West, especially in the High Sierra of California and later in Alaska. Recently, scholars have come to regard Mary Austin's *The Land of Little Rain* (1903), set in the desert country of southeastern California, as a neglected classic of early 20th-century nature writing. In 1928, Henry Beston published *The Outermost House* about a year spent living alone in a small house on the Great Beach of Cape Cod, meditating on the wind, sand, water, and wildlife next to the Atlantic Ocean. In 1947, Marjorie Stoneman Douglas produced *The Everglades: River of Grass*, her classic exposé of environmental destruction in southern Florida's fragile and exotic swamps. Two years later, Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* appeared with its profound and eloquent statement of the need for a new understanding of ecology and a new sense of moral responsibility regarding the impact of human civilization upon the natural environment. In the 1950s, Loren



Nature will bear
the closest inspection. She invites
us to lay our eye
level with her
smallest leaf,
and take an
insect view
of its plain.

—Henry David
Thoreau, journal entry,
22 October 1839

Eiseley began publishing his meditations on the self, evolution, and specific instances of contact with the natural world in what he called "personal or concealed essays," first collecting this work in *The Immense Journey* (1957).

In 1962, Rachel Carson, well-known as the marine biologist who wrote such lyrical works of popular science as *Under the Sea Wind* (1941) and *The Edge of the Sea* (1955), launched the modern American environmental movement with the publication of *Silent Spring*, a lucid and scathingly apocalyptic warning about the dangers of household and agricultural pesticides. After the appearance of *Silent Spring*, President John F. Kennedy went on a nationwide lecture tour to raise public consciousness of environmental problems. In September 1964, the Wilderness Act was passed, preserving millions of acres of

land where "the earth and the community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." Several years later, in 1968, the Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich published *The Population Bomb*, the first in his series of books that have predicted and monitored the social and environmental results of rampantly growing human population throughout the world. Gaylord Nelson, a United States Senator from Wisconsin and a longtime environmental activist, organized the first nationwide Earth Day in 1970 to raise public awareness, and this "environmental teach-in" has occurred annually on 22 April every year since.

In addition to Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* and a number of other powerful environmental warnings that appeared in the late 1960s, superb

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Giving Expression to Nature

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writers like Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Wallace Stegner, and Annie Dillard were beginning to devote their literary work to understanding the tie between human beings and the natural world. Abbey's *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*, which serves well as the keystone text of the current nature writing renaissance, came out in 1968. This book strongly echoes *Walden* in many ways (for instance, just as Thoreau expresses ambivalence about trains, Abbey reveals his own mixed feelings about cars), but it also reflects the special sensibility of the late 20th century, particularly in its radical skepticism towards the "military-industrial complex." Abbey, who died in 1989, admitted that he wrote in a "deliberately outrageous or provocative manner" to "wake up" his readers—and in doing so, he reminds us of Thoreau, who stated in *Walden*, "I do not propose to write an ode to dejection, but to brag as lustily as chanticleer in the morning, standing on his roost, if only to wake my neighbors up."³ On the heels of *Desert Solitaire* there appeared such major works of American nature writing as Wendell Berry's *The Long-Legged House* (1969), Wallace Stegner's *The Sound of Mountain Water* (1969), Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), Ann Zwinger's *Run, River, Run: A Naturalist's Journey Down One of the Great Rivers of the West* (1975), Barry Lopez's *Of Wolves and Men* (1978), and Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* (1978), all of which are now regarded as modern classics.

In 1941, F. O. Matthiessen used the term *American Renaissance* to describe the extraordinarily rich period in American literature between 1850 and 1855, during which such writers as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Emerson, Thoreau, and Walt Whitman produced some of their finest works.⁴ Dur-

The shore is an ancient world, for as long as there has been an earth and sea there has been this place of the meeting of land and water. Yet it is a world that keeps alive the sense of continuing creation and of the relentless drive of life. Each time that I enter it, I gain some new awareness of its beauty and its deeper meanings, sensing that intricate fabric of life by which one creature is linked with another, and each with its surroundings.

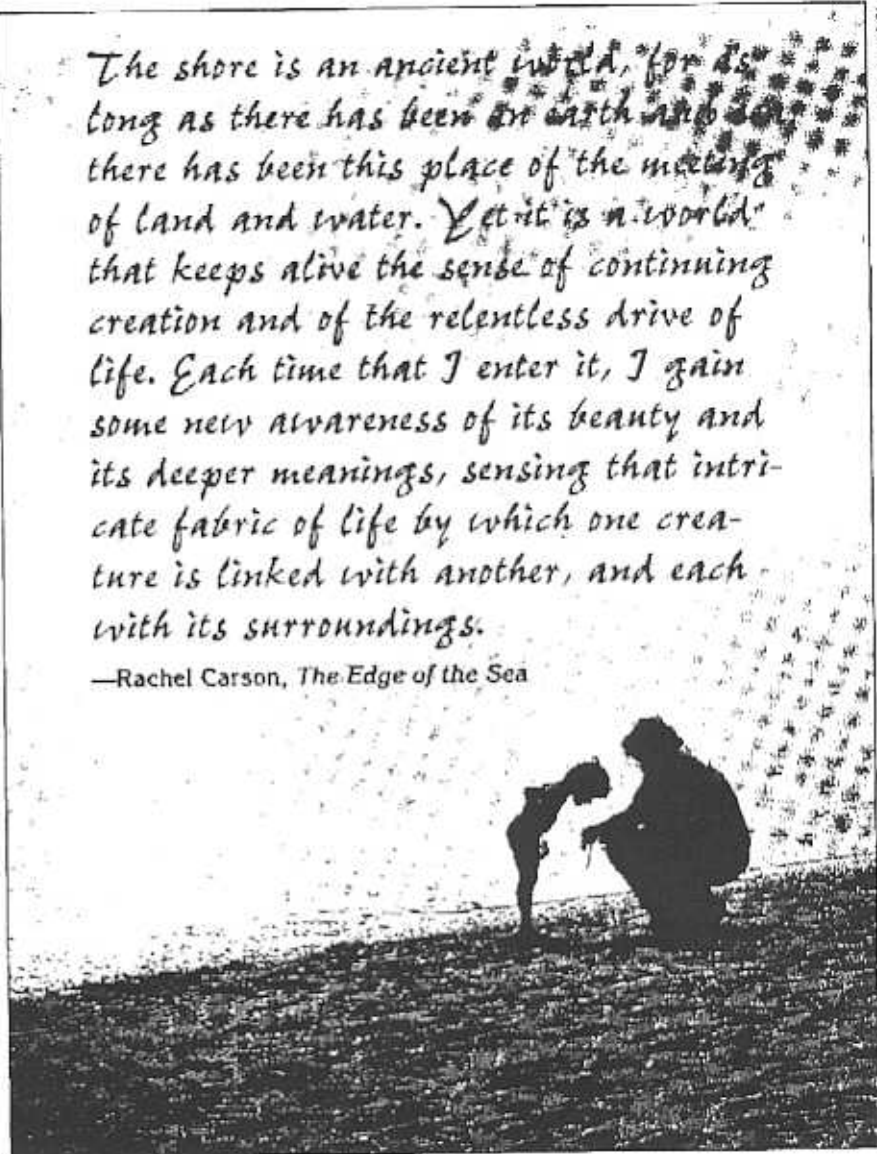
—Rachel Carson, *The Edge of the Sea*

ing the past 30 years (1968 to the present), a new American renaissance—an extraordinarily concentrated and active phase of American literary expression—has occurred in the nature writing genre. John A. Murray introduced the "Nature-Writing Symposium" in the Fall 1992 issue of the Hawaiian journal *Manoa* by writing, "Since the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970, a once obscure prose genre—nature writing—has steadily grown in stature and popularity, attracting more and more of the best writers and larger and larger portions of the reading public until, in 1992, it is arguably the major genre in American literature."⁵ During the past

decade or so, literary scholars throughout the United States (and increasingly in other countries as well) have begun to make this same argument, examining nature writing from a variety of critical perspectives, sometimes considering texts' ecological implications and other times simply adapting more traditional critical approaches to the study of literature about humans and nature.⁶

Literature's Ethical and Social Dimensions

In 1987, the Indiana essayist and novelist Scott Russell Sanders published an article called "Speaking a Word for



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Nature," in which he lamented the "narrowing and trivialization" of fashionable American fiction in the 1970s and 1980s (the literature known as "post-modernism"), so that the genre excluded a "deep awareness of nature."⁷ Sanders, as well as many of the finest writers in recent decades, sees literature that is obsessed with human society and indoor experience as fundamentally shortsighted and incomplete. Of this exclusion he writes:

However accurately it reflects the surface of our times, [literature] that never looks beyond the human realm is profoundly false, and therefore pathological. No matter how urban our experience, no matter how oblivious we may be toward nature, we are nonetheless animals, two legged sacks of meat and blood and bone dependent on the whole living planet for our survival. Our outbreathings still flow through the pores of trees, our food still grows in dirt, our bodies decay. Of course, we all nod our heads in agreement. The gospel of ecology has become an intellectual commonplace. But it is not yet an emotional one. For most of us, most of the time, nature appears framed in a window or a video screen or inside the borders of a photograph. We do not feel the organic web passing through our guts, as it truly does. While our theories of nature have become wiser, our experience of nature has become shallower. . . . Thus, any writer who sees the world in ecological perspective faces a hard problem: how, despite the perfection of our technological boxes, to make us feel the ache and tug of that organic web passing through us, how to situate the lives of characters—and therefore of readers—in nature.⁸

Concisely, the goal of environmental literature is to impress readers with a vivid, visceral sense of their own naturalness and, by extension, to encourage readers to pay attention to the nonhuman world on aesthetic, ecological, and political levels.

Literature and the other arts are ideal media for exploring and communicating systems of values—ethical frameworks—within specific communities and between one culture and another. This is not a particularly novel idea but it opposes postmodern critical theory, which is frequently noted for its inde-

terminacy, its devotion to textual debates, and its indifference to real social problems. The critic James S. Hans sums up the ethical component of literature by stating, "Literature does not exist in its own discrete space, so to limit our discussion of it to its 'literariness' is to denude it of its crucial links to the other systems that combine to articulate our sense of values."⁹

Literature performs a social function and can be a vehicle for social reform. Barry Lopez, who received the American Book Award in 1986 for *Arctic Dreams*, commented explicitly about the social and ethical dimensions of the arts in a 1990 catalog essay that he wrote for an exhibit by the Maine artist Alan Magee. Confessing that his own expertise was in the literary arts rather than the visual, Lopez nonetheless raised a series of issues that are fundamental to linking art and environmental awareness:

What is the meaning of this work . . . to a community of people? Is it rich in allusion and metaphorically striking, more in other words than just an announcement of the artist's presence in the world? Does it disturb complacency or stimulate wonder? Does it awaken anger or compassion?

These questions, I think, are more social than aesthetic. They proceed . . . from a feeling that if art is merely decorative or entertaining, or even just aesthetically brilliant, if it does not elicit hope or a sense of the sacred, if it does not speak to our fear and confusion, or to the capacities for memory and passion that imbue us with our humanity, then the artist has only sent us a letter that requires no answer.¹⁰

This concept of the social responsibility of art is a basic paradigm shift for most viewers, listeners, and readers. It is a shift that broadens the attention from mere "aesthetic brillian[ce]" to the moral dimension of the work or works in question. One of the reasons nature writing has become and continues to emerge as such a powerful force in contemporary literature is that writers such as Lopez and Sanders—as well as Terry Tempest Williams, Rick Bass, Robert Michael Pyle, Wendell Berry, Gary

Snyder, and dozens of other environmental writers—understand their work as the effort to achieve not only aesthetic brilliance, but an understanding of human society's relationship to the actualities of the planet.¹¹

To achieve this understanding, writers must have a sturdy appreciation for, and a firm grasp on, the scientific world. The lessons of modern environmental science—including the work of ecologists, environmental historians, and environmental anthropologists—are often extremely abstract and difficult for the public to believe, difficult even to decipher. What is an ecosystem and why is it so delicate? Does the ozone layer that protects the Earth from the sun's ultraviolet rays really have a hole in it? How do we know that hundreds and hundreds of animal and plant species are disappearing each year, becoming extinct? Why does this matter, especially if extinction itself is a natural process? It is easy for people in industrialized countries such as the United States and Japan simply to live from day to day, satisfying their immediate needs and trusting that there will always be a tomorrow for our species. The challenging task of nature or environmental writers is both to create an interest in nature among their readers and to impress these readers with the necessity of living with the sustainable and long-term vision of our relationship to the rest of the planet. It is the job of these writers to communicate the subtleties of this relationship that are often, as Thoreau puts it, "farthest from being appreciated."¹²

The Rhetoric of Environmental Literature

Many environmental writers see their work as combining candid exploration of personal experience with the workings of the natural world and offering more scholarly responses to particular environmental problems or issues. A clear way of understanding these important modes of expression is to identify the categories of "explorato-

ry" writing and "political" writing, realizing that in actual literary texts one seldom encounters either form in isolation from the other. In this context, exploratory writing suggests the attempt to illuminate the natural world and the relationship between the human and the nonhuman. Political literature, on the other hand, implies the effort to persuade an audience to develop a new set of attitudes toward the environment. Nature writers have traditionally viewed their work as a combination of personal exploration and political persuasion. Two brief examples of contemporary environmental writing, one that is predominantly exploratory and another that is overtly hortatory, or political, illustrate this point. Both examples contain some of environmental literature's most important traits: attentiveness to the physical world beyond human beings and stimulus for ethical reformation.

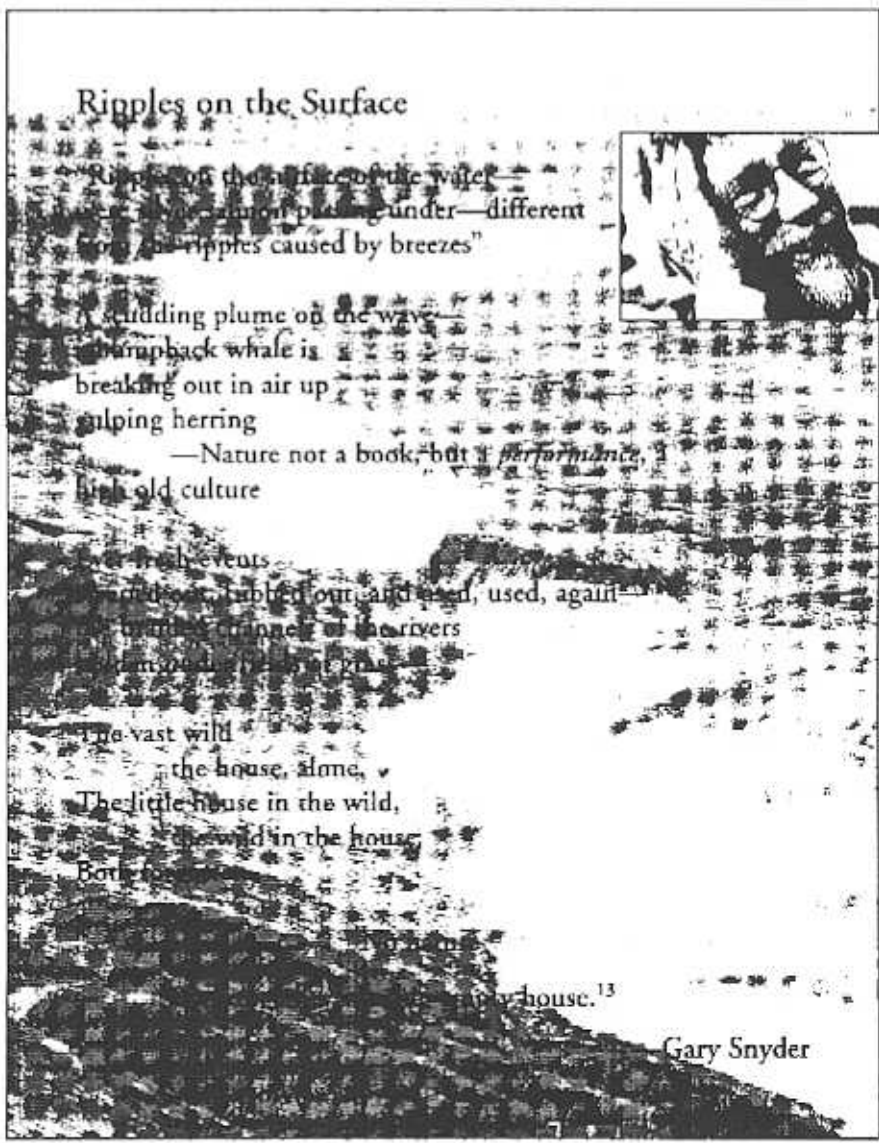
The first example comes from Gary Snyder's *No Nature: New and Selected Poems*, a collection that was nominated for an American Book Award in 1992. The final poem in the collection, entitled "Ripples on the Surface" (shown on this page), operates mainly in the exploratory mode and uses a rhapsodic, or celebratory, style.

Close reading of this text will draw the audience initially into an apparent passage from the poet's journal, an entry devoted to detailed observation of an ocean scene. The reader follows the poet's mental processes in discerning one set of water ripples ("silver salmon") from another ("caused by breezes"). Our attention is next directed toward the "scudding plume" of a surfacing whale, which leads to the realization that "Nature [is] not a book, but a performance." Nature, in other words, is movement, patterns, and physical material, something other than the staticity and abstractness of a written text. The following stanza confirms the idea of nature as active and changeable: "Ever-fresh events / scraped out, rubbed out, and used, used, again." In turn, this revela-

tion leads to the poet's concluding dissolution of the classic Western distinction between what is domestic and what is wild, between culture and nature. Although the poem opens with the human mind noticing subtle differences between superficial things, it moves toward the profound conclusion that everything—culture ("little house") and nature ("wild")—belongs together, that the universe is "one big empty house." The inclusively defined "house" (apparently recalling the Greek word, *oikos*, as in *ecology*) of the poem's final line implies habitat for the "performance" of active phenomena, human and nonhuman. This

house is "empty" of distinctions, free from such ideas as culture and nature; it is a realm of "no nature" (and implicitly a realm of "no culture," except the "high old culture" of physical performance). The repetition of the word "both" in two of the final three lines reinforces the idea of connection rather than separation.

The point of a close reading of Snyder's "Ripples on the Surface" is to demonstrate, in brief, the experience of interpreting a work of environmental literature that enacts what the author may consider an exemplary mental process (careful perception of the world) and then pursues



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the subtle strategy of imagining a worldview from which such polarized concepts as culture and nature have been abolished. Such an interpretative procedure, whether conducted in writing or in a lecture, does not mandate that the audience agree with the interpretation or even sympathize with the apparent perspective of the literary text. Rather, literary analysis is a process of exploration and reflection, and anyone who participates thoughtfully in this process is likely to end up having worked through a set of ideas that will lead to an enriched consciousness of language, mind, and the world.

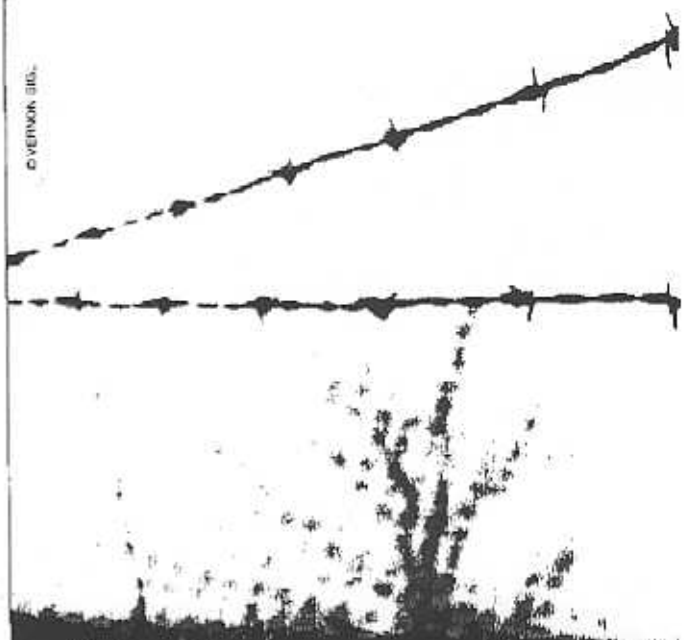
Another example of contemporary environmental literature comes from the well-known Utah author Terry Tempest Williams, whose 1991 book *Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place* helped to galvanize public attention to the condition of populations living downwind from the Nevada Test Site, the nuclear weapons testing ground in southern Nevada. A short piece of nonfiction prose concludes Williams's 1994 book *An Unspoken Hunger: Stories from the Field*. This essay, entitled "Redemption" and shown to the right, directly engages one of the major environmental debates of the rural American West: the presumed conflict between wild predators and domestic livestock. Unlike Snyder's stance of wonderment and reflectiveness in "Ripples on the Surface," Williams uses a more aggressively persuasive style of writing, opting for the "jeremiadic" language of warning and critique as a way of capturing her readers' attention.

This essay, obviously, is laden with Christian symbolism and terminology: the title "Redemption" and the final word "resurrection"; the repeated references to crucifixion; and the startling phrase "Jesus Coyote" in the emotionally intensified conclusion. Even the essay's dedication to the distinguished Kentucky nature writer Wendell Berry signals that the

principal audience for this work is likely to be rural, Christian readers, people who work the land but whose lives, unlike Berry's, do not revolve around protecting their natural environs.

Williams's prose style in this text is clipped, image-laden, and symbolic. She uses few words to sum up an entire environmental and social issue. Unlike the Snyder poem, which aims mostly to grapple with physical observation of the world and with the philosophical and psychological issue of how humans conceptualize nature, Williams is primarily intent upon expressing her own emotional and aesthetic response to wild creatures in the Great Basin Desert and her revulsion toward the anti-nature animosity of some of her neighbors in the rural West. She offers no analysis of the conflict between grazing practices and territory for wild predators, no explanation of why she expects wildness—embodied in coyotes and, presumably, other wild animals such as wolves, mountain lions, and grizzly bears—to be resurrected in this region. Her persuasive techniques, which include sweeping up readers in the narrative scene through a series of directional gestures ("pulled my gaze upward," "a few miles to the west," "down the road," "my eyes returned") and emotionally intensified verbs ("booming," "anxiously running," "shimmered"), are used so that the reader's vicarious experience of this beautiful place leads to sympathy with Williams's critique of coyote poaching.

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Redemption

Driving toward Malheur Lake in the Great Basin of southeastern Oregon, I saw a coyote. I stopped the car, opened the door, and walked toward him.

It was another crucifixion in the West, a hide hung on a barbed-wire fence with a wrangler's prayer: Cows are sacred. Sheep, too. No trespassing allowed. The furred skin was torn with ragged edges, evidence that it had been pulled away from the dog-body by an angry hand and a dull knife.

Standing in the middle of the High Desert, cumulus clouds pulled my gaze upward. I thought about Coyote Butte, a few miles south, how a person can sit on top between two sage-covered cars and watch a steady stream of western tanagers fly through during spring migration; yellow bodies, black wings, red heads.

The Inhumanist Perspective and Notions of "Place"

There are many examples in contemporary environmental literature of writers struggling to come to terms with otherness (with perspectives other than their own egocentric and anthropocentric views of the world) and with the experience of "place." In fact, two of the main contributions of environmental writers to the discussion of environmental ethics may be the various ways they have explored the implications of



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meeting Jeffers at his home on the Big Sur coast in the 1930s:

Something utterly wild has crept into his mind and marked his features. I cannot imagine him as having arisen unchanged in another countryside. The sea-beaten coast, the fierce freedom of its hunting hawks, possessed and spoke through him. It was one of the most uncanny and complete relationships between a man and his natural background that I know in literature.¹⁵

Indeed, in poem after poem published between the 1920s and the 1960s, from "Hurt Hawks" to "The Answer" (from which the line "Love that, not man apart from that" comes), Jeffers developed an ethos of respect for the intrinsic value of nature that had nothing to do with nature's economic or even aesthetic benefit to humanity. There is a rearticulation of this inhumanist perspective in the various novels and essay collections of Edward Abbey that appeared from the 1960s to the 1980s; in fact, *Desert Solitaire* echoes Jeffers's line "I'd sooner, except the penalties, kill a man than a hawk" with the

statement "I prefer not to kill animals. I'm a humanist; I'd rather kill a *man* than a snake."¹⁶

The inhumanist stance toward the natural world has come to permeate much of the environmental literature of the late 20th century, although not always as overtly as in the works of Jeffers, Eiseley, and Abbey. Generally, the notion of nature's intrinsic value, as articulated in this literature, is not directly linked to formal ethical principles or to particular legal contexts. There are some notable exceptions to

this, however. For instance, in April 1989, the distinguished Alaskan anthropologist and nature writer Richard K. Nelson (whose *The Island Within* won the John Burroughs Medal for natural history writing two years later) published an eloquent editorial in the *Los Angeles Times* responding to the oil spill in Prince William Sound. "Oil and Ethics: Adrift on Troubled Waters" is mostly a jeremiad that warns of the broader cultural implications of the *Exxon Valdez* disaster. Instead of simply complaining about the oil spill and pointing fingers at the corporation that was directly responsible for the accident, Nelson takes a more subtle and meaningful approach to the cost of modern civilization and the issue of responsibility. In addition to more abstract philosophical and political reflections, the essay makes crucial use of concrete, experiential information from Nelson's memories of a similar oil spill off the coast of Santa Barbara, California, 20 years earlier. "I have forgotten how many barrels of oil went into the Santa Barbara Channel," writes Nelson,

how much it cost to clean up the spill, how those who suffered damages were compensated, how blame was decided, how punishment was administered, how many animals were calculated to have died and how many were saved. But one memory is lodged forever in my mind—that dying bird [mentioned in the previous paragraph], her feathers matted and shining with oil, her wings drooped, her body quivering.¹⁷

This is a particularly interesting section because it demonstrates implicitly the power of literary representations of nature in guiding public attitudes and opinions. For better or worse, images are more impressive than statistics—they have an immediate emotional impact on an audience and they stick in readers' minds. Nelson's short editorial on the *Exxon Valdez* disaster illustrates how nature writing often achieves impressive eloquence (and lasting literary quality), even when seeking, primarily, to draw the attention of the general public to contempo-

And how a few miles west near Foster Flats, one can witness dancing grouse on their ancestral leks even in rain, crazy with desire, their booming breasts mimicking the sound of water.

Down the road, I watched a small herd of pronghorn on the other side of the fence, anxiously running back and forth parallel to the barbed wire, unable to jump. Steens Mountain shimmered above the sage flats like a ghost.

My eyes returned to Jesus Coyote, stiff on his cross, savior of our American rangelands. We can try and kill all that is native, string it up by its hind legs for all to see, but spirit howls and wildness endures.

Anticipate resurrection.¹¹

—Terry Tempest Williams

expanding ethical consideration to non-human species and the myriad literary studies of what it means to live a responsible and engaged life in a specific location on this planet.

Literary scholars have commonly recognized Henry David Thoreau's ideas as the antecedent to the "inhumanist" perspective in some 20th-century writers, such as Robinson Jeffers, Loren Eiseley, and Edward Abbey. Writing about Jeffers in the foreword to the Sierra Club volume entitled *Not Man Apart* (1969), Eiseley recalled

rary environmental issues. In his final paragraphs, Nelson weaves together his account of what it is like to witness an oil spill with his reflections on the moral implications of this phenomenon, concluding that "we must now recognize the need for a further growth of moral conscience, to encompass the whole community of life—the environment that nurtures, uplifts our senses and sustains our existence."¹⁸ "Oil and Ethics" is an example of the hybrid form of exploratory and political nature writing that aims to make readers sit up and pay closer attention

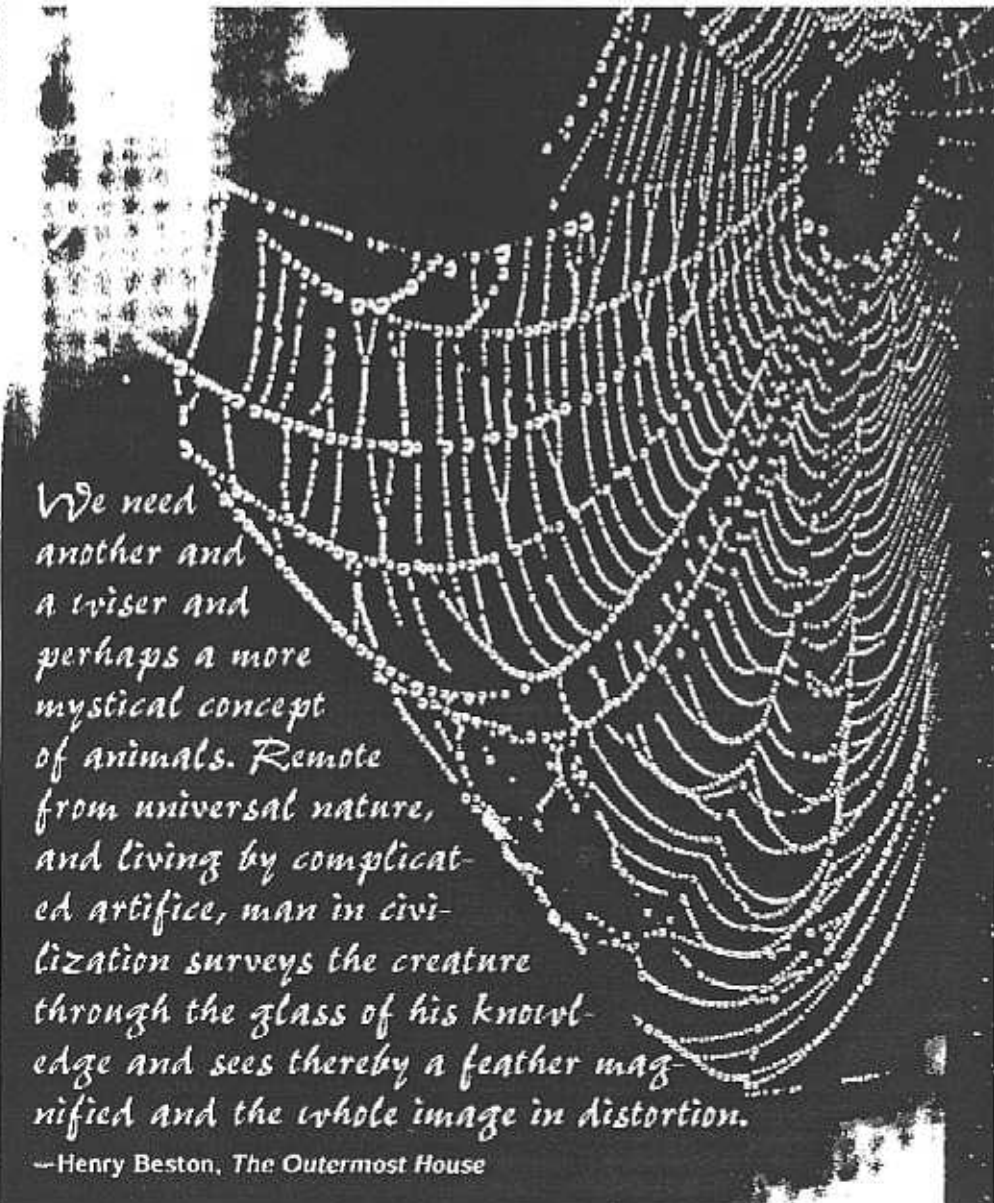
to important environmental problems. It represents an intriguing extension of the Thoreauvian tradition of inhumanist writing by showing the implications of an expanded ethical scheme for contemporary economic and industrial behavior.

Another major part of Henry David Thoreau's legacy to more recent environmental literature is his appreciation of immediate and local places rather than the distant and exotic. For some writers, such as Wendell Berry, this idea has become a crucial rallying point. In Berry's 1989 commencement

speech to the College of the Atlantic, he explained that "the question that *must* be addressed . . . is not how to care for the planet but how to care for each of the planet's millions of human and natural neighborhoods, each of its millions of small pieces and parcels of land, each one of which is in some precious way different from all the others."¹⁹ The ability to evoke the subtle mysteries of specific "neighborhoods" is one of the great contributions of nature writing to American culture, and when this nature writing is exported to other cultures, its proper function

should be not simply to attract tourists to Arches National Park (made famous by Edward Abbey) or Rick Bass's Yaak Valley, or even to Walden Pond, but rather to offer models for the process of noticing—and caring about—the world. There are many good examples of place writing in American environmental literature, from Gary Paul Nabhan's *The Desert Smells Like Rain* (1982) about the Tohono O'odham people of southern Arizona to Scott Russell Sanders's meditation on nature and community in the Ohio River Valley in his book *Staying Put: Making a Home in a Restless World* (1993).

Wendell Berry himself offers one of the best examples of a nature writer who eloquently explores what it means to live meaningfully and constructively while being rooted in a specific place on Earth. Many writers are now working to articulate the experience of urban places (see Sandra Cisneros's 1989 volume of fictional vignettes set in inner-city Chicago, *The House on Mango Street*; John Edgar Wideman's

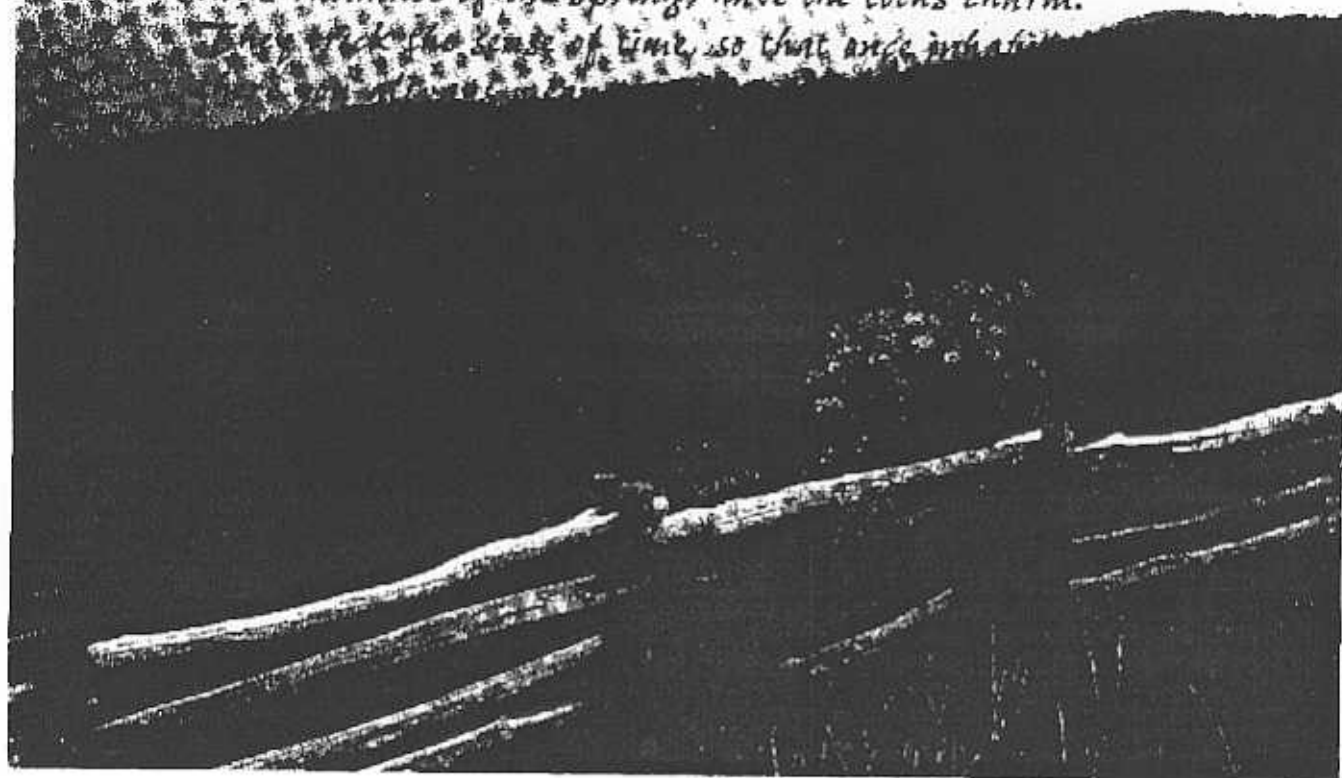


We need another and a wiser and perhaps a more mystical concept of animals. Remote from universal nature, and living by complicated artifice, man in civilization surveys the creature through the glass of his knowledge and sees thereby a feather magnified and the whole image in distortion.

—Henry Beston, *The Outermost House*

The rainbow hills, the tender bluish mists, the luminous radiance of the spring, have the lotus charm.

They track the sense of time, so that one is what



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1992 short story collection *All Stories Are True*, set in urban Pittsburgh; and Robert Michael Pyle's 1993 book of nonfiction about Denver, *The Thunder Tree: Lessons from an Urban Wildland* or of suburbia (for instance, Annie Dillard's Virginia essays, such as "Living Like Weasels" in the 1982 collection *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, and Michael Pollan's 1991 book, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*, set in Long Island, New York, and the commuter towns of Connecticut). But Berry has always been steadfast in his writings on the rural American experience; in fact, much of his work laments the ever-increasing urbanization of this country. Some of Berry's work is an overt form of social critique, chastising his readers for participating in a culture that has lost touch with the moral, psychological, and economic benefits of conscientious living in rural places. An important example of this is the 1980 essay "The

Making of a Marginal Farm," which concludes, "The land is heavily taxed to subsidize an 'affluence' that consists, in reality, of health and goods stolen from the unborn."²⁰ Other writings by Berry, including novels such as *The Memory of Old Jack* (1976) and essays such as "A Country of Edges" (1971), explore not the political and moral implications of degrading and neglecting place, but the more fundamental processes by which we come to attach ourselves to a place. In "A Country of Edges," Berry uses physical descriptions of water, analysis of the natural phenomenon of erosion, and a story about an excursion into the Red River Gorge of Kentucky to develop a sense of water, land, and the attentive human mind coming together:

We pass through carefully, no longer paddling as we wish but as we must, following the main current as it bends through the rocks and the grassy shoals. And then we

enter the quiet water of the pool below. Ahead of us a leaf falls from high up in a long gentle fall. In the water its reflection rises perfectly to meet it.²¹

In his evocation of the political complexities and the daily experience of "living in place," Wendell Berry may be the best exemplar of what writer Wallace Stegner praised as the "placed person." Yet there is increasing dissension among environmental writers over the value of roots versus the value—indeed the common necessity—of migration in industrialized societies. Authors such as John Daniel (in his 1992 book *The Trail Home* and his more recent essay "A Word in Favor of Rootlessness") and Alison Hawthorne Deming (in her 1994 book *Temporary Homelands: Essays on Nature, Spirit and Place*) aim to understand what it means to be "fluent in mobility" and to "try haltingly to learn the alphabet of place."²² The purpose of such explorations of place in contemporary envi-

ronmental literature is not to advance a single perspective on how people should conceptualize and experience place, but to provide a vocabulary for readers to use in formulating their own relationships to the landscapes where they happen to dwell, even if they are only passing through.

What Lies Ahead

It would be presumptuous to guess precisely the future trajectory of environmental literature in the United States and other countries, such as Japan and England, where this field is rapidly growing. Unlike other forms of environmental scholarship that tend to respond to specific problems in specific geographical locations, environmental literature typically plays an indirect, long-term role in social evolution, challenging readers to consider deeply—and to work gradually toward—just and sustainable relationships between their human communities and the planet.

For contemporary environmental writers, literary expression emerges from experience and, if successful, returns to the world by changing or intensifying readers' worldviews and affecting daily behavior. A few years ago, Scott Russell Sanders and his friends Alison Deming and Richard Nelson expressed this idea in a rather profound and direct way. The three of them, all regular contributors to the important environmental magazine *Orion*, composed a letter to *Orion* readers calling for an "Ecological Bill of Rights and Responsibilities." "Recently, the three of us were sloping our way through the rain in a forest near Sitka, Alaska, talking about the fate of the earth, sharing our grief and dismay," the letter begins:

We are friends drawn together by a shared passion for wildness and words. For thirty or forty years, we have been learning all we can about nature, through science and literature, through the stories of indigenous peoples and our own explorations; and for the past twenty years we have been writing books to say what we've discovered and why it matters. Our work as writ-

*ers, we have come to realize, is not enough to protect the things we love.*²³

Although these writers are among the liveliest storytellers and most lyrical crafters of imagery currently working in the English language, their aim—their self-imposed obligation—is "to give more political force to [their] concern for the earth." They confess at one point: "Words on a page do not accomplish anything by themselves; but words taken to heart, words carried in mind, may lead to action."²⁴

Beautiful words in themselves are not the objective—the purpose of this writing is to achieve social change, to affect the way readers think of themselves and their relation to the planet. This process occurs in minute and subtle ways, simply by altering how we think about language. As Charles Wilkinson put it in *The Eagle Bird: Mapping a New West* (1992),

*If the language among the people changes, the language in the law books will change. One task is to add new kinds of words to balance out a vocabulary now dominated by board feet and cost-benefit analysis. The other task is to enrich existing words.*²⁵

Consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, environmental writers strive to forge new language and new views of the world.

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NOTES

1. Although this article focuses on contemporary American environmental literature in part because this is a particularly rich and vibrant field, it should be noted that there are also scholars currently working to collect and comment upon earlier environmental literature and literature of this kind from many other countries. See, for instance, the following anthologies: J. Elder and H. D. Wong, eds., *Family of Earth and Sky: Indigenous Tales of Nature from Around the World* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1994); R. M. Torrance, ed., *Encompassing Nature: A Sourcebook* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998); and P. D. Murphy, ed., *Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook* (Chicago, Ill.: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998).

2. H. D. Thoreau, *Walden* (1854; reprint, Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1971).

3. S. Trimble, *Words from the Land: Encounters with Natural History Writing* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, 1988), 27; and H. D. Thoreau, *Walden* (1854; William Rossi, ed. (New York: Norton, 1992), 1.

4. F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (London: Oxford University Press, 1941).

5. J. A. Murray, "The Rise of Nature Writing: America's Next Great Genre?" *Mamou* (Fall 1992), 73.

6. See C. Glotfelty and H. Fromm eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1996).

7. S. R. Sanders, "Speaking a Word for Nature;" *Secrets of the Universe: Scenes from the Journey Home* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1991), 222.

8. *Ibid.*, page 226.

9. J. S. Hays, *The Virtues of Literature* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1990).

10. R. Lopez, *Alan Magee: Inters* (Portland, Maine: The Joan Whitney Payson Gallery of Art, Westbrook College, 1990), 1.

11. Many of these writers have written accounts of their political activism and the tensions between ethics and aesthetics in their work for Milkweed Edition's *Credo Series*. At this time, Rick Bass, Patricia Rogers, William Kittredge, Scott Russell Sanders, and Alison Deming have contributed to the series.

12. Thoreau, note 2 above, pages 131–32.

13. G. Snyder, *No Nature: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 381. Reprinted with permission.

14. T. T. Williams, *An Unspoken Hunger: Stories from the Field* (New York: Pantheon, 1995), 143–44. Reprinted with permission.

15. L. Eiseley, "Poreword," D. Brower, ed., *Not Man Apart* (New York: Sierra Club/Ballantine Books, 1969), 23.

16. R. Jeffers, *The Selected Poetry of Robinson Jeffers* (New York: Random House, 1937), 198; and E. Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968), 20.

17. R. K. Nelson, "Oil and Ethics: Adrift on Troubled Waters," in S. H. Slovic and T. F. Dixon, eds., *Being in the World: An Environmental Reader for Writers* (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 676.

18. *Ibid.*, page 677.

19. W. Berry, "Word and Flesh," *What Are People For?* (San Francisco, Calif.: North Point Press, 1990).

20. W. Berry, *Recollected Essays: 1965–1989* (San Francisco, Calif.: North Point Press, 1981), 340.

21. *Ibid.*, page 329.

22. J. Darlel, *The Trail Home: Nature, Imagination, and the American West* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 206.

23. S. R. Sanders, A. H. Deming, and R. Nelson, "Letter to *Orion* Readers," *Orion*, Autumn 1995, 5.

24. *Ibid.*

25. C. Wilkinson, *The Eagle Bird: Mapping a New West* (New York: Pantheon, 1992), 15–16.

