

Mark Woods

*Rethinking Wilderness*

Peterborough, Ontario, 2017: Broadview Press

ISBN 978-1-55111-348-7 (PB) \$34.95 306pp.

In *Rethinking Wilderness*, Mark Woods offers a detailed rejoinder to the numerous critiques of wilderness that fuelled the ‘great wilderness debate’ of the 1990s and 2000s. The book is structured as a reply to seven critiques of wilderness, with a chapter dedicated to each critique. Throughout, Woods engages a wide range of literature from ecology, environmental science, history, philosophy and other disciplines in developing a defence of present and future wilderness, with a focus on the United States.

The book opens by introducing ‘the received wilderness idea’, specifically the idea of wilderness as ‘quintessential nonhuman nature’ (p. 11), which sets wilderness in opposition to human beings and human culture. It is this conception of wilderness that has attracted substantial criticism, and the introduction outlines seven specific objections to wilderness, which are further elaborated throughout the book:

1. *The Imperial Argument*: The establishment and preservation of U.S. wilderness was predicated on the removal of indigenous peoples, and is thus morally wrong.
2. *The No-Wilderness Argument*: Wilderness aims to protect lands that are ‘natural’, ‘primeval’ and ‘untrammelled’, but there are no such lands, and to assume that present wilderness areas are pristine is to ignore and erase the histories of indigenous occupation and land use that preceded European colonial settlement of the United States.
3. *The Social Constructivist Argument*: The idea of wilderness presupposes that ‘a boundary exists between human cultures and nonhuman nature’ (p. 14), and that wilderness falls on the nonhuman side of this boundary. However, the boundary is indefensible, and wilderness itself is a human creation, a social construction.
4. *The Naturalist Argument Against Wilderness*: On this view (as in the preceding one) wilderness presupposes an indefensible human/nature dichotomy. But instead of collapsing all of ‘nature’ into ‘culture’ or social construction, this objection holds that humans themselves are part of nature: ‘Wilderness connotes what is quintessentially nonhuman or natural, but everything is natural’ (p. 15), thus there is nothing truly distinctive about wilderness.
5. *The Environmental Justice Argument*: Wilderness was established primarily in response to the recreational, spiritual, aesthetic values of wealthy, elite and mostly urban Americans. Wilderness is thus bound up with a form of environmentalism that favours the privileged and ignores the needs and interests of many people, including poor people, working class people and people of colour who experience environmental injustices through disproportionate exposure to environmental harms and for whom preservation of wilderness is a low priority, given more pressing needs.
6. *The Ecological Argument*: Wilderness preservation is based on the idea that nature remains in a stable, balanced state if undisturbed by humans. However, the ‘balance of nature’ idea has been displaced by a paradigm shift in ecology. Ecologists now recognise ecological systems as characterised by disturbance, flux and disequilibrium. Thus, the

idea of preserving wilderness in its original, natural condition contradicts insights from contemporary ecological science.

7. *The Management Argument*: Once wilderness areas are designated, they need to be managed. However, wilderness management involves a fundamental paradox: *management* involves human intervention, but wilderness is supposed to be a place largely *free* from human intervention (p.18). Given this tension, what should wilderness management strive to accomplish, and how?

Following the introduction, chapter 1 provides a historical and conceptual overview of U.S. wilderness, then chapters 2–8 address each of the seven arguments above. The last chapter begins to develop a positive account of wilderness, focusing on the qualities of wilderness as natural, wild and free.

The book picks up momentum as it goes. I found chapters 2 and 3, on the naturalist argument and the social constructivist argument, respectively, to be a bit slow going, with their focus on locating wilderness in conceptual space. Some of the material in these chapters would likely be frustratingly abstract for undergraduates without substantial prior philosophy background – e.g., ‘Supervenience is an asymmetric determinative dependency relation without reduction’ (p. 58) – and although I understand the reason to do some conceptual ground-clearing before turning to more concrete arguments about the history of wilderness, wilderness management, and the relationship of wilderness to questions of imperialism and environmental justice, I worry that some readers might be deterred by these early chapters. Chapters 4 through 8 are significantly more accessible, and in many ways, they form the heart of the book. Woods has done an excellent job gathering and synthesising a wide range of literature that bears on the arguments against wilderness that he considers. Each chapter begins with a premise-by-premise reconstruction of the relevant argument, and Woods then carefully and even-handedly considers the plausibility of each argument. Woods clearly has a view – he believes that wilderness remains valuable and that the critiques are in many cases overstated or insufficiently nuanced – but he develops his counterarguments to the wilderness critiques with care and attention to the concerns they raise.

Although the breadth and depth of Woods’ engagement with the relevant literature occasionally disrupts the book’s argumentative flow, this same expansiveness makes this book a valuable resource for understanding and accessing a rich and diverse array of resources on wilderness from across multiple disciplines. The book contributes importantly to debates over wilderness in the thoughtfulness and nuance it offers: this is an especially valuable intervention, given that the ‘great wilderness debates’ at times have tended to foster all-or-nothing thinking with respect to wilderness. Woods shows that there’s more than one way to conceptualise wilderness; that wilderness need not presuppose a dichotomous distinction between humans and nature; that the relationship between wilderness and Indian removal is complex and varies from place to place; and that wilderness need not be inimical to environmental justice. Even those who remain concerned about wilderness – both conceptually and on the ground – will be prompted to engage in discussions of wilderness with greater nuance and care after reading this book. Many of its central chapters would be helpful for classroom use, as thought-provoking counterparts to essays such as William Cronon’s ‘The Trouble with Wilderness’ and related work.

Woods' book is primarily a defence of wilderness against critique, and it succeeds admirably in this goal. The final chapter recommends a conception of wilderness focused on the qualities of wildness, naturalness and freedom, and begins to develop an understanding of these qualities that is compatible with the perspective Woods develops in response to wilderness critics. For example, Woods argues that 'naturalness' is not a binary concept and need not imply complete freedom from human influence. He instead argues for a process-based conception of naturalness as 'having a genesis and causal history characterised by other-than-human biological, chemical, ecological, and physical forces' (p. 248) and argues that 'naturalness comes in degrees' (p. 247). Thus, even landscapes that have been substantially disturbed by human beings can recover a natural character over time. Woods' positive conception of wilderness is less developed than his defence, but this is consistent with the aim of the book, and his closing chapter provides fertile ground for further development of an account of wilderness's value. For those seeking to understand how the value of wilderness might be defended while taking seriously the arguments of its critics, this is an important book.

MARION HOURDEQUIN  
Colorado College, USA