10 A Place of One's Own

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Decades ago, environmental advocates realized that when people develop a sense of place in the natural world through outdoor recreation, they are more likely to support pro-environmental policies (Marafiote). Indeed, John Muir states, "Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and the mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as foundations of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life" (48). Published in 1901, these words are still true today; people flock to wilderness places, looking for "escape" from civilization. The irony of outdoor recreation is that although engaging in this behavior is likely to increase one's sense of place and pro-environmental sentiment (e.g., Brooks, Wallace, and Williams; Buell; Cantrill; Cresswell; Dickinson; Ewert, Place, and Sibthorp; Kyle, Absher, and Graefe), it also has the potential to degrade the very places in which recreators seek to experience the natural world. In this chapter, we examine how this irony is revealed in the discourse of outdoor recreators. Specifically, we argue that this discourse encourages finding a place of one's own as key to an ideal recreation experience in the natural world.

We examine a set of textual fragments including popular outdoor recreation discourses in a magazine article and outdoor recreation catalogues, and interviews with outdoor recreators to understand the implications of seeking a place of one's own. Specifically, we argue that this rhetoric not only preserves the nature/culture divide and its problematic assumptions but also risks endangering the very areas that are set aside for preservation. In this chapter, we first explain the nature/culture divide and its correlation with outdoor recreation. Then, after delineating our methods, we illustrate how disparate discourses create a perception that ideal recreation happens in wild nature and alone or with a small group of known others. Finally, we explicate the consequences that this discourse produces in terms of the boundaries between nature and culture, and patterns of ownership.

OUTDOOR RECREATION IN A NATURE/CULTURE WORLD

The nature/culture divide is the idea that modern humans and civilization are separate from the natural world. Even though humans are natural beings that exist in the natural world, society reinforces the notion that humans are separate from, and sometimes better than, nature. Ideas about where and what constitutes nature are the products of centuries of rhetorically separating humans and nature. In articulating the birth of the nature/culture divide, Neil Evernden purports that with the creation of the word *nature*, we created a dualism. The "fragile division," as he calls it, between humans and nature must be maintained constantly or risk deteriorating. Jonathan Gray emphasizes the precariousness of the division. Embodying a character, he asks,

> What makes a scene authentically natural or wild? But we know it when we see it, right? It's like pornography that way, I guess. We've all probably felt the disgust of finding beer cans in a backcountry campsite. Or the surreal wonder of a hawk roosting in a crowded and noisy city. (209)

Gray highlights that nature is all around us and part of us, yet we are conditioned to understand nature as something outside of ourselves.

Within the nature/culture divide, an idealized version of nature as pristine, wilderness emerges. Yet, it is important to distinguish between wilderness and nature. Whereas nature is the material world and its processes, William Cronon defines wilderness as "a large tract of land distinguished above all else by the dominance of nonhuman nature and the relative absence of human influence" (ix). Wilderness areas are places that have not been significantly populated by or modified by modern humans, many of which are protected areas such as national parks. Peter van Wyck explains, "the perfect ecological space must be one that is absent of *modern* humans" and their accoutrements but not necessarily absent "ancient" humans and their "artifacts" (77). These "ancient" humans, the names of which sometimes refer to still living indigenous people, become part of ideal nature. Considering the nature/culture divide, the relative absence of modern human civilization in wilderness areas easily lends itself to classifying it as nature and not culture. In other words, whereas wilderness and urban spaces are both parts of the material world, the nature/culture divide constructs wilderness as nature and urban spaces as culture. Therefore, when humans seek to build a sense of place in nature, they tend to seek out wilderness areas, such as national or state parks. David Louter describes going to a national park: "We leave behind urban sprawl, the roadside blight of strip malls, and the patchwork of fields, clear-cuts, and other signatures of people at work in nature" (3). That people appreciate nature more when they come into contact with its idealized form is a cultural product not an inherent response (DeLuca; Sax).

The nature/culture divide is both constraining and enabling for environmentalists; we see them both reinforce and attack it. Proponents of wilderness preservation tend to reinforce the nature/culture divide in their suggestion that humans and potentially damaging human technologies should be excluded from some places so that those places may flourish. For example, Dave Foreman claims that even though people are part of nature, they should limit their presence in nature because we have "escaped the natural checks on our numbers," which has "allowed us to temporarily divorce ourselves from Nature" (404). This perception that nature is separate from humans positions it as something special or sacred. Although these positive impacts—preserving some areas and feeling a connection with nature—uphold the nature/culture dualism, it can also produce negative effects.

Kevin DeLuca argues that the idea of pristine wilderness is also a weakness for environmentalism. He states, "Opponents of environmentalism often argue against designating areas as wilderness because such areas are not absolutely pristine, or they will put a road in an area and then argue it cannot be wilderness" (643). As we entrench the divide between nature and culture, we feel more disconnected from nature because we cannot see that it is all around us as opposed to just in faraway and sometimes inaccessible places. Daniel Dustin, Kelly Bricker, and Keri Schwab explain that the trend of children staying indoors is detrimental to their health. Continuing to view nature as something separate hinders our "growth and development" (4). In fact, a sense of place and feeling of harmony with nature can be cultivated anywhere. One could have a profound experience with the natural world in a city park or on a farm. Challenging the separation between nature and culture encourages this perspective. One way to do this is through language. As Milstein et al. have done, using compound words such as "eco-culture" and "humanature" help change the way we think about nature and culture. Developing a sense of place through outdoor recreation is another way people suggest breaking down the nature culture divide (see, e.g., Dickinson; Spurlock).

We argue that outdoor recreation discourse sends the message that the best way to experience nature and develop a sense of place is in wilderness places. Although outdoor recreation can be defined as anything done outside from jogging in a city to hiking in a national park, we narrow our analysis to outdoor recreation in wilderness places set aside for preservation and recreation, such as national parks.[1] The key distinction we are making is a place-based distinction between outdoor recreation in places people perceive to be "nature" as opposed to places people perceive to be "culture" in line with the nature/culture divide. Outdoor recreation in these settings can including hiking, mountain bicycling, camping, and mountain climbing. The discourse associated with these activities, we contend, perpetuates a rhetoric of finding a place of one's own in which to have an "authentic" experience with nature, as conceived of in the nature/culture divide. However, as we will

show, this rhetoric risks participants seeking more remote places to have their experiences. When people understand nature in opposition to culture, finding a place of one's own becomes challenging. People venture further afield to avoid other people because they want the ideal experience. The fragments of discourse we examine implicitly argue that crowds deny the opportunity to create a place of one's own, which leads to visitors seeking other, less populated areas in which to recreate and feel connected to nature. As Gray intimates, "I experience a kind of disappointment when I realize that there is probably no place on this planet that I can go to get away from the presence of other humans" (209). The danger is that the desire to be in more remote wilderness places can actually damage them.

METHODS

To examine how some forms of outdoor recreation discourse might encourage finding a place of one's own, we selected three texts: interviews with outdoor recreators,[2] a sample of outdoor recreation catalogues, and a *National Geographic* article on the best hikes. We do not conceive of the interviews as representative of all recreators at all national parks. However, the interview transcripts constitute a case study that reveals insights about the assumptions and approaches recreators bring with them. We collected twenty-five catalogues from a variety of sources with an eye toward including local and international brands and multiple years (see Appendix). We selected a hiking-focused article from a well-known, information-driven source. A *National Geographic* article titled "World's Best Hikes," in which Peter Potterfield, the author, picks the best hikes from his 2005 book on classic hikes, exemplifies the genre of outdoor recreation guides. Although not representative of the entirety of outdoor recreation discourse, these three texts represent how discourse circulates through mainstream sources compared to discourse produced by recreators themselves. This enabled us to see how the conceptualizations of being away from unknown others in nature aligned with, contradicted, or complemented one another across these texts. These artifacts came together to provide a picture of a dominant discourse in outdoor recreation, particularly as related to hiking. We analyzed them using a generative method of criticism, conducting initial analysis for emergent themes, developing a framework, and then subsequent analysis to gather specific examples.

A PLACE OF ONE'S OWN

The outdoor recreation discourses we examined demonstrate how fragmented texts create an argument for the desirability of finding a place of their own by venturing to remote, crowd-free, wilderness places. Our initial

thought was that that most recreators desire solitude. However, our three texts complicate this interpretation. Although being alone was important, being away from unknown others was more important. In other words, retreating to *a place of one's own* means being able to decide who can and cannot be in the area. Just as one would not expect strangers to sit down on the living room couch, having a place of one's own implies that the most desirable way to experience nature is either alone or with a small group of friends or family. To get to such places, discourses suggest that recreators venture to remote places.

Wild Nature

Our analysis indicates that outdoor recreation in wilderness places is set up as the most desirable form of experiencing "nature." As outdoor recreation becomes more popular as a way to connect with nature, people seek more remote places to recreate. In other words, people feel a greater connection with a "natural" place when the place feels remote and uncivilized, thus entrenching the nature/culture divide. This perception constructs wilderness areas, areas away from civilization, as the best places to recreate.

All of our artifacts emphasized the desirability of wilderness through explicit words or images. Words supported the idea that recreation away from human culture was the best kind. Potterfield refers to "wild" places, "seemingly endless beaches of blinding white sands and surreal rock formations," "remote" locations, and a forest "so dense it seriously complicates navigation." In an interview, one woman described a climbing trip she took as her best outdoor recreation experience. She said, "It was a nice way, for 30 days, to get away from everything man-made." Many respondents stated that "escape," "to be away from the city mostly," and "to be more closely connected to the natural world and away from the busy, civilized world" were reasons they recreate outdoors. Even though they conceptualize outdoor recreation in broad strokes, their best experiences and the reasons for doing it at all strongly correlate to escaping the confines of culture.

In terms of images, the covers of catalogues never stated that people were in wilderness areas, but implied it through a lack of structures, paths, and people. They were never depicted in places crowded with people like cities but going even further, there was a noticeable lack of culture in the photographs as well. The cover photos did not show people in cabins or cafes but did show them outside, in open spaces. Even more significant were the photos of people on paths, evidence of human (and sometimes animal) use. The paths on which people walked, when they were there at all, were the only ones visible, implying the remote location. The images included in "World's Best Hikes" reinforced these norms. Although people were in almost every photograph, typically there was only one or two present in a seemingly natural place. And in only two exceptions did the viewer see evidence of cultures—towns in the background or many people walking.

These descriptions of getting into the wild or escaping culture point to one implied benefit of being away from people and culture: challenge. In finding a place of one's own, many recreators want to be challenged by being away from comforts and immediate help. They want to experience the "awe-inspiring," "amazing," "challenging," "wild," and "off-the-beaten-path" places as well. They find these places by reading magazines, trail books, and "guide books or enthusiast websites." They are willing to venture quite far to achieve the sense of newness and novelty. In researching places beforehand, participants can find out important information. The fact that the covers of the catalogues, the *National Geographic* article, and participants' answers align is no coincidence. It is impossible to say if the magazine articles make people search for more remote places or if people's desires drive the choices of catalogue manufacturers. Regardless, they unite to present a message about where to go to feel connected to nature and what constitutes and spoils nature.

Avoiding Crowds

Contemporary discourse about outdoor recreation supports the idea that connecting with nature happens in solitude and with known others. Explicit mentions of "avoiding crowds" or "being alone" illustrate how people construct a sense of place in nature. For example, in Potterfield's first entry in "World's Best Hikes," he describes a hike in Sweden: "The vibe here is 'far north,' with palpable emptiness and low-angled light that stirs the soul." "Emptiness" refers to an absence of humans and their technologies. Nature cannot be empty because it is full of all sorts of things like animals, trees, snow, and sky. This theme of seeking out emptiness and "hav[ing] it to yourself" surfaces in nine of the fifteen hikes described in the *National Geographic* article. In reference to the Grand Canyon, he advises, "Everybody does this hike in September to October or April to May, so go in March or November for a more contemplative experience." Potterfield recommends times to go and less popular routes that will allow the reader to avoid crowds: "May to September for drier weather; April or October for more solitude." Potterfield never explicitly explains that nature is supposed to be enjoyed alone, but he strongly implies it.

Our interviews confirm this finding with people reporting again and again that they try to get away from busy areas when they recreate outdoors. One person stated.

> I prefer places that are close and not crowded. This is usually a trade off. I will occasionally choose a trail/lake/mountain that I know are of lower quality (i.e. less maintained, not as nice) if it means I have a lower chance of running into a lot of people.

This idea of getting away from people was a common theme in the interviews. However, we also found that people wanted to develop relationships with known others when they recreated. People reported wanting to "be social," develop "fellowship with friend," "spend time with friends/partner," and simply "be with my girlfriend" as reasons they recreated. Notably what people are not seeking are new friendships. Nobody said that they recreated to meet people, encounter people who are different from a normal social circle, or feel the excitement of being with many other people.

In explaining where they like to recreate, people expressed that a lack of other people was desirable. Even those who saw themselves as outside the outdoor recreation subculture confirmed this finding. One self-identified "sightseer" said, "I don't want to go there because at the height of the season, on a weekend, it's going to be full of tourists." One couple reported that they "never camp in campgrounds" because they want to experience being alone together. One of them stated that they were going to hike more trails in the frontcountry of Zion National Park, but "frankly we were ready to get away from the people. National parks are really oppressive to us." They said explicitly,

> We're disappointed by the national park crowd density. I mean, we know it's happening; we know it's going to be there, in a sense. But you go there and you kind of hope it's going to be better than it is. And no, it's not better than we thought. It's as bad as what we thought.

This sentiment pervaded the interviews among a wide range of visitors. One who was camping in the administrative campground in Zion National Park explained that it was

> nice because of the mere fact that I don't have to deal with all these tourists. You might not always like it, but you are going to have people—no matter where you go—that are going to be trying to get into the country, trying to get into the environment that you are in.

A local resident told me where he liked to recreate best: "I usually go up on the east side of the park and just find a place and just wander around back there, try and get away from the people."

The images on the catalogue covers and photographs that accompany the Potterfield article also communicate the message of a place of one's own by showing only a small group recreating instead of showing no one at all or hoards of people. Most (twenty-two) of the twenty-five catalogue covers we analyzed, and most (eleven) of the fifteen "World's Best Hikes" photographs featured between one and four people engaged in hiking or other outdoor activity in nonurban places. It is important that most of these images do not show nature in its ideal form (i.e., completely absent of people) but rather in the ideal form for outdoor recreation (i.e., with a small group of known

others). The small groups imply that these people recreate together but not with unknown others, which communicates a feeling of ownership. The text and images indicate that by choosing the least crowded time of year to hike a certain trail and choosing the people with whom to hike, recreators exercise some control over how many unknown others they encounter. Although the people are not completely alone, they have the opportunity to be. Or if they want to be with other people, they can invite friends and family to join them. In most public places, people do not have this kind of control. At a crowded restaurant or movie theater, people must sit where they can regardless of who is near. But at home, a place of ownership, people can choose who joins them. The photographs communicate this possibility in nature, and make it desirable, by showing almost only small groups of recreators. This discourse cultivates the idea that people can find a place of one's own in wild nature and away from unknown others.

IMPLICATIONS

Our analysis reveals a discourse within nonurban outdoor recreation that stresses finding a place of one's own to truly experience nature. Overwhelmingly, this discourse highlights the desirability of engaging in outdoor recreation either alone or with a small group of known others in a wilderness area away from the signs of human culture. Although this discourse does support the idea of developing sense of place and experiencing the natural world, we argue that it does so in problematic ways.

First, the emphasis on being away from other people reifies the nature/culture divide. By challenging this rhetorical construction of a place of one's own, we join other scholars who argue that we can cultivate more ecologically sound practices by breaking down the nature/culture divide and pointing out the similarities between humans and nature (e.g., DeLuca; Milstein et al.; Sowards). The desire to experience more and more remote places enforces the idea that nature can only be found in places that are not crowded with humans and their technologies. However, with the constant drive of outdoor recreators seeking new less-crowded places, this may unintentionally reduce the amount of land considered to be wilderness. In other words, the new peopleless places can only stay peopleless for so long, thus motivating people to seek out new places. This can lead to the degradation of the environment in two ways. In one way, this reification of "real" nature as peopleless and wild can lead to the destruction of other places that are not perceived to be natural such as cities or even crowded parts of national parks. In another way, this desire to see "nature" in remote wilderness places can lead to the actual degradation of those places. People's presence, even if not directly destructive, can have untold impacts on the ecosystem. And the more people who come to these remote places, the more risk of destruction.

We recognize the potential contradiction in our argument that we need to protect these remote wilderness areas from the destruction of people and our deconstruction of the nature/culture dualism. However, we do not see it as a contradiction. Certain places need to be protected from human use and degradation—in both wilderness and urban areas. Val Plumwood illustrates the oppositional consequences of the nature/culture divide, how we at once need the distinction between nature and culture and how it harms the environmental case. She states,

> Without some distinction between nature and culture, or between humans and nature, it becomes very difficult to present any defense against the total humanization of the world, or to achieve the recognition of the presence and labor of nature which must be a major goal of any thoroughgoing environmental movement. For that we need sensitivity to the interplay of self and other, and to the interweaving and interdependence of nature/culture narratives in the land. But we need not and should not construct the distinction as a binary opposition, as the Western dualism of nature and culture has done. (676)

The argument that some places need to prohibit human use does not necessarily entrench the idea that nature and culture are separate. Rather it suggests that we need to limit human impact on the environment—not because it is pristine and without humans but because places need to recover from human damage.

The second implication of our analysis is that finding a place of one's own may be less about developing a sense of place and more about human competition and ownership. In other words, the aspect of finding a place of one's own that involves challenge, exploration, and adventure emphasizes being able to control how one experiences a place, which connects to the idea of conquering nature. One respondent said that (s)he hiked off trail "because trails are too confining. I'd rather have an original experience with nature—not shared by anyone else." Relph argues, "A sense of place that stresses uniqueness to the virtual exclusion of a recognition of shared qualities is an ugly and violent thing. It is indeed a poisoned sense of place" (223). In this sense, the stressing of finding a unique and special place may encourage a sense of ownership of nature.

In the end, we understand the power of peopleless experiences in nature toward developing sense of place and an associated environmental ethic. We have both had these types of experiences. John Muir, Henry David Thoreau, Dave Foreman, Terry Tempest Williams, and Rebecca Solnit describe these experiences. Rather, our critique focuses on how outdoor recreation discourses of finding a place of one's own, although seemingly pro-environmental, may actually be harmful to the natural world through encroachment, feelings of ownership, and, worse, material damage to the environment. At risk of reinforcing the nature/culture divide, we counter

the outdoor recreation discourse of a place of one's own with a call to let animals and plants have a place of their own, just sometimes.

APPENDIX: LIST OF CATALOGUES

Canada Goose, Canada, 2008. International product manufacturing.
Icebreaker, New Zealand, 2006–2007. International product manufacturing.
Icebreaker, New Zealand, 2006. International product manufacturing.
Kirkham's, U.S.A., 2007. Local store.
Kirkham's, U.S.A., 2008. Local store.
Kirkham's, U.S.A., 2008–2009. Local store.
Kirkham's, U.S.A., 2009. Local store.
Patagonia, U.S.A., 2006–2007. International product manufacturing and stores.
Patagonia, U.S.A., 2009. International product manufacturing and stores.
R.E.I., U.S.A., 1972–1973. International product manufacturing and stores.
R.E.I., U.S.A., 1973. International product manufacturing and stores.
R.E.I., U.S.A., April, 2007. International product manufacturing and stores.
R.E.I., U.S.A., May, 2007. International product manufacturing and stores.
R.E.I., U.S.A., June, 2007. International product manufacturing and stores.
R.E.I., U.S.A., "Fall Preview," September, 2007. International product manufacturing and stores.
R.E.I., U.S.A., "Labor Day Sale," September, 2007. International product manufacturing and stores.
R.E.I., U.S.A., October, 2007. International product manufacturing and stores.
R.E.I., U.S.A., "Winter Sale," November, 2007. International product manufacturing and stores.
R.E.I., U.S.A., September, 2008. International product manufacturing and stores.
R.E.I., U.S.A., October, 2008. International product manufacturing and stores.
R.E.I., U.S.A., "Warm-Up-For-Winter Sale," December, 2008. International product manufacturing and stores.
R.E.I., U.S.A., "Celebrate It," December, 2008. International product manufacturing and stores.
R.E.I., U.S.A., May, 2009. International product manufacturing and stores.
Snow Peak, Japan, 2008. International product manufacturing.
Wasatch Touring, U.S.A., 2008. Local store.

NOTES

1. Different degrees of wilderness comprise national parks. Frontcountry areas include some of the following: roads, visitor centers, campgrounds or hotels, cafeterias, and gift shops. Backcountry areas usually require hiking for access and have fewer (if any) facilities.
2. A short (ten-question) online survey contained seventy responses and produced forty-three pages of transcripts. Twenty in-person interviews gathered at Zion National Park produced over 230 pages of transcripts. Both are available on request. One of us conducted the interviews at Zion National Park over the period of a month during May and June of 2009 in different parts (e.g., backcountry, on trails, in campgrounds, in the town outside the park, in non-public areas of the park) of the park to gain access to a variety of recreators. Participants were selected more or less randomly. We gained IRB exemption status for both sets of interviews.

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