



Wi-Fi in the Wilderness

by Chris Jensen

A few years ago, editors of the *Oxford Junior Dictionary* came under fire after it was reported that they had deleted scores of words from their new edition—words about nature they no longer deemed relevant to childhood. Gone were *acorn*, *dandelion*, *fern*, *heather*, *heron*, *ivy*, *nectar*, *pasture*, and *willow*. In their place came *blog*, *broadband*, *bullet-point*, *chatroom*, *cut-and-paste*, and *voicemail*. Some were outraged by the news, seeing fresh evidence of a generation's growing estrangement from the landscape, of its divorce from the natural world in a glut of virtual indoor activity. Others, however, defended the Oxford editors, noting that dictionaries are supposed to document usage, not dictate it. "Attacking a dictionary for removing archaic words," wrote one critic, "is like punching your thermometer when it's cold."

Whatever your response, the episode highlights a growing cultural angst over how the digital age is changing our relationship to nature—evidenced by concerns about "Nature Deficit Disorder" or about whether millennials will care enough to protect our national parks in the future. The controversy also calls to mind the well-worn nature-vs-culture narrative, a bi-polar pattern of thought embedded in U.S. cultural life since at least the Wilderness Act of 1964. We have been trained to assume that the *human* and the *natural* are radical opponents in a zero-sum game: when one gains, the other loses. After all, the purpose of the Wilderness Act was to protect natural spaces from the technological fad of the day, the automobile. So roads, cars, and any motorized machines—now even bicycles—have been written out of the wilderness script. The famous legislation, decades in the making and now admired worldwide, sought to protect large areas of land that were "untrammeled by man," retained a "primeval character," and had "outstanding opportunities for solitude." And it did this. Marvelously. But cognitively, it came at a price: We have tended to overlook the truth that humans are part of nature, and that nature and culture are better viewed as allies than enemies. Indeed, it took us decades to acknowledge that our very idea of wilderness is a unique blend of American frontier ideology and the Romantic sublime: a complicated, imperfect cultural invention that, among other ironies, had to evict or ignore Native Americans entirely.

So it's not exactly a matter of choosing between *ferns* and *flash-drives* or between *daisies* and *downloads*. Rather it's about acting thoughtfully in a rapidly-evolving world that includes all of these things, which in fact requires all of these things. If Henry David Thoreau is correct in his famous dictum that "In Wildness is the preservation of the World," then Wendell Berry is equally right to emphasize its corollary: "In human culture is the preservation of wildness ... If wildness is to survive, then we must preserve it."

One of the early champions of wilderness preservation, Aldo Leopold, spoke of the importance of "contrast value"—the degree to which our outdoor recreational experience contrasted with our everyday life. Writing in 1941, he noted that our gadgets tend to destroy contrast value when we carry them into the wild. "I am not such a purist as to disdain all of them," he wrote. Yet he argued that some degree of "gadget inhibition" was crucial. "Most tourists," he said, "have no gadget inhibitions whatever."

It's true that hikers have always carried their favorite technologies in their packs and pockets: maps and compasses, lightweight tents, aluminum cook-stoves. But as connectivity has begun to creep into remote corners of the earth, the tech boom has spawned all manner of devices from iPhones to laptops to handheld GPS units. Now many of us are wondering if we are dealing with something of a different magnitude. Sure, we've preserved more than five percent of U.S. land as officially designated wilderness. But given our new wireless tools and toys—and the habits they engender—the question is, will we able (or willing) to preserve the wilderness *experience*?

In our times, uninhibited tourists with high-flying drones have bedeviled many a wildland manager; as a result, agencies have acted to prohibit drones in most national parks. But wi-fi is more complicated. Today in some places it's possible to enter the backcountry and find enough signal to maintain habits of uploading and texting that we have back home. Travelers on the Pacific Crest Trail of late have attested to this. And if Google's reported \$3 billion plan to expand global connectivity via mini-satellites comes to fruition, then high-speed, broadband Internet could become a reality in our 700-plus wilderness areas in the Lower 48. As recently as last fall, one of Google's internet balloons—from its so-called Project Loon—was spotted high above Yellowstone National Park. Is this in keeping with the spirit of the Wilderness Act? As Jason Mark wrote a few years ago in *The Atlantic Monthly*, "There's one key difference between a Gore-tex rain slicker and a satellite-connected cellphone: while the first enables an adventure into remote places, the second threatens to disrupt it."

*So it's not exactly a matter of choosing
between ferns and flash-drives or
between daisies and downloads.*

Disruption, distraction, distancing—these are the perceived risks. Some have suggested that a new preservation movement is needed to ensure wilderness areas are kept free from the reach of internet telecommunications. It remains to be seen whether this movement will take hold, and whether the seemingly inexorable movement toward hyper-connectivity can even be forestalled. What does seem certain is what David Brower, the former Sierra Club executive director, said decades ago: "All a conservation group can do is to defer something. There's no such thing as a permanent victory. After we win a battle, the wilderness is still there, and still vulnerable."

If our ever-vulnerable wilderness succumbs to the internet, we might wonder, how will the experience of solitude be changed? And—for those who cherish literature almost as much as nature itself—what will happen to our habits of storytelling? In a selfie generation with an eight-second attention span, we are better at sharing images—broadcasting narcissistic bits of information via cellphone, Snapchat, or Twitter—than at doing the slow, hard work of producing thoughtful writing. A recent *National Geographic* article quoted a young man on a float trip in the Grand Canyon who asked, “If you can’t share it now, is it really happening?”

Having developed and taught course entitled *Wilderness Literature* (ENG 269) at Portland Community College, I decided to turn to some literary companions for perspective on all of this. Here are four things I found:

First, mechanical devices can indeed narrow our vision and limit our experience of the wild. A case in point comes from Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*. Fifty years ago, at Arches National Monument (now National Park) in Utah, Abbey reflected on his humble flashlight. He writes, “Like many other mechanical gadgets it tends to separate a man from the world around him. If I switch it on my eyes adapt to it and I can see only the small pool of light which it makes in front of me; I am isolated.” Abbey’s sense of separation from the natural world becomes even more acute when he cranks up the old generator outside his trailer so he can power his stove and some lights: “The desert and the night are pushed back—I can no longer participate in them or observe; I have

exchanged a great and unbounded world for a small, comparatively meager one.” Abbey’s experience illustrates sociologist Neil Postman’s observation that for every advantage offered by a new technology, there is a corresponding disadvantage; it will both give us something and take

If our ever-vulnerable wilderness succumbs to the internet, we might wonder, how will the experience of solitude be changed?

something away (and in a consumer culture we naturally hear more about advantages than negative possibilities). Further, Postman reminds us that we tend to accord our new technologies “mythic” status. That is, we tend to accept them as inexorable facts of nature rather than what they are: an invention of culture that can be controlled, restrained, or modified. “We need to proceed with our eyes wide open,” he writes, “so that we may use technology rather than be used by it.”

Second, solitude is intrinsic to wilderness—an experience now threatened less by roads and cars than by the invisible in-roads of wireless connectivity. The literary critic Northrop Frye once said, “It is impossible to think of an ideal human life except as an alternation of individual and social life, as equally a belonging and an escape.” *Wilderness as escape*. From prophets to monks to mystics, the solo flight into the wilderness has been a perennial theme in human experience; in American literature, John Muir warns of the “deadly apathy of luxury” and exhorts us to “break clear away once in a while and climb a mountain,” while Ernest Hemingway in “Big Two-Hearted River” portrays the Michigan woods as a sort of deep therapy for PTSD. David Douglas puts it this way in his 1987 book *Wilderness Sojourn*: “The wilderness is a place of rest—not in the sense of being motionless, for the lure, after all, is to move, to round the next bend,” he says. “The rest comes in the isolation from distractions, in the slowing of the daily centrifugal forces that keep us off balance.”



It's hard not to wonder, then, if our digital technologies will redefine our encounter with this parallel world, will break the enchantment with the very preoccupations and apprehensions we most need to escape. The psychological dimensions here are striking. Sherry Turkle of MIT, author of *Alone Together*, argues that our hand-held wireless devices have trained us in the art of distraction and the habit of not being present: we tend to escape into our phones, away from genuine intimacy, away from wherever we happen to be at the time. Beyond that, she says, one of the gratifying but dangerous fantasies they offer is *the promise that we'll never have to be alone*. For many of us today, solitude has become a problem to be solved rather than an opportunity to be embraced. Our habitual reach for our phones—even on the trail—may be a flight from the harder, and potentially more rewarding, experience of solitude.

Third, in our hurried modern context of industrial progress and economic growth, it is difficult to know when or how to restrain ourselves. Wendell Berry addresses this difficulty in his 1982 essay “Getting Along with Nature” in *Home Economics*. He writes, “We do not know how ambitious to be, what or how much we may safely desire, [or] when or where to stop.” Berry’s useful term “technological elegance” grows out of his concern about proper human scale amidst to the too-bigness of industrial agriculture, industrial transportation, industrial healthcare, and, presumably, industrial tourism. To explain the idea of scale, Berry gives this analogy: “A proper human sound, we may say, is one that allows other sounds to be heard”—suggested by the difference between amplified and unamplified music in the countryside, or the difference between the sound of a motorboat and the sound of oarlocks. A properly scaled human economy or technology, Berry continues, allows a diversity of other creatures to thrive while conferring on the user freedom, simplicity, and even joy. So rather than fixating on technological breakthroughs (*Is it faster? Is it more powerful? Will it save time?*) he suggests we consider technological elegance (*Is it good for nature?*)

Is it good for culture? Is it healthy?) This idea may be an important tool in the larger conversation. Do our new devices confer freedom and simplicity? Are they appropriate in the wilderness?

Finally, wilderness travelers have always had to choose wisely about what to bring and what to leave behind—and even the best technology has never been a good substitute for skill and common sense. For example, satellite emergency devices have become hot sellers for backcountry travelers in recent years. As sales have spiked, so have the numbers of frivolous false alarms and nonemergency calls: take the fathers and sons hiking in the Grand Canyon who activated their emergency device three times in 48 hours because their water tasted salty; or the

Do our new devices confer freedom and simplicity? Are they appropriate in the wilderness?

hiker who called for help because her tentmate was snoring too loud; or the PCT hiker who pressed the device's emergency button eighteen times because a tree stump was smoldering after being struck by lightning. Still, these devices can be life-savers, and it's true that we can imperil ourselves by disregarding useful tools, whether in the form of portable technologies or

traditional wisdom. The latter is embodied by the protagonist in Jack London's famous "To Build A Fire"—the nameless newbie who, in his hubris, scoffs at the old-timer's advice not to travel in the Yukon when it gets colder than 50 below. He pays with his life. The former is exemplified by the figure of Christopher McCandless in Jon Krakauer's 1996 best-seller *Into the Wild*. It was for want of a simple topo map that the starving 24-year-old was unable to locate a cable-crossing on the Teklanika River that might have brought him safely across the swollen Alaskan stream. All he had was a tattered highway map he'd picked up at a gas station. Sadly, he died stranded just weeks later with an annotated copy of *Doctor Zhivago* at his side.

In closing, we might return to the dictionary, where there are still plenty of words to describe the wild embrace of nature—*wet, sharp, steep, bright, radiant, visceral, variegated, luminous, ineffable, Other*. We surely need the experience they convey, not just to know what it means to be human, but to keep our language healthy, too. As Jason Mark observed in *The Atlantic*, if we are forced to grapple with uncompromising elements in nature, we might be reminded of the original meanings of things: "A *net*, for example, is meant to catch and capture. A *web* is something you get stuck in." Others have observed this crucial link between language and nature. A half-century ago, the Oxford don C.S. Lewis in *The Four Loves* explained what nature-lovers get from the wild: "an iconography," he calls it, a language of images that supplies meanings for abstract words like *fear* and *glory* while awakening our deepest human longings. A century before that, Ralph Waldo Emerson spoke of the dependence of language on nature, reminding us that even our abstract words derive from sensible things: *right* comes from *straight*, *wrong* from *twisted*, *spirit* from *wind*. "All spiritual facts," he wrote, "are represented by natural symbols."

Every generation needs these lessons. And every culture—especially ours, especially now—needs to work to preserve them.