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# Introduction

WILD HEARTS AND MINDS

*Ben A. Minteer and Jonathan B. Losos*

THE ARTIST Thomas Cole knew well what it meant to “civilize” the landscape. An émigré to the United States from Lancashire, he’d witnessed firsthand the force of industrial expansion as it transformed England’s rural districts in the early nineteenth century. It was an experience he didn’t wish to see repeated in his new home, a nation so closely identified with its seemingly endless wilderness. Arriving with his family in Philadelphia in 1818 at the age of seventeen, Cole soon moved to Pittsburgh, and then on to New York City. His time in New York was a turning point in his development as an artist, as Cole took his first trip up the Hudson River in the late summer of 1825 and saw the Catskill Mountains for the first time. Over the next several years, he explored the region’s wildlands, all the while sketching and recording his experiences.

Cole’s paintings of the Catskills captured the rough-hewn beauty of this rugged corner of the Northeast, a romantic depiction of the wilderness as a vast, powerful, yet ultimately beautiful place that offered not just a therapeutic retreat from industrial and commercial life, but the opportunity to commune with the transcendent. It was an aesthetic and cultural resource, Cole believed, that was increasingly imperiled in Jacksonian

America, a time of relentless economic and territorial expansion that left behind a devastating trail of ecological and social wreckage.

Cole was an artist, but he had a naturalist's eye and an empiricist's methodological instincts. He was one of the first painters in America to work directly from the field, and his interest in geology and natural history, as well as his emphasis on the critical importance of close observation, shaped the work that adorned his canvases. And those canvases quickly became some of the most prized works of American art ever produced, with Cole ascending to the role of the nation's premier landscape painter, father of the Hudson River School, and a powerful influence on a generation of prominent artists, from Asher Durand to Cole's student, Frederic Church.

Cole's excursions in the Catskills and New England's White Mountains also confronted him with the environmental consequences of early nineteenth-century economic development. He was increasingly distressed by the transformation of the countryside in the Northeast, especially the impacts of extensive timber harvesting in the 1830s. In 1836, Cole produced a remarkable series of paintings that dramatized his fear that Americans were courting disaster by "over-civilizing" the landscape and destroying the wilderness, what he and other nature romantics saw as the source of moral virtue and nationalistic pride.

*The Course of Empire* was a five-part sequence of canvases depicting the development of a single allegorical wild landscape, from a primordial state of nature, to a transitory pastoral scene, to the emergence of a gleaming imperial city. The mountain wilderness that dominates the image in the early paintings (fig. 1) gradually recedes and becomes partly obscured by the rise of civilization, a visual progression that conveys the passage of time and the march of "progress."

In the fourth painting in the series, Cole's visual narrative takes a dark turn. A swirling storm envelops the scene, which shows the formerly resplendent city being destroyed by an invading force, a violent and fiery sacking clearly meant to evoke the fall of Rome (fig. 2). The final painting in the sequence, *Desolation*, depicts the abandoned city in ruins, completing the cyclical historical view of the rise and fall of civilization. The mountain in the background reemerges more completely as the wilderness returns, reclaiming the broken city.



FIGURE 1. Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: The Savage State*, 1836. Oil on canvas, The New-York Historical Society. Source: Wikimedia Commons.



FIGURE 2. Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: Destruction*, 1836. Oil on canvas, The New-York Historical Society. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Although *The Course of Empire* features a generic European (presumably Mediterranean) setting, it's clear that the American audience was very much on Cole's mind when he created the series. As he wrote that same year (1836):

the most distinctive, and perhaps the most impressive, characteristic of American scenery is its wildness. It is the most distinctive, because in civilized Europe the primitive features of scenery have long since been destroyed or modified—the extensive forests that once overshadowed a great part of it have been felled—rugged mountains have been smoothed, and impetuous rivers turned from their courses to accommodate the tastes and necessities of a dense population—the once tangled wood is now a grassy lawn; the turbulent brook a navigable stream—crags that could not be removed have been crowned with towers, and the rudest valleys tamed by the plow.

Cole's paintings were thus not only masterfully realized artistic works, they were a warning to Americans that they, too, could suffer Europe's environmental fate. As Roderick Nash writes in his classic text, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Cole feared that if Americans lost the vital connection to their wild roots, they would lose the natural source of virtue and independence upon which the Republic rested. The ethical, spiritual, and political consequences of falling too far from wild nature would, in other words, prove catastrophic. Cole's anxiety, and his aesthetic and moral argument for preserving American nature (and especially the wilderness), would course through contemporaneous and subsequent generations of American naturalists and conservationists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, from Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau to John Muir, Teddy Roosevelt, and Aldo Leopold.

And yet the environmentalism expressed in works like *The Course of Empire* rested upon some assumptions that today seem problematic. Chief among them is the mythic sense of the wilderness as a sublime, "pristine," unpeopled place, a land out-of-time offering a cultural and political tabula rasa to a young nation claiming an environmentally and culturally rendered exceptionalism. It's a view that's been dismantled as we've accepted



FIGURE 3. Thomas Cole, *The Course of Empire: Desolation*, 1836. Oil on canvas, The New-York Historical Society. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

a more complex ecological and historical narrative, one defined instead by the flux of nature and the ubiquity of the human presence.

Cole's wilderness idealism and romanticism, that is, can appear naively antiquarian and even ethnocentric today, a melodramatic and preachy paean to a lost and imaginary world for a privileged audience. For those not inclined to ecological alarmism and, especially, for critics of the environmental movement, he becomes one of the first of a long line of Cassandra's warning that doom awaits any society in the grip of its own hubris and afflicted by an insatiable hunger for its dwindling natural resources. And yet for others, *The Course of Empire* remains an unsettling and even prophetic work, a cultural and historical reminder that we haven't escaped Cole's sequence—or heeded its ecological and moral lessons (fig. 3).

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“One of the penalties of an ecological education,” observed the eminent conservationist and writer Aldo Leopold, “is that one lives alone in a



world of wounds.” Nowadays we might quibble with the “alone” part—the ranks of the ecologically educated have swelled significantly since Leopold wrote those words in the early 1940s—but the larger point still rings true. The ecological discords and losses that have inexorably followed the expanding human footprint on the planet weigh heavily on the hearts and minds of conservationists and nature lovers today. From mass extinctions and the loss of wildlands to the spread of ocean microplastics and global climate change, Leopold’s “wounds” have never been more cutting, nor more worrying.

But as Leopold understood, the all-important desire to *act* in response to this awareness of ecological ills isn’t only a matter of ecological education, of learning how we’re disrupting biogeochemical cycles, rending ecological communities, pushing species off the evolutionary cliff, and destabilizing the climate. It’s also a question of getting people to *connect* with the species, places, and nature experiences most vulnerable to our expanding activities and development pathways.

This connection, in turn, can lead to a deeper aesthetic, moral, and emotional bond with the natural world that augments the scientific understanding. Key to this process, Leopold believed (as have the generations of ecologists and conservationists traveling in his wake), is our ability to nourish and sustain a commitment to *naturalism*: a curiosity about biological diversity and natural history and an abiding concern for the wild as we push deeper into a human-shaped and increasingly technological and urban future. Articulating and defending this ethos, and understanding both its demands and delights, is the primary motivation of this book.

*The Heart of the Wild* is a meditation on the urgency of learning about, experiencing, and caring for nature and the wild in a time of expanding human impact. Our authors are a top-flight group of scientists, environmental studies scholars, and nature writers whose work and thought have advanced our understanding of the beauty, diversity, and vulnerability of nature (wild and otherwise) and our responsibility to learn from and sustain it. In this book, we asked them to assay the trends and forces—cultural, technological, and conceptual—that are reframing our understanding of nature and our relationship to it, includ-

ing those that seem to be pulling us farther away from wild species and places each passing day.

Specifically, we invited our authors to respond to one or both of the following questions, which together serve as the organizing force binding this collection: What do we need to observe, experience, and value in nature and the wild as it changes under human influence in order to square our role within it, now and in the future? And how can we keep a love of nature and wild things alive in an increasingly human-defined age? Although each contributor brings a unique perspective, background, and voice to these questions, three main themes emerge from the essays that follow.

One is the rapidly changing landscape and shifting assumptions of biological conservation, a concern that drives the discussion in the book's first section ("Conservation's Shifting Ground"). The common message emerging from these essays is that we need to relinquish older notions of privileging native species in unaltered, unchanging, and "pristine" places, that is, those elements of nature orthodoxy that depict human activity as inherently polluting an otherwise spotless ecological order. Indeed, as Emma Marris writes, we need to understand instead how the human presence can be "woven into the web without destroying it." Rick Shine draws a similar conclusion, arguing that we must adapt to changing times and accept our ecological disturbances, our wounded wildernesses, for the beauty and knowledge they still offer us. Even Australia's notorious cane toad has a role to play in such reshuffled ecosystems. Dingoes, too: as one of us (Jonathan) writes in his essay, this "dog gone wild" compels us to both rethink our ecological assumptions and rearrange the targets of conservation for the Anthropocene. Hal Herzog's reflections on the wildness of domestic cats and the uncomfortable ethical questions raised by our commitment to these beloved predators remind us how our assumptions about the moral and evolutionary gulf between wild and domestic species quickly collapse under closer scrutiny.

In the final contribution to this section, Peter Raven broadens the temporal and spatial scope of the conversation with his sweeping account of our global biotic history. It is a story that drives home the

ecological and social stakes of the current moment—not to mention the precariousness of our wild future.

The second set of essays (“Wilderness, Wildness, Wild: Legacies and Liabilities”) explores the limitations and value of the idea of wilderness, and related conceptions of “wildness” and “wild,” in environmental ethics and practice. Kyle Whyte opens the section by questioning the value today of appeals to wild concepts in the effort to understand places and species, especially given the painful history of wilderness preservation for Indigenous peoples. Eileen Crist counters with a strong defense of the wilderness idea in the face of recent efforts to dethrone it by a cadre of revisionist environmentalists, arguing for its necessity in arresting societal drift toward an arrogant humanism.

In his contribution, another of us (Ben) reflects on the enduring value of the classic wilderness aesthetic in a “post-preservationist” era, profiling the life and work of one of its most influential, though often misunderstood, artists. And yet as Kathleen Dean Moore writes, appeals to the traditional beauty and power of wilderness and wildness may in the end not be enough. To make good on biologist E. O. Wilson’s striking proposal to place half the world under protection, Moore suggests we’ll need to embrace not just the pristine wild, but also “feral” lands: places once “thoroughly trampled and trammled,” but that are evolving now outside of significant human influence and control.

The last section (“Knowing Nature in the Human Age”) emphasizes the vital role of natural history and the importance of direct experience in keeping us rooted to nature (both wild and not), even in—perhaps especially in—the midst of significant ecological, social, and technological change. “We are what we pay attention to,” Tom Fleischner argues, and we will only be able to keep a love of nature alive by choosing to turn away from the human and technological toward the natural and ecological. Martha Crump similarly writes how close observation of nature, when paired with a deeper emotional connection to it, can have a transformative impact, especially on children who haven’t been fully captured by the tempos and toys of the digital age. And yet, as Susan Clayton and Bill Adams point out (respectively), technologically mediated ways of experiencing the wild, from virtual nature to video games, may not always

be anathema to the ecological connections and the natural empathy Crump and Fleischner commend. Digital devices are often caricatured as the bane of conservation and wilderness ethics, but both Clayton and Adams illustrate how they can teach us important ecological lessons and values, perhaps even how to find “heart” in the digital wild. That’s especially true if such technology can connect a demographically diverse audience to shared environmental experiences that don’t require exclusive access to a shrinking number of remote wildlands.

It is an idea that’s powerfully exemplified by Christopher Schell in his discussion of the imaginative and critical resources of Afrofuturism and Black joy, especially Schell’s vision for how these expressions and meanings can inform a more equitable and vibrant social and ecological future. Indeed, as Joel Berger and Gary Nabhan both demonstrate, it may in the end be the human dramas—which in their essays include those of wildlife caretakers, curious naturalists, and the denizens of harsh ice and desert environs—that will inspire the most hope. They remind us that stories about nature are often most compelling when they are also stories about people, and about the human and ecological bonds that tether us together.

Finally, Harry Greene, in the book’s afterword, closes out the discussion by advocating an ecological and aesthetic vision of the wild in which we’re respectful participants rather than passive spectators. Most of our authors, including the two of us, have been influenced by Harry’s life and work, which provides the personal, intellectual, and literary inspiration—and heart—of *The Heart of the Wild*.

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Thomas Cole produced another noteworthy painting the same year as his *The Course of Empire* series, a large, panoramic work depicting the Connecticut River Valley in Western Massachusetts. It was a dramatically bifurcated image: The left side of the painting represented the wilderness with the depiction of characteristically rugged terrain, ominous storm clouds, and battered trees. A cleared valley with farms and groves occupies the right side of the canvas, highlighted by the river turning back on



FIGURE 4. *Top*, Thomas Cole, *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, after a Thunderstorm—The Oxbow*, 1836. Oil on canvas, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Source: Wikimedia Commons. *Bottom*, detail from the bottom of the painting, showing the artist at his easel.



itself—a feature that drew tourists to the area during Cole’s time. Titled *View from Mount Holyoke, Northampton, Massachusetts, After a Thunderstorm*, the painting is commonly known as *The Oxbow* (fig. 4).

One reading of Cole’s painting is that he’s making a visual argument for the harmonious blend of the wild and civilized on the American landscape. That is, the pastoral scene on the right side of the canvas is the golden mean, the “middle landscape” that contained the best of

both worlds—wilderness and civilization—while avoiding the excesses of each. It's a reading that fits with Cole's often personal response to the raw wilderness, which could be complicated. Although he was enamored of the wildlands of his adopted home, like many nature preservationists (from Henry David Thoreau to Edward Abbey) he also felt pulled by many of the comforts, achievements, and above all, the companionship offered by society and settled life.

And yet there's another interpretation of *The Oxbow*, one that views it as less conciliatory and more challenging. Note that Cole painted himself in the scene, appearing as a very small figure in the bottom middle of the image hard at work on his easel. He's facing the viewer, and perhaps confronting us as well with a question: What future will we choose? In this reading, the shape of the river becomes a literal question mark on the land.

Nearly two centuries later Cole's question still confronts us, albeit reframed and modified for our own time. Can we keep a love of nature and the wild alive as we push deeper into this human age? Can we balance a respect for our valued environmental and conservation traditions while also recognizing the need for change—and the often jarringly different contexts presented by today's and tomorrow's ecologies, values, and peoples? What really resides at the heart of the wild, and what does this mean in an increasingly human-occupied and technophilic age? We hope the essays that follow can help us think through these barbed but vital questions as we continue to move, even if only metaphorically, across Cole's canvases.

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