WILDERNESS – A MORAL COUNTER WORLD
A TYPOLOGY OF EUROPEAN PERCEPTIONS OF WILD NATURE
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Abstract

Wilderness is a notoriously ambiguous concept. Discussions on the topic feature a broad range of competing implicit views of what constitutes wilderness, wilderness or wild nature and of why we should cherish or disapprove it. In our paper, we develop a systematic typology of different perceptions of wilderness that exist in contemporary western European cultures. Our analysis is based on the well-established theory that what constitutes wilderness is not the specific biophysical properties of an area but rather the specific meanings ascribed to it according to cultural patterns of interpretation (cf. Nash, 1967/2001, Cronon, 1996). What these interpretations—which include projections of people's inner wilderness onto outer nature—essentially have in common is that an area is regarded as a moral counter-world to culture (Kirchhoff and Tred, 2000).

We assume that perceptions of wilderness are indeed always subjective and idiosyncratic but at the same time that they rely on shared intersubjective, culturally shaped patterns of interpretation. These have been internalized through socialization and are usually deployed unconsciously. Our thesis is that the main types of contemporary perceptions of wilderness can be reconstructed on the basis of a clearly defined set of classical worldviews that arose during the Enlightenment period and in critical response to it. This is, however, not to deny that these classical worldviews and their related perceptions of wilderness have been modified since their emergence.

Enlightenment notions of wilderness

Early Enlightenment wilderness as a place of unspoilt divine exaltation

In medieval Christendom uncultivated nature was mainly regarded as a site of the sinister and the demonic. It was considered as corrupted by the Fall, as natura lapsa. For example, mountains were regarded as the remains of a once flat earth destroyed by the Flood, with the seas as the remains of that Flood where the evil resides. This negative perception of wilderness as an obstacle to a godly life was dominant well into the 17th century.

In the 17th century, however, Christian perceptions of wilderness changed fundamentally. It now became possible to attribute positive meanings to wilderness as well. A main precondition for this change was the introduction of an aesthetic of the infinite. Whereas the world had traditionally been believed to be finite (for only God could be infinite), it was now assumed that God's attributes also applied to His creation. On this basis, Shaftesbury famously explained the fact that ‘wildness pleasures as follows: If humans abandon themselves to purposeless observation of nature unchanged by human action, they understand its divine harmonious order in a reasonable Exstasy. It is exalted by that wild nature that seems to be unordered and inexpedient from the perspective of human ideas of order and utility that features a place of pristine divine order that has remained unspoilt by men.

Liberalism: wilderness as an arena of war, an object of appropriation and a place of freedom

With the Enlightenment disentanglement from theological worldviews, new secularised concepts of individuality and society emerged and, concomitantly to them, new meanings of wilderness. In liberalism, classical proponents being Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, wilderness—understood as a region that is unexplored, uncontrolled, and unutilised—assumes an essentially double meaning, a negative and a positive one.

On the one hand, wilderness symbolises the pre-societal state of nature in which the natural urge for self-preservation leads to a state of war that pits everyone against everyone else. Accordingly, wilderness is perceived as being chaotic and dangerous nature. It must and can be explored, controlled and exploited.

On the other hand, wilderness is perceived as the symbolic and real place where the individual human being can live according to his or her own particular nature without being constrained by governmental rules or social conventions. This interest in the unregulated non-human nature corresponds with an appreciation for human non-conformity which is corresponding to ‘genius, mental vigour, and moral courage’, and as it is mirrored in the picturesque, introduced by William Gilpin, as an independent aesthetic category between the beautiful and the sublime.

Democratism: wilderness as a medium of self-experience for the autonomous subject

In Enlightenment democratism, of which Immanuel Kant is a prominent representative, wilderness is perceived negatively as the domain of instincts and passions, and thus—contrary to liberal freedom—now assumed that God's attributes also applied to its creation. On this basis, Shaftesbury famously explained the fact that wilderness pleases as follows: If humans abandon themselves to purposeless observation of nature unchanged by human action, they understand its divine harmonious order in a reasonable Exstasy. It is exalted by that wild nature that seems to be unordered and inexpedient from the perspective of human ideas of order and utility that features a place of pristine divine order that has remained unspoilt by men.

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However, wilderness is also perceived positively—as we can see in the writings of Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, for example. Uncultivated nature and supposedly uncultivated people were stylised as valuable remnants of the assumed uncorrupted, positive origin of cultural development that had to be conserved as a constituent part of a developed culture. Wilderness was equated with a fountain of youth that was set against the degenerate life in the modern metropolis as a place of return to the evil, immoral wild as well as of suffocating democratic bureaucracy. By going into the wilderness, civilised persons can rekindle their natural capacity to experience and to be instinctively aware of the natural order.

Recent transformations of traditional notions of wilderness

So far we have described basic notions of wilderness that have emerged within European cultural history and have remained influential until today. In this section, we outline four important examples of recent transformations of the traditional notions of wilderness.

Wilderness as an area of natural ecological conditions

With the rise of the modern environmental movement in the 1960s the term “wilderness” has acquired the positive meaning of an area where ecological conditions are “natural”, that is, where they have been unchanged by humans. At least two ecologised perceptions of wilderness can be distinguished.

In the first, wilderness is cherished for its natural order because it is assumed that nature’s self-organisation has lead to a unique harmonious ecological order with a specific range of biodiversity. Human changes are regarded as disturbances that threaten a pristine, perfect order whose complexity transcends human capacities. This gives rise to the sentiment “let nature take its course”. This perception of wilderness represents a seemingly scientific reformulation of cosmological optimism as expressed in Shaftesbury’s view of wilderness as ultimately ordered and the ideology of the “balance of nature” which has been rejected in scientific ecology.

In the second ecologised perception, wilderness is cherished for its natural wildness, i.e. for the multitude of unregulated natural processes exhibited by the many and varied living beings, each of which is individually striving for existence. This perception of wilderness seems to be motivated by a longing for freedom from the social taming of instinctive nature. It is instantiated, for example, by German adventurer Rüdiger Nehberg, who seeks to reintegrate himself into nature by surviving in the “jungle” with only rudimentary equipment and by overcoming the cultural exigencies that fetter the “autonomy” of instinct.

Wilderness as a place of nature’s self-reassertion

Since the mid-1960s there has been a heightened sense of appropriation of formerly cultivated, urbanised or industrialised sites that now exhibit spontaneous growth of vegetation. Essential to this perception of wilderness is the fact that nature is perceived as having regained control. So, wilderness is perceived as a process or place of nature’s self-reassertion.

The traces of former human control or cultivation must, in this view, remain discernible in these places. It is the ambiguous character of wilderness combined with the relics of culture that accounts for the appeal of this wilderness. This ambiguity has led to the proliferation of a new kind of urban nature that emerges naturally in conditions intractably influenced by humans.

Wilderness as a place of thrill

In the context of nature-based extreme sports, wilderness has gained prominence as a place of thrill that offers an “escape from an increasingly regulated and sanitised way of living”. At least three versions of wilderness as a place of thrill can be distinguished.

According to the first version, the risk that something unforeseen or predictably dangerous will occur is experienced similarly to Burke’s “delightful horror”. It is seen as reestablishing contact to basic human emotions and physical responses from which one is estranged in comforting urban living.

Longoing for wilderness as a place of thrill is, in a second variant, motivated by a desire for authenticity as a remedy to the experience of alienation in contemporary urban life. This is reminiscent of the perception of wilderness described by Riehl. However, unhindered active physicality seems to have replaced contemplative introspection as a way to access feelings of authenticity.

In a third version, humans experience themselves as being in control by mastering the physical challenges posed by the wilderness. The self-assurance thus gained is reminiscent of Kantian autonomy in the experience of the sublime.
However, in contrast to Kant’s sublime, it is the sportsperson’s body that is being physically the sportsperson’s rational control and active use of their instincts and physical power.

Wilderness as sphere of essence and meaninglessness

The different perceptions of wilderness described so far have in common that wilderness serves as a meaningful counter-world with specific moral connotations. In contrast, in the context of existential nihilism, e.g. in Friedrich Nietzsche’s late work, wilderness and wild men become representations of an a-moral existence that transcends all moral evaluations. Wilderness is a place—or a time—in which all such evaluations appear to be suspended; wilderness is the sphere of essence and meaninglessness.

Conclusion

The typology of wilderness perceptions that we offer in this paper is intended as a heuristic tool that can be used to explore the place of competing notions of wilderness, wildness, and the wild. It does so by tracing back different or even contradictory current perceptions of wilderness to diverse meanings that are deeply rooted in our cultural history and in the conceptual history of the notion of “wilderness”, thus sensitising us to the fact that competing interpretations of an area as wilderness are ultimately ingrained in different worldviews. This is why all types of wilderness perceptions that we have described here will presumably be intelligible to us, even if we might have a personal preference for one or a few of them. And whether or not one adopts the view that these worldviews are ultimately of equal value and that one cannot make a rationally founded choice between them, it becomes clear that these conflicts can only be solved through a complex societal process of negotiation; they cannot be decided by reference to scientific facts.

Our analysis of some recently developed European perceptions of wilderness has revealed that the current spectrum of these perceptions is characterised by both persistent topoi and more recent trends. Among the latter, naturalisation—wilderness and in the perception of wilderness as a place of thrill—seems to be particularly influential. It has further become clear that perceptions of wilderness differ not only between different worldviews but that there can also be an ambiguity within one worldview be it that wilderness can be either appreciated or detested, e.g. as a sphere of freedom or a state of war, as in liberalism, or that one and the same perception of wilderness is inherently ambiguous, e.g. natural wilderness, as in German conservation or in the perception of wilderness as a place of nature’s self-representation.

Finally, our analysis suggests that caution must be exercised when it comes to importing US-American ideas of wilderness into Europe, something frequently proposed by proponents of wilderness in European nature conservation. This is not only because of differences in land-use patterns in each place but also because essential elements of the US American perception of wilderness are characteristically and exclusively American, e.g. the idea of a rugged individualism honed in the wilderness which serves as a basis for democratic socialisation.

Endnotes

2 Kängler 2008: 313.
3 The ideas presented in this paper are based on Kirchhoff/Vicenzotti 2014.
5 E.g., Lupp et al., 2011.
9 Nicholson, 1959; Corbin, 1985.
10 Most notably, Henry More claimed this view in his spiritualistic concept of space (Nicholson, 1959:133–143/271–283).
18 For the following, cf. Cooper, 1999; Trachtenberg, 2003.
20 We only go here into the Early Romanticism that, unlike Late Romanticism, was clearly distinct from conservatism.21 Pritchett/Planes, 2010.
23 Cf. Pratz, 1933.
25 Burke, 1757.
27 Burke, 1827.
28 Burke, 1827.
29 Burke, 1827.
30 Burke, 1827.
31 Vicenzotti/Trepl, 2009; Vicenzotti, 2011a:140–143.
34 Vicenzotti/Trepl, 2009; Vicenzotti, 2011a:161–172; for the transformation of this conservative perception of wilderness within National Socialism see Zechner, 2011.
37 Cf. Helleis et al., 2005.
42 Puchen, 2004:177.
43 However, nature is secondary in this version of thrill which can also be experienced in a totally artificial environment.44 Schneider/Reinhold, 1995.

References


