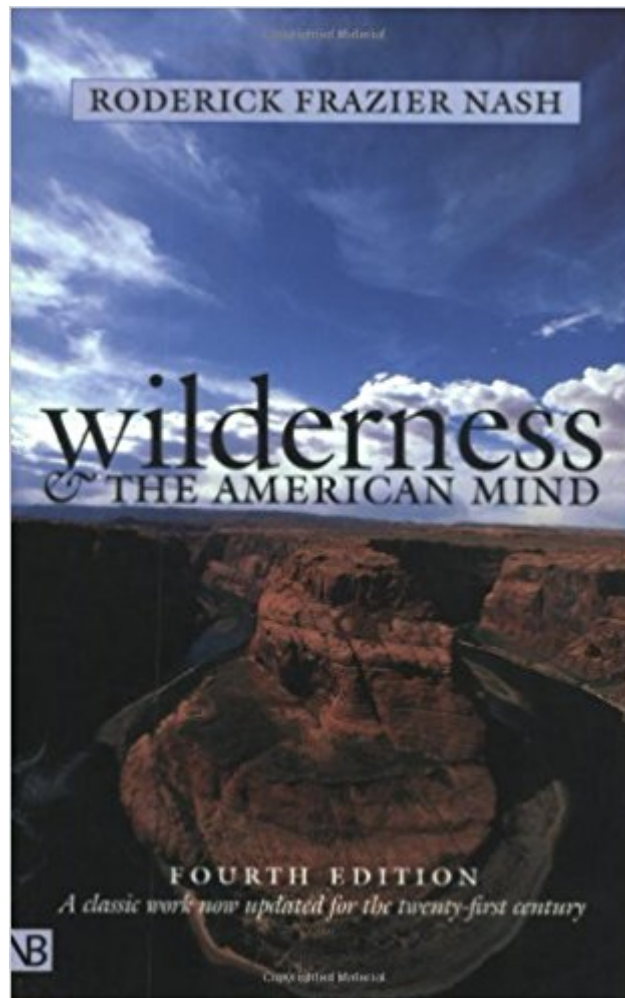


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Wilderness And The American Mind



Synopsis

Roderick Nash's classic study of America's changing attitudes toward wilderness has received wide acclaim since its initial publication in 1967. The Los Angeles Times has listed it among the one hundred most influential books published in the last quarter century, Outside Magazine has included it in a survey of "books that changed our world", and it has been called the "Book of Genesis for environmentalists". Now a fourth edition of this highly regarded work is available, with a new preface and epilogue in which Nash explores the future of wilderness and reflects on its ethical and biocentric relevance.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

For a few decades now, Roderick Nash's WILDERNESS AND THE AMERICAN MIND in its various editions has been perhaps the best all around introduction to the history of American attitudes towards nature and about what makes these attitudes unique in world culture. All editions have covered the greater story, beginning with the early attitudes towards wilderness in colonial times, in which nature was viewed primarily in terms of the use to which it could be put and a sense of human responsibility to transform it for human use. Nash then shows how American ideas towards nature gradually altered through the thought of individuals inspired by Romanticism, in particular Emerson and Thoreau. He then describes how Americans moved from a view of nature as possessing value only to the degree to which it can be put to use, to a view of wilderness having intrinsic value entirely on its own. All the major events in American environmental history are covered, from the

popularization of wilderness through painters such as Cole, Bierstadt, and Moran, to the work and influence of John Muir, through the creation of the national park and forest system, to the work of 20th century figures such as Aldo Leopold. The book makes all-in-all a fascinating read, and anyone wanting to learn about wilderness in particular, Nash shows how the view of undeveloped wilderness as something possessing intrinsic value worth preserving in an undeveloped state is a uniquely American idea, and one of the great intellectual contributions to world thought. Today, a large number of countries have followed America's lead in establishing national parks and wildlife preserves. All over the world, the notion of wilderness and nature possessing value apart from what human activity imparts to it is commonplace.

Those who have been so quick to pronounce the "death" of environmentalism surely have not taken Roderick Frazier Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* into account. With roots in European Romanticism, and blossoming in mid-19th Century writings of Thoreau and Emerson, the idea of wilderness is one of the most important ideas America has contributed to the world. The wilderness idea has no abler chronicler than Roderick Nash, whitewater rafting guide, adventurer, descendent of Canadian explorers and professor emeritus of environmental studies, who first published this book in 1967 and has taken it through four editions. His entertaining narrative covers the life of Muir and the early preservation struggles of The Sierra Club. He provides special insight into Aldo Leopold and sets the whole discussion of Leopold's land ethic in its historical context. While wilderness is everywhere under assault, many still understand the continuing need to preserve our wilderness system, a network of wild areas free from all other human activities. In fact, it's difficult to come away from Nash's book without understanding that wilderness is an intrinsic American value. The most articulate advocate of wilderness was Theodore Roosevelt, who believed the modern American was in danger of becoming an "overcivilized" man, who has lost strength and higher virtue in a trend toward "slothful ease." Nash gives great credit to Roosevelt and shows how his ideas and experiences contributed to later 20th Century concepts of environmental preservation.

I stumbled across this book in the course of some research on the so-called "Greening of American Religion," ie the reinterpretation of the Bible and other religious works to more appreciate, rather than vilify, the non-human environment. As Nash thoroughly documents in the first chapters of this book, Christianity (or at least American elements of it) certainly bears a heavy cross when it comes to environmental destruction in America. After reading Nash, someone is going to have to do some real creative reinterpretation to convince me that the Bible does not say what generations of

Americans have understood it to say: the earth was made for man, and man has every right to control and manage it to his ends, part of which means conquering and "civilizing" wilderness and everything within it. These early chapters are important, because it constructs the anti-wilderness mindset that so thoroughly dominated early American (world?) history (and for that matter continues to influence the thought of millions of Americans). Subsequent chapters chronicle how some Americans—initially only lone voices like Thoreau and Muir—rejected this view and developed the idea of wilderness we generally accept today within the preservationist movement. In the process Nash explores competing "environmentalist" theories such as the "wise use" (conservationist) leanings of Pinchot and TR Roosevelt and the surprising beginnings of some of our contemporary "environmentalist" legislation (e.g. forest reserve system). Later chapters focus on the Hetch-Hetchy controversy and Leopold. As such this book serves as a very readable and well-constructed general history of American environmentalism, a book any "environmentalist" (regardless of how you define that term) should read.

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