The shifting literary approach to nature in William Bartram, Henry David Thoreau, and Aldo Leopold: from untamed wilderness to conquered and disappearing land

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The shifting literary approach to nature in William Bartram, Henry David Thoreau, and Aldo Leopold: From untamed wilderness to conquered and disappearing land

by

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This is to certify that the master's thesis of
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has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Every landscape appears first of all as a vast chaos, which leaves one free to choose the meaning one wants to give it.

~Claude Lévi-Strauss~

What is hidden is for us Westerners more “true” than what is visible.

~Roland Barthes~

Nature writing provides a vital resource for identifying and clarifying different perceptions of nature and nature’s relationship to humankind. In the United States, from the mid-eighteenth century to the present, our perception of nature has shifted from a perception of nature as an untamed, dangerous wilderness, to one of nature as a conquered and disappearing entity. From the eighteenth century through the twentieth century, writers have depicted this shift by their individual approaches to nature within their writing.

In the eighteenth century, William Bartram approached nature as a scientist and an explorer. His perception was that the wilderness was an infinite resource that, if tamed, could provide immense economic gain for society. He also wrote about the violence in nature, for in the eighteenth century there was little understanding of and a great fear of the unknown wilderness. Bartram journeyed through the wilderness, battling the violent elements, and published his observations and discoveries in the hopes of creating new economic opportunities to further
economic growth. In America, the writings of Bartram and of his contemporaries reflect the beginning of the cultivation of nature. This movement caused the frontier to be pushed further west as the settlers swiftly subdued and conquered the wilderness.

As industrialization and economic progress burgeoned into the nineteenth century, writers took notice of the toll this progress was taking not only on the wilderness, but also on the people embroiled in the push for civilization and industrialization. Authors such as Henry David Thoreau began to write about the necessary relationship between humans and nature for intellectual, spiritual, and physical health. Thoreau wrote of nature's unparalleled ability to provide respite from the noise and pollution of an ever-increasing industrialized populace. Thoreau is also credited as being the first literary figure to voice the danger the wilderness was facing at the expense of progressive industrialization. Though he did not specifically call for a new environmental awareness, he did acknowledge that the wilderness needed protecting and he was a forerunner of the more deliberately active environmental writing of the twentieth century.

Industrialization and economic growth threatened the wilderness in the nineteenth century and nearly destroyed it in the twentieth century. Writers of the twentieth century realized that the wilderness was fast disappearing and was in serious danger of being obliterated by urbanization and economic exploitation. Authors such as Aldo Leopold observed the incalculable losses of the vanishing wilderness, and began to focus their writing away from mere environmental awareness to a starker crusade for the preservation and protection of the remaining
wilderness. Leopold’s writing differs from Bartram’s descriptive, poetic language and Thoreau’s musings in environmental awareness. Instead, Leopold’s writing presents a stark contrast between the once thriving wilderness depicted in eighteenth-century writing and the extensive destruction of the natural habitat that he has been witnessing in the twentieth century. Authors like Leopold have become the leading voices in the struggle to retain what is left of the natural habitat and wild areas.

Many notable American authors have addressed these issues during the brief history of the United States. The eighteenth century produced important writings by Gilbert White, Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, Alexander Wilson, and William Bartram, author of *Travels through North & South Carolina, Georgia, East & West Florida* (1791). Because of the vividness and scientific accuracy of Bartram’s writings, he is often touted as the first nature writer of the United States. The nineteenth century produced writings by John James Audubon, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Darwin, John Muir, John Burroughs, Celia Thaxter, John Wesley Powell, and Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau, author of *Walden: or Life in the Woods* (1854) and “Walking” (1862), is heralded by many as the major precursor of modern environmental writing. The twentieth century has likewise produced numerous significant nature writers, notably E. B. White, Wallace Stegner, John Steinbeck, John Graves, Edward Abbey, Annie Dillard, Roderick Nash, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Aldo Leopold. Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) has been monumentally influential on America’s attitudes toward land conservation.

In order to identify the shifting literary approach to nature from the eighteenth century through the twentieth century, I will be examining Bartram, Thoreau, and
Leopold. I will explore here the often over-looked violence and economic strivings revealed in Bartram’s *Travels*. I will address Thoreau as a transitional figure between the eighteenth century’s scientific and exploratory perspective to the twentieth century’s perspective that nature must be protected. Finally, I will address Leopold’s call for a new land ethic in *A Sand County Almanac* as he demands that the relationship between humans and nature must be readdressed in order to prevent the remaining land from being completely eradicated by poor stewardship and over-consumption by society.
CHAPTER TWO: NATURE—A VIOLENT, UNTAMED WILDERNESS OF RESOURCES

[All around is now still as death; not a whisper is heard, but a total inactivity and silence seem to pervade the earth; the birds afraid to utter a chirrup, in low tremulous voices take leave of each other, seeking cover and safety: every insect is silenced, and nothing heard but the roaring of the approaching hurricane.

~William Bartram~

William Bartram is often praised as the first authentic American nature writer. He was born in 1739 and spent the first seventeen years of his life helping his father, John Bartram, at the Botanical Garden in Schuylkill River, Pennsylvania (Harper xvii). After a dissatisfying apprenticeship in the mercantile business and a failed attempt at running a trade shop, William Bartram was approached by the wealthy patron, Dr. John Fothergill, to go on a biological expedition (Harper xix). *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida* written between 1773 and 1777 is Bartram’s account of his extensive scientific discoveries. Unfortunately, because he did not publish it until 1791, many of his original insights have been attributed to other scientists of the era. Francis Harper responds to this misfortune by arguing, “In retrospect of those days long past, we are tempted to say of Bartram as Wilson Flagg said of Thoreau: ‘Those whose minds were too dull to perceive the hue of his genius did not respect him’” (xxviii).
Modern readers familiar with Bartram’s *Travels* tend to read him as a romantic environmentalist. Mark Van Doren, an early twentieth century editor of Bartram’s *Travels*, assumes that Bartram is writing from “a gentle and passionate love of nature” (5). In *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967), Roderick Nash presumes that Bartram is able to “rejoice in wilderness” (54) because Bartram has a “love of the wild” (55). Thomas P. Slaughter, in his 1995 article, “The Nature of William Bartram,” maintains, “No American of [Bartram’s] day waxed so Romantic about wilderness settings. The *Travels* is, among other things, an ode to unspoiled beauty” (436).

Indeed, Bartram is a great admirer of the splendor of nature. Much of his writing espouses the beauty he encounters daily, and true to the early Romantic Period from which he is writing, he often offers prayers of supplication and praise to the Creator for providing such sublime beauty in which to dwell. Nevertheless, as much as Bartram writes from a pastoral sense of nature, it is impossible to ignore the violence he witnesses in nature and more importantly his primary motive for writing *Travels*. *Travels* is not written to venerate the beauty of the wilderness; instead, Bartram, as commissioned by his patron Dr. John Fothergill, is recording discoveries from his journey in the pursuit of economic gain through scientific exploration. In *The Environmental Imagination*, Lawrence Buell supports this assumption by detailing how Bartram has often been attacked for his “complicity in and furtherance of colonizing projects” (62). Mary Louise Pratt reinforces Buell by stating that “[in *Travels*] is to be found a utopian image of a European bourgeois
subject simultaneously innocent and imperial, asserting a harmless hegemonic vision” (qtd. in Buell 62).

Bartram approaches nature in a very formal, scientific manner because his purpose is to observe and categorize the flora and fauna he encounters. Bartram clearly outlines this purpose at the outset of his journey:

At the request of Dr. Fothergill, of London, to search the Floridas, and the western parts of Carolina and Georgia, for the discovery of rare and useful productions of nature, chiefly in the vegetable kingdom; in April, 1773, I embarked for Charleston, South Carolina . . . (27).

Bartram and Dr. Fothergill hope to achieve economic gain through the discovery of these new “rare and useful productions of nature.” Hans Huth, author of *Nature and the American*, explains how eighteenth-century scientists such as Bartram were keenly aware of and more appreciative of industrial opportunities found in the wildernesses they encountered (23). As writers, they were also aware that their audience comprised mostly of pioneers would reject anything in nature that did not provide an “immediate and practical use” (Huth 5). Thus, it is in this mindset that Bartram begins his journey.

In “Tempests and Alligators: The Ambiguous Wilderness of William Bartram,” Phillip C. Terrie expounds on how Fothergill, a wealthy Quaker doctor “engaged Bartram to search out interesting and useful plants, particularly those that might survive transplanting to England” (19). It is clear that Bartram’s primary objective in writing *Travels* is to convey his discoveries to Dr. Fothergill who can then profit by selling and trading the new species of plants Bartram preserves and brings back.
Terrie continues by pointing out that “Bartram [is] ever concerned with the utilitarian features of the natural world . . . he [is] hopeful of finding useful discoveries in the wilderness” (17-18).

Bartram’s writing addresses three divergent perspectives of nature, and these three themes continually overlap throughout *Travels*. First, Bartram writes from the perspective of a scientist searching for utility in nature, which we can observe through his extensive use of taxonomy for description. Second, he is a poetic observer of the violence found in nature. Finally, he alludes to nature’s virtue and beauty. *Travels* is filled with poetic passages exalting the landscapes he discovers daily. For example, Bartram writes:

> Thus secure and tranquil, and meditating on the marvelous scenes of primitive nature, as yet unmodified by the hand of man, I gently descended the peaceful stream, on whose polished surface were depicted the mutable shadows from its pensile banks; whilst myriads of finny inhabitants sported in its pellucid floods (64).

One can also see that Bartram is aware of the changes human contact may initiate on the land. He recognizes that the landscape is in part still beautiful because it is yet “unmodified by the hand of man” (Bartram 64). The reader can infer from Bartram’s extensive inclusions of such paeans to the wilderness how he suffers from divergent perspectives in his writing.

Bartram realizes that civilization has the ability to destroy the wilderness and thus invokes the reader to “rely on Providence [to] learn wisdom and understanding in the economy of nature” (70). Conversely, Bartram has been commissioned by
Fothergill to find and identify useful flora and fauna in the unmapped wilderness. Bartram elucidates this ever-present economic perspective when he says, “[I] greatly delighted with the pleasing prospect of cultivation, and the increase of human industry, which frequently struck my view from the distant shores” (85). He frequently encounters areas where he sees opportunity for establishing “rich, populous, delightful region[s]” (Bartram 201).

Bartram’s divergent themes of utility and virtue are exemplified throughout Travels. At one moment, Bartram is proclaiming the beauty of the landscape as it is yet “unmodified by the hand of man.” On the other hand, he often encounters a landscape he feels is incomplete without the inclusion of some unnatural modification. For example, when he observes the floating fields of the Pistia stratiotes and writes how he has chanced upon a “most picturesque appearance” of flowers, trees, shrubbery, moss, crocodiles, frogs, and other natural inhabitants, he cannot help but wonder how, “There seems, in short, nothing wanted but the appearance of a wigwam and a canoe to complete the scene” (93).

While passing through East Florida near Mount Royal and Lake George, Bartram encounters a breathtaking scene and is moved to write that “what greatly contributed towards completing the magnificence of the scene, was a noble Indian highway” (100). He describes the highway’s structure in detail and concludes this passage by asserting, “Neither nature nor art could any where present a more striking contrast” (101). Bartram sees the grandeur of the natural landscape, but he often concludes that some sort of human innovation would make it better. Bartram is fundamentally of the opinion that nature exists to be used by the species that
“everyone in this anthropocentric age would have agreed was the most important”—humankind (Terrie 22). Bartram sees nature in a utilitarian sense where human cultivation produces progress and economic gain.

Because Bartram’s primary economic purpose is often overlooked by many scholars who prefer to read him as a romantic naturalist, they choose to ignore Bartram’s sense of utility in nature at every turn of his journey. Terrie, however, asserts that “Bartram [is] ever concerned with the utilitarian features of the natural world” (17). He concludes that Bartram is “hopeful of finding useful discoveries in the wilderness” (Terrie 18) and like his capitalist-minded contemporaries, has subscribed “to the popular notion that all land should be judged in terms of its putative productivity” (Terrie 22). When Bartram leaves the island of Amelia off the coast of east Florida to continue up the St. Juan River, he reflects on his recently departed companion who “seemed to be actuated by no other motives” than to “establish his fortune” through “industry and frugality” (81). Bartram concludes that his companion’s ambitions are “equally laudable” to his own ambition of becoming “instrumental in discovering, and introducing into my native country, some original productions of nature, which might become useful to society” (81).

On a mission to find utility in nature, Bartram hopes to find medicinal plants that can be used to solve medical problems. He hopes to find new berries and other useful edible plants. He hopes to identify areas capable of supporting new agricultural endeavors. In short, Bartram desires to discover ways in nature where society can “establish a rich, populous, and delightful region, as this soil and climate appears to be of a nature favourable for the production of almost all the fruits of the
earth" (Bartram 201). Although each new expanse of wilderness prompts Bartram to
offer up thanksgiving to the Almighty Creator for the expansive wilderness itself, he
is also prompted to think on the new opportunity for industry that each new expanse
presents.

For example, Bartram writes of the usefulness of the large and abundant
trees that line the river. The “trunks of these trees, when hallowed out, make large
and durable pettiaugers and canoes, and afford excellent shingles, boards, and
other timbers, adapted to every purpose in frame buildings” (Bartram 94). On
numerous occasions, Bartram encounters rich swamps which repeatedly prompt him
to record the utility of the land. When he is journeying up St. Juan River near Dun’s
Lake in east Florida, he remarks,

This district consists of a vast body of rich swamp land, fit for the growth of
rice, and some very excellent highland surrounding it. Large swamps of
excellent rice land are also situated on the west shore of the river, opposite to
Charlotia (97).

Bartram often opens a passage with a discussion of the beauty he witnesses
and then immediately follows with a comment on the utility apparent in nature. Huth
points out that the scientific writers of the eighteenth century employed such a
method to serve a specific end. Huth says, “Although this pattern gives the illusion
that the writers were lovers of nature, it must not be forgotten that these descriptions
were more or less stylized accounts made to glorify the possibilities awaiting the
settler in the new country” (4). For example, when Bartram arrives at the Honorable
B. Andrews home near Fort Barrington, he discovers the red-belly fish and remarks:
We presently took some fish, one kind of which is very beautiful; they call it the red-belly. It is as large as a man's hand, nearly oval and thin, being compressed on each side; the tail is beautifully formed; the top of the head and back of an olive green, besprinkled with russet specks; the sides of a sea green, inclining to azure, insensibly blended with the olive above, and beneath lightens to a silvery white, or pearl colour, elegantly powdered with specks of the finest green, russet and gold; the belly is of a bright scarlet-red, or vermilion, darting up rays or fiery streaks into the pearl on each side; the ultimate angle of the branchiostega extends backwards with a long spatula, ending with a round or oval particoloured spot, representing the eye in the long feathers of a peacock's train, verged round with a thin flame-coloured membrane, and appears like a brilliant ruby fixed on the side of the fish, the eyes are large, encircled with a fiery iris; they are a voracious fish, and are easily caught with a suitable bait (34-35).

Although the fish is startling in its beauty, Bartram's final thought is how to use it for food. Bartram repeats this pattern of awe followed by utility throughout his narrative as he encounters each new discovery.

It is obvious that Bartram has an appreciation of natural beauty, but he also perceives a deep violence in nature that fills him with horror and dread, and quite often causes him to fear for his life. Robert Wernick recounts how the eighteenth century “saw wilderness and man in an adversary relationship” where the wilderness “is always out there, just beyond the clearing, a dark presence actively seeking revenge on man” (qtd. in Nash, Wilderness 239). Douglas Anderson, in “Bartram's
Travels and the Politics of Nature,” states that it is clear Bartram finds himself “in the midst of the still more fundamental violence of nature” (7). Terrie agrees that Bartram views nature as “grimly threatening” (30). It is this dread of the wilderness, the fear of the unknown, which explains why Bartram desperately seeks utility in nature. The pioneering perception is that nature might not be so dreadful if it can be tamed and cultivated into a useful economic tool for society.

Bartram’s juxtaposition of utility and violence highlight the second perspective of Bartram’s writing that is frequently ignored—his recurrent references to the violence of nature. Bartram is very deliberate in his attempt to minimize the impact of the violence on his disposition while writing because he does not want the violence itself to be the primary focus of his work. He prefers that his reader focus on the utilitarian aspects of nature, but he knows that nature’s violence cannot be ignored. Thus, according to Terrie, Bartram deliberately approaches the violent moment descriptively, and then quickly provides a peaceful resolution to the violence (30).

Nash reinforces this reading with his discussion of the moment Bartram realizes that he must cross a large mountainous area. He recounts how Bartram feels completely alone, depressed, and filled with fear and doubt at the prospect of crossing this wilderness. Instead of dwelling on his fear, however, Bartram “at once [puts] aside his fears and rapturously exclaims at ‘this amazing prospect of grandeur’” as he gazes at his path from the top of a cliff (Nash, Wilderness 55). In this way, Bartram is expressing the apprehension he experiences in the wilderness,
but avoids generating any fear that might prevent his patrons from venturing into
nature.

Earlier in his journey, while being tossed about in a storm on the sea, Bartram
remarked that he “cannot entirely suppress my apprehensions of danger” (102).
Anderson asserts that “that natural world, even in the experience of a devout
optimist like Bartram, is constantly at war” (6) and that is why Bartram cannot
completely ignore it. Nonetheless, as Nash reveals, many of Bartram’s
contemporaries “shared the pioneer aversion to wilderness, and even with them
appreciation floated uneasily on an ocean of uncertainty. The new attitude coexisted
with, rather than replaced, the old” (Wilderness 55). Bartram must focus on the
wilderness as a place of usefulness, not a place of violence.

Probably the most vivid occurrences of violence in Bartram’s Travels are his
encounters with alligators. His first account is of two alligators fighting. Bartram
writes:

Behold him rushing forth from the flags and reeds. His enormous body swells.
His plaited tail brandished high, floats upon the lake. The waters like a
cataract descend from his opening jaws. Clouds of smoke issue from his
dilated nostrils. The earth trembles with his thunder. When immediately from
the opposite coast of the lagoon, emerges from the deep his rival
champion. They suddenly dart upon each other. The boiling surface of the
lake marks their rapid course, and a terrific conflict commences. They now
sink to the bottom folded together in horrid wreaths. The water becomes thick
and discoloured . . . The shores and forests resound his dreadful roar (114).
Bartram is filled with terror after witnessing this battle. The sublime, pastoral nature of his writing is overshadowed by deep apprehension and an intrinsic need to survive the quickly approaching night. For Bartram, the beauty of nature is often replaced by its stark brutality.

Just moments after witnessing this horrific violence, Bartram himself is the target of an alligator attack:

I was attacked on all sides, several endeavouring to overset the canoe. My situation now became precarious to the last degree . . . They struck their jaws together so close to my ears, as almost to stun me, and I expected every moment to be dragged out of the boat and instantly devoured (115).

During these terrifying moments, Bartram recognizes that he is the intruder in the wilderness. He is frightened by the alligators, but the alligators do not fear the alien presence. In fact, the alligators seem “neither fearful nor any way disturbed” by Bartram’s attempts to keep them at bay (Bartram 116). Bartram suddenly realizes that he is alone and must defend himself “from malign nature” (Terrie 29). Again, the “ode to unspoiled beauty” seems to be far from his mind when he is actually writing much of his *Travels*. Bartram knows nature can kill him at any moment (Anderson 8).

Bartram not only witnesses violence in the brute creation he encounters, but also in the temperamental weather that he must battle daily. While traveling by sea to Charleston, South Carolina, Bartram recounts the powerful winds that assail their ship for almost two days and two nights, heavily damaging their sails:
The powerful winds, now rushing forth from their secret abodes, suddenly spread terror and devastation; and the wide ocean, which a few moments past, was gentle and placid, is now thrown into disorder, and heaped into mountains, whose white curling crests to sweep the skies (27).

*Travels* contain numerous similar accounts of Bartram fighting for survival against the elements. Bartram describes each account with such imagery and detail that it is impossible not to sense his terror. This imagery is especially evident during a thunderstorm he experiences while en route to Fort Barrington, Florida:

[A] tremendous thunderstorm, which came up from the N.W. and soon after my arrival began to discharge its fury all around . . . The fulgor and rapidity of the streams of lighting, passing from cloud to cloud, and from the clouds to the earth, exhibited a very awful scene; when instantly the lightning, as it were, opening a fiery chasm in the black cloud, darted with inconceivable rapidity on the trunk of a large pine tree . . . and set it in a blaze. The flame instantly ascended upwards of ten or twelve feet, and continued flaming about fifteen minutes, when it was gradually extinguished by the deluges of rain that fell upon it (Bartram 36).

Later, during another violent storm, Bartram expresses how he is unable to move from his current position because of the danger of the storm (Bartram 82).

Bartram's tales of violent storms are frequent, and each fills him with deep fear and a keen sense of danger. He is incapable of enjoying the beauty in the storms because he is blinded by the violence of them. He does not recount them romantically, but rather with the heart of one who has felt terror more deeply than
ever before. For Bartram, nature can be serene and inviting at one moment, but the next moment it is threatening, violent, chaotic, and inhospitable (Terrie 20). It is evident that Bartram wants to present a sublime, pastoral image of nature, especially in light of his desire to ignite excitement and interest in others to venture into nature for its resources. However, it is impossible to ignore the fear, the violence, the loneliness, and the desperation depicted in his writing.

Although Bartram is regularly hailed as a romantic environmentalist, his *Travels* is filled with images of utility and violence. Bartram is a scientist, journeying through the wilderness, searching for ways to better the plight of humankind. His aspiration is to find usefulness in nature. His desire is to create a relationship between nature and humankind that benefits humankind—without proposing the annihilation of nature to meet that end. Bartram proposes that humankind approach nature by the “practice of virtue and industry” (71).

Bartram’s extensive use of descriptive language occasionally hints at the danger civilization poses for the wilderness, but this threat will not become the intentional focus of writers until the nineteenth century when writers like Henry David Thoreau begin to address this issue. Bartram’s vague predictions of the danger to the wilderness—the cloudburst that “seemed to oppose and dash against each other; the skies appeared streaked with blood,” the “flaming lightning that seemed to fill the world with fire” and the “high forests behind me bent to the blast” (Bartram 131) begin to be fulfilled in the nineteenth century. Thoreau reacts to the earlier eighteenth century writers’ emphasis on progress and industrialization. Thoreau’s intention is to establish a spiritual relationship between humans and nature, and thus
he demands that the reader acknowledge a virtue in nature that Bartram is only willing to hint at. Thoreau's use of more forceful language begins to speak out against progress and will warn his reader of the inherent danger civilization poses not only to the wilderness, but also to the livelihood of all human beings.
CHAPTER THREE: SEEKING SOLACE AND BALANCE IN NATURE

In Wildness is the preservation of the world.

~Henry David Thoreau~

I looked again and saw [the surveyor] standing in the middle of a boggy, stygian fen, surrounded by devils . . . and looking nearer, I saw that the Prince of Darkness was his surveyor.

~ Henry David Thoreau in "Walking"~

Henry David Thoreau, born in 1817 in Concord, Massachusetts, is frequently referred to as the father of environmental writing. Lawrence Buell in The Environmental Imagination names Thoreau the "patron saint of American environmental writing" (115). Although Thoreau died an untimely death at the age of 44, he left behind a wealth of material that depicts a shifting approach to nature, from Bartram's furthering of "progress" through scientific discovery to Leopold's call for a new moral ethic to protect nature.

Thoreau was a man of many interests and many talents. He was a schoolteacher, pencil-maker, botanist, editor, surveyor, gardener, poet, lecturer, essayist, moral philosopher, political protester, travel writer, devoted brother and son, woodland hermit, and a village character (Finch, Norton 169). Most importantly, Thoreau was a prolific writer. In A Thoreau Profile, Milton Meltzer and Walter
Harding claim that Thoreau's writing represents the pinnacle of nature writing, thereby establishing the model Leopold would later follow. They maintain, "This love, this enthusiasm for nature flowed over into his writings, making him not only the first outstanding nature writer in our literary history, but also the greatest" (212). Thoreau's approach to nature depicts a shift in the focus of nature writing from Bartram's scientific emphasis to Leopold's stress on environmental awareness and action. Thoreau appreciates and writes of the economic progress that Bartram's writing helped to advance, but he also anticipates the call for environmental action that will dominate Leopold's writing.

In order to understand Thoreau as a transitional figure, it is important to note how Thoreau's own view of nature shifted during his short lifetime and how his writing reflects his changing views. Buell asserts that "nature was initially a pastime for [Thoreau], a place of recreational resort. Increasingly it became the environment in which he felt most comfortable. Then it became an occupation (or rather occupations, first literary then botanical) and finally a cause" (138). The writings produced near the end of Thoreau's lifetime best portray how his focus shifted toward a more environmentally aware approach to nature. However, to genuinely understand Thoreau's shift to a more environmental writing, one must first acknowledge Thoreau's initial philosophical persuasions.

Thoreau's most widely acknowledged work is an account of his attempt to simplify his life by moving into a rudimentary cabin on Walden Pond. Environmental scholars regularly rely on Walden for support of Thoreau as a pioneering environmentalist. Upon closer examination, however, it quickly becomes apparent
that *Walden* is not a manifesto in defense of nature. Meltzer and Harding indicate that while writing *Walden*, Thoreau’s real interest is in human society. Thoreau “studies nature because it is an important part of man’s background. He believes that nature is essential to man” (Meltzer 212). *Walden* is a call for humankind to better itself, not to protect nature. Thoreau’s environmental leanings do not actually come to light until much later in his life, specifically in one of his last essays, “Walking,” published posthumously in 1862.

*Walden*, published in 1854, was written early in Thoreau’s literary career, when he was ideologically aligned with Transcendentalism, believing that nature mirrors the higher laws emanating from God (Nash, *Wilderness* 85). In *Nature and the American*, Hans Huth further maintains that *Walden* is Thoreau’s attempt to show how God can be found in nature (95). It was also during this point in Thoreau’s life that he became increasingly despondent about the toll industrial “progress” had taken on his neighbors in Concord, Massachusetts. “By mid-century,” Nash writes, “American life had acquired a bustling tempo and materialistic tone that left Thoreau and many of his contemporaries vaguely disturbed and insecure” (*Wilderness* 86). Thoreau asserts that “while civilization has been improving our houses, it has not equally improved the men who are to inhabit them” (*Walden* 34), and thus he decides to leave Concord and live simply in nature. *Walden* is the result of his two-year journey into nature.

In *The New Thoreau*, Walter Harding and Michael Meyer argue that Thoreau’s purpose in writing *Walden* was simply this: “[I]f you are satisfied with your own way of life, this is not the book for you. But if you are leading a life of ‘quiet
desperation' Thoreau here offers you a way out" (53). Thoreau does not use *Walden* to implore his neighbors and readers to abandon progress and the city and move into huts near lakes and rivers to meditate on nature. He does not use it as a platform to entreat people to take better care of nature. Instead, he is simply calling for his readers to “Simplify, simplify” and he sees a relationship with nature as the means to do so (*Walden* 91).

For many scholars interested in Thoreau's attitude toward the environment, “Walking” better embodies Thoreau's ideals for which he is praised by the environmental community. Harding and Meyer see “Walking” as “the best brief exposition of Thoreau's philosophy” (61). James McIntosh, author of *Thoreau as Romantic Naturalist*, maintains that “‘Walking’ [is] Thoreau's most concentrated and subtle treatment of the wild” (90). Finch acknowledges that “Walking,” with its “ringing defense and celebration of ‘wildness,’ has become one of the gospels of the conservation movement” (*Norton* 170). It is for these reasons that “Walking” serves as an ideal piece to study Thoreau's approach to nature in contrast to those of Bartram and Leopold.

“Walking” has three central purposes that overlap throughout the essay. The first is to instill an appreciation for nature as a vital resource to humankind’s spiritual and physical health. The second is a critique of civilization and technological progress. The third is call for greater environmental awareness. The first theme explicitly outlines what Bartram only hints at when he said that there is virtue to be found in nature. Like Bartram, Thoreau incorporates poetic narratives to create images of nature as virtuous. The second theme is in direct contrast to Bartram's
push for cultivating the wilderness. Again, Thoreau relies heavily on more forcefully descriptive words to create a picture of the destruction uncontrolled progress will have on the environment. The third theme, written from a more serious tone, anticipates the call to environmental action heralded by Leopold nearly one hundred years later. In “Coda: Wilderness Letter,” Wallace Stegner asserts, “It seems to me significant that the distinct downturn in our literature from hope to bitterness took place almost at the precise time when... the American way of life had begun to turn strongly urban and industrial” (567).

Thoreau sees nature as a vital source of spiritual nourishment. As he indicates in Walden, Thoreau is concerned that people will suffer intellectually, spiritually and physically if they do not immerse themselves occasionally in nature. In “Walking” Thoreau proposes that nature is the remedy against these ailments:

I trust that we shall be more imaginative; that our thoughts will be clearer, fresher, and more ethereal, as our sky—our understanding more comprehensive and broader, like our plains—our intellect generally on a grander scale, like our thunder and lightning, our rivers and mountains and forests,—and our hearts shall even correspond in breadth and depth and grandeur to our inland seas (222).

Thoreau maintains that “modern man” must derive his strength from nature (Meltzer 212). According to Nash, “Thoreau grounded his argument on the idea that wildness is the source of vigor, inspiration, and strength” (Wilderness 88). “There is a subtle magnetism in Nature,” Thoreau says, “Which, if we unconsciously yield to it, will direct us aright” (“Walking” 216). More than sixty years later, John Burroughs
maintains this dictum in "The Gospel of Nature" as he writes, "I go to Nature to be soothed and healed, and to have my senses put in tune once more" (245).

In Thoreau's time, nature was not viewed as a significant part of one's life. Thoreau witnessed his Concord neighbors burying themselves in their work, locking themselves away in their offices, and not taking any time to immerse themselves in nature. Thoreau confesses in "Walking" that he is "astonished at the power of endurance, to say nothing of the moral insensitivity, of my neighbors who confine themselves to shops and offices the whole day for weeks and months" (208). Burroughs reinforces the danger of removing oneself from nature:

There can be no doubt, I think, but that intercourse with Nature and a knowledge of ways tends to simplify life . . . We load ourselves up with so many false burdens, our complex civilization breeds in us so many false or artificial wants, that we become separated from the real sources of our strength and health as by a gulf (265).

Thoreau writes that his experiences in nature not only strengthen him but also redeem him (Harding 144).

When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable, and to the citizen, most dismal swamp. I enter a swamp as a sacred swamp—a sanctum sanctorum. There is a strength—the marrow of Nature. The wildwood covers the virgin mould, and the same soil is good for men and for trees. A man's health requires as many acres of meadow to his prospect as farm does loads of muck ("Walking" 228).
Although Thoreau writes prolifically about the virtuous aspect nature holds, his ideas are not the norm of his time. Nash notes in *The Rights of Nature* that Thoreau is not only unprecedented in his thoughts about nature, he is “virtually alone in holding them” (37). For this reason, Thoreau's philosophy is not widely acknowledged until well into the twentieth century (Nash, *Rights* 34). Previously, nature had been approached by writers as violent and untamed, a wilderness in need of cultivation. The focus was on utility in the wilderness—economic gain waiting to be discovered. Thoreau, instead, finds nature good for the sake of its wildness, not just its usefulness. He declares that nature is not the violent oppressor of Bartram’s *Travels*. In fact, long before he pens “Walking,” Thoreau pokes fun at people who are “still a little afraid of the dark” (*Walden* 130). Thus, Thoreau continually impresses on his reader the vitality inherent in the wilderness (McIntosh 286). “In short,” he writes, “All good things are wild and free” (“Walking” 234).

It is imperative to note that Thoreau is not against civilization. Nash argues that Thoreau sees wildness and refinement as complements—not fatal extremes but “equally beneficent influences Americans would do well to blend” (*Wilderness* 95). For example, in the following passage, Thoreau does not condemn the existence of towns, but instead shows how nature improves the people living there:

[A] town is saved, not more by the righteous men in it, than by the woods and swamps that surround it. A township where one primitive forest waves above while another primitive forest rots below,—such a town is fitted to raise not only corn and potatoes, but poets and philosophers for the coming ages. In
such a soil grew Homer and Confucius and the rest, and out of such a
wilderness come the Reformer eating locusts and wild honey ("Walking" 229).
Thoreau is imploring his reader to find a balance between civilization and nature. He
is bemoaning the fact that many of the “so-called improvements of civilization are but
‘improved means to an unimproved end’” (Harding 54). Thoreau adamantly
maintains that one can experience a deeper spiritual existence while still improving
one’s material world (Harding 54).

Thoreau is not advocating against civilization; he is not opposed to progress.
Nonetheless, his approach to progress is far removed from Bartram’s strong push
for economic gain. Thoreau is concerned that “our so-called improvements to
civilization” are destroying the intellectual and physical health of his neighbors, as
well as their morality. Nash claims that Thoreau believes one can alternate between
wilderness and civilization (nature and work), but the “essential requirement is to
maintain contact with both ends of the spectrum (Wilderness 93).

In light of the advent of faster and more complicated machinery, Thoreau
sees this balance becoming more difficult to maintain. In The Machine in the
Garden Leo Marx explains:

Thoreau feels no simple-minded Luddite hostility toward the new inventions.
What he is attacking is the illusion that improving the means is enough, that if
the machinery of society is put in good order (As Carlyle had said) ‘all were
well with us, the rest would care for itself!’ [Thoreau] is contending against a
culture pervaded by this mechanistic outlook. It may well be conducive to
material progress, but it also engenders fatalism and despair (248).
Marx echoes Thoreau's stance toward civilization in contending that the intrinsic
danger of technology is that it has the ability to reverse the order of technology as a 
tool to making human beings the tools of technology (355). This danger of the 
technological civilization and the pursuit of progress disrupt the balance that 
Thoreau is striving to maintain (Nash, Wilderness 86).

Thoreau is not only concerned with the consequences of the advent of new 
technology; he is also concerned with the effects of the unchecked pioneering spirit. 
Thoreau asserts, “It is said to be the task of the American, ‘to work the virgin soil,’
and that Agriculture here already assumes proportions unknown everywhere else”
(“Walking” 229). He emphasizes this point by stating:

The weapons with which we have gained our most important victories . . . are 
not the sword and the lance, but the bush-whack—the turf-cutter, the spade, 
and the bog-hoe, rusted with the blood of many a meadow, and begrimed 
with the dust of many a hard-fought field (“Walking” 230).

Thoreau is sympathetic to the wilderness and is cognizant of the destruction human 
society is inflicting on it. As indicated by Buell, Thoreau “saw that American 
capitalism was set on a course that would ultimately ravage all wild nature on the 
continent—perhaps even the world” (365). It is through these remarks that we see 
how Thoreau's approach to nature has shifted from an appreciation of nature to that 
of protector of nature, similar to the stance Leopold will take in the twentieth century. 
Thoreau has witnessed the destruction already done to nature in the name of 
progress, and he is becoming ever more concerned that these endeavors are going 
to destroy the wilderness:
Nowadays, almost all man's improvements, so called, as the building of houses, and cutting down of the forest and of all large trees, simply deform the landscape, and make it more and more tame and cheap . . . I saw the fences half consumed, their ends lost in the middle of the prairie, and some worldly miser with a surveyor looking after his bounds, while heaven had taken place around him, and he did not see the angels going to and fro, but was looking for an old post-hole in the midst of paradise. I looked again, and saw him standing in the middle of a boggy Stygian fen, surrounded by devils, and he had found his bounds without a doubt, three little stones, where a stake had been driven, and looking nearer, I saw that the Prince of Darkness was his surveyor (Thoreau, “Walking” 212).

Nash points out that given Thoreau's philosophy of nature and his sense of the value of wilderness, it is not surprising that Thoreau takes on the responsibility of defending American wilderness (Wilderness 90). Nash continues, “With [Thoreau’s] refined philosophy of the importance of wildness, [he] made the classic early call for wilderness preservation. Like others, the disappearance of wild country made him uneasy” (Wilderness 102).

Thoreau lived in a unique time where, unlike Leopold, he was still able to observe and experience life in the wilderness. However, unlike Bartram, Thoreau saw the negative effects of the over-cultivated wilderness. Because Thoreau does not advocate complete removal from civilization, nor call for complete dominance over the wilderness, he again falls between Bartram and Leopold's individual approaches to nature. Thoreau's environmental stance calls for a balance:
I would not have every man nor every part of a man cultivated, any more than
I would have every acre of earth cultivated: part will be tillage, but the greater
part will be meadow and forest, not only serving an immediate use, but
preparing a mould against a distant future, by the annual decay of the
vegetation which it supports (“Walking” 238).

Thoreau realizes this balance is difficult to achieve and even more difficult to
maintain. He discusses the impact of the cultivation of the land as the pioneers push
further west, and he contrasts it with his current freedom to walk where he pleases in
nature, uninhibited by fences and cultivated areas. It is this realization that
foreshadows the destruction of the wild places that Leopold will witness in the
twentieth century.

At present, in this vicinity, the best part of the land is not private property; the
landscape is not owned, and the walker enjoys comparative freedom. But
possibly the day will come when it will be partitioned off into so-called
pleasure grounds, in which a few will take a narrow and exclusive pleasure
only,—when fences shall be multiplied, and man-traps and other engines
invented to confine men to the public road, and walking over the surface of
God’s earth shall be construed to mean trespassing on some gentleman’s
grounds . . . Let us improve our opportunities, then, before the evil days come
(“Walking” 216).

Thoreau contends that as difficult as the balance between civilization and nature is
to maintain, it is imperative to strive toward it. He argues that civilized nations
survive only “as long as the soil is not exhausted” (“Walking” 229). He continues,
“Little is to be expected of a nation when the vegetable mould is exhausted, and it is compelled to make manure of the bones of its fathers” (“Walking” 229). Here the reader can strongly sense Thoreau’s “defense of nature against the human invader” (Buell 135).

Thoreau predicts that cultivating and civilizing nature, for which Bartram was in favor, will bring the demise of the wilderness, and he argues instead that “in Wildness is the preservation of the world” (“Walking” 225). Finch asserts that “Thoreau anticipates contemporary nature writing in his recognition that the natural environment must be protected” (Norton 23). Leopold will later take up this cause, and fight for the preservation of what is left of the wilderness. Unfortunately, where Thoreau can write a joyful paean to nature, Leopold’s writing carries a mournful, elegiac tone, as the land Thoreau had the pleasure of writing of and walking amidst has mostly disappeared by the mid-twentieth century.
CHAPTER FOUR: NATURE—THE CONQUERED,
DISAPPEARING WILDERNESS

Wilderness is a resource which can shrink but not grow. Invasions can be
arrested or modified in a manner to keep an area usable either for recreation, or for
science, or for wildlife, but the creation of new wilderness in the full sense of the
word is impossible.

~Aldo Leopold~

Aldo Leopold was born in Burlington, Iowa in 1887. Like Thoreau, Leopold
died an untimely death while helping his neighbors fight a grass fire in 1948. He
earned a Master of Arts degree from Yale Forest School and dedicated most of his
adult life to conservation efforts. He founded the Wilderness Society in 1935 and the
Wildlife Society in 1936. He was appointed by the governor of Wisconsin to the
Wisconsin Conservation Commission. He was also elected the chairman of the new
Department of Wildlife Management at the University of Wisconsin. It was during his
years in Wisconsin that Leopold wrote A Sand County Almanac.

While Leopold was writing A Sand County Almanac, published posthumously
in 1949, he was witnessing first-hand the devastating effect unchecked human
progress had taken on the natural environment. The vast wilderness depicted in
Bartram's writings had vanished. The undiscovered West of Thoreau's time had
been mapped and exploited. What remained were mere traces of a once
remarkable wilderness that fueled a deep moral desire in Leopold to preserve what
remained. *A Sand County Almanac* is Leopold’s effort to enlighten people to the tragic loss they face if the wilderness is obliterated and of their moral obligation to prevent it from happening. Leopold’s literary effort thus depicts the shift in nature writing from Thoreau’s appreciation of nature and his call to awareness to a more deliberate, forceful call to action to preserve what is left of the nearly-eradicated wilderness. The romantic descriptions of the wilderness found in Bartram’s writing are replaced by Leopold’s stark descriptions of the toll “progress” has taken on the environment.

Today Leopold is credited with creating much of the terminology currently used to address the broader philosophical questions of land conservation (Finch, *A Sand County xxv*). In *Companion to A Sand County Almanac*, J. Baird Callicott hails *A Sand County Almanac* as the “environmentalist’s bible” (3). Stegner echoes this praise of Leopold in “The Legacy of Aldo Leopold.” He writes that *A Sand County Almanac* is a “famous, almost holy book in conservation circles” (Stegner, *Legacy* 233). It is clear that Leopold’s efforts to enlighten his readers on the plight of the wilderness have, at least in part, been successful. As Roderick Nash says, “Few today would challenge Aldo Leopold’s reputation as one of the seminal thinkers in the modern American development of environmental ethics.” Nash maintains that *A Sand County Almanac* has become “the intellectual touchstone” for the greatest environmental movement in the history of the United States (*Rights* 63).

*A Sand County Almanac* is divided into three sections. “Part I: A Sand County Almanac,” is a compilation of twelve delightful essays filled with Leopold’s observations of the natural world and its activities through the course of one year.
Leopold uses an intimate, first person narrative to create nostalgic, homey images in the form of a tale (Finch, *A Sand County* xvii). According to Finch, Leopold begins with these strong vivid images, rather than formal lessons or philosophy, to interest the reader and to lodge the images in the reader's mind (xvii). In “Part II: Sketches Here and There,” Leopold begins to diverge from the personable narrative of the first section and adopts a more formal tone. Finch notes that “the tone becomes more and more elegiac, less celebratory of what remains, and more eulogistic of what is lost, or being lost,” and that this theme of loss runs strong through section two (Finch, *A Sand County* xx). In “Part III: The Upshot,” Leopold sets out his philosophical intentions for protecting the environment. This is where his celebrated essays “The Land Ethic” and “Conservation Esthetic” appear. Callicott contends that *A Sand County Almanac* is a progression of essays from “the personal to the universal, from the experiential to the intellectual, from the concrete to the abstract” (4).

Leopold writes as one “who cannot live without wild things and who has deliberately immersed himself in them” (Finch, *A Sand County* xix). Part I is filled with recollections of Leopold's delighting in the habits and daily excursions of the wild creatures around him. For example, to begin the essay “March,” Leopold details the habits of the creatures experiencing an early spring thaw:

One swallow does not make a summer, but one skein of geese, cleaving the murk of a March thaw, is the spring. A cardinal, whistling spring to a thaw but later finding himself mistaken, can retrieve his error by resuming his winter silence. A chipmunk emerging for a sunbath but finding a blizzard, has only to
go back to bed. But a migrating goose, staking two hundred miles of black
night on the chance of finding a hole in the lake, has no easy chance for
retreat. His arrival carries the conviction of a prophet who has burned his
bridges. A March morning is only as drab as he who walks in it without a
glance skyward, ear cocked for geese (Sand County 18).

By relating similar experiences throughout Part I, Leopold is able to capture the
imagination and trust of his reader. Leopold's technique is essential, because as
John Tallmadge points out in “Anatomy of a Class,” the nature writer “must win the
sympathy and trust of their less sensitive and less well-informed readers” (119).
Leopold does this through the use of an “entertaining, engaging, and charismatic”
narrator to which the reader can relate and interact (Tallmadge 120).

However, Leopold is not content to allow the reader of this first section to
solely be filled with a love and appreciation of nature. Instead, he incorporates vivid
and often stark imagery that alerts the reader to the problems the environment is
Facing in an attempt to force the reader to assume responsibility for the land.
Tallmadge says that by doing this, Leopold is able to “challenge or confront us, even
as [he] draws us out and wins us over” (121).

One of the most startling narratives found in the opening section is in the
essay “February” where Leopold recounts a history of Wisconsin’s wilderness as his
chainsaw cuts deeper into the rings of a great oak tree. Leopold writes, “Now the
saw bites into 1920-21, the decade of the drainage dream, when steam shovels
sucked dry the marshes of central Wisconsin to make farms . . .” (10). Now the saw
cuts through “1915, when the Supreme Court abolished the state forest [because it]
is not a good business proposition” (10). “We cut 1908 . . . and Wisconsin parted with its last cougar. . . . We cut 1907, when a wandering lynx . . . ended his career among the farms of Dane County” (11). His blade slides through 1890 when “the largest pine rafts in history slipped down the Wisconsin River in full view of [his] oak, to build an empire of red barns for the cows of the prairie states” (12). “In 1878 the hunter promises to outnumber the deer . . . 1874 the first factory-made barbed wire was stapled to oak trees . . . 1872 the last wild Wisconsin turkey was killed . . . 1870 a market gunner boasted in the American Sportsman of killing 6000 ducks in one season . . . Rest! Cries the chief sawyer, and we pause for breath” (14-15). One must pause for breath, for the devastation that Leopold depicts through this brief history becomes almost unbearable as Leopold offers no other reprieve from the destruction described. Passages such as this persuade Tallmadge to warn the reader that a “deep current of melancholy runs through this book, even in the midst of rapturous celebrations” (122). Leopold's veiled purpose is to inform the reader about the necessity of protecting nature.

Leopold gives the reader pause for breath, but only briefly. He moves on to “May” and delights with tales of dandelions and meadows, and again gains trust and confidence. Then he quickly moves his discussion to a more serious note. He invokes the reader to recall with him a time when these delights had almost disappeared:

There was a time in the early 1900's when Wisconsin farms nearly lost their immemorial timepiece, when May pastures greened in silence, and August nights brought no whistled reminder of impending fall. Universal gunpowder,
plus the lure of plover-on-toast for post-Victorian banquets had taken too great a toll. The belated protection of the federal migratory bird laws came just in time (37).

This stark picture causes the reader to pause, but again only briefly, because Leopold only allows a moment’s rest. “The erasure of a human subspecies is largely painless—to us—if we know little enough about it, “Leopold writes, “[W]e grieve only for what we know” (Sand County 48). Leopold grieves because not only does he feel the loss, but also because he knows that the loss will eventually touch humans if they do not take notice. Stegner asserts that Leopold witnessed the slow obliteration of many wild places and creatures and was attentive to the repercussions. He states that Leopold “knew that our unchecked effort to make everything safe and comfortable for our own species at the expense of all others could eventually destroy us along with the earth we depend on” (Legacy 234).

In “Part II: Sketches Here and There,” Leopold abandons most of the pleasurable language of section one and begins to address more directly the losses in the environment. He discusses how the wilderness is being destroyed by industrial advances and poor management of the land. Where Bartram harkens progress and the utility of the wilderness as good, Leopold bemoans the irreparable damage “progress” has wreaked on the vanishing wilderness. In this section, Leopold laments:

The old prairie lived by the diversity of its plants and animals, all of which were useful because the sum total of their co-operations and competitions achieved continuity. But the wheat farmer was a builder of categories; to him
only wheat and oxen were useful. He saw the useless pigeons settle in clouds upon his wheat, and shortly cleared the skies of them. He saw the chinch bugs take over the stealing job, and fumed because here was a useless thing too small to kill. He failed to see the downward wash of over-wheated loam, laid bare in spring against the pelting rains. When soil-wash and chinch bugs finally put an end to wheat farming Y and his like had already traveled far down the watershed (107).

However, Stegner points out that Leopold’s writing does not reflect an opposition to the use of the land by humans (Legacy 236). Instead, Leopold is writing about the “furious excess of our exploitation, our passion to live on our principal” (Stegner, Legacy 236). Nash asserts that Leopold is calling for a restructuring of American priorities and behaviors and “a radical redefinition of progress [my emphasis]” (Nash, “Aldo Leopold’s” 84). Leopold is calling for an end to the conquest and exploitation that began in Bartram’s era. He is calling for a new ideal of cooperation and coexistence (Nash, “Aldo Leopold’s” 84). This is often referred to as the land use ethic. In his essay, “Conservation As A Moral Issue,” Leopold asks if our ignorance is worth turning our society into one akin to that of John Burroughs’ potato bug which “exterminated the potato, and thereby exterminated itself” (12).

1. To pursue this idea further, look into Leopold’s pioneering philosophy of the “biotic community” in which humans and nature are interrelated and interdependent in his essays in The River of the Mother of God, “Thinking Like a Mountain,” and “Conservation as a Moral Issue.”
Leopold's reproaches become increasingly severe throughout Part II. He discusses the confusion that exists in current relations to the land. "On the hill in the background are contoured strip-crops; they have been 'curled' by the erosion engineer to retard the run-off. The water must be confused by so much advice" (Leopold, *A Sand County* 118). Tallmadge emphasizes how "time and again [Leopold] calls our attention to the glaring disparity between our view of the land and how the land actually behaves" (121). Leopold implores his reader to take greater care with the land, to still use it to support human endeavor, but treat it with respect. Nash states that Leopold is calling for a new ideal to replace the conquest and exploitation that "had powered America’s westward march for three centuries" with a new ideal of "cooperation and coexistence" (*Rights* 73). He asserts that Leopold despairs of the inadequacy of American’s conservation efforts (Nash, *Rights* 87).

Although Leopold’s conservation ideas seem radical in his time, Huth insists that his ideas are merely a continuation of the ideals held by Emerson and Thoreau (204). Thoreau’s dictum is that in wildness is the salvation of the world. He sees the wilderness as a place of spiritual renewal and necessary for the health of humankind. Thoreau maintains that "life consists with Wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him" ("Walking" 187). Thoreau, like Leopold, is not oblivious to the danger the wilderness is in. He writes, "[T]he grove in our minds is laid waste,—sold to feed unnecessary fires of ambition, or sent to the mill, and there is scarcely a twig left for them to perch on" ("Walking" 209).
Unlike Thoreau who could only envisage the future destruction of the wilderness, Leopold is writing as a witness to the destruction humans have wreaked on nature. For instance, Leopold writes of the destruction recreation has had on the wilderness. He writes, “But to him who seeks something more, recreation has become a self-destructive process of seeking but never quite finding” (Sand County 166). Leopold recalls the joy nature has provided in the past, and the current state of the wilderness due to human modification:

The life of every river sings its own song, but in most the song is long since marred by the discords of misuse. Overgrazing first mars the plants and then the soil. Rifle, trap, and poison next deplete the larger birds and mammals; then comes a park or forest with roads and tourists. Parks are made to bring the music to the many, but by the time many are attuned to hear it there is little left but noise (Sand County 149-150).

Leopold is in favor of land use, but fears that the wilderness is being “used up” by misguided recreation (Huth 205). Leopold sees the fundamental reasoning for creating national parks to protect the land from development, but he also sees how capitalism is undermining that intention. Stegner asserts that “the lure of tourist money is a gun pointed at the heart of the wild” (Legacy 236). Edward Abbey, in “Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks,” argues that national parks have become nothing more than big business:

Industrial Tourism is a big business. It means money. It includes the motel and restaurant owners, the gasoline retailers, the oil corporations, the road-building contractors, the heavy equipment manufacturers, the state and
federal engineering agencies and the sovereign, all-powerful automotive industry (63).

Leopold reflects on the last time he visited his treasured White Mountain. He writes, "I prefer not to see what tourists, roads, sawmills, and logging railroads have done for it, or to it" (Sand County 128). He continues by pointing out that "recreation is commonly spoken of as an economic resource" (Sand County 167). Nature is still seen as an economic pursuit. In the eighteenth century, Bartram saw economic gain in the cultivation and industrialization of the wilderness. In the twentieth century, Leopold’s audience sees economic gain through nature’s recreational venues.

This is where Leopold’s philosophy of a “moral responsibility” comes into full effect, as we enter the third section of A Sand County Almanac. Leopold is not against recreational use of nature. Like Thoreau, Leopold believes that nature is imperative to the wellness of humans. Leopold “has no intention of preventing the public from making the best possible use of recreational facilities in parks and forests,” but he strongly feels that “certain limitations must be accepted” (Huth 204). Leopold points out that the integrity of the wilderness is being compromised by tourism and government disputes over rights. He writes of the controversial and conflicting policies being implemented.

Public policies for outdoor recreation are controversial. Equally conscientious citizens hold opposite views on what it is and what should be done to conserve its resource-base. Thus the Wilderness Society seeks to exclude roads from the hinterlands, and the Chamber of Commerce to extend them, both in the name of recreation (Leopold, Sand County 168).
Leopold acknowledges that the government’s creation and maintenance of the national parks have positively impacted those areas, but he emphatically points out that even these “protected” areas are in danger.

In the National Parks the same principle is recognized, but no specific boundaries are delimited. Collectively, these federal areas are the backbone of the wilderness program, but they are not so secure as the paper record might lead one to believe. Local pressures for new tourist roads knock off a chip here and a slab there. There is perennial pressure for extension of roads for forest-fire control, and these, by slow degrees, become public highways. Idle CCC camps presented a widespread temptation to build new and often needless roads. Lumber shortages during the war gave the impetus of military necessity to many road extensions, legitimate and otherwise. At the present moment, ski-tows and ski-hotels are being promoted in many mountain areas, often without regard to their prior designation as wilderness (Sand County 190-191).

Leopold shows how the government’s efforts to protect the land are not successful, and how the confusion over the policies limiting recreational use is causing greater harm to the remaining natural areas. “In short,” Leopold writes, “the very scarcity of wild places, reacting with the mores of advertising and promotion, tends to defeat any deliberate effort to prevent their growing still more scarce” (Sand County 172).

Leopold emphasizes how the integrity of the wilderness is compromised by mismanaged tourism and conflicting governmental policies, and uses these examples to exhort the individual to take individual action. In An Unsettled Country,
Donald Worster confirms that Leopold sees this as “the individual's responsibility, not the government's” (86). Worster is quick to point out that Leopold stresses the individual's “responsibility” and not the individual's “rights” (*Unsettled* 87).

It is in Worster's important clarification that one sees the full effect of Leopold's land ethic in *A Sand County Almanac*. Leopold opens Part I with pleasing tales of creatures in nature. In Part II, Leopold begins to show his reader how the lack of strong, consistent governmental policy regarding the use of nature has been detrimental to the protection of nature. Finally, in Part III, he makes it clear that the protection of the wilderness is no longer a government issue nor is it purely an economic issue. Leopold declares it is a personal, moral obligation:

> Quit thinking about decent land-use as solely an economic problem. . . A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise (*Sand County* 224-225).

In “Conservation As a Moral Issue,” Leopold states that “the privilege of possessing the earth entails the responsibility of passing it on, the better for our use, not only to immediate posterity, but the Unknown Future” (9).

John Hay notes in “The Nature Writer's Dilemma” that “it is certainly true that most people still believe in their superiority to nonhuman life” (5). Hay affirms this by illustrating how society in the mid-twentieth century “sees the natural world not as a range of correlated lives and communities but as a province for plunder” (5). Leopold addresses the attitude that the earth exists to meet humans' needs and asks, “Was the earth made for man's use, or has man merely the privilege of temporarily possessing an earth made for other inscrutable purposes?”
Leopold is questioning the Christian hegemonic notion, based in Genesis 1:27, that humans were created to rule “over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” He implores his reader to view the earth as a function of “interdependent individuals or groups” (*Sand County* 202) that must function as a “community of interdependent parts” (203). “In short,” Leopold writes, “a land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it” (*Sand County* 204).

Bartram wrote as a conqueror of the wilderness. Thoreau wrote as one who appreciated the wildness of the wilderness. Leopold writes as a witness to the disappearance of the wilderness. According to Huth, Leopold is stating that unless we change our attitudes toward our position in nature, “few of these treasures will be left to enrich the lives of future generations” (2). Leopold concludes *A Sand County Almanac* with this statement:

> By and large, our present problem is one of attitudes and implements. We are remodeling the Alhambra with a steam-shovel, and we are proud of our yardage. We shall hardly relinquish the shovel, which after all has many good points, but we are in need of gentler and more objective criteria for its successful use (225-226).
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

And I brought you into a plentiful country, to eat the fruit and the goodness thereof; but when ye entered, ye defiled my land, and made mine heritage an abomination.

~Jeremiah 1:6~

The approach to nature writing has come full circle. Bartram wrote of a wilderness, infinite, untamed, and full of natural resources that would benefit the American economy if cultivated. He saw the usefulness of taming the wilderness and taking out of it what was useful for economic gain. Thoreau wrote of a wilderness that was quickly becoming enclosed by fences and towns. He saw the wilderness as a vital source of personal rejuvenation, and yet he predicted that the wasteful use of natural resources could create substantial individual and societal concerns if the wilderness were squandered and destroyed. Leopold wrote of a land that was conquered, used, and destroyed. He wrote of the danger of obliterating the wilderness and of his longing to see again the wildness of the land. He called for a new land ethic that recognized humans as part of nature and no longer as conquerors of nature. The evolution of nature writing leads to the prediction that, unlike the writings of Bartram, Thoreau and Leopold, the future of nature writing no longer depends on an accessible natural environment. Instead, it will depend on the desire to remember what nature once was.
Yet, Leopold's writing has often been credited as a seminal work for conservation awareness, and Nash optimistically insists that the late twentieth century has seen Leopold's new land ethic being recognized. Nash states:

The new driving impulse, based on ecological awareness, transcended concern for the quality of life to fear for life itself. Americans suddenly realized that man is vulnerable. More precisely, they began to see man as part of a larger community of life, dependent for his survival on the survival of the ecosystem and on the health of the total environment (Wilderness 254).

Nash believes that Americans are beginning to realize their interdependence on nature and how they must care for the environment if it is going to sustain any life.

Regrettably, Nash's optimistic assumption that Americans have embraced this new land ethic does not hold true as we enter the twenty-first century. Noel Perrin writes in "Forever Virgin: The American View of America" how Americans are still approaching nature from divergent perspectives. Perrin states that Americans approach nature from a rational understanding that we are depleting and destroying that which sustains us and from an emotional approach, where "almost all of us still believe what the Dutch sailors thought: that here is an inexhaustible new world, with plenty of everything for everybody" (22). We still believe that nature is resilient and can absorb anything we do to it. Unfortunately, according to "Conserving Land for Recreational Enjoyment," published in May 2002, 9,898,000 acres of wild, open, natural and scenic lands have been developed to accommodate America's population growth since June 1998. This amounts to 7,000 acres per day of undeveloped land lost to "progress." In just over four years, more than 15,466
square miles of land have been lost to mostly commercial development (“Conserving”). Peter Matthiessen reminds us in *Wildlife in America* that “forests, soil, water and wildlife are mutually independent, and the ruin of one element will mean, in the end, the ruin of them all (22). Stegner predicts that “just as surely as [progress] has brought us increased comfort and more material goods, it has brought us spiritual losses, and it threatens now to become the Frankenstein that will destroy us” (565). Unfortunately, as it was in the eighteenth century with Bartram, the environmental ethic is still being guided by the American dream of economic gain. In *Nature’s Economy*, Donald Worster writes,

> The modern industrial system is the primacy of efficiency and productivity as human goals. Since the eighteenth century’s industrial and agricultural revolutions, these aims have been on the ascendancy in Anglo-American culture, and today are undoubtedly the ruling values of our time. With few exceptions, anything that does not meet their test or that challenges their supremacy has little chance of being taken seriously by the public or its leaders (293).

Abbey calls progress “a dark cloud on my horizon” (56), and Matthiessen describes humans as having a “most destructive potential” (29). Stegner echoes these assertions by maintaining that the intentional destruction of the wilderness for progress is going to be society’s own downfall (“Coda” 565). In 1960, Stegner predicted, “Something will have gone out of us if we ever let the wilderness be destroyed . . . never again will Americans be free in their own country from the noise, the exhausts, the stinks of human and automotive waste” (“Coda” 565).
Sadly, Stegner’s prophesy was recently fulfilled through a study performed by the American Lung Association in 2002 that concluded that most Americans are now breathing polluted air (“Most Americans”). John Kirkwood, president and chief executive officer of the American Lung Association, blames the air pollution on economic and political interests. Kirkwood maintains that “Somehow, industry believes it needs to continue to pollute. They have fought every step we have taken toward cleaner air for all Americans” (“Most Americans”). As Bartram’s writing implies and as Thoreau’s writing warns, the interests of economic gain through industrialization have taken precedence over the interest of nature. Unfortunately, the consequences are starting to harm humans as well as the environment.

Stegner believes that the only possible solution to this problem is to see nature as a resource in itself—“an intangible and spiritual resource” (“Coda” 565). This is an echo of Thoreau’s contention that nature provides spiritual rejuvenation and a reinforcement of Leopold’s call for a new land ethic. Stegner maintains:

Without any remaining wilderness we are committed wholly, without chance for even momentary reflection and rest, to a headlong drive into our technological termite-life, the Brave New World of a completely man-controlled environment... As the remnants of the unspoiled and natural world are progressively eroded, every such loss is a little death in me. In us. (“Coda” 565-567)

Bartram’s writing focused on “progress”, “industrialization” and “civilization.” Thoreau’s writing warned of the toll “progress” could have on the wilderness, and Leopold’s writing centered on an environmental awareness of nature. However, as
well-intentioned as Leopold's writing was, the welfare of nature continues to
deteriorate in the name of economic gain. I believe that in the near future, the nature
writer will no longer have the luxury of observing nature first-hand as did the writers
preceding the twenty-first century. As the wilderness disappears completely,
literature about it will abandon Leopold's plea to preserve it, for there will be no
wilderness left to preserve. Leopold sadly remarked that "perhaps our grandsons,
having never seen a wild river, will never miss the chance to set a canoe in singing
waters" (Sand County 116). The implication indicates that nature writing as
observation may cease with the absence of wilderness. What remains will only be in
the memory of the aged and in the pen of a poet, the words of ages past. In
Leopold's words:

Some day my marsh, dyked and pumped, will lie forgotten under the wheat,
just as today and yesterday will lie forgotten under the years. Before the last
mud-minnow makes his last wiggle in the last pool, the terns will scream
goodbye to Clandeboye, the swans will circle skyward, in snowy dignity, and
the cranes will blow their trumpets in farewell (Sand County 162).

The struggle for nature writers soon will not be in the conservation of the
environment. Instead, our challenge will be to find ways to describe what is gone.
In A River Runs Through It, Norman Maclean, gives hope that when the environment
of which nature writers write of disappears, the words they pen will not:

Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it. The river
was cut by the world's great flood and runs over rocks from the basement of
time. On some of the rocks are timeless raindrops. Under the rocks are the words, and some of the words are theirs (104).
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