

CLASSROOM AND CANOES: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO THE
TEACHING OF ECOLOGICAL AND CONSERVATION HISTORY

Christopher Plant
Western Wyoming College

During the summers of 1977 through 1980 this author taught a history course at the University of Rochester officially entitled "Wilderness and the American Mind" or, as it is popularly known among the students, "canoeing for credit." This type of offering is now a regular feature on college campuses during summer sessions. The following article will address my intellectual approach to the course, some practical aspects involved in bringing it to fruition and a problem that arises if such a course creates students who are seasoned wilderness travelers without engendering in them a concomitant regard for the ecosystem.

Intellectual Orientation in the Classroom

Wilderness and the American Mind is structured such that two weeks are spent in the formal traditional classroom environment at the University of Rochester while the final week is devoted to canoeing in the North American outback. Lectures, readings, and assignments are designed to merge with a practical experience. The expectation is that the student will develop a sensitivity to the present ecological crisis and knowledgeable criteria with which to evaluate the proposed remedies. Submergence in relatively unspoiled wilderness allows the student to personally measure the extent to which Mother Nature has already been brutalized in civilization. Armed with classroom fact and animated by the beauty of the outback the student will ideally become a potential recruit for one of the activist ecological organizations.

My chief concern in the first two weeks is to provide the students with a history of the conservation and ecological movements in the United States. The core of my lectures are drawn from Roderick Nash's Wilderness and the American Mind.¹ This work is the most definitive account of the wilderness movement. Nash, however, does not address the larger concerns that are at the heart of the present ecological crisis. In particular, he does not analyze capitalist ethics and the consequences of allowing the profit motive to dominate American life. Such issues are generally avoided by most ecological organizations whose members are staunchly middle class but they have been addressed by Native American activists, the political left, a leading foe of nuclear power, and rather evasively by the capitalists themselves.²

The lietmotif stressed is that the defiling of the ecosystem is only one measure of a modernizing process that has given us a material cornucopia along with punch clocks, class rule, pollution, and currently a frighteningly close existence on the brink of world destruction. The core assigned readings support this theme. They are generally Barry Commoner, The Poverty of Power, Ernest Callenback, Ecotopia, and Kai T. Erikson, Everything in Its Path. All three works depict America as on the verge of an ecological apocalypse with comprehensive communalism as the needed solution. The authors are sounding the tocsin for all who can or care to hear. The instructor's task is to emphasize that the alarm is no longer distant.³

My lectures are broad ranging but always oriented to the above philosophy. The first series of talks are intended to demonstrate that alternative economic ideologies and life styles are not utopian fantasies. My initial lectures outline the traditional Native American view of the ecosystem. The model is the contemporary Iroquoian peoples of the Northeast. Stressed is the non-distinction between animate and inanimate objects, the cycle of life, the value placed on sharing, and, not incidentally, the respect accorded to the political and social rights of women.⁴

Adopting Vine De Loria's adage, "We Talk: You Listen,"⁵ I demonstrate how many ethical features of the Native American life style are being borrowed by the dominant culture. Ecologists, for instance, are now considering the sacred rights of rocks and the legal status of individual trees.⁶ There is a glimmer of hope that if we acculturate ourselves to Native American ethics we can avert impending ecological tragedy.

The next series of lectures disinters and dissects the ideology of the European invaders of North America. This is an historical autopsy which searches into the origins of our current abuses of the ecosystem. The values of the European mode of production are closely analyzed. Briefly stated, these are the positive attributes attached to unilinear progress, the destruction of the wilderness, the individual hoarding of wealth, and the exploitation of the producing classes. These are the mannerisms of "cowboy capitalism" and a revisionist Christianity.⁷ They are best embodied in the European's most utilized rationalization for the exploitation of nature. God's first commandment to man was: "Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." The Europeans also knew that the last chapter of the Bible was Revelations, but they did not realize that their heirs might be the agents of their own doom.⁸

Despair can debilitate as well as motivate potential activists. The penultimate series of lectures attempts to demonstrate that the courageous can triumph in the cause of ecological sanity. These talks are a chronicle of the various struggles, heroes, and philosophical tendencies within the conservation and ecological movements. They begin with Robert Byrd's first notice of the beauty of undisturbed North America. Prior to his time most Europeans saw the continent as a "howling wilderness" which should be transformed into a garden.⁹

Time is also devoted to the beatific retreatism of Thoreau, the wilderness spiritualism of John Muir, the multi-use philosophy of Giffort Pinchot, the conservation efficiency drive of "progressive" American businessmen, the scientific aestheticism of Aldo Leopold, and the belated national acceptance of the silent prophesy of Rachel Carson.¹⁰ Accounts are given of the losing battles to prevent the destruction of the Hetch Hetchy valley and Glen Canyon. On the other hand, such stunning victories as the 1964 "Wilderness Bill," the saving of Hell's Canyon in Idaho from the power companies, and the exposure of the corporate dumping of PCBs into New York State waterways are recounted.¹¹ These test cases demonstrate that ecological visionaries, if they court public opinion, can change the course of political events and hence the common inter-related future of all living species.

My concluding talk takes place after the journey into the outback. The multifarious ecological crises facing the United States and the world are listed. The problems thus enumerated run the gamut from nuclear war to solid waste disposal. On nearly all fronts, with the possible exception of North American timber reserves, we are losing the struggle to clean up our environment, conserve nonrenewable resources, and provide the human species with a happy and productive life.¹²

Utilizing the old labor slogan: "Don't Mourn -- Organize," I proffer to the students a handout on which is printed the major national and local organizations actively engaged in recreating a healthy environment. These groups are excellent educational and information sources. In addition, they provide sophisticated lobbys for their members' special interests and they generally offer inexpensive wilderness trips that are led by highly competent guides. Ecological activism, the students discover, is beneficial for the country and fun for the individual member.

Practical Preparation

The following advice is based upon years of experience in the outback and five years of leading groups into the Canadian bush. The perspective is the summer environment of the Northeast with the basic means of transportation being a canoe on flat water. Those who wish to hike, shoot rapids, or climb peaks need to consult other experts.

Essential Instructor Preparation

The potential instructor of a wilderness course needs to be competent in four basic areas. He or she should know the rudiments of first aid, lifesaving techniques, canoe safety, and how to use a topographical map and compass.

The first three safety particulars are best mastered through classes provided by the American Red Cross and the Y.M.C.A. Expert instructors teach these offerings and they make available to their students relevant textbooks and informational sheets. The courses are inexpensive and are offered at convenient times.

The ability to utilize a compass and topographical map is needed in case the party gets disoriented or lost. The Silva method, requiring a Silva compass, is the least complicated way to read a topographical map or find one's location. There is available a fine book which illustrates the use of this technique.¹³

Choosing A Wilderness and Appropriate Route

The instructor needs to use common sense gained from previous experience when picking a wilderness area in which to venture his class. My choice of area for the last two summers has been the "controlled" wilderness of Algonquin Provincial Park in Ontario, Canada. The park is at a convenient distance from the University and a pontoon plane is flown over the region every day enabling emergency cases to be air-lifted out of the bush. The park is mapped in detail, campsites clearly delineated, and portage trails well marked.

On the other hand, Algonquin Provincial Park is laced with a thousand miles of canoeable waterways and a twenty-mile paddle removes a party from tourists and most other human intrusions. The area with its pure water lakes and rolling woods is incomparably beautiful. Big game that is rare in agricultural and urban areas abounds. It is not at all unusual to sight moose, bear, beaver, and to hear the nocturnal howling of the normally furtive timber wolves. The park's chief asset, in brief, is that it is a remote yet relatively safe haven in a very hostile world. There are many other such wilderness areas in the so-called settled Northeast.¹⁴

Every instructor about to lead a class into the outback needs to possess the "feel" of the region into which he is committing the party. Most wilderness areas are benign and beautiful but once someone is injured or ailing it can be an extremely difficult task to get him to proper medical attention. It is virtually a mandate that the instructor travel through the area with an experienced party before bringing greenhorn students into the region. In short, know the land before accepting leadership responsibilities.

TEACHING HISTORYLogistics

It is one matter to know what to bring into the outback and quite another to put the necessary forces into motion so that the operation is smooth and uncomplicated. Organization is the key to success. In practice this means the creation of definitive gear and food lists and a rigid adherence to their mandates.

I make students pack their gear a week in advance and then with list in hand I have them unpack piece by piece so that it is absolutely certain that they have the necessary equipment. Beginners, especially romantically inclined middle-class students, often do not see the immediate logic of sage advice or cannot relate to the guide's past experience. In regard to basic equipment the instructor must be unbending and severe. Poorly constructed gear, articles left behind, or inadequate food supplies can make an individual miserable. Lone misery cannot be isolated in a communal setting and its continual presence will jeopardize the plans and pleasures of the entire group.

Meals should be uniform for the whole party for several reasons. Allowing everyone to cook and carry their own foods leads to inefficient use of stoves and cooking fires. It will also cause departure delays and consequent frustration since one preparation will always take longer than another.

Communal food storage also lends itself to a more simplified routine. In the outback all food containers that are not currently being utilized must be suspended from a rope between two trees. This arrangement keeps the supplies safe from the guerrilla raids of hungry and dangerous wildlife such as bears. The suspension of packs is a laborious task and especially so at the end of a long day. A few communal food packs are much easier to arrange in this manner than attempting to hoist everyone's pack off the ground. Communal organization of the food supplies also allows the entire party to experience the same culinary joys and catastrophies. Singular memories are not much fun.

Food is purchased for the entire party by teams composed of two persons. Each team is responsible for purchasing and preparing meals for several days of wilderness travel. Trip days and hence chow duty are evenly divided so that each team is assigned its equal share of work. Through this process students receive experience in both choosing and cooking wilderness meals. Provisions are separately packed in Ziplock or food storage bags and labelled by day of use and content. The containers are then placed in food packs in the order in which they will be needed.

To some, the above outlined logistical strategy may seem superfluous. However, such arrangements are required on a wilderness trip if chaos is to be avoided. In the long run it is always less time consuming and far less tension provoking to be organized in civilization rather than being disorganized and scared in the outback.

Party Preparation

The applicable motto is "Know Thyself. Know Thy Students." All persons in the party must demonstrate that they can meet the potential physical demands of the journey. The instructor should also be sure that he or she is in good physical condition. A debilitated leader ordering a group forward under adverse circumstances loses all credibility. He or she is employing a strategem that is akin to pushing a string.

Before the expedition departs students need to know canoe handling and safety. It is difficult to teach these skills on a learn-as-you-go basis. The

confusion and fright that can be attendant on novices encountering the wilderness for the first time will intrude upon effective teaching. Daily camp routine, travel exigencies, and personal fatigue will leave precious few hours for intensive instruction.

A week before departure the class practices canoeing skills on a local shallow stream. Different strokes are learned and, more importantly, the topic of canoe safety is demonstrated. Students, for instance, learn never to swim away from a swamped canoe because in that condition it is still a safe vehicle, it can be simply reentered, and then paddled away while still full of water. Teachers may wish to incorporate the American Red Cross canoe safety course into their own class and issue the appropriate certificates. The requisite Red Cross instructor status can generally be earned over a weekend of concentrated study and practical application.

Prior to departure, students must also be well versed in what action to take if they become lost or separated from the rest of the party. In general, they are not to move, they are to start a fire, make a rudimentary shelter, and emit lots of noise. If an individual becomes lost and scared to the point of debilitation he or she should hug a tree. This will provide love, companionship, and a humorous interlude in a situation that need not be desperate.¹⁵

It is also prudent to post the rules of the road before departure so that there can be no misunderstanding of basic party principles. My "cardinal rules" are attached to the reading schedule and are listed below. "Breaking these rules" the students read, "will result in automatic failure . . . and an immediate escort to civilization."

1. Everyone, without exception, must wear a life jacket safely secured at all times, while on the water.
2. No one will swim alone and none will swim without first having notified the instructor.
3. Canoes will stay within sight and helping distance of one another at all times.
4. Students will carry with them, at all times, a whistle and waterproof matches.
5. No dope.

Another task that needs to be completed prior to leaving is the outlining of a written detailed itinerary of the journey and then securing it with a trustworthy person. If the party encounters distress and does not return in time, then it is mandatory that persistent efforts be made to get the requisite officialdom off their posteriors so that an immediate search for the party can begin. This will not be accomplished unless an interested individual, such as a wife, knows the party is late in returning. Filing itineraries with rangers, even when this is a required practice, is not a reliable means of assuring that a prompt search will begin if the group for some reason fails to reemerge from the bush. In heavily traveled areas rangers are overburdened with bureaucratic paperwork concerning hundreds of visitors and will probably not even be aware of the problem unless they are notified from the outside that something is severely amiss.

Intellectual Orientation on the Outback

Formal traditional instruction in the bush is probably not desirable and is definitely not needed. Instead I have the students carry a journal for daily entries. In their journals the students are asked to integrate their classroom experience with their objective and emotional interpretation of the outback.

The students also carry one pertinent paperback to discuss over the campfire. For instance, the work assigned for one trip was John Theberge's Wolves and Wilderness. The research for the book was conducted in Algonquin Provincial Park and the author convincingly debunks the myth of the wolf as a savage predator.¹⁶ Students learn that wolves live in complex societies, help insure the balance of nature, and despite the spine-chilling fiction of Jack London they never attack human beings. Such a work is immediately topical on a moonlit night when the park wolves are howling to one another or howling in response to human imitations of baying. It is also, needless to say, comforting to city folks when the extent of civilization seems limited to a twenty-foot radius around a campfire.

Once the class has been guided twenty or thirty miles into the bush the entire effort is turned over to the students with the instructor maintaining a veto power, that, to date, has never been utilized. By alphabetical order a leader is chosen for each day. This person is responsible for outlining the day's journey, guiding the group to a good campsite, maintaining safety standards, and supervising the setting up of camp. The students as a whole determine distances to be covered and routes to be followed. Leadership skills, individual confidence, and democracy are fostered by such self rule.

There are many informal lessons to be taught and learned in the wilderness. Most of these need not be detailed here. They cover such practical efforts as starting a fire, properly lighting a pressurized stove, locating the north star among the constellations, reading a topographical map, and the best manner in which to portage a canoe.

Many esthetic lessons cannot be conveyed even by the best of teachers. The outback itself must become the medium of instruction. One cannot lecture on the beauty of the northern lights or the marvel of a wilderness dawn on a placid lake. Only self discovery can instruct the traveler in the subjective zeitgeist of wilderness living. As one of my students expressed it in his journal, the experiences of living in the bush created "emotional memories which cannot be shared or vicariously reproduced, only mutually experienced, if you're lucky." An entry of another student noted: "The scenery is breathtaking, and I find my thoughts expanding beyond everyday trivialities and changing to a broader perspective. I feel like a miniature Thoreau."

Basis for Grading

Course grades are determined by two criteria. The first is the individual's contribution toward making the course a success. The student is evaluated on eagerness to learn, participation in the many animated discussions, determination to master camp routine, and his or her willingness to shoulder the hard physical tasks of a wilderness trek. Allowances are made for inexperience and degree of muscular prowess.

All students on all of the trips have reentered civilized life as a successful veteran voyagers. Everyone in the various parties, for instance, has stoically endured the unrelieved pain of portaging and uncomplainingly bested the misery of a cold-continuous rain. Other than an ephemeral plea of "Scotty, Beam me up!" no one to date has regretted the experience or failed to meet the basic class standards.

An evaluation of the journals is the second criteria for grading. I look for creativity, insight, and an articulate integration of classroom material with the living reality of the wilderness. A few journals are uninformed and unimaginative productions. Most are olympian efforts that sparkle with

relevant data, scintillating wit, detailed remembrances, and a growing regard for the environment. The best grades are, of course, awarded to the latter type of effort.

Wilderness Ethics

Living in the wilderness is a devotional act as well as a practical experience. Wilderness ethics now require that people enter a wild area with no intent to harm or disrupt the ecosystem. Those who journey in the outback should leave no indication that they were ever present in the wilderness. This means, in practice, carrying back to civilization, all non-burnable and non-biodegradable material. The current mottoes are "Carry Out All You Carry In" and "Take Only Pictures; Leave Only Footprints." Canned food and garbage pits are now atavistic remnants of the past.¹⁷

The new ethics also forbid the cutting or destruction of living things. Gone, for instance, are the days of fresh pine bough beds. Even inanimate objects are accorded their sacred rights. Timber is cut only if it is "dead and down" and rocks should not be profaned with human graffiti.

Many guides now define wilderness "as a place where man is only a visitor." Being a gracious guest implies adopting manners that are inoffensive to the host. Some now argue that even the sacrosanct campfire is an affront to the wilderness and should be abandoned as a wasteful and polluting utilization of nature's bounty. The larger theme is that if we guard our national heritage this defense may ensure that our progeny will have a real wilderness to marvel in and not just fairytales of remote places and great adventures. "Even though I know that a lot of . . . progress is needed," a student ruminates in her journal, "I can't help but wonder if we aren't screwing ourselves out of something that is really important. We can always build structures over sites where other structures have been . . . but we can never build back a true wilderness once it has been destroyed."

The tragic irony is that ecologists, in order to preserve wild areas, have encouraged their use so that a sympathetic preservationist constituency would develop. Unfortunately, many in this currently huge pressure group have only a cursory knowledge of the new wilderness ethics. There has been a population explosion in the outback replete with enormous ecological damage. The symptoms of a sick civilization have spread into the wilderness with the wanderings of its human vectors. There is overcrowding of campsites and problems with water pollution, devastated camping areas, garbage disposal, and even crime. Many wilderness areas are now on the verge of being destroyed by the very people who profess to be nature lovers.¹⁸

Many so-called wilderness courses are actually training in survival techniques. One is taught how to be a man. Conquer the wilderness and thus conquer yourself. This type of training requires the hacking down of trees and the unnecessary killing of wildlife. One of these offerings routinely flunks out the physically disabled, encourages lone travel, and boasts that only one person has ever died on its expeditions. Such programs as these are demeaning to the environment and demeaning to wildlife, most notably our own species.¹⁹

The philosophical cynosure of the field portion of my course consists of community endeavors and just plain fun. "I learned a much more socialistic way [of camping]" is how one student articulated this philosophy. He found the "American mix of communal effort in cooking and carrying while retaining a very individual effort in personal equipment and utensils" to be "relaxing both physically and emotionally."

Wilderness should be enjoyed, not conquered. It should soothe the soul and not be a proving ground for individual worthiness. We fight to survive everyday in the harsh Darwinian struggle of modern civilization. What we now need to learn is how to be comfortable enough in the outback so that we can satisfactorily and leisurely enjoy our commune with nature and our commune with our fellow sojourners.

Wilderness living need not be an escape into a non-existent past of rugged frontier individualism or a back-to-nature mystical religious experience. Instead a group journey into the outback can serve as a model for future societies when citizens will live in a bountiful, well balanced environment and within an economic system that will promote sharing and mutual help. Wilderness living should provide an example of what can be and not a meaningless Walt Disney version of what once was. As always, wilderness should inspire humans to be more properly civilized.

Unless students become devotees of the new wilderness ethics, the instructor has failed in his or her task. He or she has opened a region and not a style of life. The basic strain in a wilderness course is between love and death. If the teacher provides another recruit for the forces of destruction then wilderness is one step closer to extinction.

The burden on the instructor in a wilderness course is great because he or she must serve in many capacities. The instructor must be an experienced guide, stimulating intellectual mentor, and perhaps more importantly, a convincing spiritual leader.

NOTES

¹ (New Haven, 1973).

² For the Native American perspective see the following newspaper Akwasasne Notes (Mohawk Nation, via Roosevelttown, New York, 13683). The interpretation of the political left can be garnered from the following newsweekly and its associated book publisher: The Militant (14 Charles Lane, New York, New York 10014). Barry Commoner, The Poverty of Power: Energy and the Economic Crisis (New York, 1976). The apologists for capital center the blame for the current ecological crisis on patterns of individual consumption and individual reproduction. The best example of this genre is Donella H. Meadows, et al., The Limits to Growth: A Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind (New York, 1974).

³ The core assigned works are: Commoner, The Poverty of Power; Ernest Callenbach, Ecotopia: The Notebooks and Reports of William Weston (Berkeley, 1975); Kai T. Erikson, Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood (New York, 1976).

⁴ "The Iroquois of New York--Their Past and Present," The Conservationist, XXX (January-February, 1976). George H. J. Abrams, The Seneca People (Phoenix, 1976). See also Stan Steiner, The Vanishing White Man (New York, 1976).

⁵ Vine Deloria, Jr., We Talk, You Listen: New Tribes, New Turf (New York, 1970).

⁶ See for instance: Christopher D. Stone, Should Trees Have Standing? Toward Legal Rights for Natural Objects (New York, 1972).

⁷ Adam Smith, "The Last Days of Cowboy Capitalism," Atlantic Monthly, CCXXX (September, 1972), 43-55.

⁸Genesis 1:28.

⁹Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind; Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (New York, 1964).

¹⁰Henry David Thoreau, Walden or Life in the Woods and On the Duty of Civil Disobedience (New York, 1960); Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind; Samuel P. Hays, Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920 (New York, 1959); Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation from Round River (New York, 1966); Rachel Carson, Silent Spring (Greenwich, Connecticut, 1962); Frank Graham, Since Silent Spring (Boston, 1970).

¹¹Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind; William Ashworth, Hells Canyon: The Deepest Gorge on Earth (New York, 1977).

¹²Each year the National Wildlife Federation issues a comprehensive Environmental Quality Index. This assessment is abstracted from the index for 1978. National Wildlife, XVI (February-March 1978), 17-32. Reprints are available. See also: John Strohm (ed.), Endangered Species (Washington, D.C., n.d.).

¹³Bjorn Kjellslotm, Be Expert With Map and Compass: The Orienteering Handbook (La Porte, Indiana, 1967). The Silva Compass is manufactured by Silva Inc., La Porte, Indiana.

¹⁴A definitive guide to these areas is Val Landi, The Bantam Great Outdoors Guide to the United States and Canada: The Complete Travel Encyclopedia and Wilderness Guide (New York, 1978).

¹⁵Hints on what to do when lost and many other ideas on wilderness living can be found in John Hart, Walking Softly in the Wilderness: The Sierra Club Guide for Backpacking (San Francisco, 1977).

¹⁶John B. Theberge, Wolves and Wilderness (Toronto, 1975).

¹⁷The slogans and definitions quoted in this section of the article have no one source. They are common knowledge to those who often travel in the "controlled" wilderness of national, state and provincial parks.

¹⁸Nash, Wilderness and the American Mind, 262-273. See also W. E. Garrett, "Grand Canyon: Are We Loving It To Death?" National Geographic, CLIV (July, 1978), 16-51.

¹⁹John Noble Wilford, "Survival Courses Lure Many to Test of Endurance," New York Times, July 23, 1978.

Editor's Note: For those readers who would like greater detail on individual gear, party gear, food, and so forth for this sort of expedition, the author would be pleased to provide you with additional information. Contact Christopher Plant, Western Wyoming College, 2500 College Drive, Rock Springs, Wyoming 82901.