

Wilderness Through the Eyes of Edward Abbey and Wendell Berry

“Wilderness. The word itself is music. Wilderness, wilderness...” (Abbey 166). Why does this word, and all that it represents, have such allure? It calls us into unexplored places, and beckons us to find the next uncharted territory. But why are we so drawn to the most rugged and remote of environments, when the comfort and security of civilization awaits? Some might say that it is simply human nature to seek out unknown places, but as writer and environmentalist Edward Abbey would likely argue: there’s more to the story of wilderness than meets the eye.

Edward Abbey, in his work *Desert Solitaire*, documents his season as a park ranger in Arches National Monument, deep in the solitary Canyonlands of the desert southwest. Abbey is a rebel, a self-proclaimed loner, an anarchist, but also a poetic and eloquent writer. He is deeply passionate about this place that he loves, Arches, and finds great solace in its unaltered beauty and solitude. His book not only tells stories of his own experiences in the park, but paints pictures of the lives of other humans and animals who have inhabited this desert landscape. However, Abbey makes it clear that he dislikes his visitors; in his love for solitude, he also develops an aversion toward most of human society. Though he’d prefer his readers to not visit his solitary desert home, through his prose he allows them to enter and explore his world, as inhospitable and uninviting as it may appear at first sight.

Abbey, however, finds great satisfaction in the harshness of the desert. Just as other great explorers were drawn to the mountaintops or oceans, he is captivated by the emptiness of the desert. In describing this captivation, he states, “... it seems to me that the strangeness and wonder of existence are emphasized here, in the desert, by the comparative sparsity of the flora and fauna” (Abbey 26). The scarcity of life forms brings meaning to each individual plant or animal, and creates a clarity and rawness in the landscape that Abbey revels in.

Abbey also sees this rawness in the landscape as a reminder of its indifference to human presence: “Whether we live or die is of absolutely no concern to the desert” (Abbey 267). Abbey sees in the desert an ancient earth: self-sufficient, elegant, and mysterious. The desert, the wilderness, is a reminder of our minor role on this earth: mere passersby in an enormous spider web of natural phenomena. Just as the wilderness is a humbling reminder of our insignificance, its natural features may also help us to find greater meaning in our own lives. In the strange beauty of the rock amphitheater of Delicate Arch, Abbey glances deeper into its importance: “For a few moments we discover that nothing can be taken for granted, for if this ring of stone is marvelous, then all which shaped it is marvelous, and our journey here on Earth, able to see and touch and hear in the midst of tangible and mysterious things-in-themselves, is the most strange and daring of all adventures” (Abbey 37). In witnessing firsthand a natural world far more mysterious and elaborate than our own, we may learn to find the significance in our own lives, and the roles they play in a much larger framework.

While wilderness is a source of enlightenment and deeper knowledge, it is also a source of immense beauty and pleasure to its human visitors. Abbey undoubtedly finds a certain romance in the home he created in the desert, just as others have fallen in love with tranquil forests, tumultuous seas, and rocky vistas. When Abbey opens his book with “This is the most beautiful place on Earth,” he means it. But he follows his claim with, “there are many such places” (Abbey 1). In doing so, he is not contradicting his own claim, but rather highlighting the human connection with places. We find solace in beautiful places, exciting places, and places that remind us of home. And knowing that these most important places exist, even if we cannot inhabit them, is a source of comfort. In this way, many people need wildernesses even if they rarely if ever visit them: “A man could be a lover and defender of the wilderness without ever in

his lifetime leaving the boundaries of asphalt, powerlines, and right-angled surfaces” (Abbey 129). We need wildernesses as a possible refuge from city life, whether or not we ever actually set foot in them. In this way, whether or not wildernesses are utilized is perhaps not as important to Abbey as whether or not they exist. We need wildernesses, in part because they bring us hope.

Abbey argues that we also need wildernesses for one final, and perhaps most crucial reason—respect. Abbey knows and recognizes that the earth is our one and only home, and certain places, and certain ecosystems, *deserve* not to be meddled with. He writes, “the love of the wilderness is more than a hunger for what is always beyond reach; it is also an expression of loyalty to the earth, the earth which bore us and sustains us, the only home we shall ever know, the only paradise we ever need—if only we had the eyes to see” (Abbey 167). Nature is astoundingly beautiful, as it is dramatic and powerful, but it is also our home, whether or not we choose to recognize it. Preserving nature not only preserves its wildness and emotional value, but also ensures that the earth remains our home for generations to come.

In exploring these ideas throughout the stories of *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey leaves us with little doubt: humanity needs wilderness. In doing so, however, he presents his readers with a striking paradox—by definition, human civilization and wilderness are opposing beings. Humans cannot survive in the wilderness without the support of developed civilization. Similarly, wilderness as we define it would not exist without human conservation efforts, but wilderness ceases to exist when it is overrun by human visitation. This latter idea is perhaps the cause for Abbey’s apparent aversion to tourists, and much of developed society. Though his hatred for cultured society often appears as sarcastic playfulness, there is a more troubling dilemma revealed in his cynicism. Though he hates flashing lights and grocery stores, he knows

he must return to them in order to continue living. He dislikes the tourists that visit his solitary desert home, but all the while recognizes that they keep his National Park alive. Abbey does not directly address the solutions to these dilemmas, leaving them to be pondered by his readers.

If Abbey takes a romantic approach to wilderness preservation, Wendell Berry is his logical and pragmatic counterpart. Students in the same writing class and good friends, Edward Abbey and Wendell Berry both undeniably love the wilderness, and through their writings explore human interaction with it. However, while Abbey leaves us dreaming of far-off places and pondering the future of wilderness, Wendell Berry instead explores solutions to Abbey's paradoxes. In his essay "Preserving Wildness," Berry shares his wholehearted support of "wilderness of all kinds, large and small, public and private" (Berry 524). He also uses the essay to explore how humans may play a role in these wildernesses, and how we may learn to find harmony with an earth we seem to be in constant battle with.

Berry's writing serves to develop and complicate Abbey's ideas, particularly in his discussion of the division between nature and humanity. In *Desert Solitaire*, Abbey presents humanity as an entity entirely separate from nature, intent on domesticating all that it encounters. Berry instead argues that these two entities—humanity and nature—are not completely distinct, but are also inherently not identical. We live and breathe and survive as a species because we are wild, but we also cannot assume that humans and the natural world are one and the same, as Berry suggests. We are "domesticated" creatures, so we say, with developed economies, cultures, and air conditioned apartments. Abbey, on the other hand, sees only this "domesticated" side of the human race, seemingly leading to his hatred for civilized society. He forgets that these people too are also part wild, trying to survive in a confusing and complicated society. Berry instead suggests that people themselves are not to blame, but for people to be

divided against wildness is a grave mistake. He writes, “To be divided against nature, against wildness, then, is a human disaster because it is to be divided against ourselves. It confines our identity as creatures entirely within the bounds of our own understanding, which is invariably a mistake because it is invariably reductive. It reduces our largeness, our mystery, to a petty and sickly comprehensibility” (Berry 520). Berry believes that a humanity which domesticates all that it encounters is inevitably doomed to failure—the wonderful grandeur and complexity of Abbey’s wildernesses reduced to gridded parking lots and sidewalks.

It is this fear of human development that leaves Abbey paralyzed. He loves his desert passionately, but sees the exploitation of the natural world by industry and assumes that “civilized” intentions must be evil. He assumes the stance of the misanthrope, claiming that the only way the wildernesses are to be saved is through limiting human numbers. In an article featured in the *Canyon Country Zephyr*, Doug Meyer presents Abbey’s take on Berry’s “Preserving Wildness,” and Berry’s response to his criticisms. In response to Berry, Abbey states, “So long as human numbers continue to grow, there is little hope that we can save what wilderness remains in America” (Meyer 13). He advocates for population control, but Berry instead argues that this is not a responsible or realistic solution to our conflicts. As Berry suggests, we cannot question how many people is “too many” without dealing first with the issue of responsible land use.

In response to Abbey’s criticism, Berry admits to sharing Abbey’s “exasperation and resentment,” and longing to preserve solitary places. However, he argues, “I don’t think misanthropy is a solution, or that it can lead to a solution. ...I don’t think we can preserve ourselves or our world by belittling ourselves” (Meyer 13). Hating ourselves is not a productive response to our pressing problems, and Berry shows us that it can only lead into tricky subjects

(if there indeed are “too many,” how do we decide, and who decides, “how many” we need, and which ones?) (Berry 528). Berry suggests that we might rather turn our attention to how and where we interact with the land, and focus in on forging responsible relationships with nature. He argues that the most crucial question we face today asks: what is the proper extent of human influence over the land? He asks, “how much must humans do in their own behalf in order to be fully human?” Many of us, he says, would argue, “less” (Berry 527).

This question, however, puts us face to face with nature: in order to survive as a species, we must alter nature, and use it to our own benefit. Other creatures and landscapes will inevitably suffer as a result. If this is true, then we can ask, how do we interact with nature responsibly? How do we use the land, and allocate its resources, without defacing and corrupting it? The answer to this question, as Berry suggests, comes down to careful stewardship. Stewardship, he describes as: behaving properly with respect to nature, attempting to live harmoniously with it, and placing limits on human development. “Then we can see that it is not primarily the number of people inhabiting a landscape that determines the propriety of the ratio and the relation between human domesticity and wildness, but it is the way the people divide the landscape and use it” (Berry 529). He is suggesting a set of best practices, which takes into account human needs, but also places priority on respect for our environment. There is no clear-cut or simple solution, but rather a set of values and ideals that, if followed, may save ourselves and the wildernesses that we love.

In these developments, we begin to see the ways in which Berry’s writings expose the limitations of Abbey’s ideas. Abbey’s pieces are undoubtedly beautifully written and thought-provoking, but they do not provide his readers with reasonable solutions to the problems he unearths. Berry, on the other hand, sees these issues and immediately attempts to tackle them

with careful assumptions and logic. He doesn't provide a single easy solution, but rather a set of ideas that may help us forge more sustainable relationships with nature. On one hand, Abbey defends the role of wilderness: "Mountains complement desert as desert complements city, as wilderness complements and completes civilization" (Abbey 129). On the other hand, Berry focuses on how this wilderness is to be preserved: "The only thing we have to preserve nature with is culture; the only thing we have to preserve wildness with is domesticity" (Berry 522). These strangely similar phrases also reveal a major discrepancy in Abbey and Berry's approaches. Abbey is an unrelenting defender of wilderness, and shows us the ways in which it is vital for a healthy society. But in his disdain for his fellow humans, Abbey forgets that they are crucial in preserving wildness; he is left without the resources to defend what he loves most. Berry instead focuses in on how wildness is to be preserved, and argues that we, humans, are the only beings that can do so. The choices we make as a civilization will determine whether or not the places we love continue to exist for many more generations.

Wilderness: "It means something lost and something still present, something remote and at the same time intimate, something buried in our blood and nerves, something beyond us and without limit" (Abbey 167). Wilderness is beautiful; it is also humbling and liberating. Wilderness is vital, but how do we learn to come to terms with it as cities continue to grow and resources dwindle? Wendell Berry reminds us that it will take a civilization, one committed to forming responsible relationships with the natural world. It is not an easy task—in fact, perhaps one of the hardest we may ever face, but it is a necessary one. It will take seeing beyond immediate human desires and seeing instead how our society may learn to coexist with nature: how we may learn to find a home within our one true home, the earth.

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