

Special Issue The Wildlands Project



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A Personal Brief for The Wildlands Project

by Edward O. Wilson



GREAT DREAMS, AS OPPOSED TO FANTASIES, are those that seem to lie at or just beyond the edge of possibility. When I first learned of The Wildlands Project, I thought it must be beyond that limit, an admirable whimsy of noble souls. But as quickly as I gave the idea serious thought, I was converted. With imagination and will, I firmly believe, it can be done.

The Wildlands Project is one of the great dreams, worthy of the millennium and of America. It can be considered as the final of the three stages of biodiversity conservation. The first stage is the creation of reserves, the marking off and protection here and there of some of the remaining shreds of the prehuman wild. Reserves are the essential core of biodiversity conservation, of course, but establishing them is only a rearguard action. As John Terborgh has chillingly documented in his 1999 book *Requiem for Nature* (Island Press), most "protected natural areas" are open to intrusion and shrinkage—especially so in the developing world. Even when well protected, they become isolates in a sea of intensified development, within which species still inevitably go extinct. The smaller the reserve, the higher the extinction rate. So the logical second stage is restoration, the enlargement of reserves already in place, by peripheral growth and the remediation of developed land to create new reserves.

The final stage is the restoration of wilderness by the establishment of large corridors, as envisioned by The Wildlands Project. Such a large step upward can be accomplished only through a combination of science and the political process. Its workable plan is the agenda of the conservation movement writ large, wherein geographical information on biodiversity is superimposed on maps of topography, hydrology, human settlement, agriculture, industry, and transportation routes, then used by appeal to regional self-interest to argue for wildland corridors.

Wildland projects are not a utopian vision. They have been viewed as practicable by ecologists from Alaska to Panama and already made government policy in Suriname. For these countries and for the rest of the world, now is the time to create systems of reserves, because the windows of opportunity are closing fast. Humanity has entered a shrinking bottleneck caused by overpopulation and the decline of per

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About Wild Earth and The Wildlands Project

Wild Earth and The Wildlands Project are closely allied but independent nonprofit organizations dedicated to the restoration and protection of wilderness and biodiversity. We share a vision of an ecologically healthy North America—with adequate habitat for all native species, containing vibrant natural and human communities.



Through the quarterly journal *Wild Earth*, other publications, and advocacy, **Wild Earth** works to foster a culture of conservation, helping to communicate and shape the latest thinking in conservation science, philosophy, politics, and activism.

■ We make the teachings of conservation biology accessible to non-scientists, that citizen advocates may employ them in defense of biodiversity. ■ We provide a forum for dialogue within the conservation movement on the scientific, strategic, and spiritual foundations of effective conservation action.

■ We highlight the campaigns of biodiversity preservation groups and coalitions across North America, and serve as a networking tool for wilderness activists. ■ We serve as the publishing wing of The Wildlands Project.

■ We expose threats to habitat and wildlife, and regularly explore the links between human population growth and biodiversity loss. ■ We defend wilderness both as *idea* and as *place*.



The Wildlands Project is the organization guiding the design of a continental wilderness recovery strategy. Through advocacy, education, scientific consultation, and cooperation with many regional groups, The Wildlands Project is working to design and implement systems of protected natural areas—wildlands networks—across the continent.

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capita productive land. In the past 60 years the world population has grown from two billion to six billion, and it is projected to approach eight billion by 2020. Most experts agree that with the help of the industrialized countries eight billion people can theoretically be fed, housed, and clothed at a minimal standard of decency, but the strain on the environment will be intense.

The outlook is generally grim because the aftershock of economic development will be worse than the population explosion that preceded it. Most of the worst shortages will be in productive land and fresh water. The amount of productive land used by the average US citizen today—for food, water, fuel, habitation, clothing, transportation, and waste-management—is 12 acres. A large portion of this land is appropriated from other countries. This necessary dispersion is fundamentally the reason why the United States, wealthiest of nations, is so enmeshed in the economics and polity of the rest of the world. In contrast, the amount of productive land used by each person in the developing countries taken together is one acre. For the entire world population to enjoy US consumption with existing technology, the present-day human population would have to spread itself over two more planet Earths.

That is not going to happen, and the consequences of trying to find its equivalent on the planet we do have will be dire. The poor people of the world are striving strenuously to improve their lot. They cannot be blamed for following the lead of the richer nations. As a result they are wringing from Earth all of the material and energy they can reach. They are everywhere converting the last remnants of the natural environment in their final race to the limit of population growth and economic development.

Such in essence is the crisis of biodiversity: without a vision of the sanctity of life, the fauna and flora of Earth are being sacrificed to meet the needs of its single most overextended species.

I think it obviously true that for humanity and the rest of life to travel safely through the bottleneck requires a revolution in moral reasoning, which in turn must entail a shift in the goals of science and technology. The vision offered by The Wildlands Project is an important part of that revolution. Humanity will be ill-served—forever!—by the careless and unnecessary destruction of the remaining bastions of biodiversity. It is possible to reverse the trend if wise choices in technological and economic development are made that include salvaging and in time restoring the natural world.

The return of Nature in swaths of wildland across the continents is morally compelling for what it provides future generations. It is ultimately the best way to protect native faunas and floras, and to add both physical and biological stability to the global environment. For the farsighted and courageous, its undertaking will be an epic adventure. For all the rest, its achievement will increase our security and restore some of the lost prehuman magic of the world so vital to the human spirit. ☾

Professor Edward O. Wilson is University Research Professor and Honorary Curator in Entomology at Harvard University's Museum of Comparative Zoology. His many books include The Ants (with Bert Hölldobler), The Diversity of Life, Naturalist, and, most recently, Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge (Knopf, 1998).

