

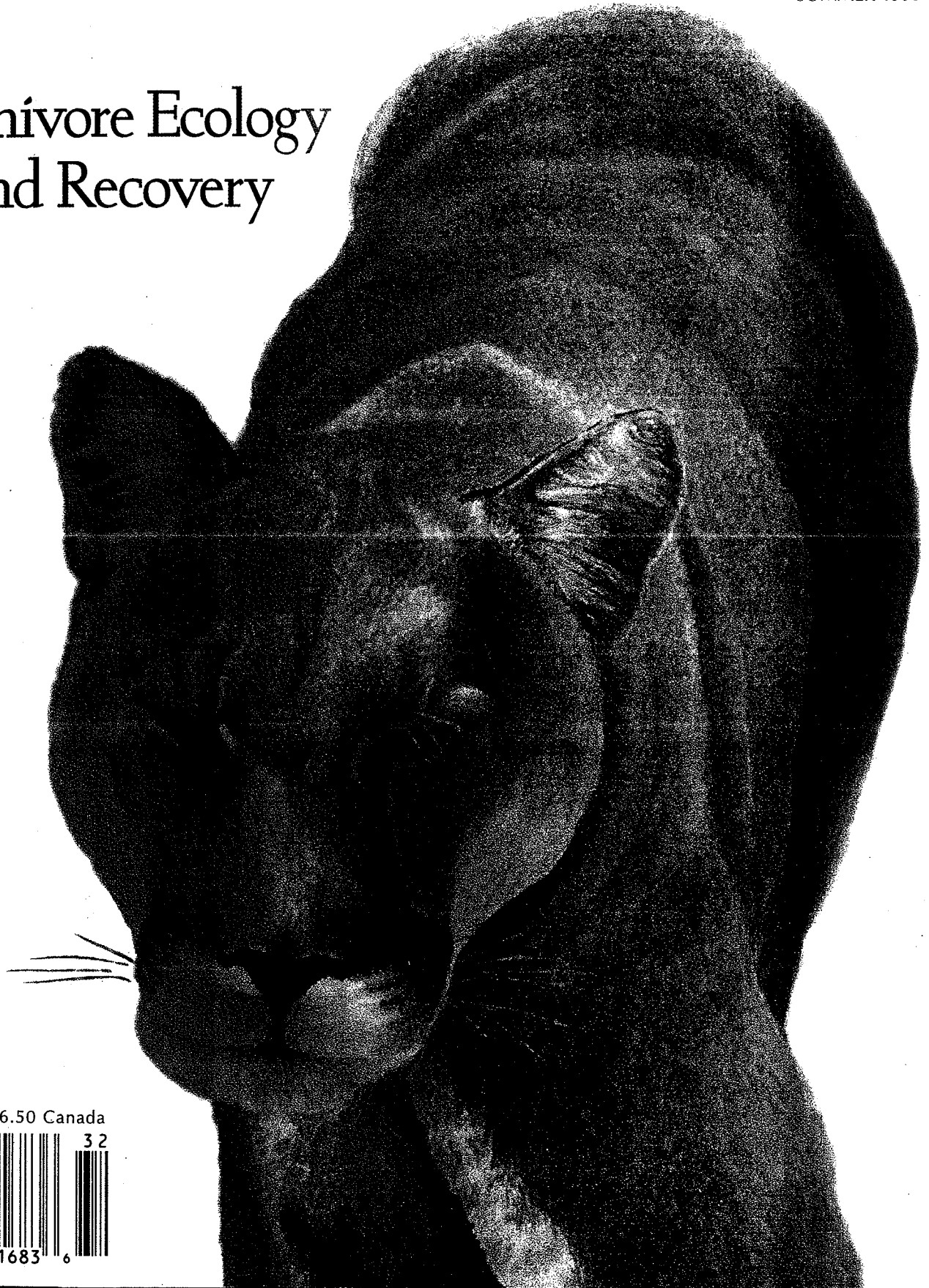
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SUMMER 1999

Carnivore Ecology and Recovery



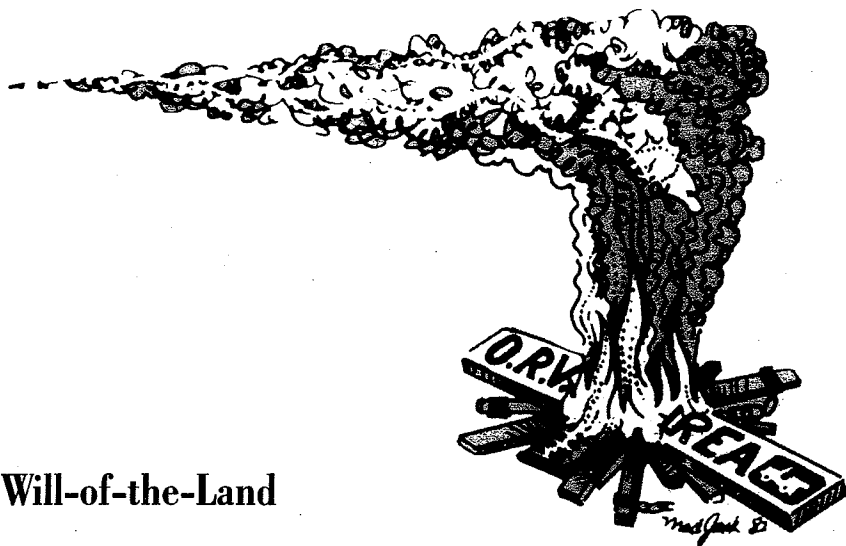
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Around the Campfire

by Dave Foreman



Will-of-the-Land

In our slacker era, when rigor in thought and ethics is too much to ask for, we often get into a snarl with poorly defined words. Bud Man on his motorized tri-cycle, academic grandees, and just about everybody in between use the word *wilderness* in sloppy ways, thus muddying the wrangle about conservation. According to historian Roderick Nash, the word *wilderness* comes from the Old English *wil-deorness*, which he defined in 1967 as “place of wild beasts.” *Wil*: Wild, or willed. *Deor*: Beast, or deer. *Ness*: Place, or quality.¹

In a 1983 talk at the third World Wilderness Conference in Scotland, philosopher Jay Hansford Vest also sought the meaning of wilderness in Old English and further back in Old Gothic languages. He showed that wilderness means “‘self-willed land’...with an emphasis on its own intrinsic volition.” He interpreted *der* as *of the*, not as coming from *deor*. “Hence, in wil-der-ness, there is a ‘will-of-the-land’; and in wildeor, there is ‘will of the animal.’ A wild animal is a ‘self-willed animal’—an undomesticated animal—similarly, wildland is ‘self-willed land.’” Vest notes that this willfulness is opposed to the “controlled and ordered environment which is characteristic of the notion of civilization.” These early northern Europeans were not driven to lord over Nature; thus wilderness “demonstrates a recognition of land in and for itself.”² Thanks to Vest, we are able to understand that this word, wilderness, is not a coinage of modern civilization; it is a word brewed by pagan barbarians of the Bronze and Iron Ages.

This “self-willed land” definition of wilderness overshadows all others. Wilderness means land³ beyond human control. Land beyond human control is a slap in the face to the arrogance of humanism—elitist or common man, capitalist or socialist, first worlder or third; for those who would dominate Nature, it is something to be feared.

continues on page 2

1. Nash, Roderick, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT 1967), pp. 1-2.

2. Vest, Jay Hansford C., “Will of the Land,” *Environmental Review* (Winter 1985), pp. 321-329.

3. Leopold, Aldo, *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK 1989 [1949]), p. 204. Aldo Leopold defined “land” as a community of soils, waters, plants, and animals—in other words as an ecosystem. I use land as inclusive of rivers, lakes, and even oceans, and as a synonym for Nature.

The opinions expressed in Campfire are my own, and do not necessarily reflect official policy of The Wildlands Project or *Wild Earth*. —DF

About Wild Earth and The Wildlands Project



Wild Earth is a quarterly journal melding conservation biology and wildlands activism. Our efforts to strengthen the conservation movement involve the following:

- We serve as the publishing wing of The Wildlands Project.
- We provide a forum for the many effective but little-known regional wilderness groups and coalitions in North America, and serve as a networking tool for wilderness activists.
- We make the teachings of conservation biology accessible to non-scientists, that activists may employ them in defense of biodiversity.
- We expose threats to habitat and wildlife.
- We facilitate discussion on ways to end and reverse the human population explosion.
- We defend wilderness both as concept 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 drafting a blueprint for an interconnected, continental-scale system of protected wildlands linked by habitat corridors.

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 human and natural communities.

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