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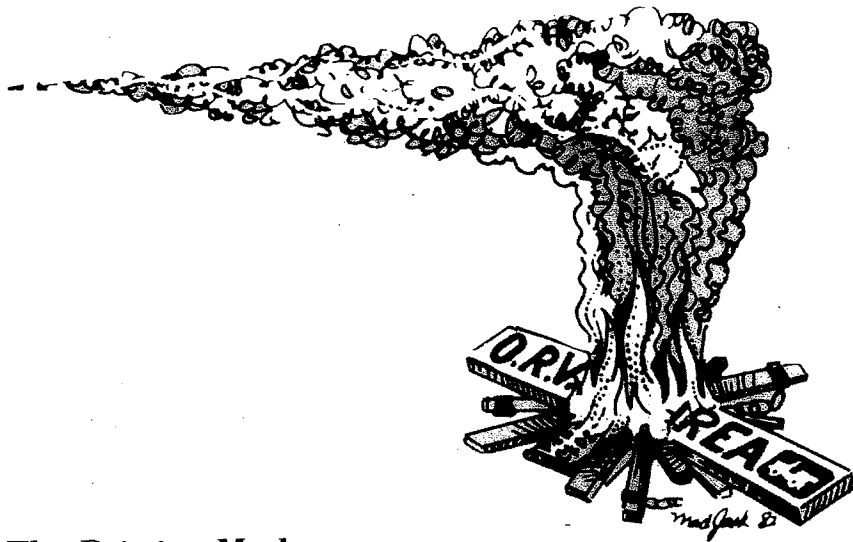
Wild, Wild
EAST

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Around the Campfire

by Dave Foreman



The Pristine Myths

IN THE 1960s AND EARLY 1970s, THE UNITED STATES FOREST SERVICE PUSHED a purist definition of wilderness, essentially arguing that any past human use of an area disqualified it from designation as a Wilderness Area. James Morton Turner and Doug Scott spell out in this issue how Congress roundly rejected the Forest Service's "Pristine Myth of Wilderness." Interestingly, the postmodern deconstructionist critics (pomo-décons) of wilderness now resurrect the Forest Service's discredited purity view to argue that the wilderness idea is phony because native peoples had domesticated the American land before Europeans arrived. I can't honestly accuse the pomo-décons of cribbing from the Forest Service's thirty-year-old misinterpretation, because I don't think they actually know enough about the history of the National Wilderness Preservation System to be aware of the battle for Wilderness Areas in the East. I suspect they believe they are putting out something new. By asking two questions, however, we can show that the pomo-décons are just as clueless about Wilderness Areas as was the Forest Service three decades ago. Had natives domesticated the Americas before Columbus? Does the Pristine Myth or its deconstruction have anything to do with Wilderness Area protection?

Geographer William M. Denevan of the University of Wisconsin is the most credible researcher of what he calls "The Pristine Myth." He claims that "the Native American landscape of the early sixteenth century was a humanized landscape almost everywhere. Populations were large."¹ Denevan has suggested a total population for the New World in 1492 of 53.9 million: "3.8 million for North America, 17.2 million for Mexico, 5.6 million for Central America, 3.0 million for the Caribbean, 15.7 million for the Andes, and 8.6 million for lowland South America."² Others have guessed that there were as many as eight million people living north of the Rio Grande. Douglas H. Ubelaker of the Smithsonian Institution, however, believes there were only two million.³

continues on page 2

About Wild Earth and The Wildlands Project

Wild Earth and The Wildlands Project are closely allied 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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inside front cover
Around the Campfire

6
Letters

8
A Wilderness View

27, 49, 61, 81
Poetry

89
Book Reviews

94
Announcements

95
Artists This Issue

inside back cover
Natural Community
Spotlight
Temperate Calcareous Cliff

cover art
"Spring's Promise" (detail)
watercolor by Dorothy Black
(©2000)

Wild, Wild East

Viewpoints

- 10** An Eastern Turn for Wilderness *by Christopher McGrory Klyza*
16 How Much Protected Land Do We Have in the Northern Forest?
by Nancy Smith and Emily Bateson

Conservation History

- 19** Wilderness East: Reclaiming History *by James Morton Turner*
SIDEBAR Eastern Wilderness Areas Act: What's in a Name? *by Douglas W. Scott*
28 Congress's Practical Criteria for Designating Wilderness *by Douglas W. Scott*

Wild Earth Interview

- 33** David Foster *interviewed by Jamie Sayen*

Biodiversity

- 40** New England's Forest Primeval *by David R. Foster*
45 Revisiting the Northwoods: A Lesson in Biotic Homogenization
by Tom Rooney, Don Waller, and Shannon Wiegmann
50 Restoring the Large Mammal Fauna in the East: What Follows the Elk?
by David S. Maehr
54 Confirming Eastern Cougar Presence *by Chris Bolgiano*
SIDEBAR Eastern Cougar Foundation

Landscape Stories

- 57** Deadfalls, Turtles, and Trout *by David M. Carroll*
62 Abandonment: On Beaver Ecology and Recovery *by Tom Wessels*

Eastern Old Growth

- 68** Using Lichens to Assess the Relative Age of Northeastern Forests *by Steve Selva*
72 Stalking Ancient Forests in the Southern Appalachians *by Robert Messick*
76 Preserving Our Old-Growth Forest Heritage *by Mary Byrd Davis*

Conservation Strategy

- 82** Puc Puggy Lives! *by Chris Reiter*

Wildlands Philanthropy

- 87** Beeswax for Biodiversity *by Phyllis Austin*

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