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WISE USE: WHAT DO WE BELIEVE?

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The following essay by Ron Arnold is regarded by many as the seminal expression of the ideas that have evolved into the richly diverse wise use movement.

Overcoming Ideology by Ron Arnold

From *A Wolf in the Garden : The Land Rights Movement and the New Environmental Debate*
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It was 1964, the year of the Wilderness Act. Historian Leo Marx began his classic, *The Machine in the Garden*, with the assertion that "The pastoral ideal has been used to define the meaning of America ever since the age of discovery, and it has not yet lost its hold upon the native imagination."¹

A little more than thirty years after, we have the present volume, *A Wolf in the Garden*, echoing Marx less than tolling a sea-change in American notions of exactly what is meant by the pastoral ideal.

Marx saw it as a cultivated rural "middle landscape," not urban, not wild, but embodying what Arthur O. Lovejoy calls "semi-primitivism"; it is located in a middle ground somewhere between the opposing forces of civilization and nature.²

The pastoral ideal is not simply a location, but also a psychic energy condenser: it stores the charge generated between the polarities of civilization and nature. Ortega y Gasset recognized this as long ago as 1930 in *The Revolt of the Masses*: "The world is a civilized one, its inhabitant is not: he does not see the civilization of the world around him, but he uses it as if it were a natural force. The new man wants his motor-car, and enjoys it, but he believes that it is the spontaneous fruit of an Edenic tree."³

There was a certain truth to this blind sight: producers in the middle landscape invisibly yielded the raw materials for the motor-car (and everything else). The labor power of dwellers in America's middle landscape has always been reified as an Edenic tree to be plucked by distant capital and unappreciative consumers, and the dwellers felt it keenly.

Since 1964, the rise of environmentalist ideology has pushed the pastoral ideal increasingly toward nature, striving to redefine the meaning of America in fully primitivist terms of the wild. Eco-ideologists have thrust their metaphoric raging Wolf into every rank and row of our civilized Garden to rogue out both the domesticated and the domesticators. The Wolf howls Wild Land, Wild Water, Wild Air. Whether Wild People might have a proper place in Wolf World remains a subject of dispute among eco-ideologists.⁴

Public policy debate over the environment and the meaning of America has been clamorous these thirty years. Its terms were succinctly put by Edith Stein:

- The environmental movement challenges the dominant Western worldview and its three assumptions:
- Unlimited economic growth is possible and beneficial.
- Most serious problems can be solved by technology.
- Environmental and social problems can be mitigated by a market economy with some state intervention.

Since the 1970s we've heard increasingly about the competing paradigm, wherein:

- Growth must be limited.
- Science and technology must be restrained.
- Nature has finite resources and a delicate balance that humans must observe.

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That fairly delineates the public debate. However, in order to critique an ideology, one needs an accurate statement of that ideology. The environmentalist ideology striving to redefine the meaning of America was expounded most realistically by author Victor B. Scheffer in a *Northwest Environmental Journal* article, "Environmentalism's Articles of Faith." The five tenets Scheffer proposed appear to be the core of shared beliefs actually held most widely by environmentalists:

1) *All things are connected.* "[N]ever will we understand completely the spin-off effects of the environmental changes that we create, nor will we measure our own, independent influence in their creation." Scheffer adds, "I use the word *nature* for the world without humans, a concept which--like the square root of minus one--is unreal, but useful."

2) *Earthly goods are limited.* "As applied to people, carrying capacity is the number of individuals that the earth can support before a limit is reached beyond which the quality of life must worsen and *Homo*, the human animal, becomes less human. One reason we humans--unlike animals in the wild--are prone to exceed carrying capacity is that our wants exceed our needs."

3) *Nature's way is best.* "Woven into the fabric of environmentalism is the belief that natural methods and materials should be favored over artificial and synthetic ones, when there's a clear choice. Witness the vast areas of the globe poisoned or degraded by the technological economy of our century."

4) *The survival of humankind depends on natural diversity.* "Although species by the billions have vanished through natural extinction or transformation, the present rate of extinction is thought to be at least 400 times faster than at the beginning of the Industrial Age. Humankind's destruction of habitats is overwhelmingly to blame."

Scheffer adds, "No one has the moral right, and should not have the legal right, to overtax carrying capacity either by reducing the productivity of the land or by bringing into the world more than his or her 'share' of new lives. Who is to decide that share will perhaps be the most difficult social question for future generations."

5) *Environmentalism is radical* "in the sense of demanding fundamental change. It calls for changes in present political systems, in the reach of the law, in the methods of agriculture and industry, in the structure of capitalism (the profit system), in international dealings, and in education."⁶

One can see the Wolf skulking in each of Scheffer's five tenets of eco-ideology.

Actual organizations and individuals comprising the environmental movement stress different clusters of these tenets. Although the environmental movement's structure is complex and amply textured, three distinctive axes of influence dominate environmental politics in America:

1. Establishment Interventionists - acting to hamper property rights and markets sufficiently to centralize control of many transactions for the benefit of environmentalists and their funders in the foundation community, while leaving the market economy itself operational. They tend to emphasize the need for natural diversity and in some cases to own and manage wildlife preserves. Notable organizations in this sector are the Nature Conservancy, National Wildlife Federation, National Audubon Society.

2. Eco-Socialists - acting to dislodge the market system with public ownership of all resources and production, commanded by environmentalists in an ecological welfare state. They tend to emphasize the limits of earthly goods. Greenpeace, Native Forest Council, Maine Audubon Society are representative groups.

3. Deep Ecologists - acting to reduce or eliminate industrial civilization and human population in varying degrees. They tend to emphasize that nature's way is best and environmentalism is radical. Earth First!, Sea Shepherd Conservation

Society, Native Forest Network are in this category.⁷

The Wolf in these varieties of sheep's clothing is rapacious, not simply protecting nature, but also annihilating the livelihoods of dwellers in the middle landscape.

Today the Wolf is firmly entrenched in Washington, D. C., where important environmental groups have established headquarters or major operating bases. Eco-ideologists have written many laws, tested them in the courts and pressured many administrative agencies into compliance with their ideology. They have, in brief, become the Establishment. The apparatus of environmentalism is no longer represented merely by non-profit organizations, but has grown to encompass American government at all levels.

Since the inception of the Environmental Grantmakers Association (EGA) in 1985, the foundation community has usurped substantial control of the environmental movement. The standard philanthropic model, "non-profit organization submits its proposal to foundation for funding," has given way to "a combine of foundations selects and dictates grant-driven programs to non-profit organization." In the instance of the Ancient Forest campaign in the Pacific Northwest, a cluster of six EGA foundations even went so far as to create their own projects because of dissatisfaction with the capabilities of the Washington, D.C. environmental community. The foundations derive their income from managed investment portfolios representing the power elite of corporate America.⁸

As the environmental debate developed during the late 1980s, the "dominant Western worldview" gained an organized constituency and advocacy leadership: the wise use movement. Incipient and gestating more than a decade in the bosom of those who had been most wounded by environmental ideology, the new movement congealed at a conference in Reno, Nevada in 1988. It was centered around a hodgepodge of property rights groups, anti-regulation legal foundations, trade groups of large industries, motorized recreation vehicle clubs, federal land users, farmers, ranchers, fishermen, trappers, small forest holders, mineral prospectors and others who live and work in the middle landscape.⁹

It came as a shock to environmentalists. The "competing paradigm" unhappily found itself confronted with a competing paradigm. The free ride was over. A substantial cluster of non-profit grass roots organizations now advocated unlimited economic growth, technological progress and a market economy. They opposed the eco-ideologists' proposals using the tactics of social change movements, such as mobilizing grass roots constituencies, staging media events including protest demonstrations and orchestrating letter-writing campaigns to pressure Congress.

It was a pivotal shift in the debate. No longer were eco-ideologists able to face off against business and industry, pitting greedy for-profit corporations against environmentalism's non-profit moral high ground. Now it was urban environmentalists defending their vision of the pastoral ideal against those who actually lived the pastoral ideal in the middle landscape.

This simple structural rearrangement of the debate went virtually unnoticed, but was crucial: Now it was non-profit against non-profit, one side promoting economic growth, technological progress and a market economy, the other opposing.

The emergent wise use movement held up a mirror to the embarrassing questions posed by the "competing paradigm": Just *who* will limit our economic growth? Who will restrain America's science and technology? Who will decide what "delicate balance humans must observe"? The answer was clear: only environmental ideologists, and not those who create economic growth, science, technology or the market economy.

Asserting such onerous control over others was not attractive and clarified the environmental movement as just another special interest protecting its selfish economic status. Economics is not about money, it is about the allocation of scarce resources. The wise use movement bared the environmental movement's ambition to be resource allocator for the world.¹⁰

Environmentalism's efforts to turn America's pastoral ideal wild stood out in sharp contrast to the wise use movement's actual stewardship of the land, the water and the air. Wise users were not perfect, to be sure, but they were down to earth, real, and necessary. They created economic growth, employed science and technology, and drove the market economy.

Environmentalism, by contrast, appeared in the same light as pastoral literature in critic William Empson's *Some Versions of Pastoral*: "about the people but not by or for them."¹¹

Environmentalism, like pastoral literature, was about those pastoral rural dwellers who produced dinner, dress and domicile for everyone, but was generated by the educated elite, not by those who lived the pastoral ideal. Environmentalism's ideology was promulgated for the ruling elite, not for the farmer or rancher or family forest owner or mineral prospector.

When the wise use movement arose to demystify eco-fetishism, the environmental movement lost its grip on the debate. It was as if history had played a huge joke on environmental ideology.

The environmental movement was not amused.

The first environmentalist reaction to the emergence of the wise use movement was passive denial--ignore it and it will go away. That lasted from 1988 to early 1992. The present phase of active denial began with a study of the wise use movement by the W. Alton Jones Foundation dated February, 1992, portraying the rising social force as a mere front for industry, created by industry, paid for by industry, controlled by industry. The fact that foundation analysts sincerely believed this assessment points up how unprepared the environmental movement was to lose its favored "non-profit versus for-profit" moral high ground in the debate. Industry *had* to be the opponent. The wise use movement *had* to be a mere front. So that's what they saw.¹²

This humbuggery lasted only half a year. Further research, sponsored by The Wilderness Society and conducted by the Boston-area media strategy firm MacWilliams Cosgrove Snider, disclosed a disturbing truth: "What we're finding is that wise use is really a local movement driven by primarily local concerns and not national issues.... And, in fact, the more we dig into it, having put together over a number of months a fifty state fairly comprehensive survey of what's going on, we have come to the conclusion that this is pretty much generally a grass roots movement, which is a problem, because it means there's no silver bullet."

The words are those of Debra Callahan, then director of W. Alton Jones Foundation's Environmental Grass Roots Program, at the 1992 Environmental Grantmakers Association annual fall retreat. Her session, titled "The Wise Use Movement: Threats and Opportunities," capped off the three day convocation of foundation executives.¹³

Callahan's source, the MacWilliams Cosgrove Snider report, titled "The Wise Use Movement: Strategic Analysis and Fifty State Review," affirmed that the wise use movement was the greatest threat the environmental movement had ever faced.¹⁴

"What people fundamentally want, what people fundamentally believe about environmental protection," Callahan said polls revealed, "is that no, it's not just jobs. And no, it's not just environment. Why can't we have both?"

"The high ground is capturing that message, okay? The wise use movement is trying to capture that message. What they're saying out there is that 'We are the real environmentalists. We are the stewards of the land. We're the farmers who have tilled that land and we know how to manage this land because we've done it here for generations. We're the miners and we're the ones who depend for our livelihood on this land. These environmentalists, they're elitists. They live in glass towers in New York City. They're not environmentalists. They're part of the problem. And they're aligned with big government. And they're out of touch. So we're the real environmentalists.'

"And if that's the message that the wise use movement is able to capture, we are suddenly really unpopular. The minute the wise use people capture that high ground, we almost have not got a winning message left in our quiver."

Judy Donald of the Washington, D.C.-based Beldon Fund, and Callahan's co-presenter, took the conclusion another step. "There are, as Deb has made clear, ordinary people, grass roots organizations, who obviously feel their needs are being addressed by this movement,," said Donald. "We have to have a strategy that also is addressing those concerns. And that cannot come simply from environmentalists. It can't come just from us. That's the dilemma here. It's not simply that people don't get it, it's that they do get it. They're losing their jobs."

Barbara Dudley, then executive of the Veatch Fund, now head of Greenpeace, stated: "This is a class issue. There is no question about it. It is true that the environmental movement is, has been, traditionally ... an upper class conservation, white movement. We have to face that fact. It's true. They're not wrong that we are rich and they are up against us. We are the enemy as long as we behave in that fashion."

These commanders of environmentalism had acknowledged they were destroying jobs and hurting those who produce our material goods. They admitted themselves the enemy. This moment of self-comprehension was a tremendous opportunity to repent and reach out to wise users, dwellers in the middle landscape who felt betrayed by big government and big business.

Instead, the foundations and their environmental cohort deliberately fell back on their stereotype, portraying wise use as a front for corporations, and risking a frontal assault against wise use with new tactics: "Attack Wise Use.... Find divisions between Wise Use and Wise Use and exploit them.... We need to ... talk about the Wise Use agenda. We need to expose the links between Wise Use and other extremists...."

In other words, a smear campaign would be mounted to tie wise users to unpopular extremists such as the John Birch Society, the Unification Church, Lyndon LaRouche, and to violent factions such as the militias. They knew they couldn't shoot the message, so they settled for shooting the messenger.

To implement the smear campaign, W. Alton Jones Foundation helped found the Clearinghouse on Environmental Advocacy and Research (CLEAR) in 1993 with two grants totaling \$145,000. In the same year Jones gave numerous grants in the \$20,000 to \$30,000 range to small local organizations that agreed to conduct smears against wise use.¹⁵

The Sierra Club engaged private investigator David Helvarg to write an anti-wise use tirade titled *The War Against the Greens* claiming a conspiracy of violence by wise users against environmentalists. Helvarg's sponsors also funded a road show for him to tie wise use to an alleged far-right terrorist network.¹⁶

The EGA foundations and their grant-driven environmentalist dependents spent millions on related media saturation projects designed to identify the words "wise use" with "violence" in the public mind. Reliance on The Big Lie revealed grant-driven environmentalists as intellectually and morally bankrupt, and the technique backfired, just as EGA members Donald and Dudley foresaw.

Grass roots environmentalists saw that big-money foundations controlled the "mainstream" environmental movement, which they felt had sold out true reform for pallid incrementalism. They deserted by the hundred thousand, preferring to form scattered local and regional groups of their own. The Wilderness Society and Sierra Club were hit particularly hard, losing 125,000 members and 130,000 members, respectively, in 1994.¹⁷

Most devastating for the foundations, an icon of the Left, author and syndicated columnist Alexander Cockburn, aired their dirty laundry in the progressive flagship, *The Nation*. "For years now," wrote Cockburn in August 1995, "David Helvarg has been backed by environmental groups such as the Sierra Club to investigate and smear the Wise Use movement by any means necessary. This goes back to the early 1990s when the Environmental Grantmakers Association offered a de facto bounty for material discrediting Wise Users as (a) a front for corporations or (b) part of a far-right terrorist network."

Cockburn--an equal opportunity critic who routinely berates the wise use movement for its failings--deplored the smear tactic. He wrote, "And so we have the unlovely sight of Helvarg behaving like an F.B.I. agent. He prowls across literature tables at Wise Use meetings and ties all the names on the pamphlets, letterheads and books into his 'terror network.' The trouble is, he never makes his case. Helvarg never comes up with the terrorist conspiracy he proclaims, because there hasn't been one."¹⁸

Indeed. What there has been, and what environmentalists cannot confront, is a potent movement subversive of environmentalism's articles of faith. That is why they resort to a hoax rather than lively debate on the issues.

Although it would be rash to propose wise use's articles of faith--it is a diverse movement--some of the following principles would probably find wide agreement among those who provide the material goods to all of humanity:

1) *Humans, like all organisms, must use natural resources to survive.* This fundamental verity is never addressed by environmental ideology. The simple fact that humans must get their food, clothing and shelter from the environment is either ignored or obliquely deplored in quasi-suicidal plaints such as, "I would rather see a blank space where I am--at least I wouldn't be harming anything."

If environmentalism were to acknowledge our necessary use of the earth, the ideology would lose its meaning. To grant legitimacy to the human use of the environment would be to accept the unavoidable environmental damage that is the price of our survival. Once that price is acceptable, the moral framework of environmental ideology becomes irrelevant and the issues become technical and economic.

2) *The earth and its life are tough and resilient, not fragile and delicate.* Environmentalists tend to be catastrophists, seeing any human use of the earth as damage and massive human use of the earth as a catastrophe. An environmentalist motto is "We all live downstream," the viewpoint of hapless victims.

Wise users, on the other hand, tend to be cornucopians, seeing themselves as stewarding and nurturing the bountiful earth as it stewards and nurtures them. A wise use motto is "We all live upstream," the viewpoint of responsible individuals.

The difference in sense of life is striking. Environmentalism by its very nature promotes feelings of guilt for existing, which naturally degenerate into pessimism, self-loathing and depression.

Wise use by its very nature promotes feelings of competence to live in the world, generating curiosity, learning, and optimism toward improving the earth for the massive use of future generations.

The glory of the "dominant Western worldview" so scorned by environmental ideologists is its metaphor of progress: the starburst, an insatiable and interminable outreach after a perpetually flying goal. Environmentalists call humanity a cancer on the earth; wise users call us a joy.

If there is a single, tight expression of the wise use sense of life, it has to be the final stanza of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. I think wise users will recognize themselves in these lines:

To suffer woes which Hope thinks infinite;
 To forgive wrongs darker than death or night;
 To defy Power, which seem omnipotent;
 To love, and bear; to hope till Hope itself creates
 From its own wreck the thing it contemplates;
 Neither to change, nor falter, nor repent;
 This, like thy glory, Titan! is to be
 Good, great and joyous, beautiful and free;
 This is alone Life, Joy, Empire, and Victory!¹⁹

3) *We only learn about the world through trial and error.* The universe did not come with a set of instructions, nor did our minds. We cannot see the future. Thus, the only way we humans can learn about our surroundings is through trial and error. Even the most sophisticated science is systematized trial and error. Environmental ideology fetishizes nature to the point that we cannot permit ourselves errors with the environment, ending in no trials and no learning.

There will always be abusers who do not learn. People of good will tend to deal with abuse by education, incentive, clear rules and administering appropriate penalties for incorrigibles.

4) *Our limitless imaginations can break through natural limits to make earthly goods and carrying capacity virtually infinite.* Just as settled agriculture increased earthly goods and carrying capacity vastly beyond hunting and gathering, so our imaginations can find ways to increase total productivity by superseding one level of technology after another. Taught by the lessons learned from systematic trial and error, we can close the loops in our productive systems and find innumerable ways to do more with less.

5) *Humanity's reworking of the earth is revolutionary, problematic and ultimately benevolent.* Of the tenets of wise use, this is the most oracular. Humanity is itself revolutionary and problematic. Danger is our symbiote. Yet even the timid are

part of the human adventure, which has barely begun.

Humanity may ultimately prove to be a force of nature forwarding some cosmic teleology of which we are yet unaware. Or not. Humanity may be the universe awakening and becoming conscious of itself. Or not. Our reworking of the earth may be of the utmost evolutionary benevolence and importance. Or not. We don't know. The only way to see the future is to be there.

As the environmental debate advances to maturity, the environmental movement must accept and incorporate many of these wise use precepts if it is to survive as a social and political force.

Establishment Interventionism, as represented by the large foundation and their grant-driven client organizations, must find practical ways to accommodate private property rights and entrepreneurial economic growth.

Eco-socialism's collectivist program must find practical ways to accommodate individual economic liberties in its bureaucratic command-and-control approach.

Deep Ecology's biocentrism must find practical ways to accommodate anthropocentrism and technological progress.

To accomplish this necessary reform, environmentalists of all persuasions will have to face their ideological blind spots and see their own belief systems as wise users see them, i.e., in a critical and practical light.

This is a most difficult change for ideological environmentalists. Failure to reform environmentalism from within will invite regulation from without or doom the movement to irrelevancy as the wise use movement lives the pastoral ideal in the middle landscape, defining the meaning of America.

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18. Alexander Cockburn, "Exchange," *The Nation*, Vol. 261, No. 5, August 14 / 21, 1995, p. 150.

19. Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Prometheus Unbound" in *The Works of Percy Bysshe Shelly* (Roslyn, N.Y.: Black's Reader Service, 1951), 180.

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