

**Review: Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched
the Modern Wilderness Movement**

By Paul S. Sutter

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Paul S. Sutter. *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement*. Foreword by William Cronon. Weyerhaeuser Environmental Books series. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002. 343 pp. ISBN 0-295-98219-5 (cloth). US\$35.00. Recycled, acid-free paper.

Wilderness politics form a centerpiece in American environmental history. Despite all the attention, caricatures and simplifications cloud much of our understanding of this vital issue. Often portrayed as part of the conflict over preservation or use of resources emerging in the Progressive-era conservation movement or as an elitist movement of those interested only in aesthetic nature, wilderness as a movement is misunderstood, and Paul S. Sutter does much to rectify these misinterpretations and misperceptions. By studying four of the founders of the Wilderness Society—Aldo Leopold, Robert Sterling Yard, Benton MacKaye, and Bob Marshall—*Driven Wild* presents a complex and persuasive argument that the wilderness movement emerged from concerns about automobiles specifically and commercialization of outdoor recreation generally. This book deserves to be read by a wide audience; there is no doubt that its conclusions are important and will frame further discussions about this aspect of American environmental history and policy.

Sutter, a professor of history at the University of Georgia, begins his study contextualizing the idea of wilderness and its recent critics. Past scholars have argued that wilderness preservation arose as a specific environmental cause because wilderness was becoming scarce, because some individuals began to appreciate the ethical components of nature, or because a growing urban and suburban white middle class wanted it for recreational and aesthetic reasons. Sutter concludes that these arguments are "sound but limited" (p. 8). Critics of the wilderness idea have identified problems with its simplified ecology, ethnocentrism, class bias, and cultural constructiveness. Here, too, Sutter concludes critics have missed the "complexity, contingency, and context" of the movement (p. 13).

The specific context out of which the wilderness movement emerged—namely interwar commercialization of outdoor recreation—is more important than previous assessments have recognized. The Wilderness Society founders

responded to a "discomfort with consumerism, tourism, mechanization, advertising, landscape architecture, and the various other forces that remade outdoor recreation during the interwar period" (p. 16). Rather than a critique of industrial use of resources, wilderness emerged as a critique of commercialized recreation that threatened, particularly through the automobile, to undermine Americans' relationship with nature. The changes in the interwar economy, especially the intensification of consumer culture, democratized and commercialized outdoor recreation.

To explore the formation of the wilderness movement, Sutter offers four short biographies of the most important founders of the Wilderness Society. Each individual arrived independently at the need for an organization dedicated to preserving roadlessness. Each of them brought unique experiences, perspectives, and ideological contributions to the movement. Subsequently, they and the organization they founded launched a campaign for a national wilderness system that culminated in the 1964 Wilderness Act. Their visions can be only briefly summarized here.

As a longtime forester, Aldo Leopold experienced changes in recreation firsthand. Because Leopold eventually developed his famous land ethic, which argued for the ethical relationship to the land based on an ecological understanding of nature, many have assumed that Leopold's wilderness advocacy derived from ecological concerns. Moreover, scholars have often assumed that wilderness was a recreational program. In fact, Sutter argues that Leopold's wilderness idea derived from opposition to recreational development and that ecological arguments only complemented his vision. Indeed, Leopold remained most concerned about consumption of resources rather than their production. The "social impulse to return to nature, not the economic drive to transform it" was most threatening (p. 81). Leopold urged wilderness as an antidote to rampant road-building and recreational development.

Robert Sterling Yard brought unique attributes to the Wilderness Society as a national park promoter. Despite his booster credentials, Yard developed a disdain for the excessive promotion of sublime scenery. His position as an advertiser, however, placed him perfectly to understand the emergent consumer society. Yard promoted the national parks as educational and inspirational places. Later, after significant road building in the parks, Yard concluded sadly that he had reached an audience of boosters who "had made marketplaces of nature's temples, and they were advertising the wild for their own gain" (p. 111). He then worked to create a higher standard for the parks, advocating "complete conservation" with the absence of commercialism and the elevation of the primitive (p. 114). Primitive roadlessness would preserve the high standards of wilderness and limit the

further commercialization of parks in the United States.

A regional planner, Benton MacKaye envisioned policies that would socialize resources while planning for regional landscapes integrating work and play. For example, he famously proposed the Appalachian Trail as "a retreat from profit" (p. 153-160). MacKaye argued that the rising metropolitanism, made possible by the automobile, "eroded rural and regional traditionalism" (p. 163). Wilderness could stem the tide of metropolitanism with proper regional planning with automobiles operating in segregated landscapes. By limiting the influence of the automobile, MacKaye hoped to weaken the inroads made by commercial society into rural America. Sutter concludes that for MacKaye, "wilderness preservation was a reformist tool, a modernist attempt to reshape American geography. MacKaye saw wilderness as a design choice" (p. 193). Although his larger social vision never achieved a wide audience, MacKaye's ideas of regional planning including wilderness areas became influential.

Bob Marshall would become the most important founder with his charisma, experience, and wealth that sustained the Wilderness Society through its early years. More than the other founders, Marshall embraced wilderness as "a place of masculine physicality, of direct bodily engagement with the natural world" (p. 194). Moreover, he placed wilderness within the American political tradition of minority rights. Wilderness would preserve American freedom, so wilderness must be preserved outside the "economic entanglements threatening the ideals of individual autonomy in modern America" (p. 217). Wilderness needed protection from the ravages unrestrained economic freedom had created. Moreover, as a U.S. Forest Service employee, Marshall developed recreational policy that included wilderness areas and areas accessible to automobiles. He hoped that recreational opportunities and wilderness could reach the masses, while worrying about the extension of economic freedom into the wild.

Driven Wild is an outstanding scholarly achievement and is one of the best books ever written about environmental politics. Sutter captures these figures remarkably well. In the process, he demonstrates the complexity of their thought and the milieu surrounding the beginnings of the wilderness movement. That complexity has been underemphasized in much environmental historiography leading to simplistic characterizations of the wilderness movement. Moreover, Sutter demonstrates that many of the founders' ideology proved to be quite radical. In this respect, wilderness becomes less of an elitist, upper middle-class social movement than it is often portrayed. With agreement that automobiles and their attendant consumerist economy threatened nature, these founders fashioned a vital organization dedicated to creating a national wilderness system. Sutter's

book helps us locate those origins in reaction to the pervasive automobile and the expansive consumer economy. It is clear from the continued ubiquity of roads, automobiles, and consumerism that the founders were prescient and the need for wilderness remains.

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