



Urban Wild: Wilderness, Wildness, and the American City



Kevin Michael Anderson, Ph.D.
Austin Water – Center for Environmental Research

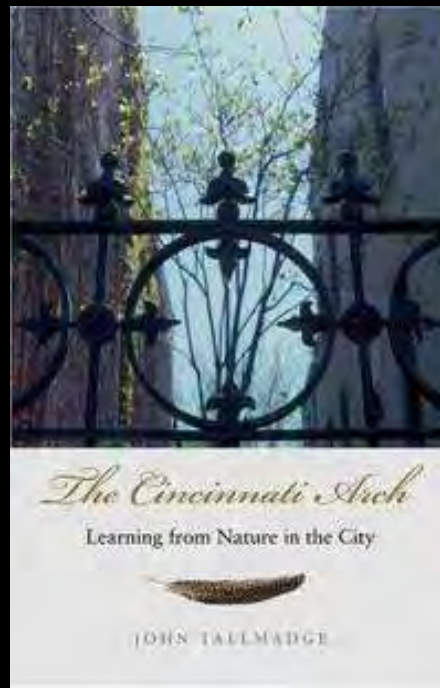
Urban Nature - Of course, “wilderness” won’t do to describe such landscapes either.

John Tallmadge *The Cincinnati Arch: Learning from Nature in the City* (2004)

Urban nature is not sublime...There’s too much sterility in the form of roofs and pavement, and, oddly enough, there’s also too much wildness, too many weeds and wooded borders and tangled banks, not to mention vacant lots going to brush.

Of course, “wilderness” won’t do to describe such landscapes either. Despite the degree of wildness, there’s too much human impact, too many alien species, too few large animals to meet the legal and cultural criteria.

The fact is that urban landscapes are just too mixed up, chaotic, and confused to fit our established notions of beauty and value in nature. ... *Maybe it’s not really nature at all, not a real ecosystem, just a bunch of weeds and exotics mixed up with human junk.*



The American Myth of Nature

In the United States, the kinds of nature that we celebrate are wilderness and pastoral landscapes.

They are the foundation of the American myth of nature from which we assess the value of nature in America.



In American cities, we perceive nature in the urban landscape filtered through a conceptual framework that prejudices its ecological and cultural value.

Our understanding of what constitutes “official” urban nature in cities is shaped by culturally dominant metaphors of nature.

Wilderness

Pastoral

Urban Nature?



Varieties of Possibility: Perspectives on Nature and the City

Narratives of Urban Nature

Narrative of Redemptive Urban Nature

Narrative of Restorative Urban Nature

Narrative of Functional Nature

Narrative of Urban Political Ecology



Narrative of Redemptive Urban Nature

The Urban Wild and The Urban Pastoral

Should the forces which push men into the arms of ignorance, sin, and death, be allowed a free field in our cities or should there be parks and open spaces to redeem the city with all that mingling of the natural and the human which we call landscape?

Charles Elliot, Jr. 1891



Charles Eliot Jr.
1859-1897

Metropolitan Park System of Greater Boston

First Regional Park System – First Land Trust



Narrative of Redemptive Urban Nature

The Urban Wild and The Urban Pastoral

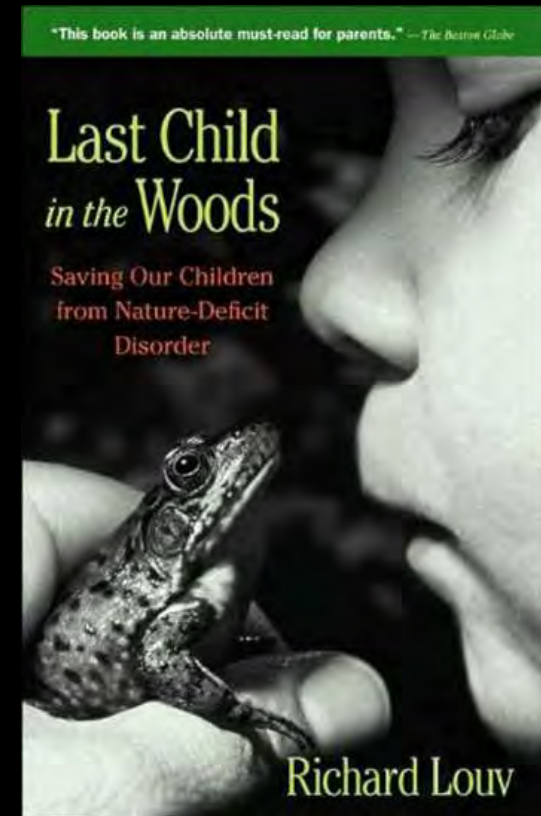
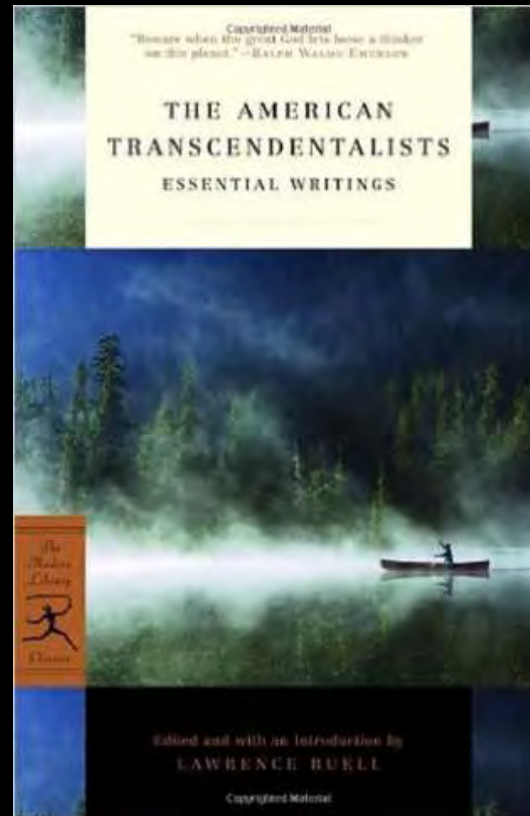
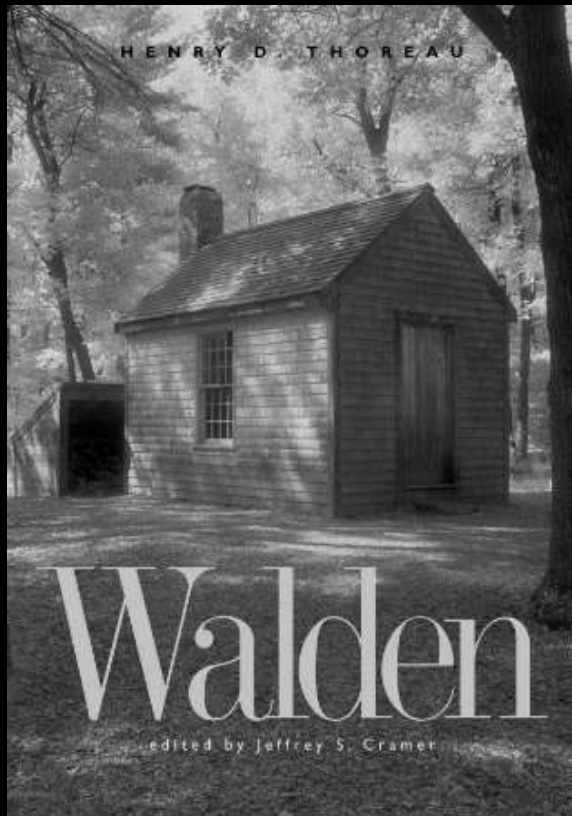
In America, we celebrate urban nature that is either deliberately cultivated pastoral “greenspace” like parks, gardens, and urban farms or formally protected as remnants of the “wild” native landscapes obliterated by the creation of the city in preserves, sanctuaries, refuges, and other “wildlands”.



Narrative of Redemptive Urban Nature – Wilderness and Wildness in the City

The narrative of redemptive urban nature uses the Transcendentalist myth of nature as a tonic for body and spirit which is deliberately incorporated into the urban landscape.

Space for nature is created to provide recreation for physical health and to allow contact with officially sanctioned nature for mental health.



American Narrative of Redemptive Nature – Wilderness and Wildness



Wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit, and as vital to our lives as water and good bread. A civilization which destroys what little remains of the wild, the spare, the original, is cutting itself off from its origins and betraying the principle of civilization itself.

— Edward Abbey —

AZ QUOTES

**“In wilderness
is the preservation
of the world.”**

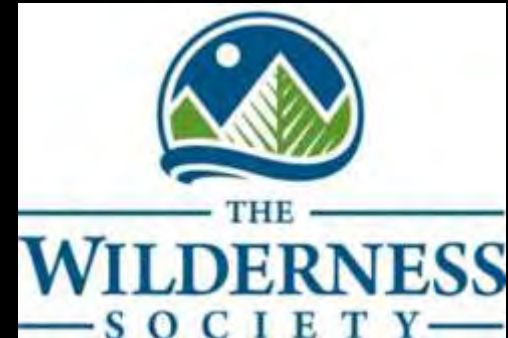
Thoreau



In God's wildness lies the hope of the world—the great fresh unblighted, unredeemed wilderness. The galling harness of civilization drops off, and wounds heal ere we are aware.

(John Muir)

izquotes.com



The Pristine Myth

Pristine Nature and the Rain Forest



“Costa Rica’s rainforests, like all places allowed to remain wild and self-sustaining, are teeming with the perfect balance of flora and fauna, of predators and prey.

Left to itself, the Costa Rica rainforest is more than a natural resource; it’s an ever-changing yet unchanging part of the world’s geography.

Zip lining in Costa Rica is a wonderful way to see the forest while supporting a small local economy in an ethical way — this is an important factor for many travelers to Costa Rica.”



The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492

William M. Denevan

Department of Geography, University of Wisconsin

Abstract. The myth persists that in 1492 the Americas were a sparsely populated wilderness, “a world of barely perceptible human disturbance.” There is substantial evidence, however, that the Native American landscape of the early sixteenth century was a humanized landscape almost everywhere. Populations were large. Forest composition had been modified, grasslands had been created, wildlife disrupted, and erosion was severe in places. Earthworks, roads, fields, and settlements were ubiquitous. With Indian depopulation in the wake of Old World disease, the environment recovered in many areas. A good argument can be made that the human presence was less visible in 1750 than it was in 1492.

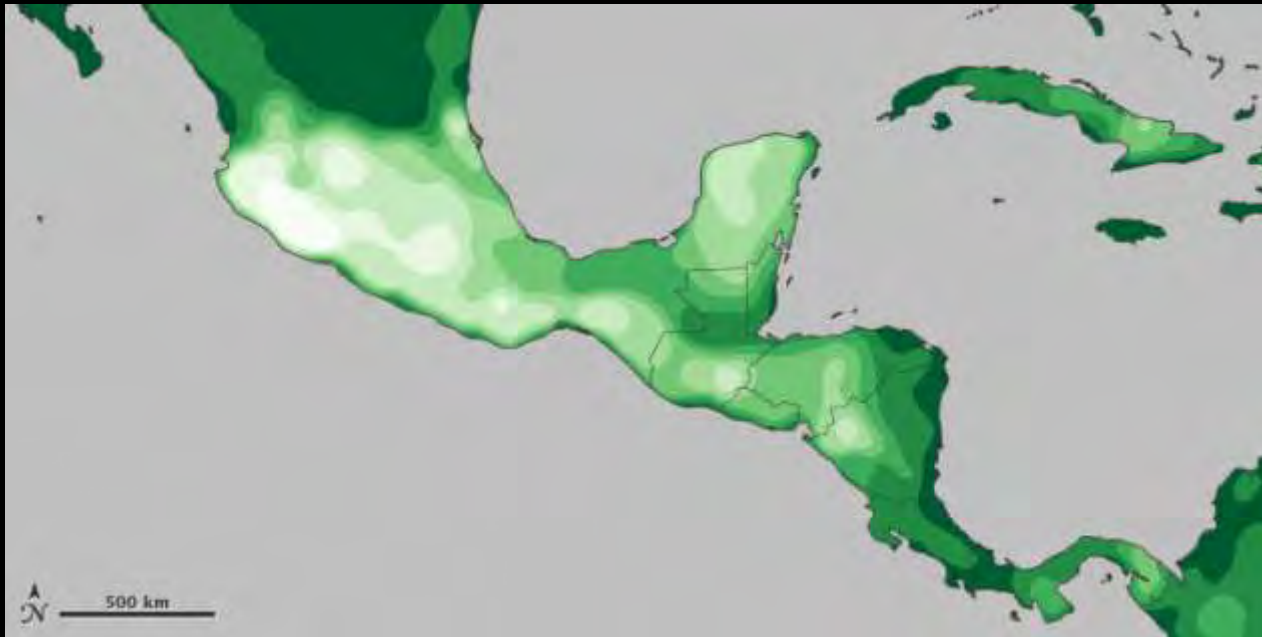


Annals of the Association of American Geographers, Vol. 82, No. 3, The Americas before and after 1492: Current Geographical Research. (Sep., 1992), pp. 369-385.

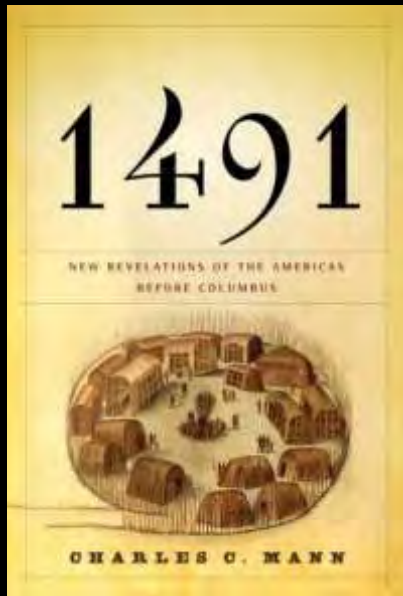
Transformation
950 A.D.



How little native forest (dark green) remained at the end of the Mayan period around 950 AD.
By cutting down the forest, the Mayans changed their local climate.



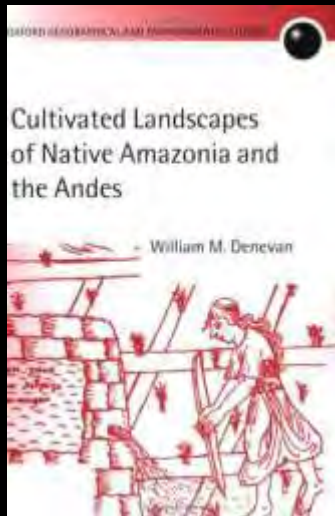
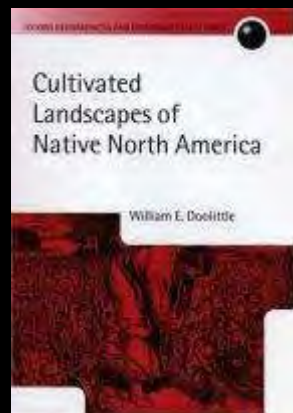
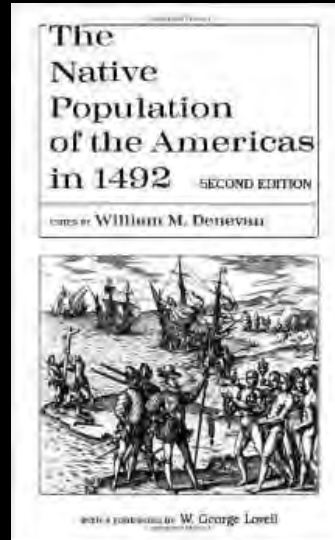
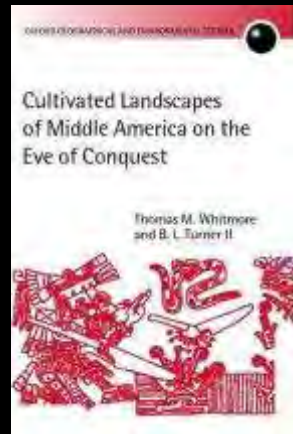
Wilderness and Humanized Landscapes of America



Cultivated Landscapes of the Americas – The Native Population of the Americas in 1492

The American population in 1492 was around 54 million.

The population north of Mexico - current estimates range from 8-10 million.

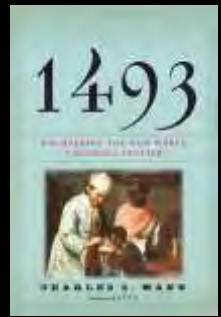
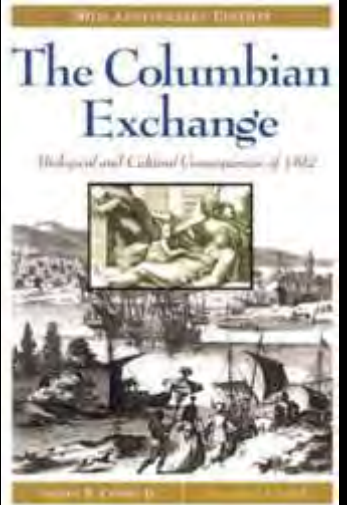


1492 The Columbian Exchange

“Until about 200 million years ago Eurasia and the Americas were a single landmass called Pangaea. It broke apart and for millions of years the parts had little communication. As Crosby put it, Columbus initiated the process of knitting back together the seams of Pangaea.

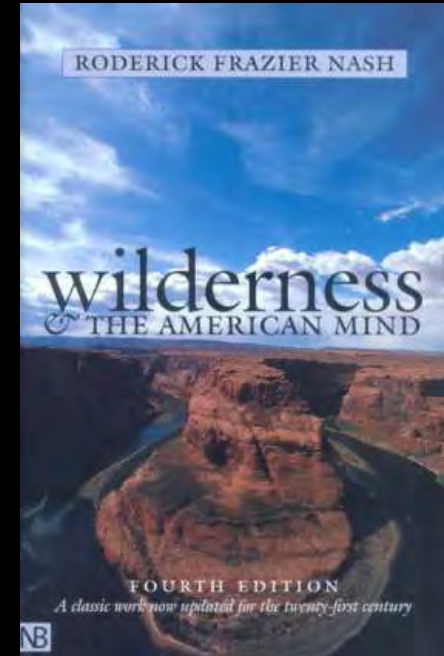
Ever since 1492, the hemispheres have become more and more alike, as people mix the world’s organisms into a global stew through the Columbian Exchange.”

Mann, 1491



The Wilderness Myth

America was seen as a pristine wilderness by Europeans arriving in this New World
– intent on subduing the wilderness and cultivating the land.

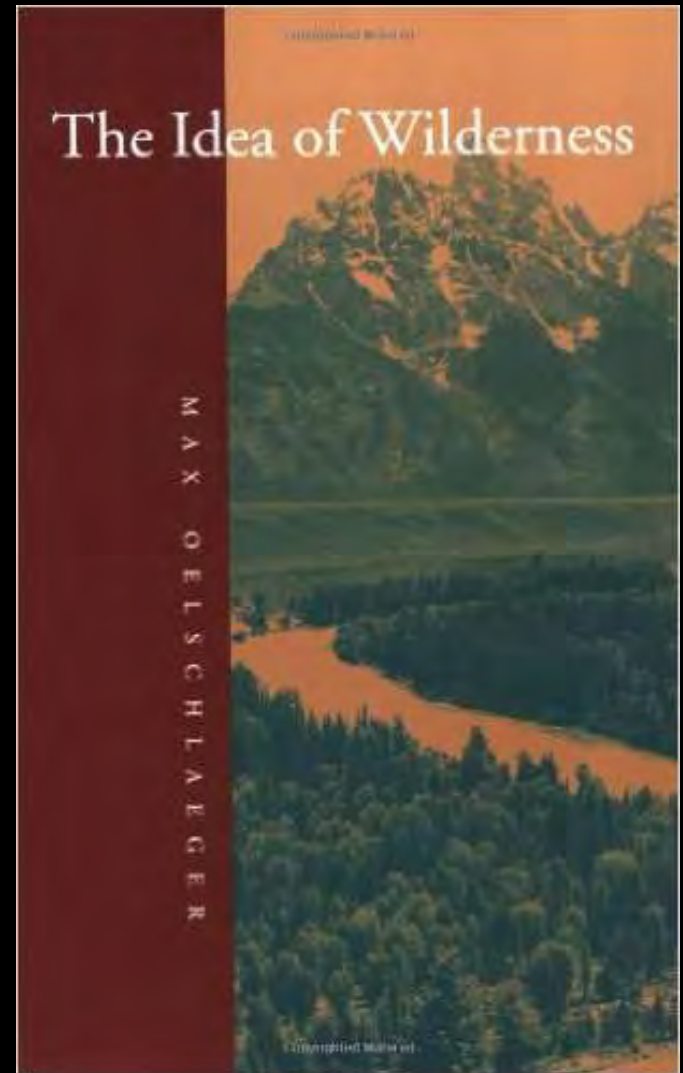
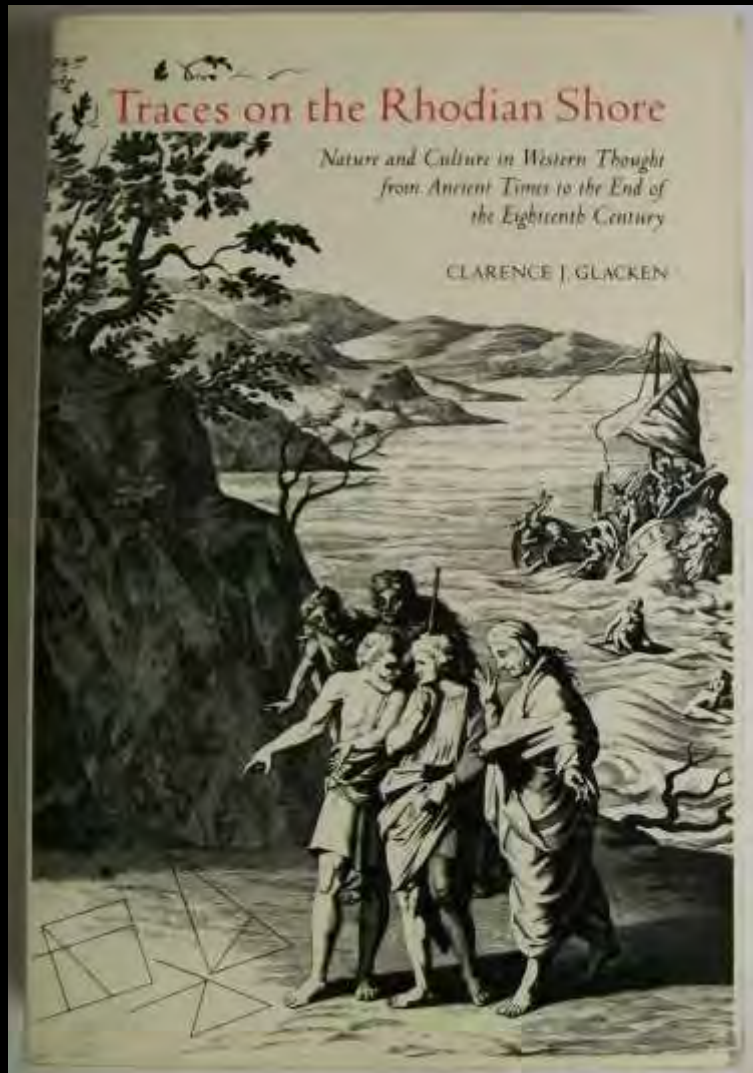


“wilderness is a matter of perception – part of the geography of the American mind”

Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967)



Western Culture and Wilderness



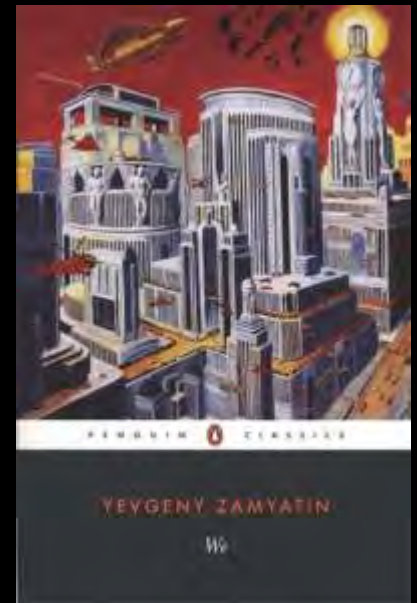
Varieties of Possibility – Kinds of Nature in Western Culture

Humans and Wild Nature

Oh, how great and divinely limiting is the wisdom of walls. This Green Wall is, I think, the greatest invention ever conceived.

Man ceased to be a wild animal the day he built the first wall; Man ceased to be a wild man only on the day when the Green Wall was completed, when, by this wall we isolated our machine-like, perfect world from the irrational, ugly world of trees, birds, and beasts.

- Eugene Zamyatin, *We* (1921)

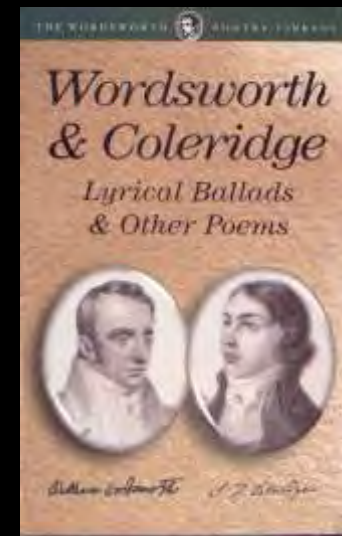


19th Century Re-invention of Nature

The Romantic Concept of Nature

The Romantic period, begins in 1798, the year of the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge. For the Romantics, Nature was closer to a spiritual experience, a natural religion of the sublime, as opposed to traditional institutionalized religion.

Romantic "nature" is a vehicle for self-consciousness. The Romantics' preoccupation with natural phenomena amounts to a search for the true self, for one's real identity.



American Transcendentalism

The Romantic idea of Nature transformed into the American Transcendentalist idea of Nature with Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, "Nature" (1844).

Nature is a source of sensations--healthy feelings. It is therapy for a diseased, overcivilized heart. Humans can discover emotional health in nature. Such health leads to moral and spiritual clarity.



Thoreau's *Walden* (1854)

Nature is a refuge from the artificial constructs of civilization.



Defense of American Nature - Wildness and Wilderness

Henry David Thoreau, "Walking" (1862)

The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world.

Life consists with Wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him.

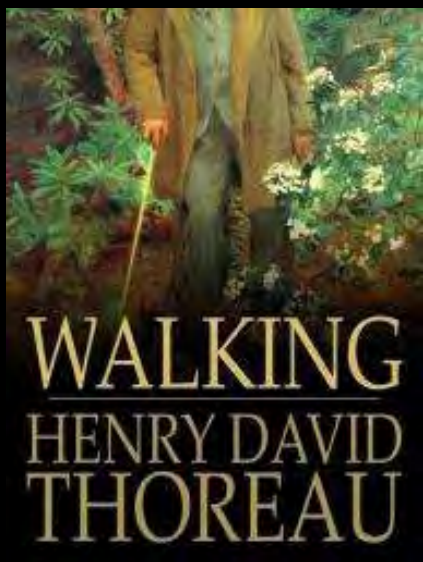
Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps.



**"In wilderness
is the preservation
of the world."
Thoreau**

SWAMPS?

1817-1862



Theory of Degeneracy of American Nature

Comte de Buffon 1707–1788

French naturalist, mathematician, cosmologist, and encyclopedia author.

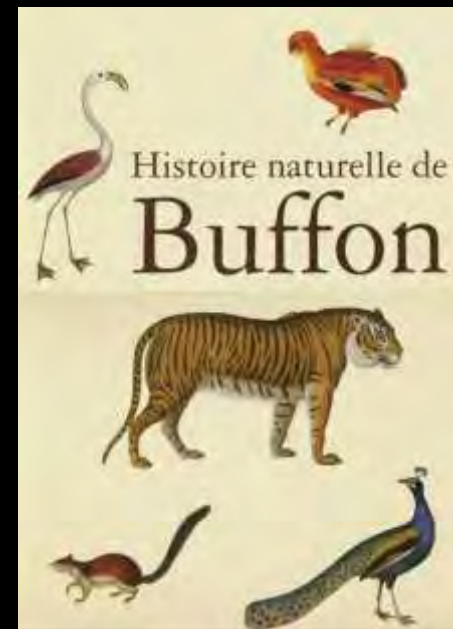
In his massive encyclopedia of natural history, Buffon laid out what came to be called the theory of degeneracy.

He argues that, as a result of living in a cold and wet climate, all species found in America were weak and feeble.

What's more, any species imported into America for economic reasons would soon succumb to its new environment and produce lines of puny, feeble offspring, which applied equally well to transplanted Europeans and their descendants in America.

America is a land of swamps, where life putrefies and rots.

If the theory of American degeneracy took hold in Europe the long-term consequences could impact trade with and immigration too the United States.



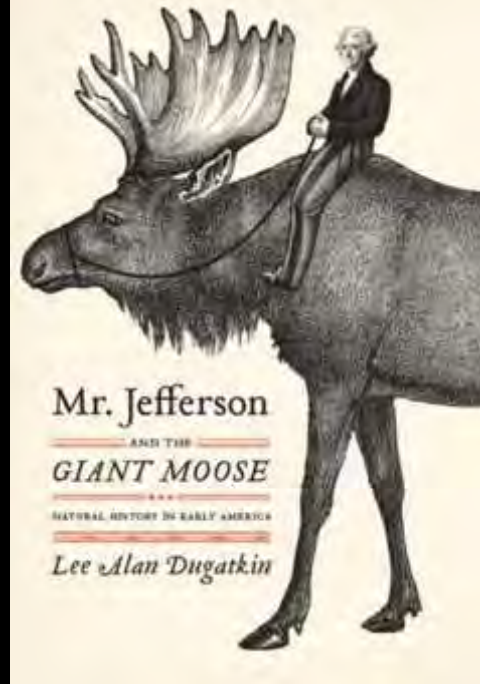
Jefferson's Moose and the Defense of American Nature

In his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) Thomas Jefferson responded to Buffon's claims.

"Jefferson also wanted to present Buffon with tangible evidence...He tried with the skin of a panther, and then the bones of a hulking mastodon...but Buffon didn't budge.

Jefferson's most concerted effort in terms of hands-on evidence was to procure a very large, dead, stuffed American moose – antlers and all – to hand Buffon personally, in effect saying, "see."

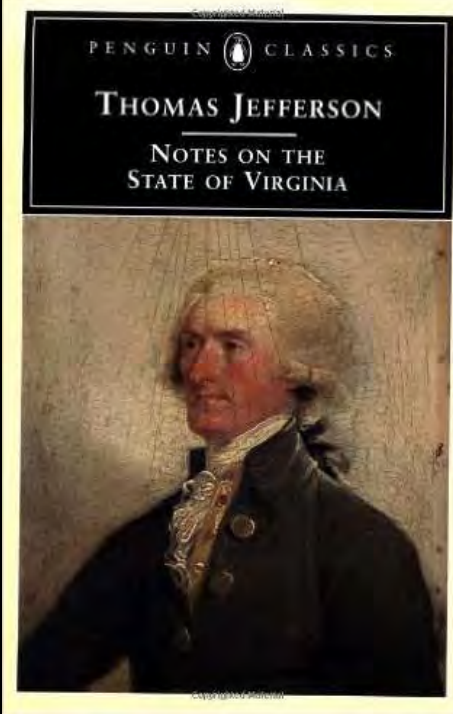
This moose became a symbol for Jefferson – a symbol of the quashing of European arrogance in the form of degeneracy." Dugatkin, 2009



A Comparative View of the Inhabitants of Europe and of America

	I. Aborigines of both		II. Aborigines of one only		III. Domesticated	
	Europe	America	Europe	America	Europe	America
Moose			Stag	Elk	Sheep	Horse
Buffalo			Manly	Elk	Sheep	Horse
White Bear			Wolverine	Puma	Ass	
Caribou			Beaver	Squirrel	Sheep	Horse
Deer			Lepus	Canis	Sheep	Horse
Elk			Puma	Tamias	Goat	
Red Deer			Gem	Tamias	Dog	
Yellow Deer			Mustel	Coyote	Cat	
Wolf			Canis	Lynx		
Beaver			Castor	Beaver		

place these places labels successively one after another 1/2 of side by side



19th Century Cultural Impact of the Theory of American Degeneracy

American Nature - Great unerring Nature once seems wrong

Hegel (1816)

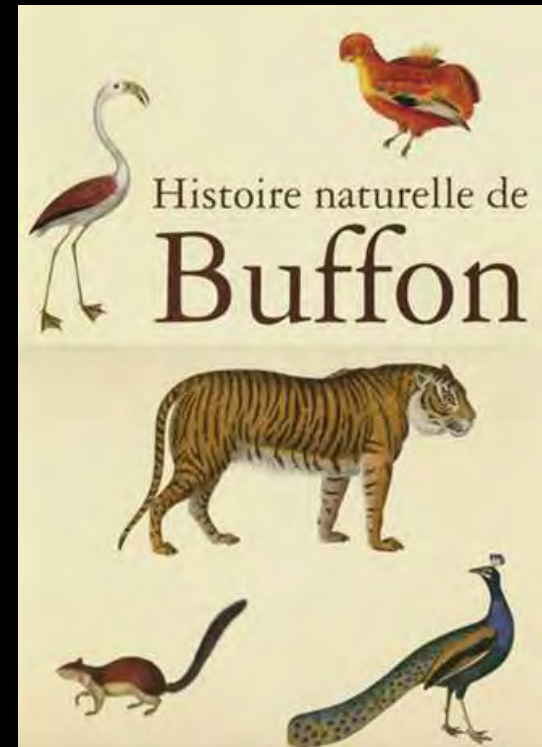
“America has always been and still shows itself physically and spiritually impotent.” and animals in the New World are “in every way smaller, weaker and more cowardly” This inferiority applied to domesticated animals as well as wild ones, “a piece of European beef is a delicacy” compared to American beef.

American birds were mostly mute and would only sing when they lived in a land that no longer “resounds with almost inarticulate tones of degenerate men.”

Keats – *Lines to Fanny* (1819)

Where shall I learn to get my peace again?
To banish thoughts of that most hateful land,
Dungeoner of my friends, that wicked strand
Where they were wreck'd and live a wrecked life;
That monstrous region, whose dull rivers pour
Ever from their sordid urns unto the shore,
Unown'd of any weedy-haired gods;
Whose winds, all zephyrless, hold scourging rods,
Iced in the great lakes, to afflict mankind;

Whose rank-grown forests, frosted, black, and blind,
Would fright a Dryad; whose harsh herbag'd meads
Make lean and lank the starv'd ox while he feeds;
There flowers have no scent, birds no sweet song,
And great unerring Nature once seems wrong.



The Birth of the Narrative of Redemption Creation of the Myth of American Nature Thoreau – “Walking” (1862)

“This statement will do at least to set against Buffon’s account of this part of the world and its productions.”

The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world.

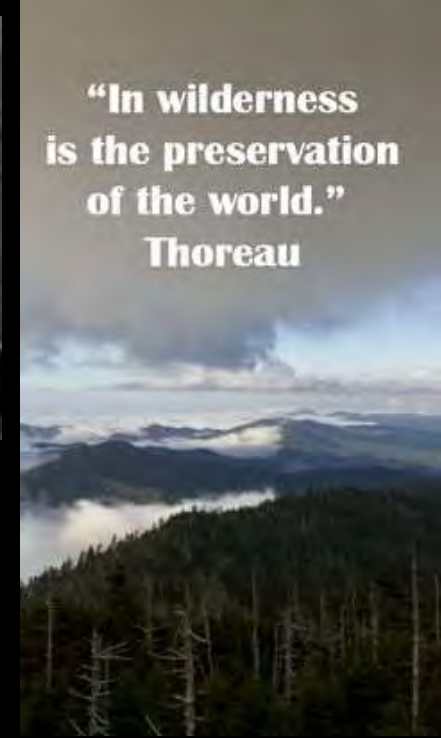
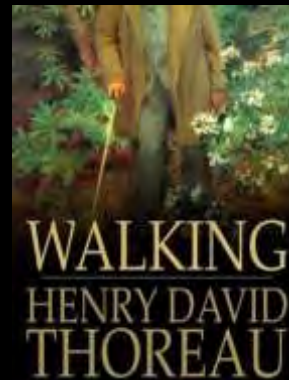
Every tree sends its fibers forth in search of the Wild. The cities import it at any price. Men plow and sail for it. From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind.

Life consists with Wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him.

Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps.



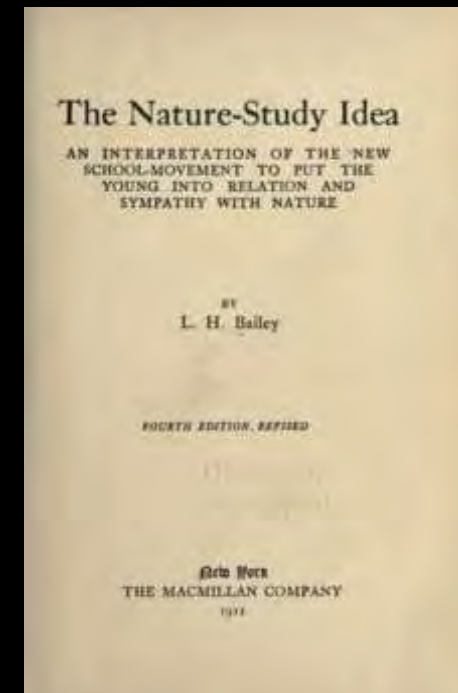
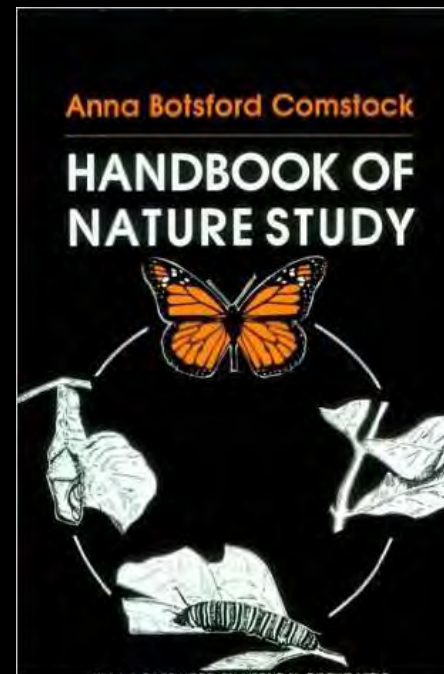
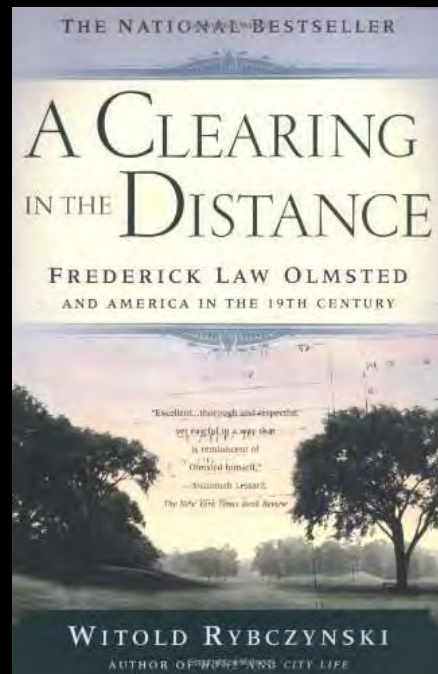
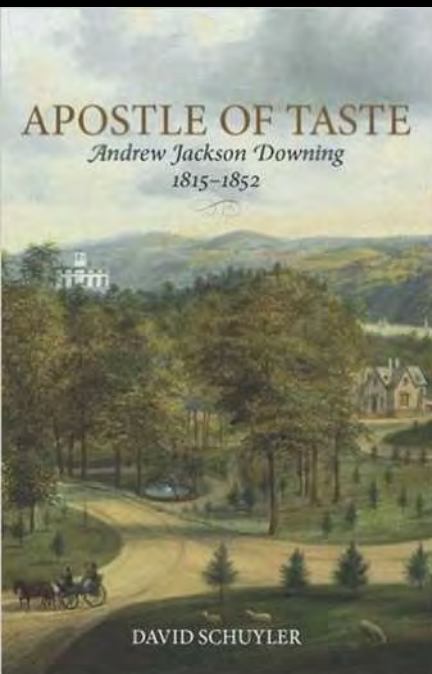
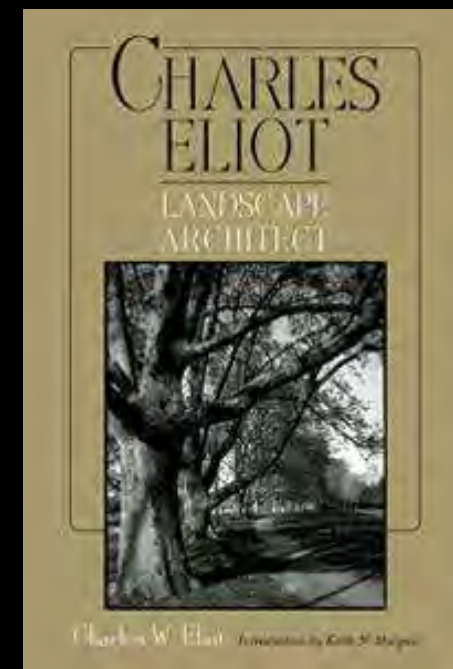
“In wilderness
is the preservation
of the world.”
Thoreau



The Birth of the Narrative of Redemptive Urban Nature Landscape, Nature, and the City 1830-1930

Should the forces which push men into the arms of ignorance, sin, and death, be allowed a free field in our cities or should there be parks and open spaces to redeem the city with all that mingling of the natural and the human which we call landscape? - Charles Eliot Jr. 1859-1897

The evils which attended the growth of modern cities and the factory system are too great for the human body to endure without the consolation of natural scenery. - Charles Eliot Sr. 1834-1926



BACK TO NATURE

The Arcadian Myth
In Urban America

Peter J. Schmitt

foreword by
John R. Stilgoe



The Arcadian Myth in Urban America

Americans turning “back to nature” rather than “back to the land” responded to a philosophy only faintly related to the pattern of thought...called “agrarianism.”

Simply put, this urban response valued nature’s spiritual impact above its economic importance; it might be called “Arcadian.”

If the Arcadian myth was not simply a reversion to Thomas Jefferson’s agrarianism, neither was it a revival of nineteenth century Transcendentalism...

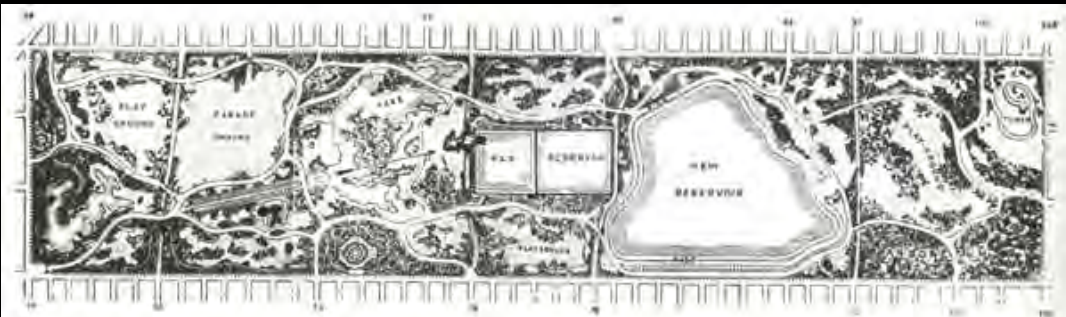
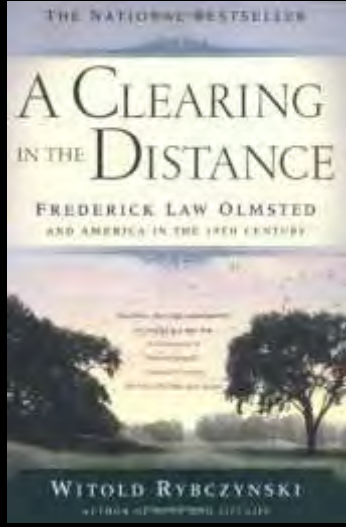
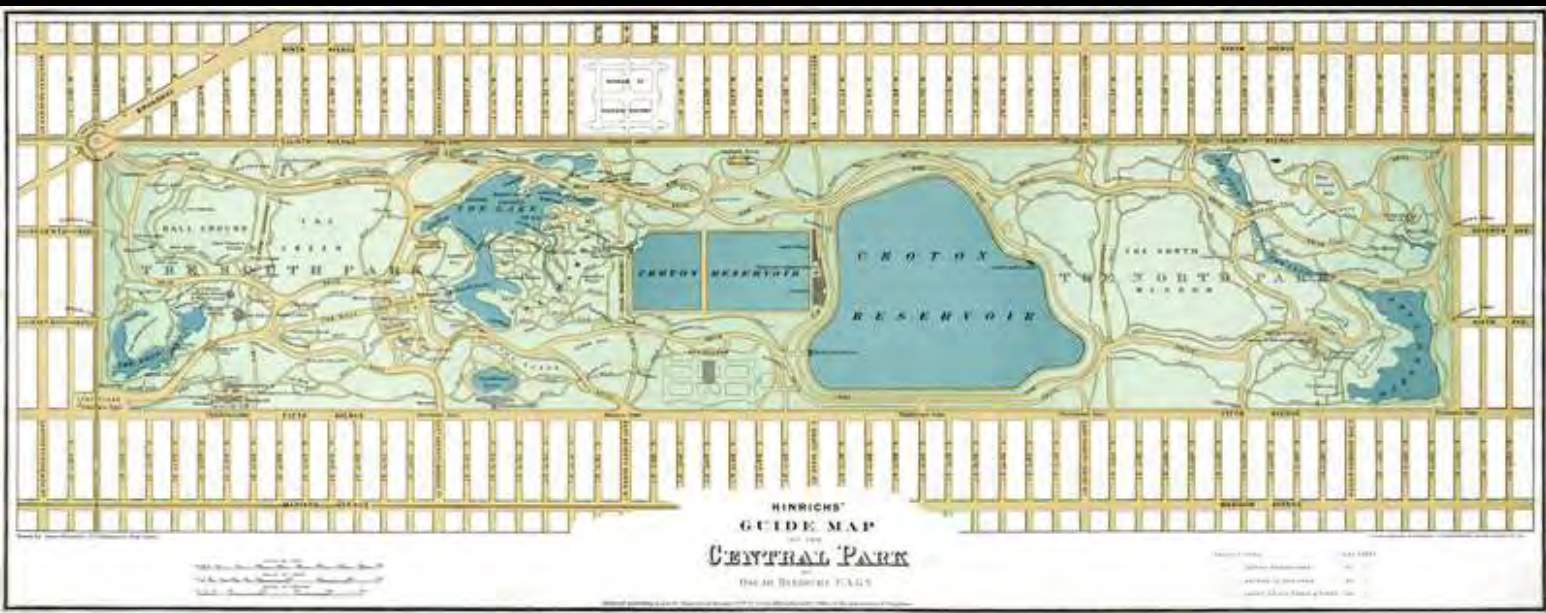
Peter J. Schmitt, *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America* 1969

Confident in their Romantic philosophy, men like Olmsted and Eliot saw themselves as educators teaching with shovel and pen a new meaning for nature in urban society.



19th Century Urban Parks - Frederick Law Olmsted 1822 – 1903

New York City Central Park 1853-1873 (843 acres)



THE
ARCHITECTURE
OF COUNTRY
HOUSES



A. J. DOWNING

with 222 illustrations
and a new introduction by J. Stewart Johnson

The Country and The City in the early 19th Century

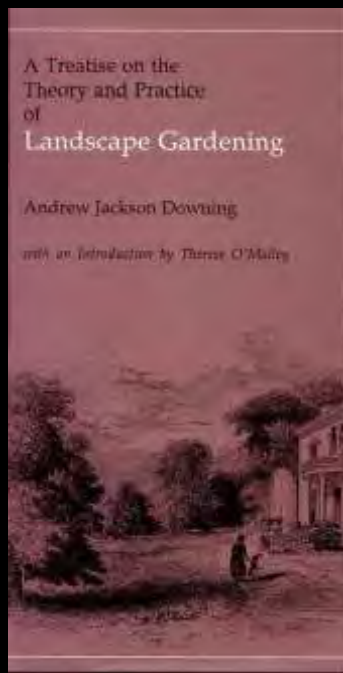
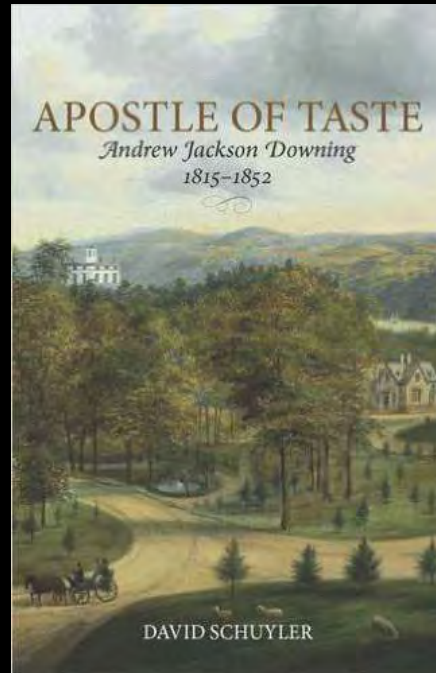
Andrew Jackson Downing 1815-52

America's First landscape architect – Landscape Gardening

Landscape architects felt they must improve on nature with axe and hoe; they must find aesthetic, not philosophical meaning in nature.

Hundreds and thousands, formerly obliged to live in the crowded streets of cities, now find themselves able to enjoy a country cottage, several miles distant - the old notions of time and space being half annihilated; and these suburban cottages enable the busy citizen to breathe freely, and keep alive his love for nature, till the time shall come when he shall have wrung out of the nervous hand of commerce enough means to enable him to realize his ideal of the "retired life" of an American landed proprietor.

Andrew Jackson Downing "Hints to Rural Improvers" 1848



Nature and City Children - Genetic Psychology and Mental Development

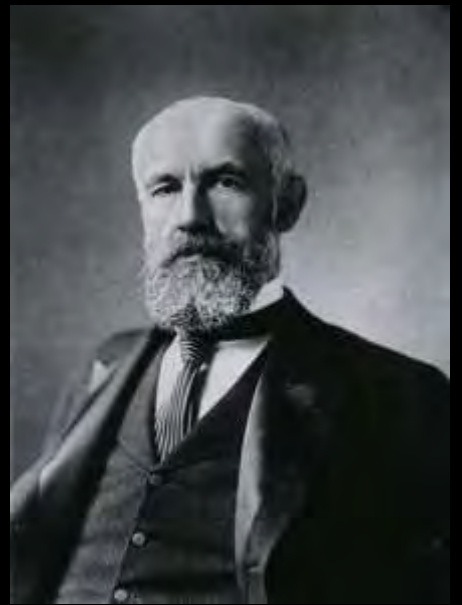
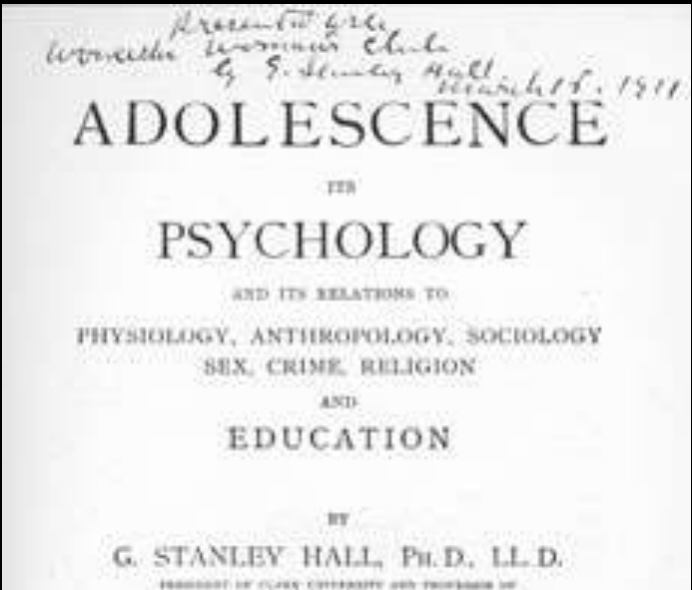
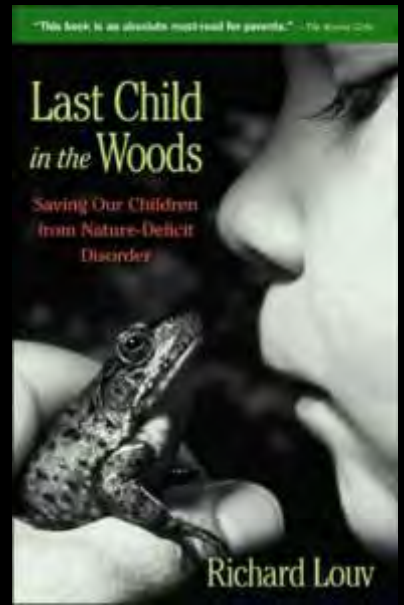
G. Stanley Hall (1844-1924) The first president of the American Psychological Association

Children must recapitulate human development from primitive rural stages to complex urban life. Denial of this process in cities bred social immaturity, crime, and chaos.

“The Content of Children’s Minds on Entering School” 1880 – Tested 200 middle class urban children in Boston entering 1st grade and “discovered ignorance of the simplest nature lore...80% could not identify the common trees of pasture and woodlot.”

Educators need to “perpetually incite” children to explore “ field, forest, hill, shore, the water, flowers, animals, the true homes of childhood in this wild, undomesticated state from which modern conditions have kidnapped and transported him...

As our methods of teaching grow more natural we realize that city life is unnatural, and that those who grow up without knowing the country are defrauded of that without which childhood can never be complete or normal.”



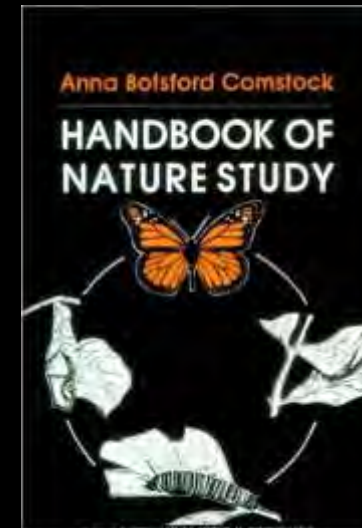
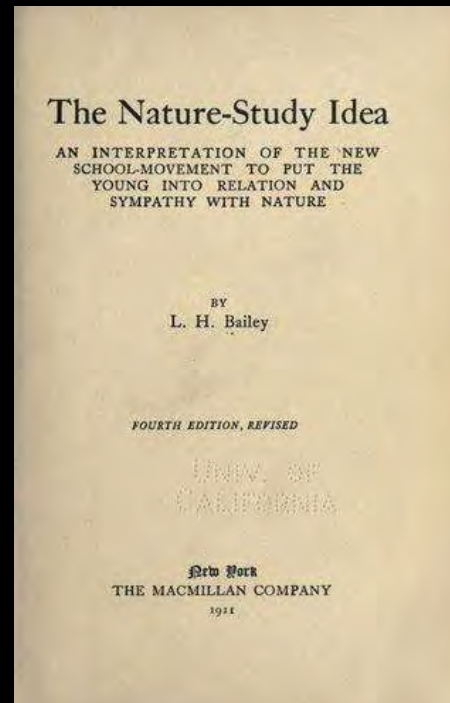
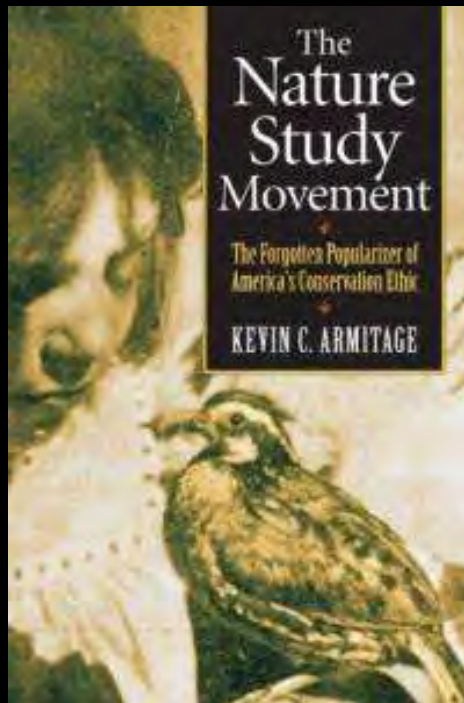
The Nature Study Movement 1890-1930

“Study Nature, Not Books” Louis Agassiz

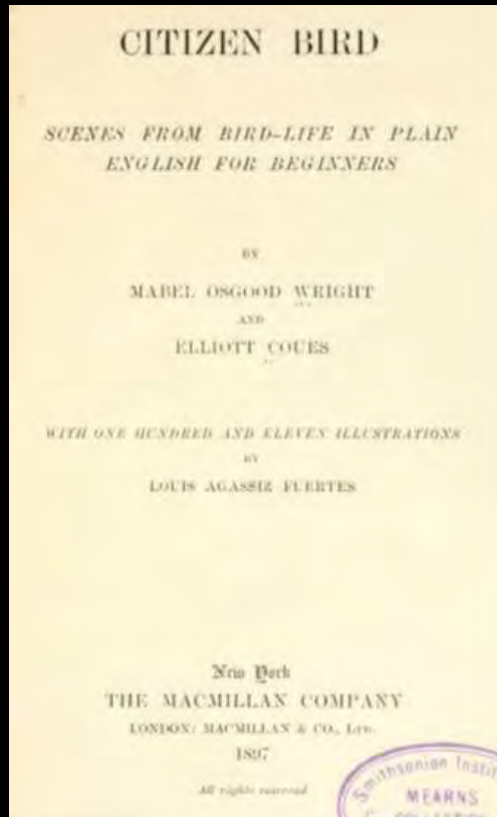
Liberty Hyde Bailey (1858-1954) *The Nature-Study Idea* (1903) “we must live closer to nature and we must perforce begin with the child”

Anna Comstock defined the idea extensively in her book, *Handbook of Nature Study* (1911) “Nature Study is for the comprehension of the Individual life of the bird, insect or plant that is nearest at hand.”

Tension with science education - “the nature study movement...reflected the scientific aspirations as well as the spiritual longings of the professional middle class.”
Armitage 2009



Birds and Nature Study – Nature behaving properly



Citizen Bird (1897) About city children learning scientific terminology on an abandoned farm in New England



Bird Stories (1921) Christian ornithology as introductory science. For city children to learn to learn scientific observation and touching parables of virtues



Nature Study as civic and moral education

Urban Nature must teach civic and moral lessons

Good Birds and Bad Birds – Invasive Foreigners “Amalgam of Science and Sentiment”

Ornithologist’s Union 1883 – checklist and official names

National Association of Audubon Societies 1886 - George Bird Grinnell (1848-1938)

- Junior Audubon Clubs in schools 1911 [205,138 junior members 1916]

Invasive Species - In 1889, the U.S. Bureau of Biological Survey devoted its first bulletin entirely to “The English Sparrow in North America” and compiler Walter Barrows concluded that these “foreigners” were “a curse of such virulence” that they should be systematically and completely destroyed.

Furthermore, it should be a crime to kill the shrike, sparrow hawk, screech owls, bluejays, or grackles, since they eat English sparrows.



Wildness - Agency of Nature

Agency - Active subjects inhabiting the urban landscape
rather than passive objects for human observation and appreciation

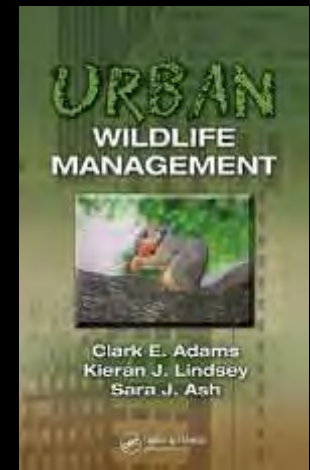
Wildness - Non-humans do unexpected things

They defy our expectations of what nature should be and how non-humans should behave...



Urban Wild - The Challenge of Urban Wildlife

This urban fauna is judged favorably when it in some way fulfills our expectations of wild nature or condemned as pestilent when it fails to follow the narrative for good fauna in the city – and stay in the proper places for nature in the city.



This narrative of urban wildlife declares that transgressive coyotes, rats, grackles, and pigeons are urban pests that further degrade the city...



...but nesting red-tailed hawks and peregrine falcons are
redemptive wild additions to the urban scene.



Down Here Below

Pale Male the famous red-tailed hawk
Performs wing stands high above midtown Manhattan
Circles around for one last pass over the park
Got his eye on a fat squirrel down there and a couple of pigeons
They got no place to run they got no place to hide
But Pale Male he's cool, see 'cause his breakfast ain't goin' nowhere
So he does a loop the loop for the tourists and the six o'clock news

Got him a penthouse view from the tip-top of the food chain, boys
He looks up and down on fifth avenue and says "God I love this town"
But life goes on down here below
And all us mortals struggle so
We laugh and cry
And live and die
That's how it goes
For all we know
Down here below

Pale male swimmin' in the air
Looks like he's in heaven up there
People sufferin' everywhere
But he don't care
But life goes on down here below
And all us mortals, struggle so
We laugh and cry

Steve Earle
Washington Square Serenade 2007



Proper Place for Urban Wildlife? All of the City is habitat

The mobility of urban wildlife allows them to exploit the entire city as habitat.



Urban Wild - Improper Urban Nature (Marginal Nature)

“oddly enough, there’s also too much wildness, too many weeds and wooded borders and tangled banks, not to mention vacant lots going to brush.” Tallmadge

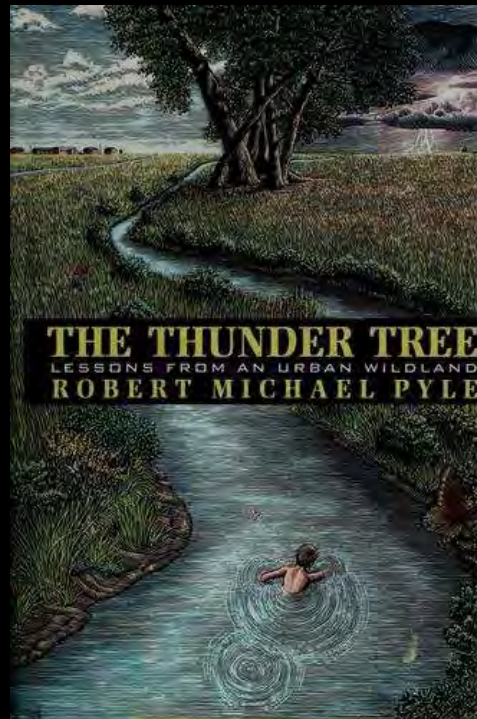
Nature flourishes through its own agency in neglected urban spaces and margins like vacant lots, garbage dumps, sewage ponds, unmaintained roadway and railway verges, old industrial tracts, abandoned buildings, overgrown urban creeks, crumbling walls, and other urban waste spaces.



The Meaning of Urban Wildness Accidental Wilds

What do shreds and scraps of the natural scene mean, after all,
in the shadow of the citified whole?

Robert Michael Pyle, *The Thunder Tree: Lessons from an Urban Wildland* (1993)



The Accidental Wild

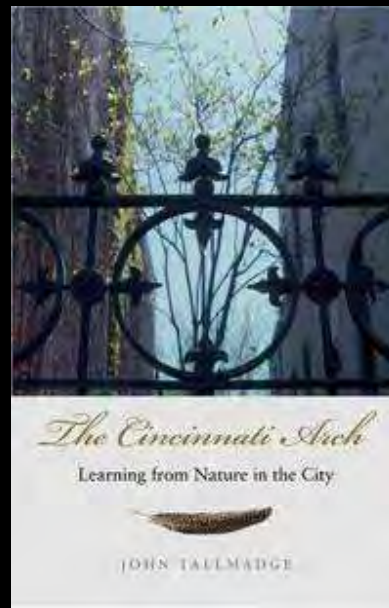
Urban Nature - Not a Real Ecosystem?

John Tallmadge *The Cincinnati Arch: Learning from Nature in the City* (2004)

Urban nature is not sublime...There's too much sterility in the form of roofs and pavement, and, oddly enough, there's also too much wildness, too many weeds and wooded borders and tangled banks, not to mention vacant lots going to brush.

Of course, "wilderness" won't do to describe such landscapes either. Despite the degree of wildness, there's too much human impact, too many alien species, too few large animals to meet the legal and cultural criteria.

The fact is that urban landscapes are just too mixed up, chaotic, and confused to fit our established notions of beauty and value in nature. ... *Maybe it's not really nature at all, not a real ecosystem, just a bunch of weeds and exotics mixed up with human junk.*



Natural What?



Environmental Perception of Nature and the American City

The Sacred and the Mundane

Wilderness and the City

Natural vs. Artificial

Pristine vs. Degraded

Native vs. Non-native

Proper vs. Improper





The CER Lunchtime Lectures 2017

Understanding Urban Nature: Ecology, Culture, and the American City

Perspectives on Urban Nature

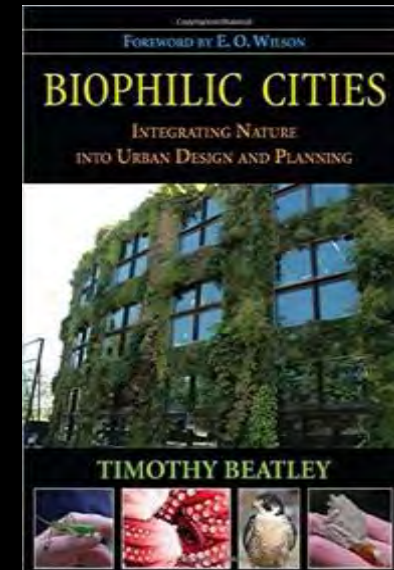
January	Varieties of Possibility: Perspectives on Nature and the City
February	Urban Wild: Wilderness, Wildness, and the American City
March	Urban Pastoral: Farms, Gardens, and Parkland in the City
April	The Elemental City: Cycles, Services, and Urban Ecology

The Nature of Cities – Urban Natural History and Ecology

May	Nature in the City: Urban Habitats and the Degradation Myth
June	The Aquatic City: The Ecology of Urban Waterways
July	The Terrestrial City: Greenspace and the Urban Forest
August	The Subterranean City: Soil and the Urban Microcosmos
September	The Aerial City: Urban Birds, Bats, and Denizens of the Sky

The Proper Place of Urban Nature

October	Nature Out of Place: Invasive Species, Novel Ecosystems, and Urban Ecology
November	Design with Nature: Urban Planning, Management, and the Sustainability Myth
December	Encounters with Urban Nature: Ecology, the City, and the Arts



Applause

