The central paradox of global environmentalism is that the people who are the most vocal in defense of nature are the people who most actively destroy it. As biologists have repeatedly reminded us, the present epoch is witness to an unprecedented attack on species and habitats. The most vital as well as the most glamorous of these species and habitats are found in the poorer countries of the South, such as Brazil, Ecuador, Kenya, Tanzania, Indonesia, and India. However, the movement for their conservation is fueled principally by processes originating in the richer countries of the North, such as Norway, Australia, Germany and, preeminently, the United States.

The American wilderness movement has a history that extends back more than a century. Its two most influential and venerated figures have been John Muir (1838–1914), who founded the Sierra Club, and Aldo Leopold (1887–1948), who co-founded the Wilderness Society. Muir and Leopold advanced both scientific and ethical reasons for protecting endangered species and ecosystems. They, and their colleagues, helped inspire the creation of the National Park Service, which in turn put in place perhaps the world’s best managed system of protected areas.

Until the middle decades of this century, wilderness protection in the United States was the preoccupation of precocious pioneers, whose shouts of alarm sometimes led to changes in public policy. However, when environmentalism emerged as a popular movement in the 1960s and 1970s, it principally focused on two concerns: the threats to human health posed by pollution, and the threats to wild species and wild habitats posed by economic expansion. The latter concern became, in fact, the defining motif of the movement. The dominance of wilderness protection in American environmentalism has promoted an essentially negative agenda: the protection of parks and their animals by freeing them of human habitation and productive activities. As the historian Samuel Hays points out, “natural environments which formerly had been looked upon as ‘useless,’ waiting only to be developed, now came to be thought of as ‘useful’ for filling human wants and needs. They played no less a significant role in the advanced consumer society than did such material goods as hi-fi sets or indoor gardens.” While saving these islands of biodiversity, American environmentalists have paid scant attention to what was happening outside them. This was especially apparent in their indifference to America’s growing consumption of energy and materials.

The growing popular interest in the wild and the beautiful has thus not merely accepted the parameters of the affluent society but tends to see nature itself as merely one more good to be consumed. The uncertain commitment of most nature lovers to a more comprehensive environmental ideology is illustrated by the puzzle that they are willing to drive thousands of miles, using scarce oil and polluting the atmosphere, to visit national parks and sanctuaries—thus using anti-ecological means to marvel at the beauty of forests, swamps,

“Wilderness lovers like to speak of the equal rights of all species to exist. This ethical cloaking cannot hide the truth that green missionaries are possibly more dangerous, and certainly more hypocritical, than their economic or religious counterparts.”
CONSUMING NATURE ABROAD

Crucially, the most gorgeous examples of pristine nature are located outside the United States (and outside Europe as well). The most charismatic mammals—the tiger and the elephant, the rhinoceros and the lion—are found in Asia and Africa; the most charismatic habitats, such as the rainforest, in Latin America. In the decades after World War II, and more so since the 1970s, the gaze of the North Atlantic wilderness lover has increasingly turned outward. What his or her homeland offered was not quite as exotic or attractive as what might be found overseas. And the appeal of foreign species was enhanced by new technologies, such as satellite television, which brought the beauties of the tiger or the rainforest into the living room. Meanwhile, air travel had become cheaper, more extensive, and more reliable; within days of reading about a tiger or watching it on your screen, you could be with it in its own wild habitat.

In response to a growing global market for nature tourism and driven also by strong domestic pressures, many nations in the developing South have undertaken ambitious programs to conserve and demarcate habitats and species for strict protection. For instance, when India became independent in 1947, it had less than a half-dozen wildlife reserves; it now has more than 400 parks and sanctuaries, covering 4.3 percent of the country (there are proposals to double this area). A similar expansion of territory under wilderness conservation can be observed in other Asian and African countries too. These parks are governed by two axioms: that wilderness has to be big, continuous wilderness and that all human intervention is bad for the retention of diversity. These axioms have led to the constitution of numerous very large sanctuaries, with a total ban on human ingress in their "core" areas. In the process, hundreds of thousands of Indian villagers have been uprooted from their homes, and millions more have had their access to fuel, fodder, and small timber restricted or cut off.

Five major groups fuel the movement for wildlife conservation in the South. The first are the city-dwellers and foreign tourists who merely season their lives, a week at a time, with the wild. Their motive is straightforward: pleasure and fun. The second group consists of ruling elites who view the protection of particular species (for example, the tiger in India) as central to the retention or enhancement of national prestige. The third group is composed of international conservation organizations such as the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and the World Wildlife Fund, whose missions are "educating" people and politicians about the virtues of biological conservation. A fourth group consists of functionaries of the state forest or wildlife service mandated by law to physically control the parks. While some officials are genuinely inspired by a love of nature, the majority—at least in Asia and Africa—are motivated merely by the power and spin-off benefits (overseas trips, for example) that come with the job. The final group are biologists, who believe in wilderness and species preservation for the sake of "science.

These five groups are united in their hostility to the farmers, herders, swidden cultivators, and hunters who have lived in the "wild" from well before it became a "park" or "sanctuary." They see these human communities as having a destructive effect on the environment, their forms of livelihood aiding the disappearance of species and contributing to soil erosion, habitat simplification, and worse. Often their feelings are expressed in strongly pejorative language. Touring Africa in 1957, one prominent member of the Sierra Club sharply attacked the Masai for grazing cattle in African sanctuaries. He held the Masai to be illustrative of a larger trend, wherein "increasing population and increasing land use," rather than industrial exploitation, constituted the main threat to the world's wilderness areas. The Masai and "their herds of economically worthless cattle," he remarked, "have already overgrazed and laid waste to much of the 23,000 square miles of Tanganyika they control, and as they move into the Serengeti, they bring the desert with them, and the wilderness and wildlife must bow before their herds."2

Thirty years later, the World Wildlife Fund initiated a campaign to save the Madagascar rainforest,
the home of the ring-tailed lemur, the Madagascar serpent eagle, and other endangered species. The group’s fund-raising posters boasted spectacular sketches of the lemur and the eagle and of the half-ton elephant bird that once lived on the island but is now extinct. Man “is a relative newcomer to Madagascar,” noted the accompanying text, “but even with the most basic of tools—axes and fire—he has brought devastation to the habitats and resources he depends on.” The posters also had a picture of a muddy river with the caption: “Slash-and-burn agriculture has brought devastation to the forest, and in its wake, erosion of the topsoil.”

**Environmental Imperialism**

This poster succinctly summed up the conservationist position with regard to the tropical rainforest. This holds that the enemy of the environment is the hunter and farmer living in the forest, who is too short-sighted for his, and our, good. This belief (or prejudice) has informed the many projects, spread across the globe, to constitute nature parks by evicting the original human inhabitants of these areas, with scant regard for their past or future. All this is done in the name of the global heritage of biological diversity. Cynics might conclude, however, that tribal people in the Madagascar or Amazon forest are expected to move out only so that residents of London or New York can have the comfort of knowing that the lemur or toucan has been saved for posterity—evidence of which is then provided for them by way of the wildlife documentary they can watch on their television screens.

Raymond Bonner’s remarkable 1993 book on African conservation, *At the Hand of Man: Peril and Hope for Africa’s Wildlife*, laid bare the imperialism, unconscious and explicit, of Northern wilderness lovers and biologists working on that luckless continent. Bonner remarks that:

> Africans [have been] ignored, overwhelmed, manipulated and outmaneuvered—by a conservation crusade led, orchestrated, and dominated by white Westerners. . . . As many Africans see it, white people are making rules to protect animals that white people want to see in parks that white people visit. Why should Africans support these programs? . . . Africans do not use the parks and they do not receive any significant benefits from them. Yet they are paying the costs. There are indirect economic costs—government revenues that go to parks instead of schools. And there are direct personal costs [that is, from the ban on hunting and fuel collecting, or through physical displacement].

A Zambian biologist, E. N. Chidumayo, echoes Bonner’s argument: “The only thing that is African about most conventional conservation policies is that they are practiced on African land.”

Bonner’s book focuses on the elephant, one of approximately six animals that have come to acquire “totemic” status among Western wilderness lovers. Animal totems existed in most premodern societies, but as the Norwegian scholar Arne Kalland points out, in the past the injunction not to kill the totemic species applied only to members of the group. Hindus do not ask others to worship the cow, but those who love and cherish the elephant, seal, whale, or tiger try to impose a worldwide prohibition on its killing. No one, they say, anywhere, anytime, shall be allowed to harm the animal they hold sacred even if (as with the elephant and several species of whale) scientific evidence has established that small-scale hunting will not endanger its viable populations and will, in fact, save human lives put at risk by the expansion, after total protection, of the lebensraum of the totemic animal. The new totemists also insist that their species is the only true inhabitant of the ocean or forest, and ask that human beings who have lived in the same terrain (and with these animals) for many generations be sent elsewhere.

Throughout Asia and Africa, the management of parks has sharply posited the interests of poor villagers who have traditionally lived in them against those of wilderness lovers and urban pleasure seekers who wish to keep parks “free of human interference”—free, that is, of humans other than themselves. This conflict has led to violent clashes between local people and government officials. At present, the majority of wildlife conservationists, domestic or foreign, seem to believe that species and habitat protection can succeed only through a punitive guns-and-guards approach. However, some Southern scientists have called for a more inclusively

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democratic approach to conservation, whereby tribal people and peasants can be involved in management and decision making and can be fairly compensated for the loss of their homes and livelihood.5

ENVIRONMENTALISTS?
The Northern wilderness lover has largely been insensitive to the needs and aspirations of human communities that live in or around habitats they wish to “preserve for posterity.” At the same time, he or she has also been insensitive to the deep asymmetries in global consumption, to the fact that it is precisely the self-confessed environmentalist who practices a lifestyle that lays an unbearable burden on the finite natural resources of the earth.

The United States and the countries of Western Europe consume a share of the world’s resources radically out of proportion to their percentage of the world’s population. A recent study by the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment, and Energy, in Wuppertal, Germany, notes that the North lays excessive claim to the South’s “environmental space.” The way the global economy is currently structured, it argues, “the North gains cheap access to cheap raw materials and hinders access to markets for processed products from those countries; it imposes a system [the World Trade Organization] that favors the strong; it makes use of large areas of land in the South, tolerating soil degradation, damage to regional ecosystems, and disruption of local self-reliance; it exports toxic waste; [and] it claims patent rights to biodiversity and the ecological footprint their consumption patterns leave on the soil, forest, waters, and air of lands other than their own.


Consider, conversely, the approach to global environmental problems advocated by a man regarded as the “dean” of tropical biology, the American scientist Daniel Janzen. In an editorial written for the October 1988 issue of the journal Conservation Biology, Janzen asked his fellow biologists—professors as well as graduate students—to devote 20 percent of their funds and time to tropical conservation. He calculated that the $500 million and the 20,000 man-years thus generated would be enough to “solve virtually all neotropical conservation problems.” “What can academics and researcher committees do?” asks Janzen. He offers this answer: “Significant input can be anything from voluntary secretarial work for a fund-raising drive to a megalomaniacal effort to bootstrap an entire tropical country into a permanent conservation ecosystem.” Janzen assumes that money plus biologists will suffice to solve “virtually all neotropical conservation problems,” although some of us think that a more effective solution would be for biologists to throw themselves into a megalomaniacal effort to bootstrap but one temperate country—Janzen’s own—into living off its own resources.

Wilderness lovers like to speak of the equal rights of all species to exist. This ethical cloaking cannot hide the truth that green missionaries are possibly more dangerous, and certainly more hypocritical, than their economic or religious counterparts. The globalizing advertiser and banker works for a world in which everyone, regardless of class or color, is in an economic sense an American or Japanese—driving a car, drinking a Pepsi, owning a refrigerator and a washing machine. The missionary, having discovered Christ or Allah, wants all pagans or kaffirs also to share in the discovery. The conservationist wants to “protect the tiger or whale for posterity,” yet expects other people to make the sacrifice, expects indigenous tribal people or fisherfolk to vacate the forest or the ocean so that he may enjoy his own brief holiday in communion with nature. But few among these lovers of nature scrutinize their own lifestyle, their own heavy reliance on nonrenewable resources, and the ecological footprint their consumption patterns leave on the soil, forest, waters, and air of lands other than their own.