

WILDER-BLINDNESS

(Part 1 of 3)

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Somewhat oddly, for a people who inhabit one of the wilder countries on earth, Canadians appear to have the hardest time of it when it comes to seeing wilderness. Like someone who goes snow-blind from looking too long at the dazzling white of a northern countryside in March, as a nation we seem to have gone unsuspectingly wilderness-blind.

Not so, some will say.

Hundreds of thousands of us use the wilderness for recreation and regard it as part of our heritage. In the North we have entire national parks described as "wilderness parks." And in the South there are wilderness



provincial parks, at least in some provinces, as well as wilderness zones in the national parks. We have wilderness societies, a wilderness literature, and wilderness commerce.

But it takes others to see us as we really are. The foremost American authority on wilderness sums us up by saying: "the wilderness preservation movement in Canada lags some two generations behind that in the United States."¹ Through American eyes Canadians are barely conscious of wilderness as an idea, only slightly interested in saving some of the thing itself, and very poorly organized to promote preservation in the political arena. In the United States wilderness is as demotic as apple pie; in Canada love of wilderness is "elitism."

It is not the purpose of this article to examine the notion that Canadians do not worry so much about the loss of wilderness as Americans do. That can just about be taken as self-evident, with four decades of almost uncontested country-sized hydroelectric projects, mindless "roads to resources", catastrophic logging, consumptive tourism, and now the despoliation of provincial parks. Instead, what follows is an attempt to answer the next question: if Canadians are indeed less mindful of wilderness than Americans, then how come?

Roderick Nash thinks he knows. He says it is because we have too much wilderness:

The Canadian experience furnishes . . . evidence for the paradox that the possession of wilderness is a *disadvantage* in the preservation of wilderness. In Canada's case it is the northcountry — unbelievably huge and empty, a continuing frontier that elicits frontier attitudes toward land. The result of having this vast reservoir of wildness to the north is that the urgency for wilderness protection is lessened.²

But who could have too much wilderness, if they loved it? When a particularly rich tract of wild country was threatened, in the Queen Charlotte Islands, Canadians from all across the country wrote to British Columbia Premier Bill Vander Zalm to protest. Few of them could have had any

thought of visiting the place or "using" it. They just valued wild country, and any diminution in it they found painful to contemplate.

At any rate, do Canadians have so much wilderness as all that? As other writers have pointed out before, much the greatest extent of our wild country lies a long way off from where the mass of Canadians live. From Toronto really wild country now stands off at least 600 kilometres, from Montreal perhaps 500, from Vancouver several hours by car. If you live in southern Canada with nearly all the rest of us and you know what wilderness is, you will not have the feeling there is a lot of it around.

This very distance of wild country from the major centres of Canadian population may in fact be part of the problem. When we hear that the government of Quebec has authorized a single clear-cut 77,000 square kilometres in extent, or the government of British Columbia has collaborated in building a railroad across the northern Rockies to rip apart a mountain for coal that is not economic to mine, often it just seems too far away to concern us. If the land is not widely publicized as being special for some reason other than its mere wildness, we let it go.

Provincial jurisdiction it is, too. In the United States the bulk of uncultivated land is federal. In Canada Crown lands are mainly owned by the provinces. Federal governments seem to respond to electorates on a higher plane than do provincial governments. For one thing, regard for wilderness is commoner among the university-educated, professional, and nicely-employed, who concentrate themselves in big cities, than it is among rural or small-town folk.³ Those big cities, of course, are scattered across the country in a very uneven way; and some geographically large provinces have but one or none of them.

A related factor is how well politicians on the federal scene versus the provincial are educated. A quick survey of a *Parliamentary Guide*⁴ reveals that whereas members of the House of Commons average about 1.2 university degrees or equivalent certificates apiece, members of legislative assemblies average just over 0.9. In some provinces the average drops as low as 0.6. Whatever their wit or wisdom, these provincial representatives of the people are statistically less inclined to canoe a wilderness river for the pleasure of it, and hence, it is fair to infer, are less inclined to have convictions about the worth of preserving such rivers unimpaired.

Quite possibly the fact that the United States is a "melting pot" while Canada is a "mosaic," as the old clichés have it, has something to do with the matter too. Immigrants usually come to the New World from densely populated parts of the world and with no experience of wilderness. If their new home is the United States they soon absorb American attitudes towards wild lands and the American mythology of wilderness. If they take up residence in Canada,