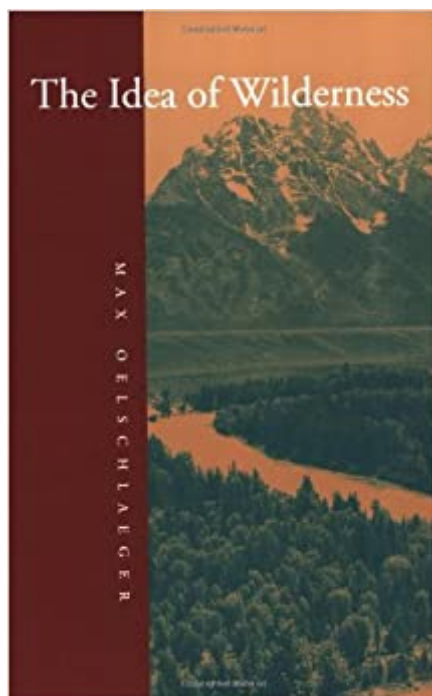


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# The Idea Of Wilderness: From Prehistory To The Age Of Ecology



## Synopsis

How has the concept of wild nature changed over the millennia? And what have been the environmental consequences? In this broad-ranging book Max Oelschlaeger argues that the idea of wilderness has reflected the evolving character of human existence from Paleolithic times to the present day. An intellectual history, it draws together evidence from philosophy, anthropology, theology, literature, ecology, cultural geography, and archaeology to provide a new scientifically and philosophically informed understanding of humankind's relationship to nature. Oelschlaeger begins by examining the culture of prehistoric hunter-gatherers, whose totems symbolized the idea of organic unity between humankind and wild nature, and idea that the author believes is essential to any attempt to define human potential. He next traces how the transformation of these hunter-gatherers into farmers led to a new awareness of distinctions between humankind and nature, and how Hellenism and Judeo-Christianity later introduced the unprecedented concept that nature was valueless until humanized. Oelschlaeger discusses the concept of wilderness in relation to the rise of classical science and modernism, and shows that opposition to modernism arose almost immediately from scientific, literary, and philosophical communities. He provides new and, in some cases, revisionist studies of the seminal American figures Thoreau, Muir, and Leopold, and he gives fresh readings of America's two prodigious wilderness poets Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder. He concludes with a searching look at the relationship of evolutionary thought to our postmodern effort to reconceptualize ourselves as civilized beings who remain, in some ways, natural animals.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Former U.S. Secretary of the Interior James Watt may have seemed only a passing nightmare in his day, but he acted out of a very old tradition of American attitudes toward the land and its proper use. So did Henry David Thoreau. So did Edward Abbey. Americans have been arguing about the environment since the first boats landed at Jamestown, and by all appearances they'll keep right on arguing into the next millennium. *The Idea of Wilderness* packs the centuries-old story into a lively narrative with its full complement of heroes--Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold--a few choice villains of the robber-baron and bureaucrat persuasion, and a few middling souls like Gifford Pinchot, founder of the United States Forest Service. Max Oelschlaeger writes persuasively on the philosophical and religious underpinnings of various environmental positions, showing that indeed there's nothing new under the sun.

It is the Kantian idea of wilderness--its teleological meaning--that occupies the author here. From the minds of five "poetic thinkers and thinking poets," namely, Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder, Oelschlaeger, professor of philosophy at the University of North Texas, brings new dimension to such matters as the origin and uses of the natural world. Against a dubious reconstruction of the Paleolithic notion of a sacred, shared wilderness, the author deconstructs the modernists' concepts of wild nature as "matter in motion." The scientific revolution in particular is shown to have widened the fissure in our cultural idea of wilderness, between the idea of nature as our "magna mater"--an organic model of the cosmos--and modernist models in history, cosmology, philosophy, and even in the author's survey of today's ecology movement (from "resourcism" to eco-feminism). Oehlschlaeger is a cautious critic and reluctant prophet; nonetheless his proposed "postmodern idea of wilderness" swims against the currents of our intellectual history and invites criticism from members of many disciplines. But Joseph Campbell readers should be able to hear, underneath Oelschlaeger's academic style, the faint heartbeat of an older wilderness mythos in his thesis. Copyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

great thank you

I don't like this book at all - it's way too philosophical and the author is too wordy. Instead of stating concise statements he draws his ideas out for pages. Not worth my time to read.

This book was purchased for school and it is incredibly dry. Has some interesting history about how the perception of nature changed over time, but it is tough to follow because it is so boring.

In this book Max Oelschlaeger tackles a massive subject with history, actually post-modern history (quite what postmodernism is, always remains unclear). In any case, the work is immense, traversing the (presumed) association of wilderness with Paleolithic hominids through to our contemporary approach to "wild nature". In doing so, Oelschlaeger covers a wide gamut of human activity in response to the idea of wilderness, including: Art, philosophy, science (in part), politics, religion (in a large part) and psychology (albeit fleetingly). There are some intellectual gems imbedded in the book but, as noted by other reviewers, you have to work hard for them. Very hard. I was determined to finish the book, which I did, but it took some will. This required effort was primarily a result of Oelschlaeger's writing style and my unfamiliarity of some of the disciplines involved in the work. That said, I think the following points were highlights of the book: As an idea, a book on wilderness stands alone and has not been repeated in as thorough effort as this. I could not find any other body of work so directly targeted at wilderness as this, in any literature source I know. That says several things; a) wilderness is not interesting to anyone else b) wilderness is not a big seller c) the topic is very esoteric d) the topic is very awkward for humanity and therefore conveniently neglected. Personally, I choose the last reason. The other significant highlight was the stimulus the book provided for looking at our modern world particularly the "benefit of juxtapositions" that is, the utility of comparing what we see, have and think now with what we used to see and have and think. This system of perception is mandatory for the "human project". However, (here it comes) there were, in my opinion, some omissions in the book. The book needed a glossary (however I got through with the help of Wikipedia) "it was written in the early 1990s so things could have been worse! Second, while I admire Oelschlaeger's historical approach to the subject, I think he could have taken a more enquiring approach to the topic rather than the descriptive and non-evidence based approach. For example, the question; what motivates humans toward images of the wilderness while at the same time away from the thought of isolation of wilderness? This is psychology and perhaps has much to do with Paleolithic conditioning (and selection toward reward/danger aversion behaviour). Evolutionary biology is touched on but not used extensively in the book, particularly resource competition. Similarly Psychology, there are many teasing hints at human brain function and myth creation for explaining phenomena but no development of a resolution. I also consider there was an underlying assumption in Oelschlaeger's thesis;

That nature is in some kind of balance and that we are somehow disturbing that balance. I take considerable objection to that assumption since there is absolutely no evidence that our world and the biota on it is in balance. At the very least one significant message that seemed to be omitted was; 'wilderness' is in short supply and getting shorter. No matter, it is an historical and philosophical work and Oelschlaeger is no fool with his traverse of religion's role in the wilderness idea (it's no friend). I think it is an important book that needs re-writing for the 21st century and beyond. Recommended, but take your time !

There is a lot to like in this book. As I'll discuss later in this review, some sections provide valuable summaries and critiques of various thinkers and streams of thought. Oelschlaeger is at his best when he examines individuals at depth, but the overall structure of the book is less satisfactory. The first two chapters summarize vastly: paleolithic man, early agricultural man, ancient and Judeo-Christian views of nature, and medieval views. Obviously the texts available to Oelschlaeger improve with time; as a result, so does the degree to which one can take his summaries seriously. His reconstruction of Paleolithic and archaic views of nature are just erudite speculation - - after all, how can he, or anyone else, really know how paleolithic man \*thought\* about nature? Oelschlaeger never makes clear why this review is important: should our views of wilderness be conditioned by how early man thought about nature? Do we need to recapture "primitive" understandings simply because they are more natural? Later on he briefly praises John Muir and ecofeminists - - amusing bedfellows, that - - for recapturing part of the Paleolithic, but it's not clear why that should be a Good Thing. Elsewhere he drops similar thoughts. Clearly Oelschlaeger sometimes seems to think something along the lines of needing to recover the Paleolithic, but he never says this, I don't think he really means it, and in any case he never confronts the issue directly. The next two chapters review modernism and its critics. Both kinds of summaries are fine. Oelschlaeger's strategy is to summarize a large number of thinkers, each of whom get 2-5 pages. More synthesis, and a more thematic development would have been better here. This book isn't really a philosophical text that is trying to understand the unity of (say) Spinoza's thought, but rather a critical overview of how people have viewed nature and wilderness. Themes, not individual thinkers, would have better made the points that he wants. The best chapters come in the middle of the book - - reviews of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold. Here Oelschlaeger finally has both enough text to work with, and enough space to develop each writer's overall thought. For me, these chapters also highlighted Oelschlaeger's failure to develop greater unity throughout the book. These three authors explore themes that we saw in the Paleolithic and ancient worlds, or in modernism and its critics, but

Oelschlaeger doesn't draw out many of the connections. That said, these are wonderful chapters on their own, taken simply for their own purposes. The chapter on Muir was the most impressive, making a case that Muir should be taken seriously as a developer of wilderness philosophy and not merely as a popularizer of others' ideas. The final pair of chapters explores wilderness poetry of Robinson Jeffers and Gary Snyder, and then summarizes contemporary philosophies of wilderness. The poetry chapter doesn't reach the quality of the Thoreau, Muir and Leopold chapters, perhaps because of the ways in which poetry differs from prose style. Or maybe it's just me. Oelschlaeger clearly seeks to contribute to contemporary philosophies of wilderness, as he does in chapter ten, which makes his review in chapter nine more important. Once again, however, he tends to move too fast - discussing authors and philosophical movements in 4-8 pages each. His own position consists more of allusions, and a la carte selections from the thoughts of others, not really a coherent alternative. Potential readers should be aware that this is very much an academic book, and most of it is not easy reading. He does define the jargon that he uses (say, resourcism) but there is rather a lot of it. Chapters on modernism or contemporary wilderness philosophy are denser than the chapters on Muir or the Paleolithic. Oelschlaeger does summarize key elements of each body of thought in a convenient table, so he's \*trying\* to make it easier on us.

Fantastic and in-depth book about deep ecology and the perspective of the wilderness. Can be a bit long at some parts however.

Oelschlaeger traces the thread of oneness with Nature from the Paleolithic to the present. This is not a book that provides a consistent final vision or synthesis. Beyond the complexity, there is unity. The book **MUST** be read from the beginning. Don't try dipping into it. Arthur Digbee expects the author to be developing his own viewpoint and then fails to find it. This is also more than a survey. The strength of the book is the **WHOLE THING**. What is seen is a similarity of the views of Nature of the "losers of history." That is, there has been a continual counterpoint to the Dominant Paradigm throughout recorded history. The dominant culture has always removed us from an living experience of oneness and replaced it with an immaterial Heaven. The reviews by Griffiths and Edwards are the best. There is a weakness in the treatment of the Middle Ages. I disagree that the Europeans of that age were orthodox Catholics. There was much "witchcraft" going on. Gnosticism and Alchemy were very much in vogue. For a better treatment, you might try Carolyn Merchant's *The Death of Nature*.

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