

Wild Imagination

A talk by Ed Zahniser to the Southern Regional Management Committee 2002 of the Appalachian Trail Conference, at Camp Cheerio, North Carolina, March 22, 2002

The original Appalachian Trail concept and the 1964 Wilderness Act are both founded on a wild imagination, a wild imagination rooted in the 1830s and 1840s. This wild imagination has been nurtured by fits and starts from the mid-19th century right up to today. You and I, your gathering here this weekend, we all stand on—and carry out our work for wilderness and wildness and protected natural areas today—we stand on this wild imagination. It is our roots as advocates of the experience of nature, of the more-than-human world.

Tomorrow night you will hear, from the Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition folks, a very up-to-date outplaying of our wild imagination, the idea of landscape-scale or regional protection of wildness in the midst of our highly urbanized, suburbanized, and exurbanized, post-Industrial, so-called Information Age. Our wild imagination is our roots. We are grounded in it. I hope you can feel it right now, a wild imagination right down there tingling in your toes. Or maybe that tingling results from all the hiking you did today!

Genetically speaking, as Paul Shepard wrote in essays and his posthumous book *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*, our very Earthly being as *Homo sapiens* is rooted in the raw materials that still evoke and provoke this wild imagination in us today. Wildness signals frantically from our DNA. It is for lack of regenerative contact with wildness, Bruce Wilshire writes in his book *Wild Hunger: The Primal Roots of Modern Addiction*, that we succumb to addictions. The case has been quite elaborately made that our entire way of life is an addictive system.

In his essay “Wilderness Is the Home of My Genome,” reprinted in his book *Traces of an Omnivore*, Paul Shepard argues that our basic genetic make-up formed in the hunter/gatherer/forager small groups of humans reaching back three million years to the great Ice Ages. Those are our roots accounting still for the great appeal of wildness.

At a joint meeting of the elders and deacons of the Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church that Bob Proudman and I both attend, our pastor Randall Tremba asked us to go around the circle and each tell about a formative experience we had had that contributed to why we were then sitting in that circle of our faith community. Without exception, everyone reported an experience they had out of doors, not in a house of worship. So you see how this wild imagination figures heavily even in faith experience.

Henry Thoreau wrote in the 1850s that every town or village should have its own wilderness of 500 or a thousand acres in its midst. Margaret Fuller, perhaps the greatest of the Transcendentalist thinkers, advocated preserving wild nature and the rights of American Indians as part of her advocacy of social reform. Margaret Fuller pioneered advocacy for the abolition of slavery, feminism, women getting the vote, educational reform, prison reform, rehabilitation of women prisoners, democratic government for Italy, whose cause she went to Italy and joined. In fact, Fuller’s 1830s reform agenda shows uncanny, one-to-one parallelism with the 1950s legislative agenda of Congressman and later Senator and vice president, Hubert Horatio Humphrey’s legislative agenda.

Humphrey’s agenda included the wilderness legislation that became the 1964 Wilderness Act. The Wilderness Act was just one important part of a legislative program also including the National Defense Education Loan Act, Civil Rights Act, and Voting Rights Act—what in fact became the Great Society program of President Lyndon B. Johnson. The Great Society program

largely was simply the fruition of Humphrey's 1950s legislative program. Wilderness and wildness, therefore, are not at the periphery of a great society, as holistically construed, but they are at its core, as necessity not luxury.

Talk about wild imagination! The Wilderness Act was not merely an eight-year struggle for a piece of legislation. It took more than 100 years of sustained wild imagination to achieve the creation of a National Wilderness Preservation System. Think of the years of struggle that went in to piecing together this 2,000-mile-long, wildly imaginative phenomenon so many now take for granted as the Appalachian Trail. So do not lose heart in your own good work! You are part of a great tradition, a collective imagination transcending our own mortal life spans. You partake of a multigenerational hope that can sustain us through the otherwise most disheartening times. You are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, a great cloud of witnesses that, I believe, goes before you as you go about your own work of preserving and protecting nature, wildness, the more-than-human world.

I would like to tell you about two wildly imaginative people who have inspired my life, Benton MacKaye and Ernest Oberholtzer. MacKaye is not a new name to you, certainly. Oberholtzer may be new to you. But he and MacKaye shared a scale of wild, imaginative vision that you may want to plug into for the sake of your work.

It was Benton MacKaye, as Wilderness Society governing council president, who wrote the letter in 1945 offering my father Howard Zahniser the job as executive secretary and editor of The Wilderness Society. My mother Alice Zahniser was pregnant with me, their fourth child. Benton MacKaye was very influential in wilderness thinking, with Bob Marshall's death in 1939, Robert Sterling Yard's death in 1945, and then Aldo Leopold's death in 1948.

In the 1920s MacKaye had helped found the discipline of "regional planning." He first conceived of an Appalachian Trail, in 1921—as a wilderness belt. As you and I both well know, MacKaye was by no means solely responsible for the trail, but without his expansive vision, we might well not be here tonight.

My sister Karen recalls that we kids always spoke of him by both names, Benton MacKaye. He didn't drive automobiles, and my father often brought him home to dinner at our home in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, D.C. My mother Alice would always try to get Benton to stay overnight, so we wouldn't have to drive him an hour down and back to the Cosmos Club, where he usually stayed when in Washington. Benton always refused: "I'll only stay when I can stay a sheet's worth, Alice." — Not just overnight, i.e.

Benton house-sat several sheets' worth for us during one of our summer vacations to the Adirondacks. This was before air conditioning. I was just a young kid. We got back home from vacation mid-day to find this arch-New Englander Benton beating our muggy mid-Atlantic heat in undershirt and boxer shorts. I ran and opened our full-sized refrigerator—a luxury we didn't have in our Adirondack cabin. Our refrigerator held one quart of milk and four oranges. That's it. Benton's was Henry Thoreau's own simplicity. Benton stood tall and thin in his skivvies against summer's then un-conditioned air.

A Stentorian raconteur, Harvard Class of 1900 and M.A. 1905 in forestry, Benton thought in tight dramatic scenes, even about forestry, labor, education, wilderness—sometimes all at once. It could make for quirky prose, considering that MacKaye worked off-and-on for your U.S. Forest Service and the Tennessee Valley Authority.

The stage and philosophy coursed through the entire clan MacKaye's blood. His father was an actor, stager of drama, and playwright. A brother was an accomplished philosopher. Benton once begged off the Governing Council of the Wilderness Society, but Bob Marshall

wouldn't let him go. Marshall knew the wilderness movement needed MacKaye's wild imagination. Benton served as honorary president for 25 years, until his death on my birthday in 1975.

The next time you visit ATC headquarters in Harpers Ferry, ask to see MacKaye's library. It is magical to browse the tomes that shaped such wild imaginings.

Wilderness and wildness imbued MacKaye's marvelous imagination. Before 1930, he prophesied the Interstate Highway System. He called it the "townless highway," that would go from point to point without reference to the towns between. You and I know them as Interstate Highways now.

In 1946 MacKaye and my father drafted proposed legislation for a "Federal Wildlands Project." Isn't that amazing? Drop the "Federal" and you have today's Wildlands Project, with its imaginative vision of a Yellowstone to Yukon wildness and the transboundary Sky Island wildness of the U.S. and Mexico. The Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition has like dreams for our own bioregion. True, we know a lot more now about things like conservation biology and ecosystem functions than MacKaye's day knew, but again, with Benton MacKaye, the vision was there. You are keepers of that far-reaching vision—of a wildness connected to the rural and urban.

Keeping that spectrum intact was the goal MacKaye called "habitability." His magnum opus on habitability, called *Geotechnics*, never found a publisher. I read the manuscript at the home of Paul and Grace Oehser, college friends of my father. Paul Oehser and my father were both charter members of the Wilderness Society. Paul was the chief of publications for the Smithsonian Institution. He and Benton's friend Lewis Mumford were working on getting Benton's book a publisher. If Oehser and Mumford couldn't find a publisher, no one would.

Wildness was necessity for MacKaye. His regional planning schemes meant to keep wilderness and wildness connected to city cores. His schemes would use wilderness and wildness to block what we now call suburban or exurban sprawl. MacKaye called it "metropolitan flow," or "the iron glacier."

We need to regroup MacKaye's philosophy with Aldo Leopold's land ethic thinking through our own wild imagination. Call this post-suburbanism. Call it true community. Call it the Wildlands Project. Call it the Network of Wildlands. Call it hope for protecting the Appalachian Trail from incursion, encroachment, and being flanked on either side by truck stops and high-performance auto race tracks.

Ernest Oberholtzer—known as Ober—was MacKaye's contemporary. Ober was born in 1884 and died in 1977. MacKaye died in 1975. Ober's wild imagination is largely responsible for the preservation of what are now Voyageurs National Park, Quetico Provincial Park in Canada, and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. His imagination was even wilder than that accounting shows. Originally, Ober advocated protecting by international treaty 14,500 square miles in the U.S. and Canada, the Quetico-Superior region. Ober's great scheme, beginning in 1924, three years after Benton MacKaye published his Appalachian Trail article, would have included protecting the traditional life ways of the area's Indians, whom Ober knew well.

Ober learned to speak Ojibway, and his biographer Joe Paddock says it is probable that Ober had been initiated as a medicine man by an Ojibway elder. On his death, a medicine bundle was found among Ober's things. The Ojibway called Ober "Atisokan," which means "story," which means what we might call "legend," because such story was the foundation of Ojibway culture. But "Atisokan" was a good name if only because Ober, like MacKaye, was a fantastic teller of stories. I got to shoot rapids with Ober in the Boundary Waters when I was 10 years old,

on a week-long canoe trip Ober took our family on in 1956. I sat on the bottom of the middle of the canoe. Gnome-like Ober, five feet, six inches tall, mostly stood up in the stern to read the rapids.

In 1912, with Ojibway Billy Magee as his companion, Ober canoed from west of Lake Winnipeg in Manitoba up the Sturgeon, Reindeer, and Cochrane rivers to Hearne Bay, and then east to Hudson Bay, and down past Churchill to York Factory and down the Hayes River and Lake Winnipeg to Grimli. This vast unmapped territory —600 miles north to south and 400 miles east to west—had not been explored by a non-Indian since Samuel Hearne in 1770. Their mutual friend Louis Hamel wrote to Ober saying Billy Magee would agree to go on his expedition. Hamel quoted Magee as saying, “Guess ready go end earth.”

Ober’s wild imagining that would make possible Voyageurs National Park, Quetico Provincial Park, and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area did not come easy. It began in 1924 with a fight against a proposal by a timber baron to turn the entire Rainy Lake Watershed—in the U.S. and Canada, that 14,500 square miles, larger than Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island combined—into a hydropower storage tank for industrial uses. Ober had no money and no other resources. The timber baron E.W. Backus was worth \$100 million and politically well connected. But Ober built and built, first a small coterie of cooperators, then supporters, and then a coalition. You know the drill! Eventually Ober drafted a comprehensive zoning plan—this was not entirely uninhabited territory—to optimize protection of the wilderness and natural values underlying the Indians’ traditional life. The dam fight essentially ended in 1930 when Congress passed the Shipstead-Nolan Act, the first federal legislation that “officially recognized and mandated wilderness values,” Ober’s biographer writes.

When the Wilderness Society was organized in the mid-1930s, Ober became a member of its governing board. He was the most adept outdoor cook with open wood fires I’ve ever known. With his reflector bake oven Ober threw together everything from biscuits to pineapple upside down cakes days away from civilization. Like most of the major wilderness advocates of that time, Ober was both a devotee of his bioregion and a citizen of the world. The one and a half acre island, Mallard Island, that was his home in Rainy Lake, Minnesota, was a marvelous place where Ober’s masterful violin playing could vie with loon calls to captivate your spirit. Such was Ober, Atisokan, Legend.

Benton MacKaye and Ernest Oberholtzer are just two greatly imaginative advocates among our great cloud of witnesses for wilderness and wildness. I urge you to reread their works and stories, to think anew about their lives and their vision so as to renew your own work.

Land law expert and Leopold scholar Eric T. Freyfogle has said that Congress created a National Wilderness Preservation System in 1964 but had no idea what to do with it. I think the work of the Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition, about which you will hear tomorrow night, is part of the beginnings of understanding what to do with the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Such work, of connecting wilderness and wildness wherever found, is smack dab in the middle of Benton MacKaye’s philosophy of habitability. Such work is at the core of MacKaye’s idea of keeping the full spectrum of urban, rural, and wild intimately connected to each other. I believe that such work also will be crucial to the survival of the Appalachian Trail as a protected natural area. Without such work the Appalachian Trail may well become like a biogeographic island archipelago until species by species, its wildness and diversity evaporate.

Eric Freyfogle’s book *Boundless People, Bounded Lands* shows how the organization of land jurisdictions in the United States makes an impossible scenario for dealing with the

ecological realities of how land works. Who knows this better than you? In Pennsylvania alone the Trail passes through more than 50 townships. It seems to me you have a great ally—for these jurisdictional problems—in the Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition and other groups with similar vision, including the Wildlands Project and the Wilderness Society's Network of Wildlands. Certainly, conscious interconnections of wildness hold special promise for protecting the Trail.

The Wilderness Act's statement of policy, Section 2 (a) says that "In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness."

Who better knows that triumvirate the Wilderness Act means to resist—increasing population, expanding settlement, and growing mechanization—than you? A 2,000-mile long, often ribbon's-width landscape, the Appalachian Trail threads a mind-boggling coming-together of the wild and the tame and must have more ecotone—more niche edge interface—per acre than any sizeable protected area in North America.

My father Howard Zahniser said we must always keep in mind that the essential character of wilderness is its wildness. I think this is the sense in which the great naturalist John Hay says that wilderness is not just designated areas but "the Earth's immortal genius." This is the sense in which Gary Snyder calls wilderness the "planetary intelligence," the whole overarching scheme of things.

The Koran of Islam says God is "as close as your jugular vein." We might say much the same of wildness. The scientist Lynn Margulis says there are more cells of other beings in and on your body than there are cells of your own. We not only inhabit the wild, in other words, but the wild inhabits us.

David Rains Wallace writes that "Wildness is not an Eden or Chaos that can be repealed by the extirpation of large wild animals or the removal of forest. It is a fundamental condition of the biosphere." "Wildness," Wallace writes, "is the workplace of the earth, civilization the playground We come into the world as wild things and go out the same way, no matter how many boxes of lead or concrete we sheathe about our bones So it is not enough to look back and admire wildness as our heritage, we must look forward to it as well."

Henry Thoreau traced the roots of the word *wilderness* to mean self-willed land. Conservation biologists today think Thoreau was right on: Wilderness is self-willed land, where *land*, as Aldo Leopold used the term, means the entire biota: land, air, water, flora, and fauna.

To preserve wilderness in perpetuity is to preserve that wildness, to retain the wildness that is its essence, the will of the land itself. My father felt this very strongly. By preserving wilderness, he wrote, we project into the eternity of the future some of that precious, unspoiled ecological inheritance that has come down to us out of the eternity of the past. Isn't that a wild thought—that working to preserve wilderness injects the eternal into the everyday? "Where do I sign up to be the missing link between two eternities?" You sign up right here. You already did sign up—when you signed on to help perpetuate the wild imagination of an Appalachian Trail.

Henry Thoreau meditated—as perhaps no one else has—on the necessity of wildness. In his essay "Walking," Thoreau inscribed the Zen koan-like rallying cry of conservation that ". . . in Wildness is the preservation of the World." And isn't it intriguing how Thoreau does not say we preserve wildness? Thoreau says *wildness* preserves the world? And for Thoreau, who read

French, German, Latin, and Greek, this word *world* is actually the Greek word *kosmos*, meaning not only world but also beauty, pattern, order. . . . in Wildness is the preservation of the World, Beauty, Pattern, Order. You can see here how thoroughly Thoreauvian Benton MacKaye's wild imagination was. In Wildness is the preservation of the World, Beauty, Pattern, Order, and—Benton MacKaye's wild imagination added—Habitability.

What will your wild imagination add to this great tradition? What will your wild imagination add to the legacy of this great cloud of witnesses who have gone before us and who go before us still? What will your wild imagination add to help project this great Appalachian Trail and its precious wildness into the eternity of the future?