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Viewpoint

Nature in the Wild: Shaped by Humans?

By Stephen Budiansky

Debates over environmental protection often center on whether to preserve land in its wild, "natural" state or to allow humans to use it for more than hiking. In a new book, Stephen Budiansky challenges this distinction. He argues that what seems natural is more artificial than we think. A senior writer for U.S. News & World Report, Budiansky has attended two PERC conferences.

If I were setting out to write a conventional nature essay in the mode of Thoreau and his countless imitators, I should begin by describing the walk I took early this morning across field and wood. How I rejoiced in the cry of the Canada geese overhead and the flash of the white tail of a fleeting deer; how the crackling of the frosted grass beneath my feet as I crossed a hollow put me in mind of the family of wild turkeys I had seen there early in the fall; how every pore of my body was open to the sweet beneficence of Nature's society unfettered by the artifices of many.

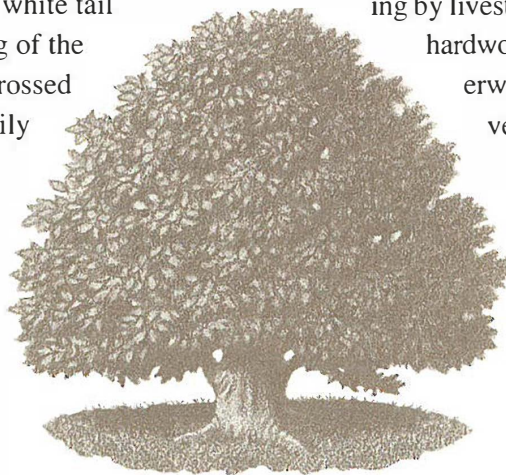
Yet every one of those stirring sights of nature's timeless

order was, in truth, nothing but the work of civilized man. The grasses in my field are aliens, timothy and bluegrass and red clover brought to America by seventeenth-century English settlers trying for a better hay crop. The sheep and horses and cattle in the field are alien imports too. But for their constant grazing, and for the annual visit of the haying machines, the open acres that stretch from my window to the copse at the bottom of the hill would in just a few years' time be choked with brambles and red cedars. But even that could hardly be counted a natural process; the return of woods to abandoned farm fields is not nature reclaiming her birthright but nature led only farther astray. Red cedars readily take over abandoned pastures today only because centuries of grazing

by livestock has unnaturally suppressed the hardwoods, such as oaks, that would otherwise outcompete the red cedars; the very abundance of red cedar today is an artifact of the dietary preferences of imported farm animals.

The woods down the hill are second growth on the land cut over at least once, probably several times, in the last 300 years. The Canada geese, which once migrated every

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Excerpted from *Nature's Keepers: The New Science of Nature Management* by Stephen Budiansky. Copyright © 1995 by Stephen Budiansky. Reprinted by permission of The Free Press, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc. This excerpt appeared in the September/October 1995 issue of the *American Enterprise*.

Nature in the Wild: Shaped by Humans?

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spring and fall, now stay year round in great flocks, grow fat and lazy on farmers' corn fields. On local golf courses and parks their abundant droppings have become a health hazard. The deer and turkey meanwhile thrive in the artificial patchwork of forest openings formed of cultivated and abandoned fields.

Wildlife biologists in Virginia estimate the state's deer population at 1 million, five times the number that existed here when Europeans first arrived.

If I set forth to look beyond my artificial view across my artificial fields to the artificial wood atop the Catoctin Mountains, I would find nothing but more fakery stretching in every direction. In Scotland, rare alpine birds nest on heather moors created and maintained by burning and sheep grazing. In the tropical rain forest of Central America, thousands of years of slashing and burning by corn-growing agriculturists have cut deep marks across lands that, in popular myth, are sacred monuments to biodiversity, the fragility of Spaceship Earth, the seamless web of life (excepting only, of course, human life). After 10,000 years of breaking the soil, after 100,000 years of setting fire to the forests and the plains, after a million years of chasing game, human influence is woven through even what to our eyes are the most pristine landscapes.

Such observations cut against the fashion of our times. We prefer to think of nature as a setting for soul-stirring contemplation of the infinite and unknowable, a cathedral to be entered with hushed tones and reverent thoughts. The nature lovers of our age jealously cling to an image of nature virginal and pure; they imagine an Arcadian wilderness where balance and harmony reign, beyond the defiling touch of

man. Open any popular nature book, magazine, tract, or fundraising letter, and you do not have to read far to find the phrase, "balance of nature," the notion that nature, left alone and freed from human influence, tends toward a state of harmony, balance, and beauty—and, conversely, that wherever man treads is trouble.

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"The ecological perspective begins with a view of the whole, an understanding of how the various parts of nature

interact in patterns that tend toward balance and persist over time," writes Vice President Al Gore in his book *Earth in the Balance*, whose very title invokes this notion. A mailing from the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental lobbying and litigation organization, reprints an interview with a Cree Indian, who is quoted as saying, "The earth was created in the way it was by the Creator, and changing it is unnatural and wrong."

A 42-acre forest of towering white pines in Cornwall, Connecticut was reduced to a heap of fallen timber by a hurricane in 1989. The 200-year-old trees, known as the Cathedral Pines,

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had stood 150 feet tall. After the storm, the Nature Conservancy, which had been given the forest in 1967 under the condition that the land be maintained

in "a natural state," promptly issued a press release explaining that the hurricane "was just another link in the continuous chain of events that is responsible for shaping and changing this forest," and announcing that it planned to allow the forest to continue to take its "natural course." With the single exception of agreeing to clear a 50-foot-wide firebreak around the perimeter, that is in fact what the managers have done.

Yet the Cathedral Pines' majestic stand was a pure artifact: not virgin forest at all, but second growth that sprung up on land cleared of hardwoods and then probably farmed for a time in the late eighteenth century by colonists. White pine stands were rare in New England before farmers began clearing fields: at the time the trees of the Cathedral Pines were seedlings, sprouting, most likely, in the grass of an abandoned cow pasture, Yale president Timothy Dwight wrote that all the pine woods of New England could fit into a single county.

So the "continuous chain" of events that had made the Cathedral Pines an object of admiration and the impassioned focus of more than a century of efforts to protect and preserve it were from the start artificial. Yet when a number of local officials and admirers suggested it might make sense to clear the fallen timbers and perhaps even replant the wood, environmental purists condemned the proponents for the crime of "anthropocentrism."

Scientists at the California Department of Parks and Recreation once advocated ripping out the eucalyptus trees from the states public parks on the grounds that they are exotic, non-native species. Opponents screamed. They liked the big trees. So, it turned out, did the butterflies and birds; 57 percent of the bird species in Angel Island State Park were found to frequent the eucalyptus groves, and 8 percent were found exclusively there. The western population of the monarch butterfly seems particularly partial to the trees, probably because they provide both shelter and food (in the form of nectar from the trees' flowers).

Of course monarch butterflies did once manage to get along without trees imported from Australia, but

what matters now is what will happen if those trees are removed. As scientist Walter Westman noted, it is not as if a mature forest of 50- to 100-year-old trees can be quickly replaced with native species of the same size. Even if the eucalyptus trees were removed, the return to the presumed "natural" state of vegetation at the parks is by no means assured. Of the 416 plant species identified on Angel Island, 53 are non-native. Maintaining the natural order is at the very minimum a full-time weeding job.

The invasion of exotic plants and animals is comparatively well known; America's environmental purists have learned to take no pleasure in the sweet

smell of honeysuckle, they remark disapprovingly of English sparrows, and kudzu, the catastrophically lush vine imported to control erosion on hillsides that has now taken over vast stretches of the South, is a national joke. Less well known is the sweeping effect that the artificial suppression of fire has had on the landscape. In the American Midwest, suppression of fire has let pines and oaks form dense stands on what were once open savannas.

Where, in the mid-nineteenth century, as few as four trees per acre stood amid prairies of tall grasses and forbs, a hundred years later stand dense forests with unbroken canopies. To literally let nature "take her course" is not one of the options any longer.

The irony is that to have nature be "natural" requires constant human intrusion. Restoration projects have been remarkably successful in reconstructing and maintaining native savannas and prairies through the use of clearcutting followed by regular, deliberate burning. The artificial turns out to be more "natural" than the natural. No matter what we choose to do, nature is being shaped by man.

