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Preservation or Conservation: Landscape Photography’s Role in Idealizing and Destroying the American Wilderness

Sarah Messenger

Landscape photography hinders conservation by equating the value of landscape with aesthetic beauty and spectacle. While landscape photography often garners support for the creation and appreciation of national parks, it idealizes pristine and untouched wilderness. Conservation is not about preserving vast swaths of untamed land while destroying other areas. Ultimately, conservation is about developing sustainable agriculture and land-use techniques, which are far less photogenic.

Landscape photography is all about aesthetic. We, as viewers, are drawn to scenes of “wilderness,” untamed, uncivilized, pristine areas. The idealization of wilderness is in part due to the works of two great landscape photographers, Ansel Adams and Carleton Watkins.



Figure 1: Ansel Adams, *Monolith, the Face of Half Dome* 1927.

Ansel Adams may be the best known landscape photographer of the twentieth century. However, he is especially guilty of popularizing a wilderness aesthetic through his depictions of the sublime. The sublime in photography is categorized as the depiction of formless and uplifting shapes that produce feelings of awe and terror (Giblett, “American Wilderness” 69-70). This effect is obvious in Adams’ work. Take for example one of his most famous pieces, *Monolith, the Face of Half Dome* (Fig.1). In the photograph, Half Dome soars upward towering above everything else. The shadows on the face of the rock add to the feeling of power and awe. *Monolith* depicts the landscape as powerful, unchanging, and pristine. Adams chose to photograph landscapes that convey the sublime aspect of nature. He almost exclusively shot mountains and clouds.

Very few images of wetlands or trees or smaller mundane scenes exist. Adams’ photographs convey a breathtaking vision of nature. Dramatic canyons and soaring mountains are aesthetically appealing to viewer, making his work very popular. But his work with the sublime also idealizes the idea of “wilderness” in the minds of his audience.

The sublime in landscape photography reflects a reverence for pristine and untouched wilderness. The picturesque sublime existed long before Adams. It originates in nineteenth century European and American painting. This aesthetic was premised on an identification between a mythical Eden and the American landscape” (Giblett “American Wilderness,” 77). The link between the American West and pristine, almost paradise-like wilderness is deeply ingrained. Adams himself shared this belief. As a young boy, Adams received a copy of James M. Hutchings’s book *In the Heart of the Sierras*. The book tells of Hutchings’ travels through the Yosemite Valley. Adams was so inspired by the adventures of Hutchings that he begged his family to visit Yosemite on vacation (Spaulding, 216). The romanticized idea of wilderness

pulled on Adams even before he began his life as a photographer. Thus, Adams' photographs of unspoiled wilderness, "are not true to fact, but faithful to Ansel's reverential ideal of nature and of a pure, unspoiled America" (Alinder qtd. Giblett "American Wilderness," 73).



Figure 2: Carleton Watkins, *Half Dome Yosemite* 1865-66.

Watkins' appeals to the feeling of serenity. But, like Adams' *Monolith*, Watkins' image depicts an untouched landscape, almost Eden-like in its peaceful quality. Just like the sublime, the picturesque idealizes the wilderness.

Both Watkins and Adams work fixed in the public's mind the vision of pristine landscape and untouched wilderness. These scenes make for stunning photographs because the landscape itself is so dramatic and beautiful. However, argues Giblett, "Representing the natural environment as an aesthetic object does not promote environmental sustainability." These images "create unrealistic expectations of aesthetically pleasing or aestheticized landscapes" ("Photography and Conservation," 227). The works of Watkins and Adams did lead to the creation and popularizing of America's national parks. However, ultimately the photographs of these two great artists hindered conservation more than they helped.

It is worth noting that Adams and Watkins are not totally at fault for the idealization of the wilderness. While they are both best known for their more dramatic works, both photographers did not limit their work to soaring visions of dramatic landscapes. Adams photographed objects such as rocks and trees, not just mountains. What is more, both photographers were motivated by a genuine love of nature. The American public already held an idealized vision of the West and of the wilderness. This myth is exemplified by Turner's Frontier Thesis which fueled American minds with ideas of "unspoiled" lands in the west or even manifest destiny (Bright 61). Americans had been idealizing nature, and especially the West, as a promised land of natural beauty, and untouched wilderness, almost since the settling of the continent. Through their photography, Adams and Watkins, simply solidified this myth in the minds of a new generation of Americans. In combination with a pre-existing myth of the wilderness in the public's mind, the works of Adams and Watkins create a very narrow definition of wilderness and conservation.

There can be no doubt that the photographs of Ansel Adams and Carleton Watkins were instrumental in the development of the national parks system as it exists today. The introduction

American photographer Carleton Watkins' photographs idealize the "wilderness" in their portrayal of the "picturesque" in landscape photography. The picturesque is categorized as presenting, "well-formed depictions of serene scenery and produces feelings of pleasure" (Giblett "American Wilderness" 70). This aesthetic is visible in Watkins photographs of Half Dome (Fig. 2). The symmetry of the mountain rising up in the distance framed by the trees on the river bank evoke feelings

of peace and contentment. While Adams' version of the mountain evokes feelings of power and awe

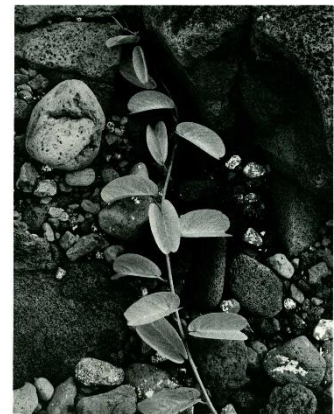


Figure 3: Ansel Adams, *Vine and Rock, Island of Hawaii*, 1948. An example of a "mundane" photograph by Adams

to a collection of Watkins photos in *California History* credits Watkins photographs for providing “compelling evidence that the American wilderness was a national treasure, portions of which deserved to be preserved in their natural state” (211). In his autobiography, Adams himself, acknowledges that Watkins photographs “had great positive effects on the efforts that made Yosemite Valley a state park in 1864” (qtd Giblett “American Wilderness,” 75). And, it was in part due to the wide distribution of Watkins photographs that Congress declared Yosemite to be a national park in 1890 paving the way for the creation of the national parks system (“California History,” 211). Adams also contributed to the movement. Historian Jonathan Spaulding credits Ansel Adams with drawing the public to the national parks and defining their meaning, “more than any other individual in this century” (Spaulding, 615).

Conservationist John Muir glowingly iterates the value of the national parks writing, “Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wilderness is necessary; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life” (Muir, 1). The national parks, without a doubt, serve a purpose in modern society. But they create a narrow scope of what conservation is and what land deserves to be conserved. Even Muir romanticizes the wilderness by describing it as a fountain of life. He emphasizes the need of ‘over-civilized’ people to seek out the wild which is defined as untouched landscapes such like the ones found in Adams’ and Watkins’ photographs. “The national park,” writes Giblett, “is a landscape preserve, rather than a conservation reserve. It is usually set aside for aesthetic reasons” (“American Wilderness,” 74). This is the drawback to the idealization of the wild created by landscape photography. In the words of the critic Weber:

Adams was neglecting nature in its humdrum, mundane and physically demanding aspects, including the stuff of work and everyday life. Adams thereby ‘helped to define the emerging environmentalist movement’ generally, but specifically as sanctuarist, as conserving special, sublime places of recreation and visual consumption, rather than as caring for all places of life and work imbued with sacrality” (qtd. Giblett “American Wilderness,” 72)

The type of conservation Adams and Watkins inspired was the protection of swaths of land in pristine “wild” condition. The critical flaw in this strategy, however, is the wilderness no longer exists.

The destruction of the wilderness is two-fold. The rise of eco-tourism means that even so called “wilderness,” such as the national parks, has become civilized. And second, the existence of reserves acts as justification for the destruction of other landscapes. Because the scope of conservation defined by landscape photography is so narrow, ordinary, less photogenic areas, are being destroyed. The combination of these two factors means that, in reality, there are no areas of untouched natural wilderness left in America.

Landscape photography is not the only visual medium to popularize ideas of the wilderness. Popular movies, such as *Indian Jones*, and programming, such as *Planet Earth*, idealize the adventure and found in the American West, the South American Jungle, even the Antarctic Circle (Young, 361). The result is the booming industry of ecotourism.

Eco-tourism is nothing new to the national parks. In fact, “establishment of national parks might not have been possible without the tourist industry” (Ansson, 4). When Yellowstone, the nation’s first park, was established in 1872 some of the park’s largest supporters were the rail barons who saw the establishment of Yellowstone as an opportunity to make a huge profit transporting tourists from the east coast (Ansson 4). The relationship between the tourist industry

and the national parks has existed ever since. Today, the national parks are drastically overcrowded. More than four million visitors come to Yosemite every year taking a toll on the landscape. In order to support the huge number of visitors the parks have undergone a huge amount of development. There are over 1,100 buildings in Yosemite. Campgrounds, lodges, concession stands, roads and other infrastructure has gone up (National Parks Service). The national parks, meant to be vast stretches of untouched wilderness, now face air pollution as bad as that found in Los Angeles (Ansson, 12). Additionally, as the number of visitors increases, the gateway communities situated just outside of the parks have expanded to serve the recreational needs of tourists. These communities often take advantage of the tourist industry by developing casinos, resorts, theme parks and other attractions. For example in Cedar City Utah, which lies just outside of Zion National Park, there are plans to build a 20,000 acre airport, a theme park and a commerce center (Ansson, 14). In reality, the wilderness photographed by Ansel Adams and Carleton Watkins can no longer be found in the national parks.

Americans do not just go to the national parks to find the wilderness. The jungles of Central America have become increasingly popular tourist destinations over the last decade. Costa-Rica alone brings in millions of dollars every year through eco-tourism which is set to become the nation's second largest industry (Young 362). The influx of tourists and foreign money has enabled the expansion of Costa Rica's national parks system which now include ten percent of the country's land (Young 362). However, with the tourists comes the construction of hotels, airports, roads, and other development needed to support the vast number of visitors. The parts of Costa Rica's forest that are not set aside in national parks are falling victim to clear cutting to make way for cattle ranching and other agricultural uses (Young, 362). As the



Figure 4: Arthur Rothstein, Car Chased by Black Blizzard. 1936.

wilderness disappears from the United States, over-civilized Americans must go further and further afield to find the wilderness. Wherever they go, they bring the same misplaced idealization of aesthetically pleasing landscapes with them. The result is that almost every place on earth is accessible. Even the great reserves of "wild" and "pristine" land have been commercialized. The wilderness simply no longer exists.

A further problem with the definition of conservation set out by the work of Adams and Watkins is that only "photogenic" landscapes are deemed worthy of conservation. During the period in which the national parks were being created and commercialized, other American landscapes were

being destroyed. Agriculture especially takes a toll. In 1995, twenty-five percent of American croplands were eroding faster than they could be replenished (Davidson, 20). Agriculture is also responsible for the pollution of 160,000 miles of waterways in this country (Davidson, 68). The destruction of the land comes with disastrous consequences illustrated by catastrophes such as the American Dust Bowl in the 1930s. The droughts, dust storms, clogged waterways, and soil erosion had devastating effects on the farmers of the Great Plains. The environmental disaster of the Dust Bowl could have been avoided through good farming practices, crop rotation, and addressing soil erosion problems. However, "in contrast to the national response to other environmental problems... the response by law-makers to agricultural pollution has been cautious and exploratory" (Davidson, 20). While the creation of the national parks was widely supported, the value of treasuring and caring for more mundane landscapes is not always recognized. Even during disasters such as the Dust Bowl, photography from the era focuses on

the human toll, instead of the environmental damage. The most famous image from the period, *Woman with Children in a Tent* by Dorothy Lange (Fig.4) shows none of the landscape and focuses entirely on the human cost of the Dust Bowl. Even photographs that do include the landscape, such as Arthur Rothstein's *Car Chased by Black Blizzard* (Fig. 3), focus on the landscape only in relation to human activity not the damage done to the land itself.

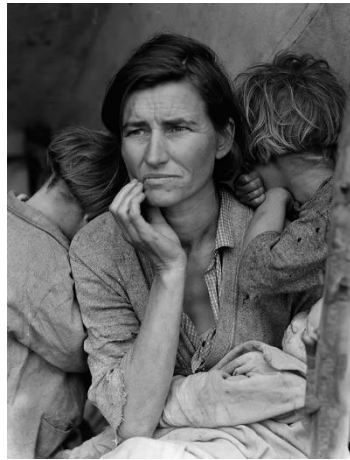


Figure 5: Dorothy Lange, *Woman with Children in a Tent*. 1936

The destruction of less photogenic landscapes has continued into the present day. During the nuclear age vast areas of the West, not far from some of the nation's most beloved national parks, were used to test nuclear bombs. Though the land used by the military lies close to several national parks, these landscapes were deemed disposable. The destruction of great parts of the American West was tolerated because the government had already set aside other vast expanses of "wilderness." As critic Rod Giblett puts it:

With Adams's photographs, its national parks and wilderness, America could have its conservationist cake and eat its nature cake as well. In other words, it could conserve 'vast tracts of wilderness' whilst ruthlessly exploiting nature everywhere else. It *preserved*, painted and photographed nature in Yosemite National Park and at about the same time bombed it just over the Sierra Nevada mountain range in the Nevada Test Site in about the same latitude (Giblett 'America', 73).

In reality the future of conservation is not preserving vast areas of land in its wild state while destroying everywhere else. The fact is that "most land is subjugated to some sort of human interference, and the goal for conservation is to preserve as much biodiversity as possible in landscapes that include mosaics of different types of land use" (Vandermeer et al, 1527). The future of conservation lies in developing sustainable land use and agriculture practices. It is naïve to believe that there is "wild land" and "agriculture land." The future of conservation lies in developing land use strategies that are mutually beneficial to both the land and the people who rely on it.

In response to environmental crisis such as the Dust Bowl, farm policy in America is starting to reflect this attitude towards conservation. In the 1930s the Soil Conservation Service (SCS) was established to develop methods of protecting farming soil from erosion (Davidson, 21). Initially the SCS was quite effective. Through subsidies the department successfully implement planting on the contour, a technique that greatly reduces soil erosion (Davidson, 21). Crop rotation is one of the most important ways land can be conserved in this country. Crop rotation allows farmers to use less herbicide because crop specific weeds are displaced and never allowed to establish thriving populations. Additionally, by alternating crops, the nutrients in the soil can be replenished (Davidson, 21). Unfortunately, in the decades after the Dust Bowl the SCS main objective shifted from sustainability to increasing yields. As the department lost funding, subsidies for crop rotation and other sustainable practices disappeared. Instead, money went to developing techniques to increase farmers' productivity (Davidson, 21). The SCS, like many government farming policies is under the impression that sustainable farming practices reduce crop yield. In actuality, "there is accumulating evidence that organic farming can produce as much, if not more in some cases, as conventional agriculture (Vandermeer et al, 1257). If managed properly, there are ways of using the land that encourages industry and conservation. A

land use study in Great Britain found that “there are some regions for which the protection of biodiversity and the conservation of carbon stocks can be achieved in the same locations” (Moilanen et al, 1420). Conservation does not require that areas be set apart to be preserved in their natural state. Instead, using great forethought and planning, a system of land use that establishes a balance “between maintaining food security, making space for further housing and industrial needs, conserving ecosystem carbon, and protecting wildlife” (Moilanen et al, 1425) needs to be established.

Photography can play a role in this new model of conservation. A new type of “conservation photography” could assist in broadening the definition of what land deserves to be conserved. Photographs that glamorize people interacting with their environment in a positive way or highlighted the beauty in a symbiotic relationship between farming and wildlife could “begin exploring, documenting and developing environmental sustainability by showcasing communities working the land in ways that conserve or rehabilitate biodiversity” (Giblett “Photography and Conservation,” 228). The works of Richard Misrach are an example of how photography can play a positive role in conservation. Misrach’s works focus on desolate, eerie, and often scarred landscapes providing a stark contrast to the pristine wilderness shots of Adams and Watkins. Misrach has criticized Adams’ photographs for “perpetuating a myth that keeps people from looking at the truth about what we have done to the wilderness” (qtd, Chianese, 65). Though Misrach does not consider himself a conservationist, his photography portrays a truer vision of nature and the impact of civilization on the wild. His photograph “Abandoned Trailer Home” (Fig 6) is a perfect example of the type of photography that may help conservation. The banks of the river are coated in synthetic debris.



Figure 6: Richard Misch, Abandoned Trailer Home, Mississippi River, near Dow Chemical Plant, Plaquemine, Louisiana. 1998.

Everywhere, the destructive impact of humans on nature is evident. The photograph certainly does not evoke ideas of “wilderness.” However, Misrach’s image is also more faithful to reality. All land in America has been impacted and altered by humans. In truth, the wilderness no longer exists. Instead of idealizing untouched and spectacular landscapes, Misrach brings to light the damage people are wreaking on the land. Changing focus from

idealized wilderness to more realistic landscapes is one way photography may be able to help conservation efforts.

By idealizing the idea of wilderness, landscape photography deems only spectacular landscapes to be worthy of conservation. In order to achieve true symbiosis between humans and the environment the myth of the wilderness needs to be dispelled and all lands, even the seemingly mundane ones, must be valued and protected.

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