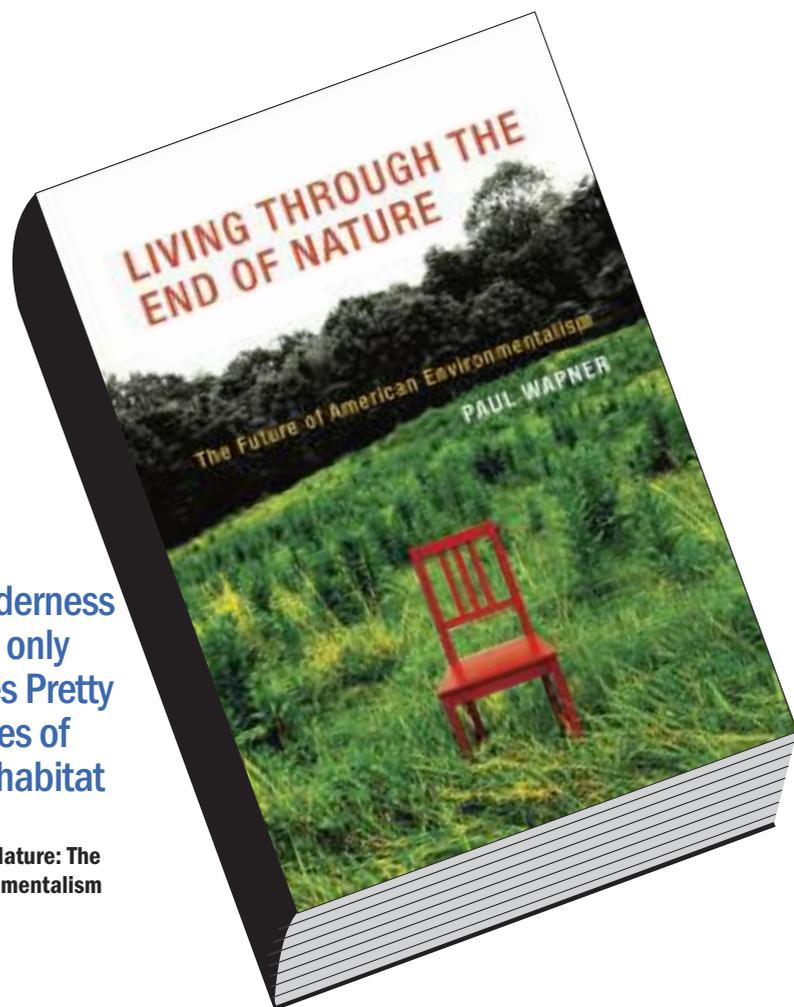


# THE BOOK OF THE WEEK



Is the pristine wilderness extinct – or was it only ever a myth? Jules Pretty on the dichotomies of humans and our habitat

**Living Through the End of Nature: The Future of American Environmentalism**  
By Paul Wapner  
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Last week, I stood at my back door as dusk crept across the garden, and I listened in wonder as a small reddish-brown bird sang to the heavens. It had just made a dramatic journey from West Africa, across the Sahara, up through southern Europe, through the volcanic ash cloud no less, to establish a territory here, in a highly managed space. Its rich liquid song, mixed with gurgles, whistles, drums and chuckles, says one thing: nightingale. The potent symbol of so much culture, the national bird of Iran, the wartime hero of Eric Maschwitz, Manning Sherwin and Jack Strachey's romantic song about Berkeley Square, and clearly wild. Part of nature. And yet, here in a garden.

So – look at the birds in your garden. Are they wild? Do you feed them, put up nest boxes and tend the shrubs and trees to encourage them? Push hard at some of the words we use to

describe our world, such as “nature”, “wild” and “wilderness”, and you find that they are not always so clear.

In *Living Through the End of Nature*, Paul Wapner expertly picks up a theme set out more than 20 years ago by Bill McKibben, the Adirondack writer and environmentalist. McKibben's concern was that we humans had so changed the world that there was nothing left we could really call nature. He worried that climate change would, well, change everything. But he was concerned, too, about the minor incursions of our industrialised world. On a tranquil lake close to his home, motorboats and their attendant waterskiers had started to appear.

“It is not the danger, or even the blue smoke on the lake. It is that the motorboats get in your mind,” McKibben mused. “You're forced to think, not feel – to think of human society and of people. The lake is utterly different on these days.”

McKibben thus suggested that we may be living at the end of nature: “the moment when the essential character of the world we've known...is changing”.

Here, Wapner begins by charting the rise of American environmentalism and the polarised core of green politics. In order to protect that which is wild, we have had to draw borders, establish thresholds and develop dichotomies. The most persistent dichotomy of all is that between the wild and the humans, between nature and culture. And this way of looking at ourselves and the world around us has been hugely influential.

When the world's first national park was established in 1872 at Yellowstone and the land was protected, few people worried that the Crow and Shoshone people had to be driven out of their homelands by the US Army, which then had to manage the park for the next 44 years.

There are now some 30,000

protected areas worldwide, covering 13 million sq km. Half of this area is strictly protected, with no humans permitted except as visitors. One legitimate additional question over protected areas persists: has this separation between the protected and (by definition) the not-protected resulted in greater damage to nature, biodiversity and environments everywhere else? In short, has the building of barriers been self-defeating? As “Earth scholar” Thomas Berry observed: “We now in large measure determine the earth process that once determined us.”

Indeed, in many ways, the use of the term “the end of nature” is itself a false construct. Nature has never been immune to human influence. Most ecosystems have been shaped by human action: some by deliberate management to increase certain valued resources, and lately many more by the side effects of pollution, waste and over-consumption.

Moreover, the positive evidence of the intertwining of culture and nature is widespread. In the lower Amazon, smallholder farmers enrich the forests with desirable fruit, timber and medicinal trees, often broadcasting seeds when cutting timber. In dryland Kenya, *Acacia tortilis* tree recruitment occurs on the sites of abandoned pastoralist corrals that are rich in organic matter and nutrients from penned livestock. Acacia seedpods are a favoured fodder, and some pass through the animals to then germinate in the next season. The result is circular woodlands of dense acacia.

Burning, too, is a widespread management practice on many continents. Australian Aborigines call it “firestick farming”, and as distinguished Australian author Deborah Bird Rose has written, they have long used fire to “make the country happy” and to keep it “clean”. The observation of smoke is still taken by Aborigines to be a sign that their country is healthy. Burning was also common in North America, helping to create the parkland-type environments of Yosemite and Vancouver Island, and was widely used by indigenous peoples of the plains to increase herd size on the prairies.

In this insightful and well-structured book, Wapner points clearly to the dilemmas and difficulties in modern environmentalism. To survive and succeed, it

has had to draw boundaries between good and evil, right and wrong, and humans and nature. Yet it is these very borders that have led to polarised dreams of naturalism and mastery. The truth is that there is no such thing as a single environmentalist movement – it is highly variegated. It will have to find a way into, as Wapner puts it, a “postnature age”.

What this will require is throwing away those unhelpful binary categories: pro- or anti-wildlife, organic or conventional, large or small farm, nature or

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culture, economy or environment. They do not work well enough. But many will see the resulting ambiguity as less than virtuous. In many ways, environmentalism has been scared to advertise its own uncertainty.

On this matter, Wapner is blunt, stating that “all of us live contradictions”. It is just that we have learned to be good at hiding them: “We love our woods and our iPod.” We are careful to eat certain sorts of food, and then we choose to drive a car. The trick is going to be synthesis – both-and rather than either-or. If you aren't gloomy in this world, Wapner observes, you haven't been paying attention. But a new environmentalism is going to need to build sustainable cities, grow our food with sensitivity to the environ-

ment, generate energy with no side effects, invest in mass transit, and find ways to live with and protect those species that stare over their own precipices.

And the “how” of the matter? It will not be easy. Wildness has come to mean “the other”, the non-human. Yet it is really about relationships. The most meaningful things to us are connections – with other people, with nature (which we will still see as “not us”) and with places. These relationships are essential to what it is to be human, and they can lead, says Wapner, to a stewardship mentality that “cultivates a human-nature world toward health and sustainability”.

But wildness is also about deep mysteries, the unknown and unknowable, disquieting moments, vigilance and inclusion. The new environmentalism will be about middle paths that are not merely polite – it will need to get things done, but equally it will be cleverly inclusive.

Poor Cassandra was given the power to foretell the future, but was then punished with a curse that ensured that no one would believe her. Today, says Wapner, nature is speaking rather loudly. So too was my nightingale, whose silent, breathless passages were almost as persuasive as the song itself.

Jules Pretty is professor of environment and society, University of Essex. He is author of *The Earth Only Endures: On Reconnecting with Nature and Our Place In It* (2007), and co-author of *Nature and Culture: Rebuilding Lost Connections* (in press).

THE AUTHOR