

# UNCOMMON GROUND

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*Rethinking  
the Human Place  
in Nature*



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# “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?”: Work and Nature

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IN FORKS, WASHINGTON, A LOGGING TOWN BADLY CRIPPLED BY BOTH OVER-cutting and the spotted owl controversy, you can buy a bumper sticker that reads “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?”<sup>1</sup> It is an interesting insult, and one that poses some equally interesting questions. How is it that environmentalism seems opposed to work? And how is it that work has come to play such a small role in American environmentalism?

Modern environmentalists often take one of two equally problematic positions toward work. Most equate productive work in nature with destruction. They ignore the ways that work itself is a means of knowing nature while celebrating the virtues of play and recreation in nature. A smaller group takes a second position: certain kinds of archaic work, most typically the farming of peasants, provides a way of knowing nature. Whereas mainstream environmentalism creates a popular imagery that often harshly condemns all work in nature, this second group is apt to sentimentalize certain kinds of farming and argue that work on the land creates a connection to place that will protect nature itself. Arguments that physical labor on the land establishes an attachment that protects the earth from harm have, however, a great deal of history against them.

There are, of course, numerous thoughtful environmentalists who recognize fruitful connections between modern work and nature, but they operate within a larger culture that encourages a divorce between the two. Too often the environmental movement mobilizes words and images that widen the gulf. We need to reexamine the connections between work and nature.

They form perhaps the most critical elements in our current environmental crisis. The attitudes of most Americans toward work indicate fundamental problems with how we conceive of the natural world and our place in it. By failing to examine and claim work within nature, environmentalists have ceded to the so-called wise-use movement valuable cultural terrain. The loss of natural terrain can only follow. The wise-use movement confuses real work with invented property rights. It perverts the legitimate concerns of rural people with maintaining ways of life and getting decent returns on their labor into the special "right" of large property holders and corporations to hold the natural world and the public good hostage to their economic gain. As long as environmentalism refuses to engage questions of modern work and labor, wise use will prosper and our children, in the end, will suffer.

There is no avoiding questions of work and nature. Most people spend their lives in work, and long centuries of human labor have left indelible marks on the natural world. From pole to pole, herders, farmers, hunters, and industrial workers have deeply influenced the natural world, so virtually no place is without evidence of its alteration by human labor. Work that has changed nature has simultaneously produced much of our knowledge of nature. Humans have known nature by digging in the earth, planting seeds, and harvesting plants. They have known nature by feeling heat and cold, sweating as they went up hills, sinking into mud. They have known nature by shaping wood and stone, by living with animals, nurturing them, and killing them. Humans have matched their energy against the energy of flowing water and wind. They have known distance as more than an abstraction because of the physical energy they expended moving through space. They have tugged, pulled, carried, and walked, or they have harnessed the energy of animals, water, and wind to do these things for them. They have achieved a bodily knowledge of the natural world.

Modern environmentalism lacks an adequate consideration of this work. Most environmentalists disdain and distrust those who most obviously work in nature. Environmentalists have come to associate work—particularly heavy bodily labor, blue-collar work—with environmental degradation. This is true whether the work is in the woods, on the sea, in a refinery, in a chemical plant, in a pulp mill, or in a farmer's field or a rancher's pasture. Environmentalists usually imagine that when people who make things finish their day's work, nature is the poorer for it. Nature seems safest when shielded from human labor.

This distrust of work, particularly of hard physical labor, contributes to a larger tendency to define humans as being outside of nature and to frame environmental issues so that the choice seems to be between humans and nature. "World War III," Andy Kerr of the Oregon Natural Resources Council likes to say, "is the war against the environment. The bad news is, the humans are winning."<sup>2</sup> The human weapon in Kerr's war is work. It is

of course, also work, but they usually do not do hard physical labor, and they often fail to think very deeply about their own work and its relation to nature.

Like Kerr, most Americans celebrate nature as the world of original things. And nature may indeed be the world we have not made—the world of plants, animals, trees, and mountains—but the boundaries between this world of nature and the world of artifice, the world of things we have made, are no longer very clear. Are the cows and crops we breed, the fields we cultivate, the genes we splice natural or unnatural? Are they nature or artifice? We seek the purity of our absence, but everywhere we find our own fingerprints. It is ultimately our own bodies and our labor that blur the boundaries between the artificial and the natural. Even now we tamper with the genetic stuff of our own and other creatures' bodies, altering the design of species. We cannot come to terms with nature without coming to terms with our own work, our own bodies, our own bodily labor.

But in current formulations of human relations with nature there is little room for such a reconciliation. Nature has become an arena for human play and leisure. Saving an old-growth forest or creating a wilderness area is certainly a victory for some of the creatures that live in these places, but it is just as certainly a victory for backpackers and a defeat for loggers. It is a victory for leisure and a defeat for work.

Work and play are linked, but the differences matter. Both our work and our play, as Elaine Scarry has written, involve an extension of our sentient bodies out into the external world. Our tools, the products of our work, become extensions of ourselves. Our clothes extend our skins; our hammers extend our hands. Extending our bodies into the world in this manner changes the world, but the changes are far more obvious in our work than in our play. A logger's tools extend his body into trees so that he knows how the texture of their wood and bark differs and varies, how they smell and fall. The price of his knowledge is the death of a tree.<sup>3</sup>

Environmentalists so often seem self-righteous, privileged, and arrogant because they so readily consent to identifying nature with play and making it by definition a place where leisured humans come only to visit and not to work, stay, or live. Thus environmentalists have much to say about nature and play and little to say about humans and work. And if the world were actually so cleanly divided between the domains of work and play, humans and nature, there would be no problem. Then environmentalists could patrol the borders and keep the categories clear. But the dualisms fail to hold; the boundaries are not so clear. And so environmentalists can seem an ecological Immigration and Naturalization Service, border agents in a socially dubious, morally ambiguous, and ultimately hopeless cause.

I have phrased this issue so harshly not because I oppose environmentalism (indeed, I consider myself an environmentalist) but precisely because I think environmentalism must be a basic element in any coherent attempt

cans at the end of the century. Environmentalists must come to terms with work because its effects are so widespread and because work itself offers both a fundamental way of knowing nature and perhaps our deepest connection with the natural world. If the issue of work is left to the enemies of environmentalism, to movements such as wise use, with its single-minded devotion to propertied interests, then work will simply be reified into property and property rights. If environmentalists segregate work from nature, if they create a set of dualisms where work can only mean the absence of nature and nature can only mean human leisure, then both humans and non-humans will ultimately be the poorer. For without an ability to recognize the connections between work and nature, environmentalists will eventually reach a point where they seem trivial and extraneous and their issues politically expendable.

Given the tendency of environmentalists to exaggerate boundaries, to make humans and nature opposing sides in a bitter struggle, any attempt to stress the importance of work needs to begin by blurring the boundaries and stressing human connections with nature. Work once bore the burden of connecting us with nature. In shifting much of this burden onto the various forms of play that take us back into nature, Americans have shifted the burden to leisure. And play cannot bear the weight. Work entails an embodiment, an interaction with the world, that is far more intense than play. We work to live. We cannot stop. But play, which can be as sensuous as work, does not so fully submerge us in the world. At play we can stop and start.<sup>4</sup> A game unfinished ultimately means nothing. There is nothing essential lost when recreation is broken off or forgone. Work left unfinished has consequences.

It is no accident, then, that the play we feel brings us closest to nature is play that mimics work. Our play in nature is often itself a masked form of bodily labor. Environmentalists like myself are most aware of nature when we backpack, climb, and ski. Then we are acutely aware of our bodies. The labor of our bodies tells us the texture of snow and rock and dirt. We feel the grade of the incline. We know and care about weather. We are acutely conscious of our surroundings; we need to read the landscape to find water and shelter. We know where the ground is soft or hard. We (some of us better than others) know the habits of fish because we seek to kill and eat them. The most intense moments of our play in nature come when it seems to matter as much as work: when the handhold in the rock matters; when we are four days from the trailhead and short on food; when whitewater could wreck a craft. It is no wonder that the risks we take in nature become more extreme. We try to make play matter as if it were work, as if our lives depended on it. We try to know through play what workers in the woods, fields, and waters know through work.

This confusion of work and play, the segregation of nature from real work, and the denigration of modern labor are complicated phenomena.

many Americans. The first is that the original human relation with nature was one of leisure and that the first white men in North America glimpsed and briefly shared that relation. The second (not wholly reconcilable with the first) is that the snake in the garden was the machine. It tempted humans away from whatever benign possibilities work in nature once held. These two assumptions need critical examination.

We supposedly still get a hint of an earlier and proper relation between humans and nature embedded in the first conviction, which connects nature and leisure during our own excursions into the backcountry. In buttressing this belief in a connection with nature through play, we tend to mask the ways humans have known the natural world through work.

To make the case for an original relation with nature in North America that predates work, modern environmental writers—and, I suspect, many environmentalists—tell stories that make it seem as if play provided a primal and pristine contact with nature that work ruined. In effect, popular environmental writing tells an old Judeo-Christian story. Work is a fall from grace. In the beginning no one labored. In the beginning there was harmony and no human mark on the landscape. This is also the story told in the backcountry. This, we say, is how it must have appeared to the first white man: the mythical first white man whose arrival marks not just specific changes but the beginning of change itself. We identify our acts in the backcountry with the acts of historic figures emblematically connected with nature, and we make their work seem the equivalent of our play.

The first white man is, I think, a critical figure in our confusion about work and nature. We are pious toward Indian peoples, but we don't take them seriously; we don't credit them with the capacity to make changes. Whites readily grant certain nonwhites a "spiritual" or "traditional" knowledge that is timeless. It is not something gained through work or labor; it is not contingent knowledge in a contingent world. In North America, whites are the bearers of environmental original sin, because whites alone are recognized as laboring. But whites are thus also, by the same token, the only real bearers of history. This is why our flattery (for it is usually intended to be such) of "simpler" peoples is an act of such immense condescension. For in a modern world defined by change, whites are portrayed as the only beings who make a difference.

In telling stories about the first white man, environmentalist writers aren't just narrating a history. These accounts pretend to be history, but they are really just-so-stories about the paradise before labor. Over the last two decades academic historians have produced a respectable body of work on humans and the environment in North America that concentrates on how Indian peoples shaped the natural world they lived in.<sup>5</sup> But, by and large, this literature either has not penetrated popular treatments of nature or has been dismissed. The first white man always enters an untouched paradise. The first white man must also always be a *white man*. French métis trappers

white men came along, but they tend to drop from the accounts. Working people of mixed race entering a region of modified nature can't carry the story line of the wonder of a world before work.

The most popular first white men remain Lewis and Clark and Daniel Boone. Daniel Boone is Wendell Berry's first white man.<sup>6</sup> Bill McKibben uses Lewis and Clark, and so does Philip Shabecoff, a good and intelligent environmental journalist. In *A Fierce Green Fire*, his recent history of the environmental movement, Shabecoff follows his first white men through lands "unchanged by humans."<sup>7</sup> The last of the first white men was Bob Marshall, who, consciously imitating Lewis and Clark, often gets credit for walking through the last areas in North America unseen by human beings. But the Central Brooks Range of Alaska, where Marshall hiked, had been inhabited by the Nunamiut in the nineteenth century, and they had returned in the 1940s. It is very unlikely that the areas Marshall traveled had been unvisited.<sup>8</sup>

These first white men are fascinating and sympathetic historical figures in their own right, but my concern with them is as cultural figures constructed by environmentalism. They are made into viewers of a natural world "as," according to McKibben, "it existed outside human history."<sup>9</sup> But it is not nature that exists outside human history; it is the first white men who do so. For environmentalist writers depict not how these travelers actually saw the natural world but instead how we would have seen it in their place. In this construction the first white men travel through nature untouched by human labor and are awed by it. Shabecoff's brief account in *A Fierce Green Fire* is typical. He quotes a journal entry by William Clark praising the scenery "in a country far removed from the civilized world." Shabecoff admits some "slight impact" on the environment from European introductions such as horses and guns, but he stresses how much of the continent was "unchanged by humans." Lewis and Clark serve both to reveal the untouched continent and to set its destruction in motion.<sup>10</sup>

This is not, however, the most likely or persuasive reading of what Lewis and Clark saw and did. They were, first of all, quite aware that they were moving through landscapes where human work had altered nature. Lewis and Clark described Indians farming, hunting, fishing, and grazing their animals. Their journey west was punctuated by fires set by Indians to shape the landscape, influence the movement of animals, or signal each other.<sup>11</sup> They described a landscape that we know, partly through their accounts, was already in the midst of wrenching change as a result of human labor.<sup>12</sup>

Nor did Lewis and Clark spend much time being staggered by the beauty and the sublimity of what they saw. They are not blind to the beauty of the world, but they are matter-of-fact: "the country still continues level fertile and beautiful," Lewis noted in a typical entry.<sup>13</sup> Even when touched, as in the Missouri Breaks, by "Seens of Visionary enchantment," what engages far more of Lewis's and Clark's attention is the laborious work of moving

upstream.<sup>14</sup> Their labor gives them their most intimate knowledge of the country. In describing work, their writing becomes expansive and detailed. They are not just seeing the country. They are feeling it; they are literally enmeshed in it. Here are Clark and Lewis describing their struggle to pass through the Missouri Breaks. First Clark: "we Set out, and proceeded on with great labour . . . & the banks were So muddey & Slippery that the men could Scercely walk. . . ." The land near the river, the land they struggle through, is "much hard rock; & rich earth, the Small portion of rain which has fallen causes the rich earth as deep as is wet to Slip into the river or bottoms." Now Lewis:

the men are compelled to be (much) in the water even to their armpits, and the water is yet very cold, and so frequent are those point that they are one fourth of their time in the water, added to this the banks and bluffs along which they are obliged to pass are so slippery and the mud so tenacious that they are unable to wear their mockersons, and in that situation dragging the heavy burthen of a canoe and walking ocasionally for several hundred yards over the sharp fragments of rocks which tumble from the clifts and garnish the borders of the river; in short their labour is incredibly painfull. . . .<sup>15</sup>

What most deeply engaged these first white men with nature, what they wrote about most vividly, was work: backbreaking, enervating, heavy work. The labor of the body revealed that nature was cold, muddy, sharp, tenacious, slippery. Many more of their adjectives also described immediate, tangible contact between the body and the nonhuman world. Environmental writers have edited this out; they have replaced it with a story of first white men at strenuous play or in respectful observation.

We have masked the work of first white men. We have equated their work with our play. We have implicitly presumed that the journey of first white men must have been one long backpack across the West. But they did not gain knowledge of nature through play; they knew and connected with the world through work. And we unwittingly admit as much when we make our own play mimic their work.

This masking of knowledge gained through work is typical of one environmentalist approach to labor, but the actual role of labor is easily unmasked. Examples of human knowledge of nature gained through labor are readily apparent if we look. For millennia humans have known animals largely through work. Work gave the people who trained and worked with animals a particular knowledge of them. "There is something about a horse that isn't an engine you know," Albert Drinkwater, a British Columbia horse logger, explained; "a horse won't work for everybody the same. He'll work for one man and he'll pretend to pull for the other one." "The horses themselves became . . . part of the man that drove them."<sup>16</sup> Today the animals we know most intimately are pets; they share our leisure, not our

work. We find working partnerships only in a few odd places. One of them is the circus. There the joint labor of humans and animals survives as entertainment.

Circuses where humans and animals connect for a common task are today often marked as unnatural or even cruel. Animals that work are pitied and presumed abused. But such pity is misplaced in the circus world that Diana Cooper describes in her recent book *Night after Night*. To work intimately with a trained animal is, she says, to know something nonhuman, vividly and deeply. She writes of trainers as being "deep in their work, focused on the animals and their human partners and what they are all creating together."<sup>17</sup> It is the trainer "who, through *knowing* Toto, has taught him what he needs to know."<sup>18</sup> And what trainers learn about elephants and horses is not only something about elephants and horses in general but also a deeply particular knowledge of individual elephants and horses. This is a knowledge we possess because we have bodies with which to work. Embodied, we encounter not ideas of the world but other bodies. We confront the intransigent materiality of the world itself. To know an elephant or a horse through work is to know that for all the general knowledge of horses or elephants you may have, what also matters is a knowledge of this particular elephant at this particular time.

It is precisely this recognition of how work provides a knowledge of, and a connection to, nature that separates a minority of environmentalists, particularly those sympathetic to Wendell Berry, from the dominant environmentalist denigration of work. But this second, minority position limits such good work to labor done without modern machines. They rely, to varying degrees, on the second conviction of modern environmentalism regarding the work in nature under examination here. In doing such work, people supposedly once had a truer, more benign relation with the natural world, one that technology has severed. It is supposedly modern work, not work itself, that has made us into dangerous monsters. Consequently, both our salvation and the land's can be found by harking back to a time before modern technology, to a time, in Shabecoff's telling, before the "new machines" degraded the landscape.<sup>19</sup>

The demonization of modern machines and the sentimentalization of archaic forms of labor allows a bifurcation of work into the relatively benign and even instructive, and the modern and destructive. Nowhere does this bifurcation show up more than in agriculture. Some, but again hardly all, environmentalists romanticize peasants, non-Western farmers, and even some premodern American farmers granting them an earth knowledge derived from their work. But in an age of vast, mechanized agribusinesses, in a land where farmers have given way to growers and where the very category "farmer" has now disappeared from the census, environmentalists grant no such knowledge to most modern farmers.

John Berger doesn't write from such motives, but his essays on peasants

these communities "working is a way of preserving knowledge."<sup>21</sup> There are no peasants in the United States, but there are farmers who embody some of the peasants' working knowledge of the land. Farmers in the mountains of New Mexico, for example, once shared the life Berger describes.

Jacobo Romero was a New Mexican farmer in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of New Mexico. Along with the Rio de las Trampas, a small river that is really little more than stream, he is the central figure in William deBuys and Alex Harris's haunting *River of Traps*. Romero knew nature through work. Like Berger's peasants, "inexhaustibly committed to wresting life from the earth," he was so wedded to a particular place that to move him would have been to change who and what he was. He worked his land along the river, and his work yielded knowledge that could be passed on. Working—how one works, how one wields a spade, how one handles a horse—imparts a bodily knowledge and a social knowledge, part of what Pierre Bourdieu calls *habitus*. Such knowledge is connected with physical experience, but it is not derived solely or often even directly from physical experience. Working communicates a history of past work; this history is turned into a bodily practice until it seems but second nature. This *habitus*, this bodily knowledge, is unconsciously observed, imitated, adopted, and passed on in a given community. Our work in nature both reinforces and modifies it.<sup>22</sup>

Luckily, in *River of Traps* Bill deBuys and Alex Harris were outsiders, too old and slow to learn in the usual way. Jacobo Romero had to articulate and explain what would otherwise be second nature at their age. His first and most telling injunction was "never to give holiday to the water," but instead "to put every drop to work."<sup>23</sup> To deBuys and Harris, watching Romero fulfill this injunction is to watch his shovel become a "tool of art." He tuned the water, "watching and listening to it like a technician attending his instruments, amplifying the flow here, muting it there, adjusting, repairing and rearranging."<sup>24</sup> He knew his ditches and fields intimately and precisely; he knew them because he worked them. He knew how to work water, because, from years of working with water he knew that "you got to let the water show you. You take your time, and sooner or later the water will show you."<sup>25</sup>

Wendell Berry is the environmental writer who has most thoughtfully tried to come to terms with labor like that of Romero or Berger's peasants. He is not only one of the few environmental writers who takes work seriously; he also has the impressive consistency of actually laboring in his own fields. But Berry quite purposefully and pointedly makes his own labor archaic and unusual; he relies on animal power and urges others to do this same. It is advice best taken by literary farmers. It is only Wendell Berry's writing, after all, that enables him to farm with horses. Such work resembles gardening, a favored model these days for a reconciliation with nature.<sup>26</sup> It is admirable; it yields lessons and insights, but it does not yield a living. It

modern workers—those who work with machines that depend on more than muscle or wind for their power, those who gain their livelihood from work—the possibility of connections to and knowledge of nature.

The inroads that Wendell Berry, or Jacobo Romero, or Berger's peasants make into the general environmentalist disdain for work in nature are ultimately dead ends. For such work is always either vanishing or unable to yield a living. Wendell Berry and Jacobo Romero serve only as additional critiques of modern farming, logging, fishing, ranching, and industry. They don't change the basic message that modern work is the enemy of nature.

How modern work came to be alienated from nature has become the subject of another just-so-story. This story, ironically, is often told by workers themselves. It is not racialized, like the story of the first white men, but it is just as gendered: it treats work and machines as if they were male or female. Once, this story says, there was real manly work that took skill and strength and was rooted in the natural world. This was the work of Berger's peasants or Jacobo Romero. But this good work has now been contaminated by machines.

This story, like the story of the first white man, uses history without being a history. There certainly is a very real sense in which machinery did both deskill workers and alienate them from nature. As work became less physically demanding, as it required less bodily knowledge, workers who once possessed the skills now made irrelevant by machines felt robbed of something valuable. Old loggers in Coos Bay, Oregon, for example, denigrate modern logging. Their own work among the big trees demanded judgment, strength, and hours of strenuous labor on a single tree, all of which might be lost if the tree fell wrong and broke. But modern loggers harvest "pecker poles." The old loggers knew big timber, but loggers are cutting "dog hair these days."<sup>27</sup> This is, of course, hardly the view of modern loggers, although they, too, prefer the harvest of old growth.<sup>28</sup>

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, blue-collar workers regarded physical work as a mark of manhood. They often saw the machines that broke their connection with nature as emasculating them; they associated these machines with women. Charley Russell was a working cowboy before he became a cowboy artist. When he lamented the end of the West, he mourned a world where work in nature defined manhood. Machines that didn't need real men, which could be run by women, had broken the tie between labor and nature.

Invention has made it easy for man kind, but it has made him no better. Machinery has no branes. A lady with manicured fingers can drive an automobile with out maring her polished nails. But sit behind six range bred horses with both hands full of ribbons these are God made animals and have branes. To drive these over a mountain rode takes both hands feet and head and its no ladvs job.<sup>29</sup>

A man did real work with "God made animals"; a woman could handle machines "with out maring her polished nails." Machines associated with women broke a male connection with female nature, thus creating an almost domestic drama. Clearly for Russell, machines broke the old connections forged by manly labor.

But this division between good work close to nature and bad work, the work of machines that alienated men from nature, doesn't hold up to historical scrutiny. First of all, archaic labor and peasant labor, for all the knowledge they yielded, were not necessarily kind to the land. Bill deBuys, who works for the Nature Conservancy, deeply admired Jacobo Romero and his work. He was his neighbor and worked beside him. But he has no illusions that such knowledge protected the land from harm. DeBuys has shown how the agriculture of Jacobo and his neighbors took a toll on the land even as his work created knowledge of natural world and forged a deep connection with it.<sup>30</sup>

A connection with the land through work creates knowledge, but it does not necessarily grant protection to the land itself. There is a modern romanticism of place that says that those who live and depend on a place will not harm it. Its conservative version is wise use. Its environmentalist version appears in bioregionalism or in the work of Wendell Berry. Berry regards his own writing as depending on "work of the body and of the ground."<sup>31</sup> He regards himself as being very much of a place. In part his connection is from deep familiarity, but it also comes from the pleasure he takes in the work of restoring that place by hand. Yet he restores land that others, who were just as fully of this place, destroyed through their work. Berry writes as if working in nature, of being of a place, brought a moral superiority of sorts. Such rootedness supposedly offers a solution to our problematic relationship with the nonhuman world. I do not think this is necessarily true.<sup>32</sup> The choices are neither so simple nor so stark. Both destructive work and constructive work bring a knowledge of nature, and sometimes work is destructive and restorative at the same time, as when we cut or burn a meadow to prevent the encroachment of forest.

The intellectual, social, and political costs of limiting our choice to these two attitudes toward work and nature are immense. Condemning all work in nature marks environmentalists, as the Forks bumper sticker declares, as a privileged leisure class. Approving of archaic work while condemning modern work marks environmentalists as quaint reactionaries; they seem oblivious to the realities of the modern world. Environmentalists appeal to history to maintain these positions, but they turn history into just-so-stories.

We need to do better. The choice between condemning all work in nature and sentimentalizing vanishing forms of work is simply not an adequate choice. I am not interested in replacing a romanticism of inviolate nature with a romanticism of local work. Nor am I interested in demonizing

machines. Environmentalists need to come to terms with modern work. The problem *is not* that modern work has been defiled by machines. Women who did much of the backbreaking labor on American farms before electricity have never, to the best of my knowledge, grown nostalgic for the work of pumping and carrying water or cleaning clothes on zinc washboards or any of what Senator George Norris of Nebraska called “the unending punishing tasks” of rural life.<sup>33</sup> Anyone in doubt about the hopes for liberation through machines and the kind of labor in nature that prompted those hopes should read the literature surrounding rural electrification; it described the tedium and social cost of this work in graphic detail.<sup>34</sup>

Coming to terms with modern work and machines involves both more complicated histories and an examination of how *all* work, and not just the work of loggers, farmers, fishers, and ranchers, intersects with nature. Technology, an artifact of our work, serves to mask these connections. There are clearly better and worse technologies, but there are no technologies that remove us from nature. We cannot reject the demonization of technology as an independent source of harm only to accept a subset of technologies as rescuing us from the necessity of laboring in, and thus harming, nature. We have already been down this road in the twentieth century.

In the twentieth century technology has often become a container for our hopes or our demons. Much of the technology we now condemn once carried human hopes for a closer and more intimate tie to nature. Over time the very same technology has moved from one category to another. Technology that we, with good reason, currently distrust as environmentally harmful—hydroelectric dams, for example—once carried utopian environmental hopes. To Lewis Mumford, for instance, dams and electricity promised an integration of humans and nature. Mumford saw technology as blurring the boundaries between humans and nature. Humans were “formed by nature and [were] inescapably . . . part of the system of nature.” He envisioned a Neotechnic world of organic machines and “ecological balance.”<sup>35</sup>

In an ironic and revealing shift, Mumford’s solution—his liberating technology, his union of humans and nature—has become redefined as a problem. It is not just that dams, for example, kill salmon; they symbolize the presence of our labor in the middle of nature. In much current environmental writing such blurred boundaries are the mark of our fall. Nature, many environmentalists think, should ideally be beyond the reach of our labor. But in taking such a position, environmentalists ignore the way some technologies mask the connections between our work and the natural world.

The idea that pure nature, separate from our work, might no longer exist can prompt near hysteria. Bill McKibben fashioned a best-seller, *The End of Nature*, from that possibility. For McKibben global warming proved the final blow. “We have changed the atmosphere and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made

fatal to its meaning. Nature’s independence *is* its meaning; without it there is nothing but us.”<sup>37</sup>

Now, nature as I have used it in this essay is only an idea. When we use the word “nature,” we assert a unity, a set of relations, and a common identity that involves all the things humans have not made. Nature is, in this sense, purely cultural. Different cultures produce different versions of nature. Although nature is only an idea, it is unlike most other ideas in that we claim to see, feel, and touch it. For in everyday speech we use the word not only to describe a unity of all the things we have not made but also to name a common quality—the natural—possessed by seemingly disparate things: for example, sockeye salmon, Douglas fir, and cockroaches. When we see rocks, animals, or rivers in certain settings, we say we are seeing nature.

McKibben admits that his nature is only an idea, but that only raises the question of why he is so upset over the end of an idea. The answer is, I think, that McKibben, like the rest of us, doesn’t really carry the distinction between nature as an idea and nature as the living, breathing world around us over into daily life or practice.<sup>38</sup> It is hard to read his *The End of Nature* without thinking that he considers our modern, Western construction of nature to be largely congruent with a real world that is also ending. Most human beings can, after all, easily accommodate a change in the meaning of a word. We all change our minds. We don’t often pine for old definitions and ideas. What we miss more are people, animals, landscapes that have vanished. And if all McKibben is lamenting is the loss of an idea, then he is a man who lives far more deeply in his head than in the natural world he writes about. It is as if, all the while insisting on the distinction between mothers and motherhood, he mourned the death of his mother, not, so he claimed, for her own sake, but because *the idea* of motherhood has for him died with her.

To the extent to which McKibben is upset and not merely being histrionic, it is hard not to suspect that it is the end of what he regards as the natural world itself that upsets him. Thunderstorms, mountain ranges, and bears persist, but without the ability to draw a clear line between weather, mountains, animals, and plants and the consequences of our labor, they have ceased for McKibben to be natural, and we have become unable to “imagine that we are part of something larger than ourselves.”<sup>39</sup>

If McKibben’s angst is widely shared, then the issue of our contamination of nature is a serious one indeed. For while it is in part the deleterious effects of our labor that McKibben objects to, it is ultimately the ability of our labor to touch all aspects of the natural world, even the climate, that dismays him. The popularity of McKibben’s book indicates that for many of us the meaning of the world depends on clear boundaries, pure categories, and the separation of nature out there from us, our bodies, and our work in here. This is, I think, a common American reaction to the modern world, and it



labor—along with our casual, everyday ahistoricism that robs us of any sense of how our current dilemmas developed—explain at least some of our own inability to deal with mounting environmental problems, bitter social divisions, and increasing despair about our relations with the rest of the planet.

When McKibben writes about his work, he comments that his office and the mountain he views from it are separate parts of his life. They are unconnected. In the office he is in control; outside he is not. Beyond his office window is nature, separate and independent. This is a clean division. Work and nature stand segregated and clearly distinguished.

I, like McKibben, type at a keyboard. On this clear June day I can see the Olympic Mountains in the distance. Like McKibben, I do modern work. I sort, compile, analyze, and organize. My bodily movement becomes electrical signals where my fingers intersect with a machine. Lights flicker on a screen. I expend little energy; I don't sweat, or ache, or grow physically tired. I produce at the end of this day no tangible product; there are only stored memories encoded when my fingers touched keys. There is no dirt or death or even consciousness of bodily labor when I am done. Trees still grow, animals still graze, fish still swim.

But, unlike McKibben, I cannot see my labor as separate from the mountains, and I know that my labor is not truly disembodied. If I sat and typed here day after day, as clerical workers type, without frequent breaks to wander and to look at the mountains, I would become achingly aware of my body. I might develop carpal tunnel syndrome. My body, the nature in me, would rebel. The lights on this screen need electricity, and this particular electricity comes from dams on the Skagit or Columbia. These dams kill fish; they alter the rivers that come from the Rockies, Cascades, and Olympics. The electricity they produce depends on the great seasonal cycles of the planet: on falling snow, melting waters, flowing rivers. In the end, these electrical impulses will take tangible form on paper from trees. Nature, altered and changed, is in this room. But this is masked. I type. I kill nothing. I touch no living thing. I seem to alter nothing but the screen. If I don't think about it, I can seem benign, the mountains separate and safe from me as the Adirondacks seem safe from McKibben as he writes his essays for the *New Yorker*. But, of course, the natural world has changed and continues to change to allow me to sit here, just as it changes to allow McKibben to write. My separation is an illusion. What is disguised is that I—unlike loggers, farmers, fishers, or herders—do not have to face what I alter, and so I learn nothing from it. The connection my labor makes flows in only one direction.

My work, I suspect, is similar to that of most environmentalists. Because it seems so distant from nature, it escapes the condemnation that the work that takes place out there, in "nature," attracts. I regularly read the *High Country News* and its articles just as regularly denounce mining, ranching,

have some sympathy for rural people trying to live on the land, letters from readers denounce the paper for not condemning these activities enough. The intention of those who defend old growth or denounce overgrazing is not to denounce hard physical work, but that is, in effect, what the articles do. There are few articles or letters denouncing university professors or computer programmers or accountants or lawyers for sully the environment, although it is my guess that a single lawyer or accountant could, on a good day, put the efforts of Paul Bunyan to shame.<sup>40</sup>

Most humans must work, and our work—all our work—inevitably embeds us in nature, including what we consider wild and pristine places. Environmentalists have invited the kind of attack contained in the Forks bumper sticker by identifying nature with leisure, by masking the environmental consequences of their own work. To escape it, and perhaps even to find allies among people unnecessarily made into enemies, there has to be some attempt to come to terms with work. Work does not prevent harm to the natural world—Forks itself is evidence of that—but if work is not perverted into a means of turning place into property, it can teach us how deeply our work and nature's work are intertwined.

And if we do not come to terms with work, if we fail to pursue the implications of our labor and our bodies in the natural world, then we will return to patrolling the borders. We will turn public lands into a public playground; we will equate wild lands with rugged play; we will imagine nature as an escape, a place where we are born again. It will be a paradise where we leave work behind. Nature may turn out to look a lot like an organic Disneyland, except it will be harder to park.

There is, too, an inescapable corollary to this particular piece of self-deception. We will condemn ourselves to spending most of our lives outside of nature, for there can be no permanent place for us inside. Having demonized those whose very lives recognize the tangled complexity of a planet in which we kill, destroy and alter as a condition of living and working, we can claim an innocence that in the end is merely irresponsibility.

If, on the other hand, environmentalism could focus on our work rather than on our leisure, then a whole series of fruitful new angles on the world might be possible. It links us to each other, and it links us to nature. It unites issues as diverse as workplace safety and grazing on public lands; it unites toxic sites and wilderness areas. In taking responsibility for our own lives and work, in unmasking the connections of our labor and nature's labor, in giving up our hopeless fixation on purity, we may ultimately find a way to break the borders that imprison nature as much as ourselves. Work, then, is where we should begin.