

Among the Giants:
Resituating the Environmental Philosophy of John Steinbeck

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ABSTRACT

Deeply influenced by emotional, ethical, and ecological principles, John Steinbeck developed a holistic ideology to describe and analyze the relationships among individuals, society, and the more-than-human world. Although he explored environmental issues with ecological insight and philosophical contemplation that placed him well beyond his literary and scientific contemporaries, Steinbeck's contributions to modern ecological inquiry and environmental thought have received only intermittent attention from literary scholars. Throughout his writing, Steinbeck develops a view of intellectual holism that encourages (perhaps even enables) us to dovetail science and ethics as we attempt to construct a new environmental paradigm. Viewing the world through his holistic lens, Steinbeck was able to see the global ecosystem, local environments, human communities, and even minute tide pools as objects of scientific and artistic inquiry. Specifically, it is my contention that the American environmental movement owes a greater debt to John Steinbeck than it realizes. In short, John Steinbeck made significant contributions to the growing awareness of human-nature interconnectedness and the parallels between social ills and ecological ailments. Yet, for whatever reasons Steinbeck is not granted a position of honor alongside the other giants of American environmental thought. Now witnessing the full blossoming of 21st century environmentalism, it is useful to cast a reflexive eye upon our ideological forebears with the intent to better understand the genealogy of the American environmental movement. Doing so will not only provide a richer and fuller family tree, but will also promote additional flourishing of new approaches to solving ongoing environmental troubles.

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Among the Giants:

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Leading the (Un)Examined Life

Nearly forty years after the inaugural Earth Day,¹ we find ourselves at an environmental crossroads. While a portion of the population is working for positive social change and advocating a more sustainable mode of living, an alarming number of people seem unaware of the myriad of environmental issues that are jeopardizing the future of the only known inhabitable planet in the Milky Way. Before we run too far afield of our current aims, ponder for a moment that each and every one of us does things during the course of a day that adversely affect the health of the planet. Flipping on the light switch, running water from the tap, purchasing groceries, or washing our clothes, among various other *second-nature* activities, contribute to environmental ailments such as aquifer depletion, climate change, deforestation, not to mention our ever-enlarging ecological footprints. Rarely (if ever) does someone turn on the lights in the living room with the intention of emitting a few tons of CO₂ into the atmosphere. Nor do we wash our dirty jeans and soiled shirts with the hope of running the Ogallala Aquifer dry. Despite the lack of intention, our unexamined daily decisions seriously and adversely affect the state of the planet. Moreover, the consequences of continuing with unexamined behaviors become more serious with each passing day. The time for change is upon us; we are at a socioenvironmental tipping point. Individually and collectively, we must give more thought to our everyday

¹ Initiated by U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson (D-WI), the first U.S. Earth Day was celebrated on 22 April 1970.

practices. No longer is it a question of whether or not the unexamined life is worth living, but a realization that the unexamined life is simply unsustainable.

Throughout history, as a species (an animal if you will) *Homo sapiens* have demonstrated an uncanny knack for migration, adaptation, and proliferation. Caught in a self-degrading spiral of desire, creation, and disposal as a culture, we are blind to the ecological truth that “the very success of an animal is its downfall” (J. Steinbeck, *LSC* 78). Perhaps more pertinently, we need to acknowledge that more often than not, the downfall is the consequence of the very things we highlight as measures of success. “...the very byproducts of the animals’ own bodies prove poisonous to a too great concentration of their own species” (*LSC* 78-9). Before Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*² or Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*,³ and long before the popularization of the myriad of current environmental crises, John Steinbeck was strongly critical of behavioral tendencies and cultural attitudes toward the more-than-human⁴ world and what he foresaw as the subsequent ecological devastation of America by Americans. Throughout his writing, Steinbeck develops a view of intellectual holism that encourages (perhaps even enables) us to dovetail science and ethics as we attempt to construct a new environmental paradigm. Viewing the world

² First published by Houghton Mifflin in September 1962, Carson’s socially critical and environmentally eye opening text is often cited for popularizing environmental issues and adding terms such as *bioaccumulation* and *biomagnification* to the public lexicon.

³ Published in 1968 by McGraw-Hill, Abbey’s first book length work of non-fiction drew supportive comparisons with Thoreau’s *Walden* and firmly established Abbey’s place as the preeminent nature writer of the American West.

⁴ Instead of relying upon terms such as environment or nature, which tend to invoke emotional responses and narrowly focus attention upon unspoiled wild areas, the more-than-world refers to both undomesticated wild areas and the anthropogenic world. For, as Wendell Berry reminds us, “The argument over the proper relation of humanity to nature is becoming, as the sixties used to say, polarized... At one extreme are those who sound as if they are entirely in favor of nature; they assume there is no necessary disjuncture of difference between the human estate and the estate of nature, that human good is in some simple way the same as natural good... At the other extreme are the nature conquerors, who have no patience with an old-fashioned outdoor farm, let alone wilderness” (137).

through his holistic lens, Steinbeck was able to see the global ecosystem, local environments, human communities, and even minute tide pools as objects of scientific and artistic inquiry.

Mixing humor and sorrow, science and awe, reverence and contempt, Steinbeck approached life with a compassionate understanding of the interconnected nature of all people, places, and things. Deeply influenced by emotional, ethical, and ecological principles, John Steinbeck developed a holistic ideology to describe and analyze the relationships among individuals, society, and the more-than-human world. Although he explored environmental issues with ecological insight and philosophical contemplation that placed him well beyond his literary and scientific contemporaries, Steinbeck's contributions to modern ecological inquiry and environmental thought have received only intermittent attention from literary scholars.⁵ It is time we recognize the importance of Steinbeck's environmental philosophy and place him alongside other well-regarded environmental thinkers, providing his ideas the attention they deserve.

Rethinking Our Approach

The American psyche has undergone some rather serious changes during the past century. Armed conflicts captured global attention, economic systems ebbed and flowed, the specter of Communism rose and fell, not to mention innumerable other ideological and physical challenges that helped to create a uniquely 21st century American ideology. Although the present

⁵ Although articles on the subject have appeared sporadically since the 1970s, the first (and really the only) serious book-length treatment of Steinbeck's approach to and understanding of the environment is a compilation of articles edited by Beegel, Shillinglaw, and Tiffney (*Steinbeck and the Environment: Interdisciplinary Approaches*), published in 1997. Interestingly, this nine year-old text has since fallen out of favor with the publishing company and is only available at select academic libraries and rare bookshops.

inquiry does not preoccupy itself with the schizoanalysis⁶ of the contemporary American mind, it does however explore the lasting influence of one author on a particular realm of this collective knowledge. Specifically, it is my contention that the American environmental movement owes a greater debt to John Steinbeck than it realizes. In short, John Steinbeck made significant contributions to the growing awareness of human-nature interconnectedness and the parallels between social ills and ecological ailments. Yet, for whatever reasons Steinbeck is not granted a position of honor alongside the other giants of American environmental thought.⁷ Now

⁶ Introduced by the French duo of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (hereafter D&G) in their *Anti-Oedipus* and revisited in *A Thousand Plateaus*, schizoanalysis seeks to move beyond the shortcomings of other analytical practices in order to explore the unconscious and sociohistorical domains and rediscover the forces of desire-production. Undergirding much of this practice is the conception of the world as a *rhizome*. At first glance it may seem absurd to explain the functioning of the world as a complex subterranean system of roots and stems. But, is it more sensible to explain the world as a hierarchical system with preestablished channels of transmission, where the individual is merely slid into an allotted position (remember *The Matrix*)? D&G suggest that the world is a complex assemblage of interdependent thoughts, ideas, and actions. In other words, the rhizomatic structure of the world “connects any point to any other point... a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits” (21). Just as an individual’s thoughts meander, jumping from idea to idea, so too does the rest of the world. To many, this idea of the world as an interdependent assemblage, simultaneously moving in multiple directions is likely to be alarming. Such a reaction is the byproduct of the fact that “thought lags behind nature” (5). D&G explain that modern society is operating from a paradigmatic foundation that is incompatible with reality. Referred to as an *arborescent* system, this outdated paradigm is a hierarchical system in which an individual “only receives information from a higher unit, and only receives a subjective affection along preestablished paths” (16). Conversely, the rhizome explains that the world is a centered system in which everything is connected to everything else. Certainly an intellectually worthwhile endeavor, conducting such a schizoanalysis would simply takes us too far afield from the current task of resituating Steinbeckian environmental philosophy.

⁷ Research regarding the importance of writers and literature to the development of American environmentalism is a new and relatively unexplored field of study. Perhaps the most ambitious and notable of such works is Daniel J. Philippon’s *Conserving Words: How American Nature Writers Shaped the Environmental Movement*. To date however, this research has focused solely on the niche genre of “nature” writers. Even Philippon’s extensive text, which provides a clear look at the connection between literature and the environment, offers only a glimpse of the complete picture. The subtleties of the art are overlooked, leaving many important writers without a place at the table they helped set. Despite his influence, Steinbeck is one author who is rarely invited to dine at this noble table. Although Steinbeck was not “prominently involved in the formation and development of an environmental organization” (the standard of measure Philippon utilizes in his study), his recurrent environmental commentary in works such as *The Log from “The Sea of Cortez”*, *Travels with Charley*,

witnessing the full blossoming of 21st century environmentalism, it is useful to cast a reflexive eye upon our ideological forebears with the intent to better understand the genealogy of the American environmental movement. Doing so will not only provide a richer and fuller family tree, but will also promote additional flourishing of new approaches to solving ongoing environmental troubles.

To undertake this investigation of ideological genealogy, it is necessary to reconsider Steinbeck's environmental philosophy and understand where this ideology fits among the giants of environmental thought. It is my hypothesis that Steinbeck's approach to the more-than-human world is the ideological offspring of two giants from American environmental history. Examining the environmentality of Steinbeck's writing will reveal an irrefutable match of ideological DNA with John Muir⁸ and Aldo Leopold.⁹ Although the examination of the complete body of work produced by the 1962 Nobel Laureate is unrealistic for a study of this scale, by focusing on a subsection of Steinbeck's works, I hope to suggest a broader philosophical unity and thematic design that runs throughout the extent of his writing. Reading Steinbeck alongside Muir and Leopold will demonstrate how traits from the latter two writers find expression in Steinbeck's deep commitment to educating society about its interdependent relationship with the more-than-human world.

The writings of Steinbeck, Muir, and Leopold provide an intellectual outline for the examination of a wide range of environmental issues, ideologies, and remedies. Undoubtedly, each writer is unique and valuable in his own right. However, collectively, they thoroughly examine the dualistic relationship between humans and wilderness from the very emergence of

America and Americans, among other works created a lasting influence on the American environmental ideology.

⁸ Born 21 April 1838—Died 24 December 1914

⁹ Born 11 January 1887—Died 21 April 1948

conservation to the foundation of the inaugural Earth Day. Despite some thematic and stylistic differences, the writers are connected by a consistent philosophical voice. Each author thoroughly examines wilderness as both an anthropocentric and ecocentric value; considering the conceptual dualism, which has resulted from the American environmental paradigm. Hence, the environmental philosophy and intellectual inquiry found throughout each of the texts enables us to explore the cognitive dissonance that has crept into the American environmental movement and perhaps also enables us to propose methods to harmonize belief with action.

Selecting a sample of Steinbeck's texts may lose some mark of comprehensiveness, but given the author's attentive focus on "America—complicated, paradoxical, bullheaded, shy, cruel, boisterous, unspeakably dear, and very beautiful" (J. Steinbeck, *A&A* 318) throughout his career, it is my assertion that these select texts are quite representative of Steinbeck's contributions to the evolution of American environmental thought on the whole. His focus on how a "tendency toward irresponsibility persists in very many of us" and on the "stealing from the future for our clear and present profit" (*A&A* 377) can be noticed throughout his fiction, nonfiction, and journalistic pieces. By reading between the lines and into the vocabulary, it is possible to recognize how Steinbeck perceives and relates to the more-than-human world and comes to form an approach to the more-than-human world that is both distinctly his own, while at the same time imbued with the ecological and philosophical qualities of Muir and Leopold.

Providing the theoretical underpinning for this study is the belief that environmental studies and literary studies are the two complimentary halves necessary for arriving at a deeper understanding of the dynamic relationship between culture and nature. With somewhat of a yin and yang approach to literary criticism, this methodology begins from the premise that to portray their understanding of how a culture interacts with and values the environment, writers rely upon

various narrative techniques. As with other ideological representations, depictions of the environment—just like those of gender, race, class, etc.—are never neutral. As ideological constructions, such representations are imbued with authorial purpose and perpetuate particular cultural meanings. Moreover, from an ecocritical perspective, these narrative constructions help to conceptualize a culture's relationship with the more-than-human world. Discussing the omnipotence of cultural influence on environmental paradigms, Verena Winiwarter¹⁰ emphasizes that it is imperative that we “acknowledge that indeed, all we perceive is culturally influenced” (16).

Following Winiwarter's declaration, there exists an opportunity to decipher the environmentality of a text in order to arrive at a full understanding of the content and context of such a creation. Echoing Winiwarter, renowned environmental literary scholar Lawrence Buell insists, it is quite “productive to think inclusively of environmentality as a property of any text,” (25) because texts “frame environmental ethics in varied ways” (2). With their words, throughout their plots, and within their characters, writers address environmental topics of all scales. From the seemingly simple (e.g. wastefulness is bad) to the overtly complex (e.g. Precisely what is nature; what makes something natural? When did humanity delineate nature from that which is unnatural?) authors throughout time, across genres, and around the globe have grappled with and continue to engage these issues.

Initially focused on direct authorial comments regarding humanity's relationship with nature, environmental literary scholarship is expanding its concentration in order to illustrate how literary expressions of humanity's relationship with the environment are emblematic of essential cultural tendencies. Building upon the momentum of contemporary environmental

¹⁰ Professor for Environmental History at the Institute of Social Ecology, Faculty for Interdisciplinary Studies (IFF), University of Vienna.

literary scholars who are encouraging the ecocritical consideration of texts beyond the niche of nature writing (e.g. *Walden*, *Silent Spring*, *Desert Solitaire*, etc.), the present discussion of Steinbeck's environmental philosophy rests upon close readings of *The Log from the "Sea of Cortez"*, *America and Americans*, and *Travels With Charley in Search of America*. Drawing upon a selection of Steinbeck's nonfiction (i.e. scientific narrative, essay/commentary, and travelogue) provides a writing sample that most accurately demonstrates where Steinbeck places himself in the preservationist-conservationist discussion. In addition to emphasizing Steinbeck's approach to and utilization of the environment, these selections also seem to be the most equivalent to the writings of "The great naturalist writers John Muir and Aldo Leopold" who developed their philosophies within voluminous nature journals (Louv 196). As I shall demonstrate, Steinbeck's literary style and environmental philosophy combines Muir's biocentric reverence and scrupulous attention to detail with Leopold's pragmatic scientific holism and stewardship ethic to reveal an environmental component within his already respectable canon. Essentially, Steinbeck's writing provides a forum for continued dialogue between preservationist and conservationist ideals that invoke the environmental values of John Muir and Aldo Leopold. In other words, this thesis explores Steinbeck's ability to convey environmental values and the author's dedication to establishing a holistic understanding of the world.

Now facing a series of ongoing environmental crises, it is imperative that we rethink our place in the world and reconsider our interdependent relationship with the more-than-human world. Shifting our environmental paradigm will engage all of our intellectual faculties and require willingness to include some previously overlooked thinkers. John Steinbeck is one such environmental thinker whose ideas have received little critical attention. With growing

ecological consciousness many scholars and citizens are seeking to forge a more sustainable mode of living. In doing so, it is quite useful to emphasize Steinbeck's importance as an environmental thinker and study how, long before environmentalism was a sociopolitical buzzword, he was "artfully introducing readers to ideas about all life-forms—most definitely including our own—being interdependent parts of an organic whole" (Gilbert).

While thinking about the ways in which a writer might speak in a philosophical voice, I am reminded of Martha Nussbaum's thoughts regarding the ideological importance and unique power of narrative. Nussbaum states it is narrative alone that can "adequately state certain important truths about the world, embodying them in its shape and setting up in the reader the activities that are appropriate for grasping them" (6). Narrative requires the attentive reader to grapple, imaginatively, with intellectually and emotionally bewildering choices between incommensurable goods, with complex characters that we learn to trust and perhaps emulate or as importantly not to trust and never to emulate, with risk, and unpredictability. Given the present focus on the writing of Steinbeck (which is almost entirely narrative) and the critique of some from the philosophical camp that writers of fiction cannot and should not dabble in philosophy, it seems warranted to briefly mention the importance of narrative in ideological transmission. Not just aesthetic window dressing for an analytic argument, or a sort of case study of a general principle, a narrative is "drawn from the concrete and deeply felt experience of life in this world and dedicated to a fine rendering of that life's particularity and complexity" (5). It cannot be reduced to or paraphrased in a principle, which is not to say that principles are irrelevant. Should environmental philosophers pay attention to narratives because they contain certain truths that are only possible to convey through story? Should readers pay attention to stories because they elicit philosophical and practical wisdom?

Absolutely.

Nov(Ecologist)elist or the Ecologist within the Novelist

An awareness of interrelationships among various organisms and their environment is certainly not a new concept. One does not require formal academic training to recognize that without herbivores there would be no predators (although it is a somewhat of a chicken-egg situation) and that equatorial foliage cannot grow in Antarctica. However, ecology¹¹ was not an articulated intellectual concept or an academic discipline until the latter portion of the nineteenth century. Charles Darwin's 1859 presentation of his ideas regarding evolution,¹² along with subsequent elaborations upon it, was fundamental to the development of contemporary ecological thinking. Although there were inchoate versions of ecology before 1859, it would be very difficult to form (let alone comprehend) concepts of interrelationships among organisms and the environment without the processes of change and adaptation (as Darwin demonstrated) as the driving forces developing such connections. By the turn of the twentieth century, various people were practicing this *new* ecological science and still more were utilizing this knowledge in other ventures.

It is within this intellectual milieu that Muir, Leopold, and Steinbeck were developing their conjoined philosophies regarding the human—more-than-human dynamic. Ultimately, Steinbeck's ethical position betwixt the environmental ideologies of Muir and Leopold is the result of his involvement in the foundation of the contemporary ecological discipline. In fact, much of the ecological knowledge that we now take for granted originated from studies conducted by Steinbeck and his fellow early ecological innovators. Attempting to more

¹¹ Originally concerned with the relationships between organisms and the environment, this new comprehensive science was dubbed *oekologie* by Alexander von Humboldt in 1866.

¹² Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. London: John Murray, Albemarle Street, 1859.

completely understand the relationship of humans to the more-than-human world, Steinbeck conducted fieldwork when and wherever possible throughout his life. Steinbeck was so enamored with the innovative ecological art that his wife Elaine apparently placed no higher than third on her husband's list; writing [of course] being first:

We spent the first summer of our marriage on the (Nantucket) island in 1951, in a little house on a bluff high above the Atlantic Ocean, next to the Sankaty Lighthouse. John wrote a great part of *East of Eden* there, and he spent as much time as possible on the sea, in the sea, and studying that particular bit of sea. He became involved with the Marine Biology Station in Woods Hole, Massachusetts, marine biology being the second love of his life, just after writing. (E. Steinbeck xi)

Much has been made of one well remembered and oft quoted line from *The Log from the "Sea of Cortez"*. While discussing the infinite web of existence that binds all species and connects all actions, Steinbeck arrives at a succinct but nonetheless poignant epiphany, "ecology has a synonym, which is ALL" (*LSC* 72). Although certainly representative of Steinbeck's environmental frame of mind, this statement is only the tip of the ideological iceberg. In order to understand the full grandeur of Steinbeck's environmental ideology, I suggest the utilization of the timeless and classically trusted Muir-Leopold litmus test. Relying upon the Muir-Leopold test provides a universally accepted standard to which Steinbeck's environmental philosophy can be measured and comparatively evaluated. To properly investigate the proposed hypothesis, it is necessary to rummage through Steinbeck's ideas and see how closely things line up with his ideological forebears (i.e. Muir and Leopold) in the larger conversation of the American environmental movement regarding the relationship between humans and the more-than-human

world. Although Steinbeck may not have been an avid reader of Muir or Leopold, this inquiry does not charge itself with the task of establishing and examining Steinbeck's reading habits.¹³ Instead, the goal here is to see how conservationist and preservationist ideals (as epitomized by Leopold and Muir, respectively) appear within Steinbeck's writing and therefore give credence to the call for Steinbeck's prominence within the evolution of the American environmental movement.

Steinbeck's approach to understanding and interacting with the more-than-human world rests upon notions of interconnected existence, ecological complexity, and an ethical compassion. In general, Steinbeck's environmental thinking conveys a unique understanding of the environment and human dependence upon it. In each of his works, Steinbeck rejects a human-centered universe and creates a paradigm that can only completely be understood when a reader acknowledges the interaction between humans and their environment. Steinbeck exemplifies this synthetic position amidst pragmatic conservationist stewardship (i.e. Leopold) and preservationist biocentric reverence (i.e. Muir) in *The Log from the "Sea of Cortez"* when describing *Grapsus grapsus* with scientific specificity, philosophical profundity, and an acute sense of sarcasm. In the early portion of this encounter, Steinbeck's prose is observant and factual:

Many people have spoken at length of the Sally Lightfoots. In fact, everyone who has seen them has been delighted with them. The very name they are called by reflects the delight of the name. These little crabs, with brilliant cloisonné carapaces, walk on their tiptoes. They have remarkable eyes and an extremely fast

¹³ Thanks to Robert Demott's *Steinbeck's Reading: A Catalogue of Books Owned and Borrowed*, we can see that Leopold's writing never occupied any shelf space and Muir's name appeared only once in Steinbeck's library.

reaction time. In spite of the fact that they swarm on the rocks at the Cape, and to a less degree inside the Gulf, they are exceedingly hard to catch. (*LSC* 52-3)

Attentive and precise, Steinbeck's description of the crabs' physical traits and survival techniques would appropriately fit within the pages of a marine ecology text. With hints of Leopold's concerned scientific tone from "Part I" of *A Sand County Almanac*,¹⁴ this area of *The Log from the "Sea of Cortez"* is a fine example of how Steinbeck unites science, philosophy, and humor to create an informative and memorable piece of environmental literature. As the crab-catching episode progresses, Steinbeck begins to intersperse his scientific field notes with a writer's wit and playful sarcasm.

They seem to be able to run in any one of four directions; but more than this, perhaps because of their rapid reaction time, they appear to read the mind of their hunter... If you walk slowly, they move slowly ahead of you in droves. If you hurry, they hurry. When you plunge at them, they seem to disappear in little puffs of blue smoke—at any rate, they disappear... They are very beautiful, with clear brilliant colors, reds and blues and warm browns. We tried for a long time to catch them. Finally, seeing fifty or sixty in a big canyon of rock, we thought to outwit them. Surely we were more intelligent, if slower, than they. (*LSC* 53)

¹⁴ Comprised of three main sections, Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* offers readers an opportunity to learn simultaneously from "Leopold the forester, Leopold the wildlife ecologist, Leopold the conservationist, Leopold the environmental philosopher and educator... [and] Leopold the writer" (Finch xv). Exploring environmental issues from various angles of expertise, Leopold's text is authoritative without becoming pedantic. "Part I: A Sand County Almanac" is a series of essays that describe Leopold's experiences living in a cabin on the Wisconsin River. With an anecdotal and conversational style, each essay addresses a singular event with a moralistic and ecological mindset honed by decades of professional experience and philosophical reflection. It is in this opening section that Leopold is his most celebratory when describing the ecological delight and bountiful resources of the great outdoors.

Intermingling humor and sorrow, science and spirituality, *The Log from the "Sea of Cortez"* is Steinbeck's examination of a small section of the Pacific coast. During this examination of life in the water and along the shoreline of the Gulf of California, Steinbeck recurrently explores the relationship of humans to the more-than-human world. Maintaining narrative precision and scientific curiosity, Steinbeck's retelling of the battle of human intellect versus crustacean physicality demonstrates the author's awareness of intricacies of the dynamic human—more-than-human relationship.

Accordingly, we pitted our obviously superior intelligence against the equally obvious physical superiority of Sally Lightfoot. Near the top of the crevice a boulder protruded. One of our party, taking a secret and circuitous route, hid himself behind this boulder, net in hand. He was completely concealed even from the stalk eyes of the crabs. Certainly they had not seen him go there. The herd of Sallys drowsed on the rocks in the lower end of the crevice. Two more of us strolled in from the seaward side, nonchalance in our postures and ingenuousness on our faces. One might have thought that we merely strolled along in a contemplation which severely excluded Sally Lightfoots. (*LSC* 53)

As the crew of the *Western Flyer* implements its scheme, Steinbeck speaks briefly from the other side of the Leopold-Muir continuum. While collecting and cataloguing specimens are very Leopoldian exercises, the concern with interspecies connectedness and holism of experience are more indicative of a Muirian approach to the more-than-human world.

In time the herd moved ahead of us, matching our nonchalance. We did not hurry, they did not hurry. When they passed the boulder, helpless and unsuspecting, a large net was to fall over them and imprison them. But they did not know that.

They moved along until they were four feet from the boulder, and then as one crab they turned to the right, climbed up over the edge of the crevice and down to the sea again. (*LSC* 53)

The way in which Steinbeck was able to fuse [arguably objective] science and [seemingly subjective and emotionally charged] ethics in his writing provides invaluable lessons for contemporary citizens, scholars, and policymakers. Despite the legislative preference for the scientific method and a social bias for quantifiable data, science cannot adequately answer many of the questions it raises. We must therefore rely upon additional modes of thought in order to reconsider contemporary environmental ailments and revise our relationship with the more-than-human world. Recent scholastic enthusiasm for interdisciplinary approaches to social problems echoes the understanding that “one of the important trends of the last quarter century has been the increasing humanistic and historical contextualization of science” (Shillinglaw & Hearle 7). Throughout his work, Steinbeck demonstrates how, when imbued with humanistic qualities, science can address environmental concerns with a more worldly approach and produce more holistic understandings.

Seeking a more accurate (i.e. comprehensive or holistic) understanding of the human—more-than-human relationship, Steinbeck’s environmental philosophy is significant because he not only meditates on the health and vitality of environment itself, but he is also deeply concerned with man’s role in the world and interdependent connection with nature. Suggesting that the “destiny of the land is intimately related to the destiny of the people and vice versa” (Beegel et al., “Introduction” 17), throughout his writing Steinbeck focuses on the role of the individual in society as well as society’s role in the wider world.

Discussing [and at times defending] the scientific qualities of Steinbeck's writing, Jackson Benson points out, that Steinbeck

...most clearly and directly expresses the condition of what "is." Thus, plot moves from condition to condition, and the structure of Steinbeck's novels usually involves contrasts and parallel of condition... Man is perceived as an intimate part of his environment; indeed, character can be often perceived as a function of scene. Within such a scientific perspective—and—I think that is exactly what the emphasis on scene provides—man's role is diminished. ("John Steinbeck: Novelist as Scientist" 261)

From an ideological perspective, Steinbeck wavers between Leopold's conservationist tendency to inventory, calculate, and utilize with an eye to the future and Muir's preservationist tendency to experience, appreciate, and reflect upon how to better commune with the more-than-human world. Although they do not exist at opposite ends of the ideological spectrum, Leopold and Muir promote subtly different environmental visions. On the one hand, Leopold confesses,

I find it disconcerting to analyze, *ex post facto*, the reasons behind my own axe-in-hand decisions. I find, first of all, that not all trees are created free and equal. While a white pine and a red birch are crowding each other, I have an *a priori* bias; I always cut the birch to favor the pine. Why? (68-9).

With clear preferential treatment of one natural component over another, Muir would invariably disagree with Leopold's axe-in-hand logic. Contemplating his choices, Muir arrives a different conclusion:

Nevertheless, again and again, in season and out of season, the question comes up, 'What are rattlesnakes good for?' As if nothing that does not obviously make

for the benefit of man had any right to exist; as if our ways were God's ways. Long ago, an Indian whom a French traveler put this old question to replied that their tails were good for toothache, and their heads for fever. Anyhow, they are all, head and tail, good for themselves, and we need not begrudge them their share of life ("The Yellowstone National Park" 516)

Teetering on the line separating Leopoldian pragmatism from Muirian idealism, Steinbeck conveys an environmental ethic that draws heavily upon both men. For instance, while outlining the bounty of a recent scientific excursion (a Leopoldian activity of collecting and cataloguing), Steinbeck weaves spiritual and existential (a Muirian exercise of interconnected contemplation) elements into what might have been a simple list of Latin and common names.

It was a good rich collecting day, and it had been a curiously emotional day beginning with the church. Sometimes one has a feeling of fullness, of warm wholeness, wherein every sight and object and odor and experience seems to key into a gigantic whole. That day even the [foul] mangrove was a part of it. (*LSC* 101)

Central to placing Steinbeck betwixt the environmental giants of Muir and Leopold is an understanding of conservation and preservation as distinct, albeit related, conceptualizations of the human—more-than-human relationship. Interestingly, many of the points that we now relying upon to demarcate one tradition from the other were not always as divisive. While modern instantiations tend to emphasize points of rigid ideological departure, the origins of conservation and preservation tend to dovetail more smoothly than usually acknowledged. In fact, the duration of these ideologies and their related practices are so longstanding that everyday usage of the terms tends to result in a great deal of terminological conflation and ideological

confusion between conservation and preservation. Discussing the importance of these concepts to the evolution of land use practices in both the UK and US, Peter Larkham explains that “Although the terms are often used together in [land use] guidance, and interchangeably by many writers, ‘preservation’ tends to be the older concept and implies retention without significant change. ‘Conservation,’ very much a twentieth-century usage, implies a need for change but awareness that change should be directed in order to retain key valued elements” (105).

Brief, but insightful, Larkham’s thoughts are quite telling of our work along the Muir-Leopold continuum. While both men were deeply concerned for the health of the planet, worked diligently to protect wilderness (and all its various components), and wrote about humanity’s relationship with the more-than-human world, it is not accurate to use their names and ideas interchangeably (as often is the case). In simple terms, Muir sought to preserve the naturalness of nature “without significant change,” whereas Leopold advocated conscientious management that “should be directed in order to retain key valued elements [i.e. ecosystem integrity].” Imbued with qualities from both thinkers, Steinbeck worked to reconcile his desire to preserve the purity of unspoiled nature with his understanding of the need to proactively manage nature because of the ubiquitous reach of human action.

In striving for the proper application of the Muir-Leopold litmus test, it is important to understand the full richness of the conservationist-preservationist continuum. Initially focused on rural land issues, both traditions arose as reflexive examinations of humanity’s relationship with the more-than-human world. By the late nineteenth century, much of the unsettled land in the U.S. had been allocated and developed according to federal land use laws. As the national perception of “abundant unexploited land teeming with wildlife and fertile soils began to turn to one of wasted resources and inefficient use” (Merchant 141), many concerned citizens began to

call for the conservation of natural resources as well as the preservation of wilderness areas. Questioning the perceived flaws of longstanding anthropocentric attitudes of Western culture,¹⁵ early conservationists and preservationists both advocated a more comprehensive (i.e. holistic) approach to the more than human world. As esteemed environmental historian Roderick Nash points out, “Appreciation of wilderness led easily to sadness at its disappearance from the American scene. What to do beyond regretting, however, was a problem” (96).

The rampant, yet legal, destruction of America’s forests and open spaces produced a broad public effort to curb such wanton abuses of the country’s natural resources. It was in response to this “sadness” that the preservation and conservation movements found their initial inspirations. At first, “the problem seemed simple: ‘exploiters’ of natural resources had to be checked by those determined to ‘protect’ them” (Nash 129). General feelings of anxiety and the aforementioned sadness about the rapid depletion of natural resources provided a common rallying point for numerous points of view. At the beginning of this movement to protect nature, a common enemy united early American environmentalists, but the protectors soon realized that wide differences existed within the group. Essentially, the “schism ran between those who defined conservation as the wise use or planned development of resources and those who have

¹⁵ In its broadest form, the Judeo-Christian worldview establishes a dichotomy between humans and nature. Separate from the apparent chaos of nature, one is free to assume a role of superiority and mastery over the natural world. Although the fondness for an anthropocentric approach to understanding the more than human world is deeply engrained within the western cultural paradigm (WCP), it is important to note the tendency toward the free disposition of land during western expansion and the significance of the transition to use-value philosophy (i.e. utilitarianism). A vehemently anthropocentric laissez-faire approach to resource conservation, free disposition of land only balanced one side of the equation and tended to create resource deficits. Failing to recognize the interconnections among society and nature, the conceptually disconnected approach to resource conservation helped initiate some of the first preservationist—conservationist debates. A more conscientious version of conservation arose from a position based on J.S. Mill’s idea of acting so as to create the greatest good for the greatest number. Under such a utilitarian approach to conservation, land and resources were managed in order to maximize social utility.

been termed preservationists, with their rejection of utilitarianism and advocacy of nature unaltered by man” (129).

Promoting wise and frugal use of natural resources for the benefit of present and future human generations (as opposed to the entirety of the biotic community), at its roots, conservation extols a utilitarian (i.e. pragmatic) view of the more-than-human world. An ideological catchall, resource conservation gathered various notions regarding the development and use of water, rangelands, and forests to promote a rational approach to the wise and efficient use of natural resources. Spearheading the early conservationist cause was Chief of the Division of Forestry¹⁶ Gifford Pinchot,¹⁷ a Yale graduate whose practice was based upon his study of forestry management practices in France and Germany. Interested in maximizing the efficient use of resources, Pinchot pioneered the *wise use* method of conservation. Following this wise use strategy, “the early Forest Service sought to improve the management of forest resources for the economic demands of ‘Progress’” (J. Steinbeck, *LSC* 130). This utilitarian method of conservation management was a crucial step in the evolution of American environmental discourse. Unlike the loot and plunder method of free land allocation that preceded it, conservation’s notion of drawing upon the bounty of natural resources while remaining cognizant of an obligation to conserve materials for future generations was essential to the development of modern environmental thought and our understanding of the finite scope of natural resources.

Pinchot and other early conservationists protected land not for nature's sake, but for people's. For early conservationists, national forests protected trees less for their aesthetic beauty

¹⁶ Established in 1905, the Division of Forestry is now known as the Forest Service; Gail Kimball, the first female to hold the position, is currently the 16th Chief.

¹⁷ Born 11 August 1865—Died 4 October 1946

or inherent worth and more to guarantee a stable supply of timber for wise use (both in the present and for future human generations). Long revered as one of conservation's foremost figures, Aldo Leopold was a pioneer in fields such as wildlife and restoration ecology who strongly influenced the development of conservational ethics and environmental decision-making. Pragmatically trained and philosophically minded, Leopold approached forest management with a unique awareness of the interdependence of environmental and social relationships. Building upon Pinchot's approach to the wise use of natural resources, Leopold's vision of holistic stewardship sought to enlarge "the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land" (204) as well as humans, in order to promote the responsible use of and care for the environment. Deeply involved in the evolution of twentieth century conservation, Leopold encouraged the thoughtful extraction of resources not simply for future human generations, but in light of our inclusion with the rest of the biotic community. Imbued with Pinchot's wise use philosophy, Leopold entered his professional career with a paradigm that required him to manage forests as if they were crops.

In one of the most important lines in environmental discourse, Leopold proclaimed, "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (224-5).¹⁸ This statement not only embodies the whole of ecological philosophy, but also signifies a shift in the conservationist approach to land management. Still largely aimed at conserving natural resources for current and future

¹⁸ Found in the closing pages of Leopold's ecological autobiography *A Sand County Almanac*, this oft-quoted remark is the distillation of 40 years of career experience and philosophical contemplation. Although not published until 1949 (the year after Leopold's death) as a component of the *Sand County* collection, the idea began much earlier. Working on the manuscript late in his life, Leopold wanted one more essay that would "integrate the various components of his argument for an ecological understanding of land and land-use" (Meine 501). In a Mendelian moment, Leopold spliced together pieces of his writing from 1933, 1939, and 1947 to create the basis for "The Land Ethic" essay.

consumption, Leopold's "Land Ethic" adjusts the wisdom of usage. Placing humans within the ecological web (as opposed to the assumption that humans exist beyond, and really above, the workings of nature), Leopold altered the conservationist conception of resource use and intimately tied the health of humanity to the health of the environment. While some may argue that the "Land Ethic" is "problematic from a philosophical point of view since, with the exception of a few references to some popular ethical traditions, it does not connect to any serious ethical theory" (Liszka 44), its influence is deeply rooted in the American environmental ideology and it continues to find widespread use during various discussions (practice-oriented land use decisions as well as more abstract ethical dialogues).

The first day of September 1867 marked the beginning of Muir's self-dedication to nature. He set out on a long walk from Indiana to Florida, which he later recorded in *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf* (1916)—a book which staunchly defends the rights of wildlife against the callous advances of man. "Now, it never seems to occur to these far-seeing teachers," Muir jotted down in his notebook, "that Nature's object in making animals and plants might possibly be first of all the happiness of each one of them, not the creation of all for the happiness of one. Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation?" Such a philosophy developed further in his final destination high in the California Sierra, where he first laid eyes on the "range of light" in 1868, six months after he had started out from Jeffersonville, Indiana. Ever the wanderer, Muir's decision to walk out of the lecture hall and into the Wisconsin wilderness marks the beginning of a pilgrimage that would last for the remainder of his life. Thought to merely have been aimlessly ambling about the countryside in the beginning, Muir's "walk into the American wilderness, for the sheer joy of it, was relatively unmediated by cultural precedents...Although he hadn't yet realized it, he, in fact, was helping

to set cultural precedent in the very journal he kept of this trip” (O’Grady 53-4). Like Pinchot, Muir wanted to expand the national forest system, but his motives were foundationally different. Muir strongly disagreed with Pinchot and the utilitarian notion of conservation. Muir thought that the wilderness areas were sacred refuges that should not be commoditized and sold like the farm crops that Pinchot (and later Leopold) advocated.

Seeking the preservation of wilderness for spiritual, aesthetic, and other nonconsumptive uses, Muir believed nature was a symbol of spiritual fact. For Muir, nature was God’s temple, complete with living pillars. Since destruction of this sacred temple was clearly a sacrilege, it was therefore essential to preserve God’s temples wherever they might be. Throughout his life Muir made exploring wilderness and extolling its values a way of life. While many of his ideas echoed the thoughts of Thoreau, Muir, the “patron saint of the American West” (McKibben 295), articulated them with an intensity and enthusiasm that demanded attention and “introduced a whole new grammar of wilderness to the world” (295-6). Although Muir did not publish a book until he was fifty-six years old and his books were only minor bestsellers during his lifetime, “as a publicizer of the American wilderness Muir had no equal” (Nash 122).

Trekking through California’s Sierra Nevada with only the sparsest collection of belongings, Muir was always sure to include *The Prose Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*¹⁹ in his knapsack. Profoundly influenced by Emerson (among other Transcendentalists), Muir carried this book with him during his countless explorations in the mountains, scribbling meditative marginalia in response to Emerson’s declarations regarding the value of wilderness. Observing an apparent disconnection between humanity and nature, Emerson writes in his essay *Nature*,

¹⁹ Published by Fields, Osgood, and Company of Boston in 1870, this text now resides in the Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library at Yale University. I am deeply indebted to Edwin Way Teale for his excellent treatment of the mutually influential relationship between Muir and Emerson.

“There is in woods and waters a certain enticement and flattery, together with a failure to yield a present satisfaction. This disappointment is felt in every landscape” (Quoted in Teale xi).

Alongside this passage, Muir scribbled his dissent remarks, “No—always we find more than we expect” (xi). Although brief, this instance of disagreement with his respected friend exemplifies Muir’s philosophical foundation that he believes “every explorer feels in Nature’s untrodden wildernesses” (*The Mountains of California* 24) which is the marriage of the divine and the natural.

The fiction of John Steinbeck has had a special appeal to the scientist (and ecologists in particular), for of all the major American writers of fiction in the 20th century, Steinbeck alone demonstrated an interest in natural science and fully displayed that interest to his writing. He was, according to several professional scientists who knew him, "a very good amateur biologist" (Benson, “John Steinbeck: Novelist as Scientist” 248). If Steinbeck is able to capture the attention of future generations of readers, much of that claim will be based on his concern with science, since he alone, among American novelists of his time, saw humans as part of the ecological whole. Considering for a moment the importance of Leopold’s *land ethic* declaration, one may wonder about a similar proclamation from Steinbeck. Echoing Leopold’s famous ethic, Steinbeck states, “Each figure is a population and the stones—the trees, the muscled mountains are the world—but not the world apart from man—the world and man—that one inseparable unit man and his environment. Why they should ever have been understood as being separate I do not know” (Beegel et al., “Introduction” 8-9). Advancing complementary theories, both men are claiming the quicker we learn that everything on the planet is in some way a part of the biotic community, the quicker we will move toward a true and universal environmental ethic. So, if two great minds are separately working toward the same ecological epiphany, why is it then that one

of these two men is revered in the annals of environmental thought and the other has been cast as a novelist who amateurishly dabbled with science?

While literature may not provide complete answers to our environmental conundrums, it is likely to provide instruction in how to reframe these issues and guide us toward new solutions. No less dramatic than many of the ideological shifts that have occurred in recent history, the environmental movement has *ecologized* almost every aspect of contemporary American culture. From advertising to politics, environmental buzzwords are an everyday part of the American lexicon. Through his writing, John Steinbeck made significant, early contributions to the evolution of American environmental thought. For whatever reasons (perhaps the subtle integration of environmental themes in his fiction with overt social criticism or the fact that he wrote only one book focused on marine ecology) Steinbeck has yet to receive an invitation to sit alongside the other giants of American environmental thought. This thesis calls for the resetting of the table where members of the environmental canon engage in perpetual discourse; certainly there is room for one more.

As a man and writer of his time, Steinbeck gave a voice to ordinary Americans and he became the social conscience of America. “With empathy and clarity he witnessed and recorded much of the political and social upheaval of the twentieth century; the Depression, World War II, the Cold War, Vietnam. And always he wrote a marvelously lucid, accessible prose” (Shillinglaw & Hearle 1). From the beginning of his career as a writer, Steinbeck embraced a dual role as both critic and champion of American culture. Just as Muir,

‘John of the Mountains,’ as he came to be known, [enjoyed] walking, climbing, pursuing his desire, to-ing and fro-ing the length and breadth of California, singing its undomesticated praises...[to become] our wilderness warbler, and

radiating from his writings is that tremendous great joy of discovering and exploring the body and soul of the beloved, (O'Grady 47-8)

Steinbeck relied upon his rich narrative to convey “A trip, a safari, an exploration...different from all other journeys” for as “We find after years of struggle that we do not take a trip; a trip takes us” (*TWC* 3). In other words, Steinbeck purposely sought to have his readers “look again, to try to rediscover” themselves, their immediate surroundings, as well as the entirety of “this monster land” known as America (*TWC* 5). Exposing our many cultural faults and failures while, at the same time, celebrating the values and goodness of American citizens, Steinbeck was (and continues to be) a celebrated master of fiction and nonfiction alike. When accepting the 1962 Nobel Prize in Literature, Steinbeck reiterated this role by proclaiming, “The ancient commission of the writer has not changed. He is charged with exposing our many grievous faults and failures, with dredging up to the light our dark and dangerous dreams for the purpose of improvement” (*A&A* 173).

As a writer, Steinbeck was part ecologist and part philosopher. From this hybrid nature arose a deep desire to understand how everything fits together. Studying marine biology and self-reflexively engaging in the critical evaluation of society, Steinbeck developed an understanding of the intimate ties that bind one thing to all other things. Following suit, it becomes necessary to live in a respectful equilibrium with the more-than-human-world. It is from this edict that the confluence of preservationist and conservationist ideologies is readily apparent. Depicting the world as an interdependent community (i.e. ecological web of life) Steinbeck stresses an approach that is perhaps best summarized as an enlightened stewardship. Metaphysically reverential of the mighty *Sequoia sempervirens* (i.e. Coast or California

Redwood) and *Sequoia gigantea* (i.e. Giant Sequoia) of his native California, Steinbeck evokes Muirian sentiments:

The redwoods, once seen, leave a mark or create a vision that stays with you always. No one has ever successfully painted or photographed a redwood tree. The feeling they produce is not transferable. From them comes silence and awe. It's not only their unbelievable stature, nor the color which seems to shift and vary under your eyes, no, they are not like any trees we know, they are ambassadors from another time. They have the mystery of ferns that disappeared a million years ago into the coal of the carboniferous era. They carry their own light and shade. The vainest, most slap-happy and irreverent of men, in the presence of redwoods, goes under a spell of wonder and respect. Respect—that's the word. One feels the need to bow to unquestioned sovereigns. (*TWC* 143)

At the same time however, Steinbeck is keen to demonstrate that his knowledge of the more-than-human world is based upon more than merely biocentric reverence. From a very Leopoldian perspective, Steinbeck meditates upon the precise and intricate position that every species holds in the interdependent and dynamic web of life,

The desert, being an unwanted place, might well be the last stand of life against unlife. For in the rich and moist and wanted areas of the world, life pyramids against itself and in its confusion has finally allied itself with the enemy non-life. And what the scorching, searing, freezing, poisoning weapons of non-life have failed to do may be accomplished to the end of its destruction and extinction by the tactics of survival gone sour. If the most versatile of living forms, the human,

now fights for survival as it always has, it can eliminate not only itself but all other life. (TWC 165)

Of course, Steinbeck considers a wide array of subjects throughout his writing, which might lead skeptics to assume a shallow depth of knowledge in any one particular category. Stephen K. George points out that although Steinbeck is most often remembered as an author of heavy-handed social commentary, he “was never a writer who fit neatly into any one category” (266). In large part, it is this versatility that can explain why many have been slow to acknowledge Steinbeck’s environmental voice. In 1962, the Swedish Academy presented Steinbeck with the Nobel Prize in Literature “for his realistic as well as imaginative writings, distinguished by a sympathetic humour and a keen social perception” (Österling 574) In fact, Steinbeck’s environmental commentary grows out of his acclaimed social critiques to create and engage larger sociocultural concerns. In light of geography, it is perhaps inevitable that *The Log from the “Sea of Cortez”* would contrast Mexican and American approaches to the more-than-human-world. However, Steinbeck addresses environmental issues with a complex understanding of the social—ecological interdependence that is on par with late 20th and early 21st century ecological knowledge. After one in a series of interactions with indigenous Mexicans, Steinbeck explains his respect and admiration for the reverent approach of the people to their surrounding while, at the same time, criticizing the naïveté of Americans.

It is said so often and in such ignorance that Mexicans are contented, happy people. “They don’t want anything.” This, of course, is not a description of the happiness of Mexicans, but of the unhappiness of the person who says it. For Americans, and probably all northern peoples, are all masses of wants growing

out of inner insecurity. The great drive of our people stems from insecurity. (LSC 81)

Steinbeck's call to change our environmental paradigm appears simple enough. While it is possible to conceptualize a complex web of life and deduce our place within such a web, taking the time to do so is another matter entirely.

A region dominated by the long sweep of the Salinas Valley, highlighted by its subterranean river and opposing ranges of mountains, Monterey County in northern California is pure and essential Steinbeck country. From this intricately textured landscape came the settings, the themes, and the symbols of Steinbeck's greatest writing. Steinbeck's overriding sense of this California quality was of central importance in shaping the philosophical themes and providing the emotional intensity in his writing. It is in this part of California that Steinbeck found the inspiration necessary to profess, "the new eye is being opened here in the west—the new seeing. It is probable no one will know it for two hundred years" (Valjean 123). This *new seeing* that Steinbeck suggested would exchange the dangerous myth of a boundless American Eden with limitless resources for the holistic ideal of commitment—commitment to what Steinbeck called "the one inseparable unit man plus his environment" (123). In nearly every piece of writing, Steinbeck strove to hold this failed Edenic myth up to the light of everyday reality and to stress the necessity for commitment to place. It is this sense of place and symbolic topography that makes the environmental ethic of Steinbeck's writing so profoundly important (albeit vastly underappreciated). Mourning the repercussions of the absence of the *new seeing* and the failure to recognize that "conservation is a state of harmony between man and land" (Leopold 207), Steinbeck offers a poignant anecdote,

A number of years ago, a newcomer, a stranger, moved to my country near Monterey. His senses must have been blunted and atrophied with money and the getting of it. He bought a grove of sempervirens in a deep valley near the coast, and then, as was his right by ownership, he cut them down and sold the lumber, and left on the ground the wreckage of his slaughter. Shock and numb outrage filled the town. This was not only murder but sacrilege. We looked on that man with loathing, and he was marked to the day of his death. (*TWC* 143-4)

Although it is sarcastically that Steinbeck acknowledges the power of land ownership here, he does indeed understand that if humanity is to continue, natural resources must be consumed. Yet, with this power also comes a great deal of responsibility. This enlightened approach to land stewardship emerges directly from Leopold's sense of true conservation. Moving beyond simply conserving land because it provides resources for us and near future generations, Leopold emphasizes that we must "quit thinking about decent land-use as solely an economic problem." (224). In order to avoid the "slaughter" of the land, we must insure that our collective senses have not "been blunted and atrophied with money and the getting of it." Unfortunately, "it goes without saying that economic feasibility limits the tether of what can or cannot be done for land. It always has and it always will" (225). Given the fact that our valuation of the more-than-human world is almost always tied to money, it is critical that we "examine each question in terms of what is ethically and esthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient" (224).

Reworking this same somber account later in *America and Americans*, Steinbeck not only conveys his criticism regarding the entrenched economic motives but also expresses a deep emotional and spiritual connection with the more-than-human world:

Quite a few years ago when I was living in my little town on the coast of California a stranger came in and bought a small valley where the Sempervirens redwoods grew, some of them three hundred feet high. We used to walk among these trees, and the light colored as though the great glass of the Cathedral at Chartres had strained and sanctified the sunlight. The emotion we felt in this grove was one of awe and humility and joy; and then one day it was gone, slaughtered, and the sad wreckage of boughs and broken saplings left like nonsensical spoilage of the battle-ruined countryside. And I remember that after our rage there was sadness, and when we passed the man who had done this we looked away, because we were ashamed for him. (*A&A* 381)

Making an economic decision irrespective of ethics or esthetics, the stranger [who clearly lacks any knowledge of the interdependent web that relates one thing with all things] waged an unholy war on the more-than-human world, disgracing a cathedral of nature. During the nineteenth century, a few hundred miles south of Monterey, Muir expressed similar sentiments about what he perceived to be sacrilegious treatment of Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy Valley,

These temple-destroyers, devotees of ravaging commercialism, seem to have a perfect contempt for Nature, and, instead of lifting their eyes to the God of the mountains, lift them to the Almighty Dollar. Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for watertanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man (*Wilderness World of John Muir* 320)

More adamant about the divine aspects of Nature, Muir understood the interconnections of existence from a deeply spiritual position and without any knowledge of ecology. Even without an ecological basis, Muir grasped the concept of holism. Muir bemoans the fact that

“most people are *on* the world, not in it—have no conscious sympathy or relationship to anything about them—undiffused, separate, and rigidly alone like marbles of polished stone, touching but separate” (*Wilderness World of John Muir* 313). It is of little wonder that we decide from this disconnected position to decimate our most revered temples in exchange for a few dollars. With his astute ecological knowledge, Steinbeck arrives at a similar holistic understanding from a foundation of spiritually influenced science:

And it is a strange thing that most of the feeling we call religious, most of the mystical outcry which is one of the most prized and used and desired reactions of our species, is really the understanding and the attempt to say that man is related to the whole thing, related inextricably to all reality, known and unknowable. This is a simple thing to say, but the profound feeling of it made a Jesus, a St. Augustine, a St. Francis, a Roger Bacon, a Charles Darwin, and an Einstein. Each of them in his own tempo and with his own voice discovered and reaffirmed with astonishment the knowledge that all things are one thing and that one thing is all things. (*LSC* 178-9)

Although many critics are quick to point out that “during his later years John Steinbeck entered a period of intense reflection that inevitably influenced his literature,” it is not as though “Steinbeck suddenly caught a moral vision the way one catches a cold—quite by accident of circumstance and condition” (Timmerman 310-11). To be fair, Steinbeck’s later works are indeed more deliberately moralistic (with *Travels With Charley* and *America and Americans* perhaps most overtly detailing Steinbeck’s thoughts regarding the human—more-than-human dynamic and the development of his environmental ethic), but this by no means suggests that his early pieces were not connected with morality. While the expression of Steinbeck’s

environmental ethic may have flowered during his final decade of writing, the intense social commentary of his early works allowed Steinbeck to nurture his developing environmental ideology. The epiphany in 1940 aboard the *Western Flyer* that “ecology has a synonym which is ALL” (LSC 72), did not spontaneously materialize out of the salty sea air. Quite oppositely, the environmental ethic that Steinbeck elaborates upon late in his career was held throughout his life and provided a thematic pattern for his literature as well as a personal creed for understanding his place in the world. Discussing the significance of ecological inquiry to Steinbeck’s development, biographer Jay Parini emphasizes the primacy of Steinbeck’s environmental ethic:

One of the more interesting phases of Steinbeck’s second major assault on the citadel of Stanford University was the summer course at the Hopkins Marine Station near Monterey...This was a seminal moment in Steinbeck’s intellectual progress, and his later concerns with ecology and the organismal nature of life have their beginnings in his course here...This period at the marine station laid the basis for his lifelong interest in marine biology...Unlike most other novelists of this century, Steinbeck was at heart a scientist, and he viewed human beings as part of a group that had to be considered, ultimately, within a general ecological perspective. (37)

While Steinbeck’s role as a writer-scientist is indeed important, it is the innovative quality of his ecological perspective that is particularly significant. Establishing Steinbeck’s philosophical place alongside Muir and Leopold, it is necessary to “appreciate the originality of Steinbeck’s ecological perspective, which ran counter to the mainstream of modernist writing, where (as in Lawrence or Joyce) the individual is commonly celebrated for his or her separateness from the crowd” (Parini 37-8).

Setting out into the Gulf of California to collect and catalogue specimens at a time when “very little was known about the marine life of the Gulf of California...except that it was a good place for big game fishing...[and that] the area had rarely been visited by scientists” (Hedgpeth 299), and then cataloguing the finding with a coherent and engaging narrative ought to be enough to position Steinbeck as a writer with serious environmental interests. The realization that the writer’s goal was to bring what was already known about the invertebrates together in an ecological context should do much to boost his eco-capital.

We were curious. Our curiosity was not limited, but was as wide and horizonless as that of Darwin or Agassiz or Linnaeus or Pliny. We wanted to see everything our eyes would accommodate, to think what we could, and, out of our seeing and thinking, to build some kind of structure in modeled imitation of the observed reality. (*LSC* 1-2)

As Steinbeck’s longest and most focused treatment of ecology, *The Log from the “Sea of Cortez”* allows him to more fully develop an environmental philosophy that is increasingly relevant to today’s environmental discourse.

Bursting with detailed observations about the natural world: the lives of ghost shrimp, sponges, crabs, oysters, worms, urchins, snails, and hundreds of other creatures, *The Log from the “Sea of Cortez”* represents Steinbeck’s clear desire to understand his place (and by extension, that of all humanity) in the more-than-human world. “Throughout the entire journey, which lasted for a month, Steinbeck and Ricketts sat on the bridge on clear nights under the stars, arguing about the nature of the universe and the way everything was mystically united in a single biosphere” (Parini 243). Emerging from this voyage was a much clearer conceptualization of Steinbeck’s notion of an ecosystem. For Steinbeck, the tide pool represents the interrelationships

of nature. In simple biology, the tide pool is an ecosystem. Each individual member (i.e. starfish, crab, anemone, etc.) serves a role essential to the community as a whole. So captivated by the pure ecological essence of the tide pool, Steinbeck professed:

Each member of the [*Pyrosoma giganteum*] colony is an individual animal, but the colony is another individual animal, not at all like the sum of its individuals. Some of the colonists, girdling the open end, have developed the ability, one against the other, of making a pulsing movement very like muscular action. Others of the colonists collect the food and distribute it, and the outside of the glove is hardened and protected against contact. Here are two animals, and yet the same thing...So a man of individualistic reason, if he must ask, "Which is the animal, the colony or the individual?" must abandon his particular kind of reason and say, "Why, it's two animals and they aren't alike any more than the cells of my body are like me. I am much more than the sum of my cells and, for all I know, they are much more than the division of me." (*LSC* 136-7)

Capable of conveying the essential and intimate characteristics of place and people with his writing, Steinbeck exhibited a unique power to evoke the principal qualities of the more-than-human world. Whether detailing an intense emotional attachment or a moment of contemplative introspection, Steinbeck's writing precisely captures the particulars of a moment in time and space. Not simply reiterating the cultural milieu, the act of writing history actively shapes the evolution of the American conscience. Fully aware of the context in which he was writing, Steinbeck does an admirable job addressing the significance of the entire range of species and actions. Small or large, each plays a vital role in the web of existence:

And if we seem a small factor in a huge pattern, nevertheless it is of relative importance. We take a tiny colony of soft corals from a rock in a little water world. And that isn't terribly important to the tide pool. Fifty miles away the Japanese shrimp boats are dredging...rapidly destroying the species so that it may never come back, and with the species destroying the ecological balance of the whole region. That isn't very important in the world. And thousands of miles away the great bombs are falling and the stars are not moved thereby. None of it is important or all of it is. (LSC 3)

This focus on purposeful science with a holistic and social conscience arises recurrently throughout Steinbeck's writing. When discussing the design, purpose, and preparation for the "makeshift expedition" early in *The Log from the "Sea of Cortez"*, Steinbeck offers some telling commentary about the differences between "dry-ball" and "true biologists" (LSC 21, 25-6).

We sat on a crate of oranges and thought what good men most biologists are, the tenors of the scientific world—temperamental, moody, lecherous, loud-laughing, and healthy. Once in a while one comes on the other kind—what used in the university to be called a "dry-ball"—such men are not really biologists. They are embalmers of the field, the picklers who see only the preserved form of life without any of its principle. Out of their own crusted minds they create a world wrinkled with formaldehyde. The true biologist deals with life, with teeming boisterous life, and learns something from it, learns that the first rule of life is living. (LSC 25-6)

From this rather pointed description of those whose profession is to explore the biosphere, we learn much about the author himself. With such a favorable portrayal of *true* aims and methods,

it seems safe to assume that Steinbeck believed he and his mates aboard the *Western Flyer* fell within the latter category. Steinbeck displays a clear respect, even an admiration, for *true* biologists and by extension, truly cognizant and contemplative scientists. Overlooked by the *dry-ball* scientists of early 20th century, the importance of reflection and awareness in science is something Steinbeck emphasized throughout his work. The marriage of Leopoldian ecology and Muirian spirituality is particularly pronounced in Steinbeck's philosophical pre-departure monologue:

‘Let us go...into the Sea of Cortez, realizing that we become forever a part of it; that our rubber boots slogging through a flat of eel-grass, that the rocks we turn over in a tide pool, make us truly and permanently a factor in the ecology of the region. We shall take something away from it, but we shall leave something too.’
(LSC 3)

In 1961, while Steinbeck was working on *Travels with Charley*, another preeminent piece of American environmental literature was being serialized in *The New Yorker*. Solidifying the popular understanding of the interdependence amongst the human and more-than-human worlds, Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* is an environmental colossus. Largely indebted to Leopold's ecological elucidation, “the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts” (203); Carson meticulously explained how Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (the synthetic pesticide better known as DDT) entered the food chain and accumulated in the fatty tissues of animals. Carson's *Silent Spring* sought to revise the American environmental paradigm and ultimately prompted a new public awareness that nature was vulnerable to human intervention. With an approach similar to Carson's, Steinbeck was searching for the essential characteristics of

America throughout his writing. Early in the poodle-accompanied trek, Steinbeck presents a highly critical view of the American consumptive connection with the land, where

American cities are like badger holes, ringed with trash—all of them—surrounded by piles of wrecked and rusting automobiles, and almost smothered with rubbish. Everything we use comes in boxes, cartons, bins, the so-called packaging we love so much. The mountains of things we throw away are much greater than the things we use. In this, if in no other way, we can see the wild and reckless exuberance of our production, and waste seems to be the index. Driving along I thought how in France or Italy every item of these thrown-out things would have been saved and used for something. This is not said in criticism of one system or the other but I do wonder whether there will come a time when we can no longer afford our wastefulness—chemical wastes in the rivers, metal wastes everywhere, and atomic wastes buried deep in the earth or sunk in the sea. When an Indian village became too deep in its own filth, the inhabitants moved. And we have no place to which to move. (*TWC* 22)

Steinbeck's focus on the consequences of a burgeoning U.S. population and the associated resource consumption and waste production was unique during the author's life (and largely thereafter as well). This is an insightful example of Steinbeck's environmental ethic. He is not only engaging the more-than-human world, but also concerned for humanity's future in an increasingly dire future. In the ten essays that comprise *America and Americans*, Steinbeck addresses socioeconomic matters, manners and morals, government and business, and other subjects, all of which play into his evaluation of the human—more-than-human dynamic and the conjoined discussion of environmental concerns. "In *America and Americans* Steinbeck traces

our failure in regard to the environment to a perfidious irresponsibility with roots in the spirit of humanity” (Timmerman 311), thereby creating a revealing work where Steinbeck “wrote and said exactly what he thought about his country” (Parini 458). Working from an ethical point of view based upon ecological principles as a rational means of achieving global understanding, Steinbeck was convinced that “materialism, and a consumer attitude toward the environment carried in its flowering the seed of destruction,” causing him to plead for “a more urgent view of community as a force that could be the planet’s and society’s salvation” (Gaither 53). Fostering community (in both the narrowest and broadest sense of the term) was, for Steinbeck, the best way to understand the symbiotic connection between society and the more-than-human world. Unfortunately, as Steinbeck dreaded and witnessed, the skewed community dynamic (both then and now) was becoming increasingly materialistic and individualistic. Without realization of the bonds to the rest of the [biotic] community, it is easy to follow a hedonistic path (individually focused utilitarianism at its most destructive) and thereby nearly impossible to develop any concern for the well-being of the more-than-human world.

Grounded in ecology and following Leopold’s “Land Ethic,” Steinbeck presents an all-encompassing ethic that holds everything on the planet to be a part of the biotic community. Moreover, it is with urgency that Steinbeck prods us to realize our own place within this web so we can move to protect the more-than-human world for its own sake, but also for ourselves. While it may seem cognitively dissonant to approach the protection of wilderness simultaneously from an ecocentric and an anthropocentric point of view, this is the very reason that Steinbeck’s environmental ethic belongs alongside the tomes handed down by the likes of Muir and Leopold. Ardently focused on creating a community with the more-than-human world in order to build a more sustainable future, Steinbeck used his writing to unite scientific and humanistic doctrines.

The fact that Steinbeck's guiding principle, his "ecological holism had not only biological but also metaphysical dimensions" (Beegel et al., "Introduction" 8), illustrates how his approach to the more-than-human world incorporates both preservationist and conservationist ideals. Much of his writing conveys the sense that nature deserves to exist for its own sake, not merely because of its capacity to provide instant resources for humanity. Imbued with Muir's emotion and reverence for the more-than-human world, Steinbeck strongly critiques the rapacious American attitude that views land merely as something to be used and abused. Speaking about the westward movement of the American population and the subsequent settlement of the "beautiful and boundless land [available] for the taking," (*A&A* 379) Steinbeck admits, "...the Americans moved like locusts across the continent until the western sea put a boundary to their movements" (*A&A* 379). Unfortunately, "It was full late when we began to realize the continent did not stretch out to infinity; that there were limits to the indignities to which we could subject it...Conservation came slowly, and much of it hasn't arrived yet" (*A&A* 380). Even more concerning for Steinbeck is the realization

This tendency toward irresponsibility persists in very many of us today; our rivers are poisoned by reckless dumping of sewage and toxic industrial wastes, the air of our cities is filthy and dangerous to breathe from the belching of uncontrolled products from combustion of coal, coke, oil, gasoline. Our towns are girdled with wreckage and the debris of our toys—our automobiles and packaged pleasures. Through uninhibited spraying against one enemy we have destroyed the natural balances our survival requires. All these evils can and must be overcome if America and Americans are to survive; but many of us still conduct ourselves as

our ancestors did, stealing from the future for our clear and present profit. (*A&A* 377)

This lament of communal irresponsibility echoes Muir's suggestion that although "no wild animal in the world is without enemies...Man is the most dangerous enemy of all" (*The Mountains of California* 234). Therefore, it should come as little surprise that the land-hunting humans

...went land-mad, because there was so much of it. They cut and burned the forests to make room for crops; they abandoned their knowledge of kindness to the land in order to maintain its usefulness...The merciless nineteenth century was like a hostile expedition for loot that seemed limitless...There has always been more than enough desert in America; the new settlers, like overindulged children, created even more. (J. Steinbeck, *A&A* 379)

At the same time, Steinbeck recognized the limitations associated with advocating an ethical position largely based upon subjective perception. Cognizant of the myriad of social ailments, Steinbeck acknowledged the challenges, from a biocentric point of view, of preserving nature. In many ways, this is representative of our current approach to the protection of nature. If a biocentric ethical position fails to convince an individual to protect nature for its own sake, environmentally minded individuals and organizations shift their approach to a rhetoric that is more tied to an anthropocentric assessment of the more-than-human world. If for no other reason, it is important to protect nature because of our interdependent connection to it. By causing harm to the more-than-human world, we are in turn causing harm to ourselves. "Steinbeck's writing grieves the loss of community and pleads once more for the connectedness of us all and the earth that sustains us" (Gaither 54).

Fully aware of humanity's assumed disconnect from the more-than-human world, Steinbeck discusses the consequences of this misunderstanding time and again. Relying upon narrative vignettes in *Travels with Charley* or more didactic prose in *America and Americans* or *The Log from the "Sea of Cortez"*, Steinbeck is constantly pushing us toward living in harmony with the more-than-human world. Based upon scientific and spiritual qualities, Steinbeck tries to raise awareness about our interdependent relationship with the more-than-human world.

Unfortunately,

Man is the only animal whose interest and whose drive are outside himself. Other animals...make little impression on the world. But the world is furrowed and cut, torn and blasted by man...And these changes have been wrought, not because any inherent technical ability has demanded them, but because his desire created that technical ability...He is the only animal who lives outside of himself, whose drive is in external things—property, houses, money, concepts of power. (*LSC* 73)

This faulty paradigm situates our economically minded land use strategies in opposition to Steinbeck's plea to live in harmony with the more-than-human world. Foreshadowing much of what Steinbeck would weave into his novels, nonfiction narratives, and essays, Muir explains both the origin of this flawed mindset and the consequences of following the unfounded prescriptions. Utilizing his witty prose and intelligent rhetoric, Muir lambastes the utilitarian (and highly anthropocentric) approach to stewardship:

The world, we are told, was made especially for man—a presumption not supported by all the facts. A numerous class of men are painfully astonished whenever they find anything, living or dead, in all God's universe, which they

cannot eat or render in some way what they call useful to themselves...the sheep, for example, is an easy problem—food and clothing ‘for us,’ eating grass and daisies white by divine appointment for this predestined purpose, on perceiving the demand for wool that would be occasioned by the eating of the apple in the Garden of Eden...whales are storehouses of oil for us...Cotton is another plain case of clothing...Iron was made for hammers and ploughs, and lead for bullets; all intended for us. (*Wilderness World of John Muir* 316)

An account of what Steinbeck, Ricketts, and some companions did and thought about while they were collecting marine animals in the Gulf of California, *The Log from the “Sea of Cortez”* is where, for the first time, Steinbeck explicitly expresses his we-are-all-in-this-together philosophy. Explaining the impetus for this voyage, Steinbeck compares the ambitions of the *Western Flyer* to those of Darwin, “He wanted to see everything, rocks and flora and fauna; marine and terrestrial...This is the proper pace for a naturalist. Faced with all things he cannot hurry. We must have time to think and to look and to consider. And the modern process—that of looking quickly at the whole field and then diving down to a particular—was reversed by Darwin. Out of long consideration of the part he emerged with a sense of the whole” (*LSC* 51). After his time drifting aboard the *Western Flyer* hoping to “fill in certain gaps in the knowledge of Gulf fauna” (*LSC* 172), Steinbeck expressed a mutually dependent notion of we. As such, man is both determined by his environment and (more than) capable of determining what his environment looks like. The removal of any one part of the interdependent system results in the collapse of the ecological web. While it does little good to conceive of a more-than-human world that was created for the limitless plundering, it is similarly ill advised to imagine that humans exist outside this web.

Now, it never seems to occur to these far-seeing teachers that Nature's object in making animals and plants might possibly be first of all the happiness of each one of them, not the creation of all for the happiness of one. Why should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation? And what creature of all that the Lord has taken the pains to make is not essential to the completeness of that unit—the cosmos? The universe would be incomplete without man; but it would also be incomplete without the smallest transmicroscopic creature that dwells beyond our conceitful eyes and knowledge. (Muir, *Wilderness World of John Muir* 316-7)

Although Steinbeck never achieves any satisfactory answer to the question of the purpose of the Gulf expedition, his comments at the end of *The Log from "The Sea of Cortez"*, are not those of resignation, but of realization. Without a large and quantifiable product, the voyage could have easily been viewed as a disappointment. For Steinbeck (and for mindful readers under the tutelage of the author) time aboard the *Western Flyer* cultivated a realization of the truly profound interconnectedness that links all people, places, and things. "Here was no service to science, no naming of unknown animals, but rather—we simply liked it. We liked it very much. The brown Indians and the gardens of the sea, and the beer and the work, they were all one thing and we were that one thing too" (*LSC* 224).

Truly Among the Giants: Steinbeck's Place as an Environmental Thinker

Despite near-universal consensus among scientists that we are on the brink of an environmental collapse (of global proportions), our society lacks the will to take collaborative action. We are collectively paralyzed by apathy, inertia, or quite simply, lack of imagination. This reconsideration of Steinbeck challenges all of us to make positive social and ecological

change. In consideration of our current ecological situation, it is simply foolish to overlook any writer who offers constructive analysis regarding our discombobulated relationship with the environment. If for no other reason than the fact that Steinbeck has a lot to say about our conceptualization and subsequent understanding of human—more-than-human relations, it is necessary to reevaluate his writing in terms of its environmental commentary and philosophy. Perhaps because of his recognition as a canonical fiction writer, Steinbeck's contribution as an environmental thinker has been almost entirely ignored. Although it may seem a bit illogical to restructure a paradigm based upon the ideas of a man who made a career out of writing stories, it is important to remember that Steinbeck has long been critically recognized for his astute social commentary. The man and author did not simply come out of nowhere. In fact,

John Steinbeck stood witness to some of the most significant upheavals of the twentieth century—the Depression of the 1930s, World War II, the McCarthy hearings, the Cold War, Vietnam. A man of compassion and intelligence, he developed into a writer who was constantly engaged with the manners, morals, and controversies of the world around him. He had the journalist's urge to participate, to see for himself. And he had the moralist's urge to comment, evaluate, and find solutions. (Shillinglaw & Benson 65)

One of the most essential functions of literature is the ability to convey intimate details of history and the intricacies of the human condition. The power of prose is truly remarkable; the cultural practices, political structures, and mundane daily activities of ancient civilizations have been recreated based upon textual evidence (e.g. Ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, the Nubian Kingdom, etc.). In short, written documents are critical to the dissemination of cultural ideologies; each writer is in a unique position where he is both being shaped by culture and is at

the same time engaging in the process of shaping culture. Therefore, a strong bond exists between narrative style and cultural philosophies. In other words, “narrative is not just aesthetic window dressing for an analytic argument...A narrative is ‘drawn from the concrete and deeply felt experience of life in this world and dedicated to a fine rendering of that life’s particularity and complexity’” (Slicer 2). Thus it was with purpose that Steinbeck hypothesized,

Something happened in America to create the Americans. Perhaps it was the grandeur of the land—the lordly mountains, the mystery of deserts, the ache of storms, cyclones—the enormous sweetness and violence of country which, acting on restless, driven peoples from the outside world, made them taller than their ancestors, stronger than their fathers—and made them all Americans. (*A&A* 403)

Commenting on the peculiarities of how the North American landscape molded the American physique and ideology, and then how the American persona has since altered that landscape, Steinbeck is aware that he is acting as both sculpture and sculptor; both an intellectual product of this process and altering the process with his writing. Precise with his words and deliberate with his commentary, Steinbeck was very aware of the strong bond between the craft of writing and the shaping of cultural ideology:

If there is magic in story writing, and I am convinced that there is, no one has ever been able to reduce it to a recipe that can be passed from one person to another. The formula seems to lie solely in the aching urge of the writer to convey something he feels important to the reader. If the writer has that urge, he may sometimes but by no means always find the way to do it. (“Art of Fiction” 11)

Closely analyzing Steinbeck’s literature not only demonstrates his philosophical position as a Muir-Leopold composite, but also emphasizes his belief in the interaction of science and

literature as a means for creating ecological awareness. Although the marriage of science and literature may often appear fraught with ideological infidelity, it is valuable to recognize that “literature and literary critics are not isolated from the ideas and products of science, and scientists do not live apart from the concepts and reality of literature” (Beegel et al., “Introduction” 23). Situated in the historical and theoretical context of the science of his time, Steinbeck’s values are a result of living a life close to nature and being passionate about community, society, science, and nature. When his writing is granted full consideration, Steinbeck’s role as a literary environmentalist becomes evident and his ideas regarding humanity’s place in the larger world leap directly from the page and into our contemporary environmental discourse. Although man’s appropriation and exploration of the more-than-human world is a resonant theme throughout much of the American literary canon, Steinbeck rejected the traditional frontier myth for a more contemplative and integrated attitude toward the land that enabled him to constructively criticize the American tendency to embrace a shortsighted anthropocentric paradigm.

For various reasons, it is important to emphasize how we think about the environment. Ideas about nature are powerful because practices follow quickly from ideas. In other words, how we think about nature guides how we act toward nature. The better the model, the better the practice. Unfortunately, we have been working with a flawed model for some time. As a consequence, our dynamic with the more-than-human world is terribly askew. Thankfully, there are numerous voices that are calling for a new model; a more comprehensive understanding of our place in the ecological web; an enlightened environmental paradigm. As Steinbeck himself reminds us, “If this is a time of confusion, then that should be the subject of a good writer if he is to set down his time” (Benson, *John Steinbeck, Writer: A Biography* 759). John Steinbeck was

undeniably one of those writers who set out to not only embody his time but simultaneously to expose the crumbling foundation of an unsound worldview. Perhaps more important is the challenge that Steinbeck issued to each of his readers to work toward positive social change. While he may have mocked his craft by claiming, “writing is a very silly business at best” because of the “ridiculousness about putting down a picture of life” (“Art of Fiction” 15), Steinbeck truly believed in the power of writing and his noble profession as a champion and critic of American culture. Continuing his sarcastic diatribe against his chosen profession, Steinbeck emphasizes the importance of writing.

Having gone through all this nonsense, what emerges may well be the palest of reflections. Oh! it’s a real horse’s ass business. The mountain labors and groans and strains and the tiniest of rodents comes out. And the greatest foolishness of all lies in the fact that to do it at all, the writer must believe that what he is doing is the most important thing in the world. And he must hold to this illusion even when he knows it is not true. If he does not, the work is not worth even what it might otherwise have been. (“Art of Fiction” 15)

The simple fact of the matter is that Steinbeck did believe in what he was doing as a writer and it made (and continues to make) a difference. Even if only to himself and a small global cadre of others, it did, and still does, matter. His ideas regarding the human—more-than-human dynamic and the American mindset were well-thought-out, contemplative, and engaging. Whether adrift in the Gulf of California, ambling about the country with a poodle in a truck named *Rocinante*, or pondering the essential qualities that comprise his country, John Steinbeck was constantly engaged in a process of reflexive inquiry. Throughout his writing there runs a deep commitment to society. Embracing all of its accomplishments and honors while

simultaneously criticizing the collapses and attempting to uplift the downtrodden, Steinbeck emphasized the oneness and interdependence of existence. In 1985 one of the foremost American ecologists, Garrett Hardin, proposed a third requirement²⁰ for a minimally educated person: “*ecolacy*, the understanding of ecology or the natural environment and our relationship to it” (Pojman 3). It seems as though Steinbeck would agree wholeheartedly with Hardin’s proclamation. The importance of environmental education and application of such knowledge simply cannot be stressed enough. Realizing the ubiquitous nature of environmental issues and attempting to solve such dilemmas is crucial for the conservation and preservation of humanity. Thankfully, momentum is building toward a paradigmatic tipping point. Even in the mid 1960s, Steinbeck could see change on the horizon.

No longer do we Americans want to destroy wantonly, but our newfound source of power—to take the burden of work from our shoulders, to warm us, and cool us, and give us light, to transport us quickly, and to make things we use and wear and eat—these power sources spew pollution on our country, so that the rivers and streams are becoming poisonous and lifeless. The birds die for the lack of food; a noxious cloud hangs over our cities that burns our lungs and reddens our eyes. Our ability to conserve has not grown with our power to create, but this slow and sullen poisoning is no longer ignored or justified. Almost daily, the pressure of outrage among Americans grows. We are no longer content to destroy our beloved country. We are slow to learn; but we learn. When a superhighway was proposed in California which would trample the redwood trees in its path, an outcry arose all over the land, so strident and fierce that the plan was put aside.

²⁰ The other two being literacy (the ability to read) and numeracy (being able to use numbers in calculations).

And we no longer believe that a man, by owning a piece of America, is free to outrage it. (*A&A* 382)

Wise enough to foresee the consequences of a Malthusian situation where power grows exponentially while conscience grows only arithmetically, Steinbeck was a true environmental visionary. Oftentimes critical of his country, Steinbeck was nonetheless enamored with America and fought vehemently against injustice. Eventually a critical mass will heed Steinbeck's call and take a collective stance, fully embracing the richness of an enlightened stewardship that is rooted in emotion, science, and ethics, hopefully sooner as opposed to later in order to protect as much of Steinbeck's beloved country as possible.

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