

Which Nature? A Case Study of Whitetop Mountain

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(Abstract)

In light of the social construction of nature, “new” ecology, and the fact that neither nature nor science (as the systematic study of it) can tell us what the Earth *should* look like, it becomes evident that numerous (if not infinite) past, present and future natures exist from which society must select the nature or natures that become the goals of local environmental management. The challenge is to find themes or patterns that might help organize and discuss these many natures. It is not enough to say or to demonstrate that many natures exist. Society needs conceptual tools that help focus the discussion of “Which Nature?” on those that are possible and socially acceptable. This paper is an effort to identify and articulate some of these themes to see if they have power in helping structure public understandings of natural landscapes. Specifically, we are looking for natures that are evident in a larger national dialogue, reflect issues that are significant to the region where the nature being managed exists, and themes that have historic and place-specific qualities that can be found in local discourse about the place. Four different but closely related points of view fit this need: *romanticism*, *ecotourism*, *pastoralism*, and *ecologism*. These four “views of nature” are distinct and coherent “ways of seeing” evident in national, regional, and local discussions about nature and natural landscapes. Each promotes a unique range of “natural” conditions that will be more-or-less possible and acceptable in any particular place. In the following sections, I will first provide a general overview of the “natural” landscape of Whitetop Mountain and then describe how it is can be seen from each of the four alternative “views of nature.”

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
“New” Ecology and the Social Construction of Nature	1
The Case Study	3
Whitetop Mountain	3
Romantic Nature and the Ideal of Wilderness	6
Ecotourism and Recreational Development	9
Pastoralism and Rural America	11
Ecological Sustainability and Biodiversity Hotspots	14
Conclusion	16
Endnotes	17
Bibliography	21
Vita	25

Introduction

People from cultures around the world view the peaks they revere in a bewildering variety of ways. Some consider them cosmic centers giving order and stability to the universe around them; others as sacred walls and pillars forming the perimeters of the world in which they live. A large number of cultures worship mountains as divine sources of water and life without which they could not survive. They are seen also as places of the hallowed dead, to be treated with caution and respect. Sacred mountains appear as gods, demons, heavens, hells, temples, houses, thrones, wombs, tombs, people, animals, birds, and flowers, to name just a few of the countless ways in which people visualize them (Bernbaum 1988, pp. 13-14).

Mountains, like all landscapes, may not be natural so much as they are cultural, they may not be physical so much as they are social, they may not be just “out there,” shaped by the wind and the rain, so much as they are given form by the ideas that exist inside our heads. What a mountain looks like will depend on the observer’s point of view and what one wants to see. Such is the case of Whitetop Mountain in the Jefferson National Forest of southwest Virginia.

In contemporary America, where “the public” is a heterogeneous composition of various cultures and unique individuals, public lands, national forests, and Whitetop Mountain in particular are “natural” landscapes that a diverse constituency of stakeholders value for conflicting reasons. Nature is contested terrain and the controversies that so often surround natural areas may be interpreted as recurring manifestations of a long-standing but largely unspoken debate concerning what is “natural,” what counts as environmental quality, and what should be the goals of management. This case study is an attempt to better understand the controversy and the implications for designing, planning, and managing “natural” landscapes.ⁱ

“New” Ecology and the Social Construction of Nature

Nature, like society’s ideas of it, is constantly changing: where nature was once thought to be balanced and pristine it is now seen to be dynamic and cultured.ⁱⁱ This “new” ecology has implications that many people have been reluctant to accept:

If change is a fundamental feature; if humans are a part of nature and anthropogenic changes are as natural as any other; if, for more than 10,000 years, there have been no large-scale, pristine, untouched terrestrial

wilderness environments (outside Antarctica); if species in communities can mix and match as they always have to form novel associations; if diversity is not necessarily essential to stability; then how can anyone express more than a personal subjective preference in declaring any change whatever that human beings may impose on landscapes as bad? What is wrong, objectively wrong, with urban sprawl, oil slicks, global warming, or for that matter, abrupt, massive, anthropogenic species extinction--other than that these things offend the quaint tastes of a few natural antiquarians? Most people prefer shopping malls and dog tracks to wetlands and old growth forests. Why should their tastes, however vulgar not prevail in a free market and democratic polity? (Callicott 1992, p. 46).

Callicott's concerns are in response to recent advancements in the ecological sciences that show society's received ideas of nature to be largely socially constructed.ⁱⁱⁱ Current ecological theory says that there is no single best, original, authentic, or correct nature, no one natural state, no ecologically optimum environmental conditions; rather, there are many possible natures that could exist and which one should exist is open to discussion.^{iv} According to this more public ecology, neither nature nor science (as a systematic study of it) can tell us what the Earth *should* look like. Therefore, discussion about what counts as environmental quality and acceptable management in natural landscapes will necessarily go beyond the science of ecology.^v

Public understandings of nature and public preferences for "natural" landscapes are mediated by a variety of cultural traditions and social aspirations. Science is only one of the many sources of influence.

[T]he environment about which we all argue and make policy is the product of the discourse about nature established by powerful scientific disciplines such as biology and ecology, in government agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency and its regulations, and in nonfiction essays and books such as Rachael Carson's *Silent Spring* and Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb*. Beyond this, the values and beliefs we hold about the environment are established through the discourse of a bewildering variety of genres, institutions, and media. For example, the value the environment holds in our culture is shaped not only by documents such as environmental impact statements, but also by books like Thoreau's *Walden: Or Life in the Woods* or television shows such as *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom* that we watched as children. The language of these various discourses determines what exists, what is good, and what is possible (Herndl and Brown 1996, p. 3-4).

This case study will explore this American environmental discourse in search of themes and patterns that explain public understandings of nature and natural landscapes. It is an attempt to make constructive the social construction of nature by providing a conceptual framework to organize public discussions of “Which Nature?”^{vi}

The Case Study

In light of the social construction of nature, “new” ecology, and the fact that neither nature nor science (as the systematic study of it) can tell us what the Earth *should* look like, it becomes evident that numerous (if not infinite) past, present and future natures exist from which society must select the nature or natures that become the goals of local environmental management. The challenge is to find themes or patterns that might help organize and discuss these many natures. It is not enough to say or to demonstrate that many natures exist. Society needs conceptual tools that help focus the discussion of “Which Nature?” on those that are possible and socially acceptable. This paper is an effort to identify and articulate some of these themes to see if they have power in helping structure public understandings of natural landscapes. Specifically, we are looking for natures that are evident in a larger national dialogue, reflect issues that are significant to the region where the nature being managed exists, and themes that have historic and place-specific qualities that can be found in local discourse about the place. Four different but closely related points of view fit this need: *romanticism*, *ecotourism*, *pastoralism*, and *ecologism*. These four “views of nature” are distinct and coherent “ways of seeing” evident in national, regional, and local discussions about nature and natural landscapes. Each promotes a unique range of “natural” conditions that will be more-or-less possible and acceptable in any particular place. In the following sections, I will first provide a general overview of the “natural” landscape of Whitetop Mountain and then describe how it is can be seen from each of the four alternative “views of nature.”

Whitetop Mountain

The vertical elevation that occurs between the South Holston River and the top of Whitetop is about 4,000 feet, essentially as much as that between Denver and the crest of the Front Range of the Rockies... not, by

any standards, inconsequential.

Dr. Richard Hoffman, Virginia Museum of Natural History^{vii}

Whitetop Mountain, the second highest mountain in the state of Virginia (elevation 5534'), boasts the highest road in the state and provides a home to rare salamanders and endangered flying squirrels. Located in southwest Virginia, just a few miles from the Tennessee and North Carolina borders, Whitetop is part of the Blue Ridge and Appalachian Mountains. Its location makes it an attractive year-round destination for visitors who value the stunning vistas and recreational opportunities offered at the summit: hiking, pleasure driving, berry-picking, camping, hunting, and nature study.

The mountain is visually unique in that much of its summit is absent of trees. The south face of the summit resembles a high alpine meadow as may be found above tree-line in the Rockies and New England. This meadow-like opening, known as a grassy bald, is a phenomenon found scattered throughout the Appalachians. No one knows for sure how this portion of Whitetop Mountain came to be bald, but a century's worth of debate has produced a variety of fascinating stories.

Of the many Native American myths that explain the origin of the Appalachian balds, two Cherokee stories are particularly interesting. The first explains the balds to be the footprints left by the devil as he stepped on the mountain in his walk across the land. The second story tells of a great, green-winged hornet, the U'la'gu'. This giant insect kidnaped children and took them away to its lair in a mountain cave. Distraught by their losses, the Cherokee appealed to the Great Spirit for aid in slaying the monster. In sympathy, the Great Spirit drew up a thunder storm and cast a mighty lightning bolt to tear open the mountain and expose the hornet to the waiting Cherokee. The Cherokee were able to slay the giant and thereby so please the Great Spirit that he rewarded them by clearing the mountaintops of trees so that they would forever be able to see the coming of their enemies.^{viii}

The origin stories submitted by the scientific community are equally fascinating. Scientists offer a variety of natural and human factors to explain how the balds were created and maintained. In the most recent theory, Weigl and Knowles (1995) speculate that the clearing may be the result of prehistoric disturbances during the glacial climatic conditions of the Late Pleistocene. Once cleared, the bald was maintained by grazing,

first by megaherbivores (giant grazers like mastodons, mammoths, and ground sloths, among others (all now extinct)), later by buffalo and elk (now extirpated from the East), and most recently by the domestic livestock (goats, sheep, horses and cattle) of European settlers. Of the scientific stories, this megaherbivore theory is certainly the most inclusive and likely to prove the most compelling.^{ix}

Beyond the bald, except for scattered shrub communities, the remainder of the mountain is forested. Red spruce occupy the summit and uppermost elevations of the mountain. At lower elevations, the spruce give way to northern hardwoods (beech-birch-maple). Further down the slope the northern hardwoods are replaced by tree species more typical of the region (oak, hickory, poplar).^x

People visit the bald and forested summit of Whitetop Mountain for a variety of reasons. Local residents drive the 2-mile gravel road to the summit for picnics, reunions, and chance meetings. Local and non-local recreationists either hike, bike, or drive to reach the spectacular views, abundant wildflowers, and delicious berries. Amateur astronomers, appreciative of the clear night skies, come in winter to gaze at stars. Hunters in search of game explore the mountain off trail. Technicians frequent an electronics compound located at the summit where a variety of equipment keeps tabs on such things as ozone, acid rain, air traffic and communications. Biologists visit the summit to study the ecosystems and species maintained by the grassy balds and northern forests.

The mountain is a local landmark. The summit not only marks the intersection of three counties (Grayson, Smyth, and Washington), but also provides a gathering place for local residents who have long enjoyed meeting on the mountain for social occasions. At various times in the past, a resort hotel, dance hall, milk farm, summer cattle grazing, and other cultural activities have occurred on the mountain. Earlier in this century, when the mountain was still private property, the land owner operated a toll booth and charged a fee to access the summit (Price 1970). Activities such as driving to the top of the mountain to watch the sun glisten off of a heavy frost are part of many resident's cultural heritage (USFS 1995b, p9). Large crowds have been known to congregate for three annual festivals: Ramp Festival, Naturalist Rally, and Sugar Maple Syrup Festival. The shared memories that result from these cultural activities enhance the physical presence of the mountain to provide local residents with a source of pride. People are proud of the

place they call home when they know that others come from miles away to visit their local mountain. In a letter to the USFS, one local resident wrote, “We are very proud of Whitetop and frequently boast of its beauty to tourists.”^{xi} Included among the tourists is First Lady Roosevelt who upon visiting the region chose Whitetop Mountain as the one local place worth stopping.^{xii} In this sense, the mountain provides a physical location around which community takes place.^{xiii}

In addition to its local significance, Whitetop is of interest to a regional and national constituency. In the early 1970s, the United States Forest Service (USFS) purchased the summit and higher elevations of Whitetop Mountain from its private owners and incorporated the area into the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area (MRNRA), a district of the Jefferson National Forest (JNF). This change of hands, from private to public and local to national, marks a significant point in the changing public perceptions and use of the mountain. The constituency with an interest in the mountain changed and grew overnight. Soon thereafter, the USFS began removing buildings, cattle, and “unnecessary” evidence of humans. The mountain was cleaned up, sanitized, and made to appear natural.^{xiv} More recently, with the rise of global environmentalism, the mountain is once again experiencing a shift in meaning from national recreation area to global biodiversity reserve such that the mountain is now promoted as a unique ecosystem, a rare and unusual specimen of nature.^{xv}

While Whitetop may be a significant “natural” area, it is also a place well-known and appreciated for its cultural heritage. Public perceptions and representations of the mountain are ever-changing, and stakeholders would be wise to remind themselves that any one portrayal of the mountain is likely to be only one of many possible descriptions. In the heartfelt words of one USFS employee, “We all love Whitetop, it’s just that we love it in different ways.”^{xvi} In the following sections, I will describe the mountain as it can be seen from four very different points of view.

Romantic Nature and the Ideal of Wilderness

In the mid 1800s, Charles B. Coale wrote a number of essays about Wilburn Waters, “The Famous Hunter and Trapper of White Top Mountain” (Coale 1878). In his accounts, Coale depicts Whitetop Mountain as a haven of Edenic proportions. He

portrays the mountain as a “fastness,” a stronghold to which men retreat, escaping the strictures of society in search of a more fulfilling life. In Coale’s stories, the trip to Whitetop Mountain is a difficult pilgrimage. The mountain “is approached through deep and intricate gorges, over steep foot-hills, and through almost impenetrable laurel jungles, sometimes infested by bears, wolves, wild-cats, and rattlesnakes.” But once attained, Whitetop provides “luxuriant growth,” “fruits in never-failing abundance,” “waters so pure and light they never oppress,” and “exhilarating effects.” The image that Coale creates is a pious depiction of Whitetop Mountain as the very epitome of God’s Creation. Coale was writing in the mid to late 1800s, at the height of the Romantic period and his colorful descriptions of Whitetop may tell us less about the mountain than they do about the idealized version of Nature championed by poets, painters, and promoters of this tradition.

Romanticism “resists definition,” but is a view of the world based on several well-rooted strands of aesthetic and spiritual thought in the Western tradition (Nash 1983). Organicism, primitivism, and the sublime are among the many sensibilities that coalesced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a coherent Romantic Movement. The movement emerged principally in literature but spread throughout the arts as a response, both negative and challenging, to the increasingly godless, inorganic and urbanized world produced by ever expanding technological developments of science, industry, and rationality (Oelschlaeger 1991). Coale’s Romantic contemporaries in America included the likes of Emerson, Thoreau, and Muir. In their writings, and in many instances of their daily lives, these romantics expressed an enthusiasm for the “strange, remote, solitary, and mysterious,” and preferred their nature to be wild, rejecting “meticulously ordered gardens” in favor of the “unkempt forest” (Nash 1983, p. 47).

In America, the Romantic affinity for a living, wild, and sublime natural world gave rise to an impassioned constituency of nature preservationists who organized a successful political campaign to protect natural areas in the form of National Parks and Wilderness Areas. This campaign reached a climax with the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964. Today, more than 100 million acres of land in the U.S. is protected as federally designated Wilderness. According to the contemporary legal definition, “wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the

landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (Wilderness Act 1964).^{xvii} This American “wilderness” and “idea of wilderness” are arguably two of the Romantic movement’s greatest cultural achievements and, for many twentieth century Romantics, Nature--pristine and undisturbed by humans--has become the ideal American landscape.

Whitetop Mountain, which adjoins a federally designated Wilderness Area, is often mistaken for something it is not. To those living outside the region, Whitetop Mountain, like the whole of the Jefferson National Forest, appears as a “green dot” on the map and people who are unfamiliar with the history and changing land uses of the mountain may idealize the dot as a few shades greener than it actually is. On the other hand, well-informed individuals and dedicated organizations such as Preserve Appalachian Wilderness (PAW) and Virginians for Wilderness continue to lobby for minimized human presence and action on the mountain despite the current lack of political support for federal wilderness designation at Whitetop Mountain. These Romantic environmentalists consider motorized access and roads in particular inimical to wilderness and they have expressed a strong preference for closing and removing the gravel road leading to Whitetop’s summit. This preference, which is supported by a large constituency, is frequently heard in public comments submitted to the USFS. For instance, in one recent letter, a PAW representative wrote,

... I remember hiking to Whitetop from the west. I thought I was in paradise until I heard the roar of an automobile—I hadn’t realized that there was a road up there. Up the road came the automobile, churning up the dust as it spun along. The driver was some fool who probably hadn’t gotten any exercise in years, except in his right foot. He didn’t stay very long. He just left his car in idle and looked out of the tinted window. Then he turned around and left.... It was much better before he came.^{xviii}

In reality, nature is seldom as pure as this ideal. And recently, the idealized “American wilderness” has been criticized as little more than a myth, a cultural artifact and an icon of national identity, held up and exalted by a society that is alienated from the reality of nature. This critique condemns wilderness as a potentially dangerous ideal, one that blinds its admirers to the sobering concern that all of the earth’s many landscapes,

not just wilderness, are in need of protection and care (Cronon 1995, Callicott and Nelson 1998).^{xix} Despite Romantic ideals of wilderness and regardless of this recent critique, leaving Whitetop in the hands of Nature has never been what the USFS had planned for the mountain.

EcoTourism and Recreation Development

Designation of this area as a national recreation area with its accompanying management programs will emphasize its capacity to meet the ever-growing outdoor recreation needs of our people, aid in conserving its special botanical and ecological features, and promote public awareness of the scenic beauty, and the recreation fields it offers. (Freeman 1966, p. 5)

Whitetop Mountain—located midway between Shenandoah National Park and the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, near the crossroads of Interstates 77 and 81, and within a day’s drive of Washington, D.C. and over half the population of the U.S.—has long been a regional tourist attraction. As previously mentioned, the mountain was once home to a resort hotel and dance hall and, throughout this century, tourists have visited the summit for sightseeing, pleasure driving, hiking, camping, hunting, star gazing, and picnicking. Prior to the 1970s, the mountain was privately owned, access was restricted, and visitors attempting to reach the summit were required to stop at a toll booth and pay a fee. In 1966, Congress established the Mount Rogers National Recreation Area (MRNRA) in southwest Virginia, and Whitetop began to experience the first aspirations of becoming a significant regional tourist attraction.

Congress established a National Recreation Area surrounding Mount Rogers and Whitetop Mountain “in order to provide for the public outdoor recreation use and enjoyment of the area... and to the extent feasible the conservation of scenic, scientific, historic, and other values of the area...” (US Congress 1966). This national effort to develop regional outdoor recreational resources in Appalachia has roots in Depression Era state-federal cooperative recreational planning efforts, such as the Civil Conservation Corps, the Works Progress Administration, and the Tennessee Valley Authority programs. More directly, the federal government’s establishment of a National Recreation Area in southwest Virginia served as a complement to the pro-development

initiatives of the Appalachian Regional Commission and can be viewed as part of a national effort to modernize Appalachia.^{xx}

The development of recreational resources in Appalachia has long been held by some state and federal government officials and private-sector businesses to be a positive approach to the region's problems of chronic underemployment and low incomes (Raitz and Ulack 1984, p. 262).

Promoters of development have long characterized Appalachia as impoverished, if not degenerate, and the MRNRA was cast as an economic asset that would "materially advance the local economy" by providing an infrastructure to benefit the region "both immediately and in the long run through the inflow of funds and the accelerated development and intensified administration and the upbuilding of a permanent economic base oriented to full utilization of all the national forest resources" (Freeman 1966, p. 115). According to these initial plans, the MRNRA was intended to "accommodate a diversified and, in places, intensive recreational use," including: 900 family camping units, a ski area, reservoir, and Scenic Highway for an anticipated 5 million visitors by the year 2000 (Sarvis 1994, p. 44).

Consistent with this development-oriented conservation agenda, early USFS proposals for tourism and recreation opportunities at the summit of Whitetop Mountain involved three stages (USFS 1978, pp. 92-93). Stage One was intended to accommodate the then existing use (late 1970s). Developments in this early stage were to include: temporary parking for 50 cars, sanitary facilities, and a central garbage collection system. Stage Two proposed more significant and controversial development to be implemented when visitation exceeded 200 people at one time on an average weekend day. At such time, a parking area for approximately 100 cars would be built, a new road constructed, and a shuttle bus service initiated to transport visitors the last mile from the parking area to a new observation facility at the summit. There were also plans for a restaurant, craft shop, and restrooms to be constructed. Stage Three anticipated further developments (including a mysterious "self-supporting public conveyance") and was to be initiated when the average day use regularly exceeded 400 visitors at one time.^{xxi}

Public comments regarding these early plans, encouraged the USFS to scale back their proposed developments. In the 1981 Final Plan, the USFS proposed only two stages of development and made no mention of a restaurant, craft shop, or public conveyance.

Thus far, visitation has remained well below projected levels and the USFS has yet to fully implement any of these stages. Economic recession (in the 1970s), local opposition to “improvements,” and “increasing attention from state and national groups who challenged the NRA development on environmental grounds” are three factors that largely account for these undeveloped proposals (Sarvis 1994, p. 53). However, it should be noted that the gravel road to the summit is “the heaviest used forest development road” on the MRNRA (USFS 1995a, p. 56) and several factors--a boost in the regional economy, an increase in the regional population, changing local demographics (due to a new back-to-the-land movement composed largely of retirees and telecommuters), and an increasing demand for outdoor recreation opportunities^{xxii}--may yet contribute to increased use and development.

Further development at Whitetop is a contentious issue. Despite extensive public involvement in early planning efforts, many of the currently involved constituents are unaware that these development proposals exist. For instance, two otherwise well-informed local residents, who regularly participate in USFS decision making processes, were shocked to hear of these plans. In a letter to the USFS, they wrote: “If improving the road will eventually result in any of those projects, heaven help Whitetop! It sounds terrible.”^{xxiii} Clearly, there are locals and non-locals alike who value the mountain for its non-developed, and yet non-wilderness, qualities.

Pastoralism and Rural America

[T]he question is, will this area remain a rural Appalachian underprivileged area, which I believe most people want, or will it be allowed to be commercially developed and destroy our mountain culture?

Reverend William Gable^{xxiv}

Like wilderness, tourist development catering to urban recreationists and other outsiders may not fit with many local resident's expectations of the landscapes in which they live. Local residents value Whitetop Mountain, Appalachia, and the landscapes of rural America for their qualities of cultured naturalness. Pastoral is a phrase that describes a middle landscape that is lived-in, storied, made complete and unique by the presence and actions of local people who care. Unlike the romantic and touristed natures discussed above, cultured nature is a place where people live, work, *and* play.^{xxv}

Pastoralism is another idealized view of nature that proved controversial in a "Rural Americana" theme promoted by the USFS in early plans for the MRNRA. According to a plan written in 1968,

the meaning of Rural Americana is to restore, recreate, and perpetuate those elements of early rural America which have had a lasting charm and attraction. Virginia's verdant pattern of field and forest, the covered bridge, rail fences, the old mill, the stone-iron furnaces all exist near the NRA and have a strong appeal (USFS 1978, p. 81).

This theme recognizes the local cultural heritage of the region and gives special emphasis to "civilized man's use of the area" in the years between 1776 and 1950 (USFS 1978, p. 107). In later plans, the name was changed to "Rural America," but the theme continued to idealize the landscape of Whitetop Mountain and Appalachia as a sparsely populated region characteristic of an earlier, and perhaps better, American life. According to the USFS,

In some places it's almost as if time has passed the area by and life is still very much as it was in the early days of our nation.^{xxvi}

This thematic attempt on the part of the USFS to capture “the atmosphere of a bygone era” and provide for visitors “nostalgic expectations” of early American life is an impulse that derives from a long-standing pastoral tradition in Western civilization.

Aesthetic appreciation of the pastoral is a tradition with roots in Greek poetry. Beginning with Theocritus’ *Idylls*, in the third century BC, the pastoral developed over the course of several thousand years from a strictly literary into a broad artistic tradition, with eventual influences on early American Jeffersonian ideals of the agrarian landscape (Marx 1967; Short 1991).^{xxvii} In the words of Leo Marx (1967, p. 141),

Beginning in Jefferson’s time, the cardinal image of American aspirations was a rural landscape, a well-ordered green garden magnified to continental size. Although it probably shows a farmhouse or a neat white village, the scene usually is dominated by natural objects: in the foreground a pasture, a twisting brook with cattle grazing nearby, then a clump of elms on a rise in the middle distance and beyond that, way off on the western horizon, a line of dark hills. This is the countryside of the old Republic, a chaste, uncomplicated land of rural virtue.

In Jefferson’s mind, there was “no condition happier than that of the Virginia farmer” and this agrarian ideal of Americans and the American landscape is one that has infused the national identity throughout the past several hundred years (Jacob 1997, pp. 6-10).

In late twentieth century America, the pastoral has come to mean “the real or symbolic landscape images in which nature predominates as a tended pattern, where human intervention is usually obvious but appears gentle and nonabusive” (Schauman 1998, p. 189).^{xxviii} This appreciation of the pastoral image, which is evident in early USFS descriptions of the current and desired conditions of the MRNRA landscape, not only reflects, but also produces the landscape conditions that currently exist at Whitetop. Not only did the USFS maintain the existing pastoral features of the landscape, but in some settings they actually removed incompatible features (including several buildings) and added others that were more appropriate to the ideal (such as split rail fencing and visual buffers).

The Rural America theme calls for period farms representing every fifty years from 1776 to 1950 to be included in the interpretive program of the MRNRA (USFS 1978). While this proposal does not target specific locations, Whitetop Mountain would be a prime candidate for such an interpretation. Period farms are reminiscent of

Whitetop's earlier days, when the bald served as a commons area for pasturing cattle during the summer months and a mink farm occupied space within the spruce forest.

Local community festivals further contribute to the American pastoral image in the Whitetop landscape. The Whitetop Sugar Maple Syrup Festival is a springtime event celebrating the harvest of Whitetop's "Sugar trees." The festival provides the opportunity to display related aspects of the local culture, including arts and crafts, "Old Time Banjo" and "mountain music played in the traditional style," and real working "draft horses" (Blanton 1978).

Pastoralism and the Rural America theme, as aesthetic expectations for the countryside, are "basic factors underlying a host of land-use decisions and controversies" (Schauman 1998, p.188). Locals and people from outside the region each occupy different points of view and, while the Rural America interpretation is seen by its promoters as a way to preserve the pastoral qualities of the Whitetop landscape (albeit while attracting visitors and enhancing the local economy), others will perceive it as a form of development which makes a patronizing sideshow of local life while exploiting both the natural and cultural heritage of the mountain (Sarvis 1994, pp. 50-1).

Ecological Sustainability and Biodiversity Hotspots

Whitetop Mountain... is of exceptional biological interest because of the number of organisms which occur nowhere else in the state, most of them associated with elevations above 4,000 feet. Some represent northern forms which extend southward along the higher parts of the Appalachians but the majority are species endemic to the southern Appalachians which extend no further north.

Dr. Richard Hoffman, Virginia Museum of Natural History^{xxix}

In 1995, the USFS produced a document titled the Whitetop Opportunity Area Analysis (WOAA) (USFS 1995a). This document was intended to describe the current and desired future conditions at Whitetop Mountain. In its opening statements, the WOAA characterizes Whitetop as a place of "exceptional biological interest," and devotes the vast majority of its 100+ pages to describe the mountain as a unique natural (biological and physical) phenomenon. Unlike earlier USFS plans, the WOAA all but ignores the local cultural heritage (past, present, and future) of the mountain. This

oversight may not be intentional so much as it is simply typical. Ever since and even before the first Earth Day in 1970, natural resource professionals (including the USFS) have been increasingly predisposed to see the places they manage through an ecological lens. Such is the case with Whitetop Mountain.

Despite the extensive resource extraction and repeated clearcutting that has occurred throughout Appalachia, the region is considered by conservation biologists to be a globally significant biodiversity reserve. This is particularly true for places like the summit of Whitetop Mountain, which has remained relatively undisturbed. Both the grassy bald and the spruce forest at the summit of Whitetop are relict landscapes, rare habitats left over from a pre-historic glacial age. Grazing and fire (both natural and anthropogenic) have served to maintain the pre-historic openness of the grassy bald and the spruce forest is one of only a small number of old-growth forests remaining in the eastern United States. Taken together these two relict landscapes which co-exist at the summit of Whitetop Mountain are valued by biological conservationists as a unique ecosystem and a truly unusual specimen of nature.^{xxx}

Any number of more-or-less scientific reasons have been used to argue for the protection of nature at Whitetop. Both the grassy balds and the spruce forests and many of their attendant species are rare and therefore are often classified as endangered, threatened, or sensitive.^{xxxi} The balds, spruce forests, and associated species are endemic and “range restricted,” which means that not only do they exist in few other places, but there are very few other places where they are even able to exist (White and Sutter 1998; Pyle and Schafale 1988). Conservation biologists have identified the spruce forest as a critically endangered ecosystem, and a forest type that is in rapid decline (Noss et al. 1995; Noss and Scott 1997, p. 244; Nicholas et al. 1999). Other scientists claim that the Appalachian region surrounding Whitetop Mountain is but one of only twelve remaining areas in the lower 48 that is large enough and intact enough to maintain viable populations of large vertebrates (Salwasser et al. 1987; Salwasser 1988).

In response to such concerns, citizen activists, ecological scientists, and natural resource professionals have joined in a campaign to promote and protect the biodiversity and ecological integrity of the Appalachian region and its special places like Whitetop Mountain. The Appalachian Restoration Campaign (ARC) “cites the failure of traditional

efforts to conserve biological integrity through piecemeal and reactionary attempts at conservation and responds with landscape approaches to protect biological diversity and natural evolutionary processes” (ARC 1998).^{xxxii} This desire on the part of the ARC for systematic “ecosystem management” is an increasingly popular approach to conservation, one that encourages environmental decision makers to consider their actions within the context of ever larger scales of space and time.^{xxxiii}

“Think globally, act locally” may be a popular environmental mantra, but there is a certain danger in its simplicity. When a specific place, such as Whitetop Mountain, is conceptualized within larger scales of space and time, its unique particulars (including the humans who call it home) necessarily become increasingly abstract as they are simplified and categorized to fit within an evermore general and theoretical model of the larger region. While this process may serve the professional planners’ and decision makers’ psychological and intellectual needs for cognitive simplicity, unique places like Whitetop suffer the consequences. Reducing the uniqueness of a place like Whitetop Mountain in order to have it fit within a category, labeled either “natural” or “cultural,” is at least a gross oversimplification if not clearly a distortion of reality. Landscapes at all scales are both natural and cultural, they are unique and ultimately irreducible. To this end, biological conservationists should be aware that privileging biodiversity at the expense of cultural diversity tends to polarize discussions of “Which Nature?” by pitting Humans and Nature against one another such that one can flourish only with the demise of the other. This leads to a sort “jobs versus the environment” mentality which is an unfortunate and unnecessary conclusion for our society to reach.

Biocultural sustainability has been offered as an alternative conservation agenda; one which strives to recognize human society as an integral component of ecological systems and find ways for people to interact with and live sustainably within natural areas. Biocultural sustainability is increasingly accepted by the international conservation community which has long recognized the limited opportunities for and effectiveness of biodiversity reserves that disallow human occupation and livelihood (i.e., National Parks and Wilderness Areas).^{xxxiv} In recognition of this trend, the Appalachian Restoration Campaign and its affiliates are promoting themselves as conservationists whose aim is “to establish an interconnected system of buffered ecological reserves ... in which human

activity is compatible with ecological restoration” (ARC 1998). While forward-looking and admirable in regards to issues of environmental and social justice, such goals are not easily achieved. As mentioned above, the nature-culture dichotomy is a powerful heuristic and, in the contested terrain of Whitetop Mountain, an obstacle not easily overcome.

Conclusion

The Southern Appalachian region harbors the most biologically diverse flora and fauna in North America, along with remnants of old-growth forest, and a rich cultural heritage. But air and water quality are degraded, exotic species threaten its native ecology, and economic growth promises many changes for the region—for better or worse, depending on your outlook (LeQuire 1999, p. 1).

In light of the social construction of nature, “new” ecology, and the recognition that neither nature nor science can tell us what the Earth *should* look like, stakeholders involved in the design, planning, and active management of natural landscapes must necessarily engage in a public dialogue about “Which Nature?” This paper is an attempt to facilitate this dialogue by illustrating alternative constructions of nature using Whitetop Mountain as a case study. I have tried to show how one “natural” landscape—Whitetop Mountain—can be seen differently by the many people who care about it. *Romanticism*, *ecotourism*, *pastoralism*, and *ecologism* are four distinct but closely related “views of nature,” each of which promotes a different set of environmental conditions at Whitetop. Alone, each of these views of nature offers a different answer to the questions what is “natural,” what counts as environmental quality, and what are the goals of management.^{xxxv} Taken together, they begin to provide a framework that helps to explain diverse public understandings of nature and conflicting management preferences for natural landscapes like that of Whitetop Mountain.

Endnotes

ⁱ In recent years, Whitetop Road, which leads to the mountain's summit, has been a point of much contention. In the early 1990s, the USFS recognized "damages" due to vehicular use of the mountain and decided to temporarily and seasonally close Whitetop Road. While this decision pleased many stakeholders, others were vehemently opposed to the change. The USFS soon reconsidered and reversed its decision. These events which occurred from 1991 to 1995 remain salient and may yet to be fully resolved. The controversy (which occurred mostly on paper in the form of letters and litigation, see MRNRA files) embroiled and polarized a community of people all of whom care about the mountain. In retrospect, and from afar, it is easy to recognize the Whitetop Road Controversy as a latent conflict which, although aroused by the closure and subsequent reopening of the road, was fueled by diverse stakeholders disparate ideas of nature and the naturalness of Whitetop Mountain. If environmental decision making intends to transcend environmental dispute, much of which has been characterized as "irreconcilable" conflict, then stakeholders must be able to engage in meaningful and constructive dialogue. Both misunderstanding and disagreement contribute to dispute/conflict. Therefore, the ability to better see the values and beliefs behind one's own and others' management preferences may open the door to dialogue. For recent discussions and examples of environmental debate and controversy see: conflict: Wondolleck (1988) and Crowfoot and Wondolleck (1990); "irreconcilable conflict": Moore (1990); deer, hunting, and watershed management: Dizard (1994); old-growth and forest management: Langston (1994) and Proctor (1995).

ⁱⁱ A number of scholars have noted what appears to be a shift in the scientific and popular understanding of ecology from notions of balance, stasis, and climax to those of chaos, disequilibrium, and flux. This shift, if it does exist, seems to parallel other "postmodern" developments in contemporary society. "New ecology" and the "social construction of nature" are topics of endless debate. There is a growing body of literature from a variety of disciplinary perspectives attached to each of these phrases. For an introduction to what some scholars are calling the "new ecology" see Zimmerer (1994). On the issue of nature being socially constructed, the question is not so much whether or not nature is socially constructed but to what degree. Arguments ensue and because of the multiple language communities involved, they have a tendency to be confusing. In a recent book titled, *What is Nature?*, philosopher Kate Soper (1995) uses the concepts of "nature-endorsing" and "nature-sceptical" to bring a fresh perspective to what is often a tiresome and certainly an ancient debate. For discussions of the social construction of nature that are more explicitly applicable to natural resource management see Cronon (1995) and Soule and Lease (1995). These two books approach the topic from somewhat different points of view and each is an edited collection that includes essays from a number of disciplinary perspectives. See also: Shrader-Frechette and McCoy (1995); Shrader-Frechette (1995).

ⁱⁱⁱ Undoubtedly, making the claim that nature is socially constructed will raise eyes, if not hair, on all sides of the environmental arena. Yet this statement need not be so troubling. When we say that nature is socially constructed we are simply saying that nature means a variety of things to a variety of people. We are simply saying that there are many aspects of nature that can be described, studied, managed or restored and which nature is selected depends upon the people who pick it, their agendas, and their expectations of it. To say

that nature is socially constructed means that members of society draw on a variety of personal and cultural ideas to construe (explain, make sense of, interpret, think about, talk about) what nature is, how nature works, why nature changes, and the appropriate relationship between humans and nature. To say that nature is socially constructed is not to claim that physical reality does not exist, rather it is simply to say that what we know about the world out there is informed by ideas of the world that exist inside our heads. Nature is socially constructed to the extent that we use our languages, theories, and methods to understand it. This “antiessentialist” argument is well-stated by Escobar (1999).

^{iv} Hull and Robertson (2000) discuss this argument in a forthcoming book chapter.

^v People are understandably uncomfortable when confronted with such constructivist arguments of nature, ecology, and science. Some ecologists view the constructivist argument as threatening, if not absurd, because it implies sharing with nonscientists the responsibility, the power and the privilege of defining what’s best. Experts and the lay public alike find the constructivist position unsettling because it forces them to abandon the belief that nature (and science) knows best: the belief that if we learn enough about nature we will be able to discern objective criteria for deciding which state/type/quality of nature should be present on the land. More practically, the constructivist position is uncomfortable because it squarely places responsibility for decisions about environmental quality on the shifting sands of the political process and public negotiation.

^{vi} Using case studies to make constructive the social construction of nature is the implicit goal of much recent scholarship (Crumley 1994; Shrader-Frechette and McCoy 1994; Escobar 1999; Norton and Hannon 1997; Harraway 1991). These scholars (each in their own way) have critiqued the nature-culture dichotomy as a conceptual barrier to ecological sustainability. Despite their good intentions, these environmentally-minded scholars, who strive to problematize the purity of “nature” (as a category) by discussing its cultural aspects (materially and ideally), are often seen as undermining the hard-won achievements of the environmental conservation movement. These often misunderstood scholars are simply trying to make the “question [and discussion] of nature” more sophisticated.

^{vii} As quoted in USFS Whitetop Opportunity Area Analysis (WOAA) (USFS 1995a, p. 3).

^{viii} There are many versions of these stories, many of which are contested. The degree to which these stories predate European influence is debatable. For more of these stories and an explanation of their problematic interpretations, see, in particular, Gersmehl (1970, pp. 45-69) and also Smathers (1981).

^{ix} Summaries of the scientific theories can be found in: Gersmehl (1970) White and Sutter (1999), Peterson (1981), and Smathers (1981). Other stories include the legends told by European settlers and the narratives posed by local authors. These stories contribute to an on-going debate concerning the origin of the Appalachian balds, much of which is focused on whether the balds are “natural,” due to Native American influences, or caused by early European settlement. Despite extensive study and discussion within the scientific community, there remains no consensus concerning the origin of the Whitetop bald. While there is no consensus as to the origin of the Appalachian grassy balds, there is wide agreement that active management is required to arrest forest succession of these

clearings. The balds will not remain bald unless they are actively managed. Management options include: prescribed burning, livestock or wildlife grazing, herbicides, and mechanical or manual mowing. The Whitetop bald is currently maintained through prescribed burns, but prior to the 1970s livestock grazed the area. For a thorough discussion of the balds as a regional management issue see White and Sutter (1999).

^x Biological surveys include the WOAA (USFS 1995a), an environmental assessment (EA) (USFS 1995b), and assessments produced by the Virginia Department of Conservation and Recreation, Natural Heritage Division (VDCR, NHD): VDCR (1994) and (1996).

^{xi} Letter to USFS regarding Whitetop Road decisions, dated 2/1/95 (MRNRA Files).

^{xii} See Kendra et al. (1998) and letter to USFS regarding Whitetop Road decision, dated 1/27/95 (MRNRA Files).

^{xiii} Much information about the cultural heritage of Whitetop Mountain was collected during interviews with local residents conducted by the author and colleagues as part of a larger study in 1997-98. See Kendra et al. (1998).

^{xiv} The USFS vegetative management plan for the bald says that the spruce forest will be “staggered” and “unevenly spaced to give a soft feathered natural appearance” to the edge of the bald (USFS 1995a, appendix C).

^{xv} The USFS, environmental NGOs, and some local residents are promoting this image. This promotion is discussed in following sections of this paper.

^{xvi} Personal communication with USFS line-officer at MRNRA (1998).

^{xvii} The Eastern Wilderness Act (1975) is a more realistic expectation of the pristineness of wilderness conditions. This Act of Congress provides for the restoration of wilderness conditions to anthropogenically disturbed areas and thereby recognizes both the creative and destructive potential of humans in the natural landscape (Hendee et al. 1990).

^{xviii} Letter to USFS regarding Whitetop Road decisions, undated (MRNRA Files).

^{xix} In a recent anthology titled, *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, Callicott and Nelson (1998) include a variety of new and reprinted articles on this topic. Perhaps Thoreau was displaying more foresight than that for which he has already received credit, when he made the statement, “In wildness [not necessarily wilderness] is the preservation of the world.”

^{xx} Arguments put forth in this paragraph are based on Sarvis (1994) and appendices to the MRNRA Plan (USFS 1981).

^{xxi} These proposed tourism development plans are consistent with the USFS Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS) setting characterization of Whitetop Mountain as “Roaded Natural.” According to this classification, the USFS sees Whitetop Mountain as an area “characterized by predominantly natural appearing environments with moderate evidences of the sights and sounds of man. Such evidences usually harmonize with the natural environment. Interaction between users may be low to moderate, but with evidence of other users prevalent. Resource modification and utilization practices are evident, but harmonize with the natural environment. Conventional motorized use is provided for in construction standards and design of facilities.”

^{xxii} Highway 58 which provides access to Whitetop Mountain is being upgraded and, in 1998, more than \$1 million of federal money was appropriated for improvements to a Rails-to-Trails project adjacent to the mountain (Boucher 1998).

^{xxiii} Letter to USFS regarding Whitetop Road decisions, dated 8/12/93 (MRNRA Files).

^{xxiv} As quoted in Sarvis (1994, pp. 50-1). According to Sarvis (1994) Reverend Gable was a relative newcomer to the Whitetop area, an exurbanite who relocated to rural Appalachia.

^{xxv} The phrase “cultured naturalness” was generated from interviews with local residents of the MRNRA landscape (Hull, Robertson, and Kendra 1999).

^{xxvi} This quotation (attributed to the USFS) and the following sentence are taken from a 1973 Richmond *Times-Dispatch* article which highlighted the “battle” between the USFS and local residents for ownership of the land within the MRNRA boundaries (Basgall 1973).

^{xxvii} Short (1991, p. 28) notes that “the term ‘idyll’ is now used to refer to an idealized picture of a country scene.”

^{xxviii} Schauman (1986) is careful to point out that contemporary countryside ideals involve at least three dimensions: agrarianism, ruralism, and pastoralism; which she identifies as distinct conceptual categories. Along similar lines, Tuan (1974, p. 112) writes that appreciation of the countryside reflects three distinct images: “shepherds in a bucolic landscape; the squire in his country estate reading a book under an elm; and the yeoman in his farm.”

^{xxix} As quoted in the executive summary of the WOAA (USFS 1995a, p. 3).

^{xxx} Biodiversity hotspots are landscapes of high species diversity and endemism that have been identified by conservation biologists and biological conservationists as globally significant (i.e., of “universal” value) based on the biological wealth they offer to the global environment. Mittermeier et al. (1998) identify 24 biodiversity hotspots scattered around the globe that “contain no less than 50% of all terrestrial biodiversity in only 2% of the land surface of the planet.” With “hotspots” as its guiding principle, this conservation agenda focuses its efforts on “areas with the greatest concentration of biodiversity and the highest likelihood of losing significant portions of that biodiversity...” (Mittermeier et al. 1998, p. 516). While neither the SA region or Whitetop Mountain in particular make the “top 24,” the region and the mountain are widely considered to be both nationally and globally significant biodiversity conservation areas. Red spruce forests are a classification of forest type found in the central Appalachian Mountains of West Virginia. Whitetop Mountain is the only occurrence of Red Spruce forest in Southern Appalachia. In this sense, it is an anomaly (i.e., rare) as the forests found in similar and adjacent high elevations are of the Spruce-Fir classification (Nicholas et al. 1999; Pyle and Schafale 1988).

^{xxxi} Classified PETS (“proposed, endangered, threatened, and sensitive”) species include: northern flying squirrels, salamanders, a variety of birds and plants. See assessments referenced in endnote #6.

^{xxxii} This conservation strategy is closely aligned to the Wildlands Project proposals for the Appalachian region (Mann and Plummer 1993) and the Southern Appalachian Man and the Biosphere (SAMAB) project (Randolph et al. 1999; Hinote 1999).

^{xxxiii} It is an approach which has been adopted by the USFS, corporate land owners, and others under the guise of “ecosystem management.” Ecosystem scale approaches to management are made appealing by the development of the field of landscape ecology and global information systems (GIS) technologies.

^{xxxiv} Biocultural sustainability is a conclusion that is being reached from at least two perspectives, one predominantly biocentric and the other anthropocentric. These two

perspectives may have more in common than they tend to realize. While there may be considerable agreement about what is to be conserved, disputes continue to arise as to why and for whom conservation should take place.

^{xxxv} What counts as environmental quality and acceptable management differs according to each view of nature: *romanticism*: little management, little evidence of humans, natural or naturally-appearing change is acceptable; *ecotourism*: environmental change is tolerated to the extent that it increases access and recreational opportunities without degrading the amenities tourists seek; *pastoralism*: small-scale management reflecting traditional landuses is acceptable; *ecologism*: active management is acceptable to mitigate impacts from invasive species, to protect PETS species, and to meet ecological restoration goals.

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