



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 **Appreciating Wilderness**
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 28-35)

Suggested Articles:

📖 **In Harmony with Nature**
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 50-53)

📖 **Becoming Mindful of
Creation**
(*Caring for Creation*,
pp. 65-72)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Appreciating Wilderness

The term “wilderness,” which is so multi-faceted today, extends beyond its original implication of a wild, savage land. The scenic wonders of designated wilderness areas link with ordinary oak forests and cattail marshes adjoining suburbs into a natural tapestry that is a spiritual resource, an interactive exercise in understanding God’s will and original intentions for creation.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Psalm 104:1-24

Reflection

“The concept of a designated wilderness is among the most American of environmental values. It’s been embraced by governments on all continents as they struggle to provide recreation for their increasingly urban populations and mitigate the impacts of human development on the earth’s many ecosystems,” Susan Bratton observes.

What specific places of the world come to mind when you hear the word “wilderness”? Why are they valuable to you? Bratton suggests that “for today’s Christians, wilderness still provides an opportunity for reflection and allows us to tap the deepest roots of our spiritual heritage.”

An avid hiker as well as research scientist, Bratton has surveyed and interviewed many hikers along the Appalachian Trail which extends 2200 miles through the mountains of the eastern United States. The further they have trekked, the more spiritual engagement these hikers typically report, whether their personal walk with God is at a stage of “exploration (examining the spiritual self), relation (recognizing and accepting the transcendent), maturation (growing in understanding), [or] incorporation (thinking about ministry to or care for others).”

To help us more fully appreciate wilderness areas – both for the spiritual engagement they can foster and for other values intrinsic to their ecology – she encourages us to take these steps.

- ▶ *Become clear on the changing meaning(s) of “wilderness.”* Our word comes from *wilddeoren*, an Anglo-Saxon term for a place where savage beasts dwell. Translators of the King James Version of the Bible used it to render words that mean desert or grazing land, not totally uninhabited places. The later idea of “wilderness as free of humanity is a construct of colonization and industrialization,” Bratton notes. And today we use the term more broadly for “natural areas with little human development. The managers of the Appalachian Trail, for example, honor wilderness values, even if most of the trail does not traverse ‘legal’ wilderness.”
- ▶ *Reflect on the positive roles of wilderness in Scripture and Christian tradition.* Several poems like Psalm 104 and Job 38-41 celebrate wild places. “The Old Testament associates intentional journeys into the wilderness...with opportunities to escape threat, gain courage, and communicate with God,” Bratton writes. Prophetic sojourns in the wilderness often featured “a direct encounter with God or God’s messengers.” In the wilderness God formed the nation of Israel and later prepared young David for leadership. These themes of divine encounter and spiritual formation echo



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in the New Testament when Christ rebukes Satan in the desert, or appears transfigured before his disciples on the mount.

Fourth-century Christians moved into the deserts of Egypt and Palestine to resist temptation, concentrate on godly work, and practice continual prayer. Bratton writes, "The passion for the desert spread north with Christian evangelists to boreal forests and chilly lochs" when eighth-century Celtic Christians valued remote hermitages. "While the first non-conformist Protestants rejected the monastic vocation," she admits, "they accepted Sunday strolls as a legitimate break from the week's labor and for enjoyment of creation." Later, Christian artists like Thomas Cole (1801-1848) would glimpse God's providence and blessing in the scenic landscape of New England.

- ▶ *Experience wilderness for ourselves.* "Wilderness offers beauty and value beyond the things and goods we personally own or control," Bratton reminds us. For families who cannot afford to travel to remote protected areas and large nature reserves, she commends regular visits to hike through local city parks or to explore local wetlands that serve, for many migratory species, to link the great protected natural areas. She concludes, "Just as in our other relationships – those with God and other people – when we care in a thoughtful and informed way [for this tapestry of natural areas], we receive much joy and beauty in return and our own lives are much enriched by the effort."

Study Questions

1. How does Psalm 104 extol wild places and wild creatures? How are humans and their needs included in the picture?
2. Select one of these stories that involve a wilderness sojourn – Hagar (Genesis 16:1-13), Hagar and Ishmael (Genesis 21:8-21), Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-17), Jesus (Mark 1:12-13; Matthew 4:1-11), or Jesus and three close disciples (Matthew 17:1-13). How do the persons encounter God? How are they changed?
3. When you have visited or studied a wilderness area, how has it changed you? Do your experiences match some of those reported by Appalachian Trail hikers to Bratton?
4. Did a friend, an author, or a person you met on the way guide your early experiences of wilderness? How can you share this ministry of vision and appreciation with others?
5. Follow Heidi Hornik's lead in "In Harmony with Nature" to consider how Thomas Cole depicted humans in relation to wilderness. What vision for American society was the artist commending in *The Oxbow*? Does it have merit today?
6. In "Becoming More Mindful of Creation" Wes Smith describes how Christian organizations such as A Rocha and Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies are working to help Christians value the natural world around them. Discuss how these organizations might lead you and your congregation to take the next step toward appreciating wilderness.

Departing Hymn: "Chosen in Creation's Plan"

Appreciating Wilderness

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss meaning of wilderness; roles in Scripture & tradition	Discuss members' experience of wilderness and plans to care for it
Questions 1, 3, and 4	Questions (selected)	Questions 1, 2, and 5	Questions 3, 4, and 6
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To explore the role of wilderness in the biblical narrative.
2. To consider the value today of wilderness areas and the tapestry of connecting forests and marshes – both for the spiritual engagement they can foster and for other values intrinsic to their ecology.
3. To discuss how to we can learn to appreciate and care more for wilderness areas.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 6-7 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Caring for Creation (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Thomas Cole (1801-1848) was the founder of America's first art movement, the Hudson River School of painters. This group of artists, Heidi Hornik explains, "maintained studios in New York City, but travelled throughout New York State from the spring through the fall making drawings of the beautiful and unique landforms. These drawings then served as the basis of large paintings executed during the winter months in their city studios."

As they sought to develop a characteristic "American" art genre, the Hudson River School artists were influenced by "the interpretation of the American landscape as a manifestation of God's creation." In his "Essay on American Scenery," Cole, an Englishman by birth, explains:

...whether [an American] beholds the Hudson mingling waters with the Atlantic – explores the central wilds of the vast continent, or stands on the margin of the distant Oregon, he is still in the midst of American scenery – it is his own land; its beauty, its magnificence, its sublimity – all are his; and how undeserving of such a birthright, if he can turn towards it an unobserving eye, an unaffected heart!

In this study Susan Bratton guides us to appreciate the designated wilderness areas and tapestry of connecting lands around us as wonderful manifestations of God's creation.

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to open your eyes and heart to appreciate wilderness areas as windows onto God's will and original intentions for creation.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 104:1-24 from a modern translation.

Reflection

As we learn to appreciate and value the interwoven created order, we will be more drawn into God's plan to care for it, both its cultivated and uncultivated parts. This study focuses on appreciating and caring for some of the most uncultivated parts of Earth – its wilderness areas. The next two studies, "Faithful Eating" and "Doing Good Work," turn to valuing and caring for the human cultivated landscape.

If your group would like to extend their study of the appreciation of wilderness, you might explore the roles of wilderness in Scripture and Christian tradition in the first session and then discuss your experience of wilderness areas and strategies to care for them in a second session.

Study Questions

1. Psalm 104:1-24 extols features of the sky (heavens, clouds, rain, lightning, sun, moon, and the deep), wild lands (mountains, springs, forests), and wild animals (asses, birds, storks, wild goats, coney, and lions). But it also includes cultivated fields, domesticated cattle, and human cultivated foods (wine, oil, and bread). The psalm goes on to mention the sea and its many creatures, especially the awesome Leviathan. God cares for them all.
2. Hagar is driven into the wilderness by Sarah when she is pregnant and later when her son Ishmael is very young; in each case an angel appears unexpectedly to care for her and renew God's promise to her and Ishmael. Elijah runs to the wilderness to escape Queen Jezebel's wrath; an angel appears unexpectedly to care for him, and then God appears to him as a "sound of sheer silence" and promises to care for him. Jesus' disciples are surprised by Christ's transfiguration, the appearance of Moses and Elijah, and the voice of God from a bright cloud; they return with an understanding of Jesus' mission. Jesus, by contrast, knows what to expect in the wilderness and on the mount; he is confirmed in his mission.
3. Encourage members to share their experiences and compare them to those reported by Appalachian Trail hikers to Susan Bratton. "A heightened perception of the presence of God or of the divine in nature" was commonly mentioned, and a few hikers reported "intense numinous experience, visions of God, or direct encounters with the divine." Their experience was related to their previous religious commitments, prayerful preparation, and amount of time and effort expended in the wilderness. A sense of humility, thoughts of caretaking, personal peace, and assistance in negotiating a significant life transition were common.
4. First experiences in wild places can be disorienting and fearful, so we are more comfortable with a knowledgeable friend or guide (either personal or in a guidebook). Our guide knows how to deal with changing circumstances, teach us what to look for and how to appreciate it, and share their enthusiasm for wilderness places. Encourage members to name and thank God for their wilderness guides, and then consider how they can share their knowledge and enthusiasm with family members, friends, and members of the congregation.
5. The single figure in the painting (the artist, Cole, with his canvas) is very small, and the human farms and buildings are small in the distance. Yet the artist enjoys his work (he turns to smile directly at the viewer), and the humans are "living in such harmony with nature that their habitation blends into the beautiful surroundings," Heidi Hornik notes. She quotes Cole's description of the iconography of the painting (*Caring for Creation*, 53). "A great debate was raging at the time between Americans in favor of a Jeffersonian agrarian society and those advocating for a Jacksonian *laissez-faire* economics that embraced unrestricted industrial, commercial, and financial development," Hornik reports. "Thomas Cole was an early environmentalist who found the rapid destruction of the wilderness abhorrent. *The Oxbow* clearly pronounces his personal preference for the wilderness, while championing the virtue of an agrarian civilization in which Americans respect their covenant with God."
6. Wes Smith describes how A Rocha and Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies are helping church members develop an "apologia of earth-care and...theology of ecology," experience wilderness at their research centers and also explore the places where they live, educate themselves and others about environmental concerns, and form communities of earth-keeping in their congregations. Consider his recommendations for how your congregation can take another step toward accomplishing these four related tasks.

Departing Hymn

"Chosen in Creation's Plan" is on pp. 43-45 of *Caring for Creation*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.