

**The Geography of Hope**  
**By**  
**Daniel E. White January 19, 2026**

Wallace Stegner, Pulitzer-Prize winning novelist, wrote about people who “declare our dependence on the Earth and our responsibility for it” in an essay titled *It All Began with Conservation*. Stegner went on to state that “We are still in transition from the notion of Man as master of Earth to the notion of Man as a part of it.”

Such authors as Edward Abbey (*Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness*) and Aldo Leopold (*A Sand County Almanac*) are luminaries in the literature about conservation and wilderness. Stegner was more well-known for his fiction: *Angle of Repose*, *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, *Crossing to Safety*, *The Spectator Bird*, among many other titles. But, beginning in the 1960s, Stegner also wrote prolifically about environmental issues. He brought to his essays, non-fiction books and novels a passion for the West unparalleled in the American literary scene.

In 1960, in the midst of the campaign to persuade Congress to pass The Wilderness Act which had been debated for years, Stegner wrote a letter to David Pesonen, a UC Berkeley professor charged with working on a portion of the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission’s report focused on the wilderness. The letter became known as “The Wilderness Letter,” well-known to generations of environmental activists, and, in the 1960s, read on occasion by Interior Secretary Stewart Udall as the text of speeches Udall gave in defense of public lands in general and wilderness in particular.

Stegner began his letter: “If I may, I should like to urge some arguments for wilderness preservation that involve recreation, as it is ordinarily conceived, hardly at all. Hunting, fishing, hiking, mountain-climbing, camping, photography, and the enjoyment of natural scenery will all, surely, figure in your report. So will the wilderness as a genetic reserve, a scientific yardstick by which we may measure the world in its natural balance against the world in its man-made imbalance. What I want to speak for is not so much the wilderness uses, valuable as those are, but the wilderness idea, which is a resource in itself. Being an intangible and spiritual resource, it will seem mystical to the practical-minded—but then anything that cannot be moved by a bulldozer is likely to seem mystical to them.”

In short, Stegner maintained that simply the *idea* of wilderness was valuable. To know that there are still great tracts of wilderness preserved is important for our spiritual well-being, even if we never set foot in them ourselves.

Later in his letter, Stegner proposed, “Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed...never again [to] have the chance to see ourselves single, separate, vertical, and individuals in the world, part of the environment of trees and rocks and soil...part of the natural world and competent to belong in it.”

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Stegner’s letter concluded: “We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the **geography of hope**.”

In “Community or Commodity” (3/13/23), I wrote, “The record of people who have come before us, as stewards of the land, is spotty, at best. Even indigenous peoples have cut down forests to use the wood or exterminated species in a quest for agricultural land or food. Today there are those who scar the land or pave it over, destroying more land. People have given ample evidence of their ability to do great harm, failing to consider the consequences.”

Aldo Leopold would call such destruction a violation of the “love and respect” that are an “extension of ethics.”

Leopold added, “As the population of the planet expands, preserving large tracts of natural space becomes more challenging. But I do believe that, when it comes to stewardship of the land, ensuring that those who come after us do not inherit a completely spoiled planet, however one defines that, is a community effort.”

I returned to the topic in July 2024, writing: “In a letter to Congress in 1913, the editor of *Century* magazine, Robert Underwood Johnson wrote:

‘I am aware that in certain quarters one who contends for the practical value of natural beauty is considered a ‘crank,’ and yet the love of beauty is the most dominant trait in mankind. The moment anyone of intelligence gets enough to satisfy the primal needs of the physical man, he begins to plan for something beautiful—house, grounds, or a view of nature. Could this be capitalized in dollars, could some alchemy reveal its value, we should not hear materialists deriding lovers of nature with any effect upon legislators. Without this touch of idealism, this sense of beauty, life would only be a race for the trough.’” “Economics of Beauty.” (7/29/24)

And just last summer, “The plants in Madera Canyon and the quail population, insofar as we know, do not think about their position in the natural world. Humans do and have done for our entire history. In all likelihood, figuring out our relationship with nature or whether there are absolutes or not will be the lot of humanity well after we are gone.” “Letting Nature Be.” (7/21/25)

You and I live in interesting times. The geography and the wilderness idea in which we can find hope have transcended scores of “interesting times.” If we are successful stewards in our time, they will transcend scores more. I find comfort in that connectedness—to the past, to the future, to the land, to the wilderness idea—and in that, hope.

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