PERSPECTIVE

Sustainable Land Stewardship In the Adirondacks

Christian Wilderness Ministries Are Generating Hopeful Approaches to Creation Care

By GREGORY E. HITZHUSEN

Abstract

Religious responses to environmental concerns are on the rise, and one area where faith-based environmental efforts may have particular promise in the Adirondacks is in environmental wilderness ministries. Increasingly, Christian camping and wilderness ministries have incorporated environmental themes to foster environmental citizenship. This development counters the tradition of environmentalist thinking that emphasizes the alleged environmental negativity of Judeo-Christian views on nature, such as Roderick Nash's popular indictment of biblical views in Wilderness and the American Mind. *Biblical scholarship reveals a more positive legacy. As exemplified by Camp Fowler near Speculator, New York, environmental wilderness ministries foster a range of virtues conducive to sustainable community development and land stewardship.*

Religious communities have become crucial players in local and global efforts to respond to environmental concerns, and faith-based environmental efforts may have particular promise in the Adirondacks. As an Adirondack pastor stated in these pages 10 years ago, churches are working to preserve both the community and the environment, making them one of the best institutions for supporting sustainable development and improving the lives of Adirondack residents, while preserving the unique natural environment of the area.[1] Some environmentalists have traditionally criticized biblical environmental values, but recent initiatives to address climate change, environmental justice, and other ecological issues underscore just how prevalent religious attention to the natural world has become. Christian organizations and denominations have taken the lead in many of these areas.[2] One genre of programs that show particular promise, especially in the Adirondacks, is Christian environmental wilderness ministries.

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Wilderness ministries are an outgrowth of outdoor and camping ministries that have long been an important part of the American religious landscape. As city, state, and national nature parks were established to balance nineteenth and twentieth century development and industrialization of the continent, camping and retreat ministries evolved from their tent-revival precursors and became institutionalized as outlets for retreat, renewal, education, and recreation. With the rise of environmental concerns and the popularization of wilderness recreation in the 1960s and 1970s, many church camps developed wilderness programs. Some of these programs retain a focus on spiritual conversion,[3] others highlight the role of adventure in spiritual formation more generally,[4] and some pursue an ecological focus alongside these other goals. Ecologically speaking, this latter category is of most interest, particularly as it represents a transformative and ethically rooted source of environmental education. But notably, successful programs of this type often retain a primary focus on spiritual experience and relationship with God, mediated through adventure or retreat experiences in Christian community, and then integrates ecological questions and lessons accordingly.[5] The National Council of Churches (NCC) has recently developed a wilderness study resource[6] for individuals and congregations that follow a similar logic. The NCC resource encourages wilderness exploration and ministry in the tradition of Jesus and his disciples' frequent retreats to wilderness, where thoughtful reflection can empower environmental awareness and action.[7]

The potential for ecological wilderness ministries in the Adirondack Park seems high. No place in the eastern United States has better access to protected wild lands, nor as rich a wilderness history. In addition to local churches, the Park is home to many camp and retreat centers with the capacity for wilderness ministry. And as resources like the NCC's wilderness primer multiply, churches and religious camps gain the support needed to add such

programming to their repertoire. Thus the infrastructure already exists to incorporate Christian environmental and wilderness ministries. At the same time, the unusual coexistence of private and wild land in the Adirondacks, and the management challenges that come with it, suggest another advantage of church-based environmental programs. Where environmental advocacy efforts (like other single-issue concerns) can become narrow and polarizing, church-based environmental ministries are more likely to be informed by and complement the churches' other social and community improvement ministries. The successful development of environmental and wilderness ministries, attuned in this way to complex social factors, can strongly complement other efforts to establish environmentally sustainable communities in the Adirondacks.

Some environmental advocates, especially those schooled in the tradition that sees Judeo-Christian teaching as environmentally antagonistic, may resist this endorsement of religious communities as partners in land stewardship. Some might fear that biblical views are biased toward development values over conservation values, or that biblical perspectives make a poor foundation for land stewardship ethics. For instance, the classic text on wilderness, Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*, leaves the impression that biblical doctrine is negatively disposed, if not hostile toward wilderness, and has been the major force justifying disregard for wild land in the Western world.[8] Though much of Nash's theological critique has been eclipsed, his claims remain influential in environmental preservationist thinking in the United States, and deserve a closer look in order to address lingering skepticism.

Nash's interpretation of biblical perspectives on land was remarkably damning, and scholarly rebuttals such as Susan Bratton's thorough refutation have done little to unseat the impressions left by Nash.[9] Yet Nash could only achieve such a dramatically negative interpretation of biblical traditions by selective reporting. Nash began by suggesting that biblical usage of the term "wilderness" typically connotes a "wasteland," when in fact the only Hebrew term translated as wilderness that shares roots with the concept of "waste" is used less than one percent of the time.[10] Nash also curiously claimed that already in Genesis the Bible establishes wilderness as the immoral, evil abode of the devil, the precise antipode of paradisiacal Eden. To make this case, Nash contrasted scriptural descriptions of Eden with those of wastelands. But in fact the Eden story in Genesis makes no mention of wilderness. And the single verse Nash used to demonstrate the supposed contrast ironically is one where the prophet Joel laments the devastation of green wilderness pastures by locusts.[11] Perhaps more critically, Nash blurred the boundaries between land types, conflating the relationship of indigenous Hebrew tribes to the desert wilds of the ancient Near East with the recent American ideal of pristine parklands. Obviously biblical references to harsh, desert environs, eons before the advent of recreational backpacking and the need to preserve wild lands from twentieth century population and development pressures, reflects an entirely different context than that of the contemporary American mind.

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To be fair, Nash did note some of the positive dimensions of biblical traditions regarding land. In fact, Nash reviewed the primary implications of the biblical wilderness texts: the wilderness is a place of sanctuary, where people draw close to God, a place of testing to develop humility, and a place of discipline and spiritual formation. Many prophets spend time in wilderness, and some call the people to return to wilderness for their own sake. But Nash's conclusion to this suggestive summary is that Hebrew tradition had no fondness for wilderness itself. Similarly Nash highlights the use of wilderness in the New Testament era to foster purity and simplicity, for sanctuary and revitalization, and for testing, as in Jesus' preparation for ministry. But Nash again judges these themes in a negative light, implying wilderness as a place of evil and hardship. These selective readings seem odd today, but they made perfect sense to readers in the counter-cultural heyday of 1967, the same year that Lynn White Jr. published his famous thesis blaming Judeo-Christian values for the modern ecological crisis. In fact, Nash cited White to corroborate his own interpretations, but White's claims have not held up to scrutiny, either.[12] Indeed, if Nash's and White's misapplied blame is removed, these several gifts of wilderness suggest much of the basis for biblically rooted wilderness ministries.

A particularly good example of a biblically based wilderness ministry can be found at Camp Fowler, a Reformed Church of America denominational camp located on Lake Sacandaga, near Speculator, New York. Director Kent Busman has been implementing an ecologically progressive vision for the camp since becoming director in 1987.[13] Fowler's wilderness programs contribute to a holistic ecological and community ethos based on Christian principles. Teen participants in Fowler's Outcamps program engage in spiritual reflection as they journey through the wilderness, learning about God and God's creation, and humans' role as its stewards. Like the Israelites finding their identity in the Exodus, or Jesus demonstrating (and

solidifying) his character through wilderness experiences, wilderness ministry participants are empowered to live in a graceful relationship between people, land, and God, just as biblical covenants intended. These ideals are reflected in the character of the camp. Fowler employs solar panels, organic gardens, green purchasing, and composting to meet its material needs, teaching that "matter matters" but that human flourishing does not require every "bigger, better, and faster" product advertised by the media. Through such creation care ministries, living simply, and building community, Fowler demonstrates that the church brings good news to all creation, as commended in Mark 16:15, and hopes to encourage faithful lifestyles outside of camp.

Fowler's appreciation of natural resources has a certain resonance in the Adirondacks, where so much of the American wilderness ethic was created and refined, but where the preservation of wild land is uniquely entwined with the presence of human communities. Adirondack resident and writer Bill McKibben describes a similar hopefulness in many examples of creative approaches to land and human community health in the Adirondacks and elsewhere, and commends such laboratories as signposts for the future.[14] Fowler's approach to land management, while respecting a relatively undisturbed place for wilderness, also evokes the gardener's ethic described by Michael Pollan in his aptly titled work *Second Nature*,[15] an ethic that points beyond old dichotomies between preserved land and developed land. Attending to the genius of a place like the Adirondacks, as Pollan would advise, suggests deemphasizing agricultural development of marginal Adirondack farm lands, maintaining sustainable forestry, and cultivating a comparative advantage as a recreational and spiritual site.

Fowler is exemplary particularly in applying the spiritual advantages of wilderness ministry to transform the camp community and by extension, the communities of Fowler's visitors. The same potential applies to local churches: wilderness ministries can help inspire a range of creation care actions, both locally and beyond.[16] As land development and resource use increase, the challenge of protecting wild lands for their ecological, economic, recreational, spiritual, and aesthetic values becomes perennial. Local and global environmental issues will not go away. But churches in the Adirondacks are not "environmental organizations" with a single focus, rather they are places where people's economic, social, political, spiritual, and recreational lives intersect. Churches are thus in a unique position to reflect upon and engage the relationships between the Adirondack economy, its wild resources, and the hope of sustainable communities, human and wild.

As communities in the Adirondacks seek to flourish and endure, church-based environmental ministry can provide a compass to help orient and guide the journey.

Wendell Berry's remarks about the value of wilderness retreats are apt. Berry states:

> We go to wilderness places to be restored, to be instructed in the natural economies of fertility and healing, to admire what we cannot make. Sometimes, as we find to our surprise, we go to be chastened or corrected. And we go in order to return with renewed knowledge by which to judge the health of our human economy and our dwelling places.[17]

The path to sustainable communities, regardless of the technical and managerial competence it will entail, will require spiritual sustenance, which religious communities are uniquely qualified to provide. The "promised land"—the desired goal—may not be something we can entirely envision in the present. As communities in the Adirondacks seek to flourish and endure, church-based environmental ministry can provide a compass to help orient and guide the journey.

Notes

1 Arnold, E. 1997. Sustainable Community Development: The Churches' Stake. *Adirondack Journal of Environmental Studies*, Fall/Winter.

2 A few recent examples include the collaboration of evangelicals and scientists (http://chge.med.harvard.edu/media/releases/jan_17.html) to address global environmental issues, the Evangelical Climate Initiative (http://www.christiansandclimate.org), the Noah Alliance (http://www.noahalliance.org), the growth of the National Council of Churches Eco-Justice Programs (http://www.nccecojustice.org), the Healthy Families, Healthy Environment ministry (http://healthyfamiliesnow.org), Interfaith Power and Light (http://www.theregenerationproject.org), and the work of the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (http://www.nrpe.org) and the Forum on Religion and Ecology (http://environment.harvard.edu/religion/main.html) more generally. Parallel efforts in other religious traditions are also highlighted by some of these sources, and also by the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (http://www.arcworld.org/), the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life (http://www.coejl.org/), and the Islamic Foundation for Ecology and Environment Sciences (http://www.ifees.org).

3 For example, Climbing for Christ (http://www.climbingforchrist.org).

4 Examples include the Christian Adventure Association (http://www.cwlc.net), Wheaton College's HoneyRock program (http://www.honeyrockcamp.org), and the wilderness ministries of Sunnyvale Presbyterian Church (http://www.svpc.us/wilderness.html).

5 Hitzhusen, G. E. 2005. Understanding the Role of Spirituality and Theology in Outdoor Environmental Education: A Mixed-Method Characterization of 12 Christian and Jewish Outdoor Programs. *Research in Outdoor Education*, 7:39–56.

6 "Out of the Wilderness: Building Christian Faith and Keeping God's Creation" can be downloaded alongside other resources at http://www.nccecojustice.org/resources.html.

7 Examples of land stewardship advocacy arising from such an approach include http://www.christiansforthemountains.org,

http://www.nccecojustice.org/landbaucasletter.htm, and http://www.emoregon.org/pdfs/MtHood_Wilderness_Spiritual_Values.pdf.

8 See Nash, chapter 1, "Old World Roots of Opinion" in *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 2001).

9 Bratton, S. P. *Christianity, Wilderness, and Wildlife: The Original Desert Solitaire* (Scranton, PA, University of Scranton Press, 1993).

10 Nash grossly overstated the connection by focusing on the one percent. *Midbar* is the main Hebrew term translated as wilderness (more than 250 uses in the KJV), and it refers to uninhabited land, land where wild animals live, or land for grazing. Desolation and waste are derived from different Hebrew terms. The exception is the Hebrew term *yeshimown,* which does suggest a waste, but is used only twice to refer to wilderness (four times for "desert") in the RSV translation Nash referenced. See http://www.nccecojustice.org/wilddefs.htm for further commentary.

11 In what is nearly a reversal of Nash's point, Joel 2:3 laments the devastation of the landscape, including wilderness. The agents of devastation are locusts, which make the green pastures of the wilderness desolate. The contrast in the text between an Edenic garden and a desert waste accentuates the difference between the land before and after the locusts destroy it. The story has a happy ending, though: at the end of the chapter God declares: "Be not afraid, O wild animals, for the wilderness pastures are becoming green." That is, God is restoring them to the way they were before the locust plague.

12 Cross-national and U.S.-based research has refuted White's thesis. For a review of relevant studies, see Hitzhusen, G. E. 2007. Judeo-Christian theology and the environment: moving beyond skepticism to new sources for environmental education in the United States. *Environmental Education Research*, 13(1):55–74.

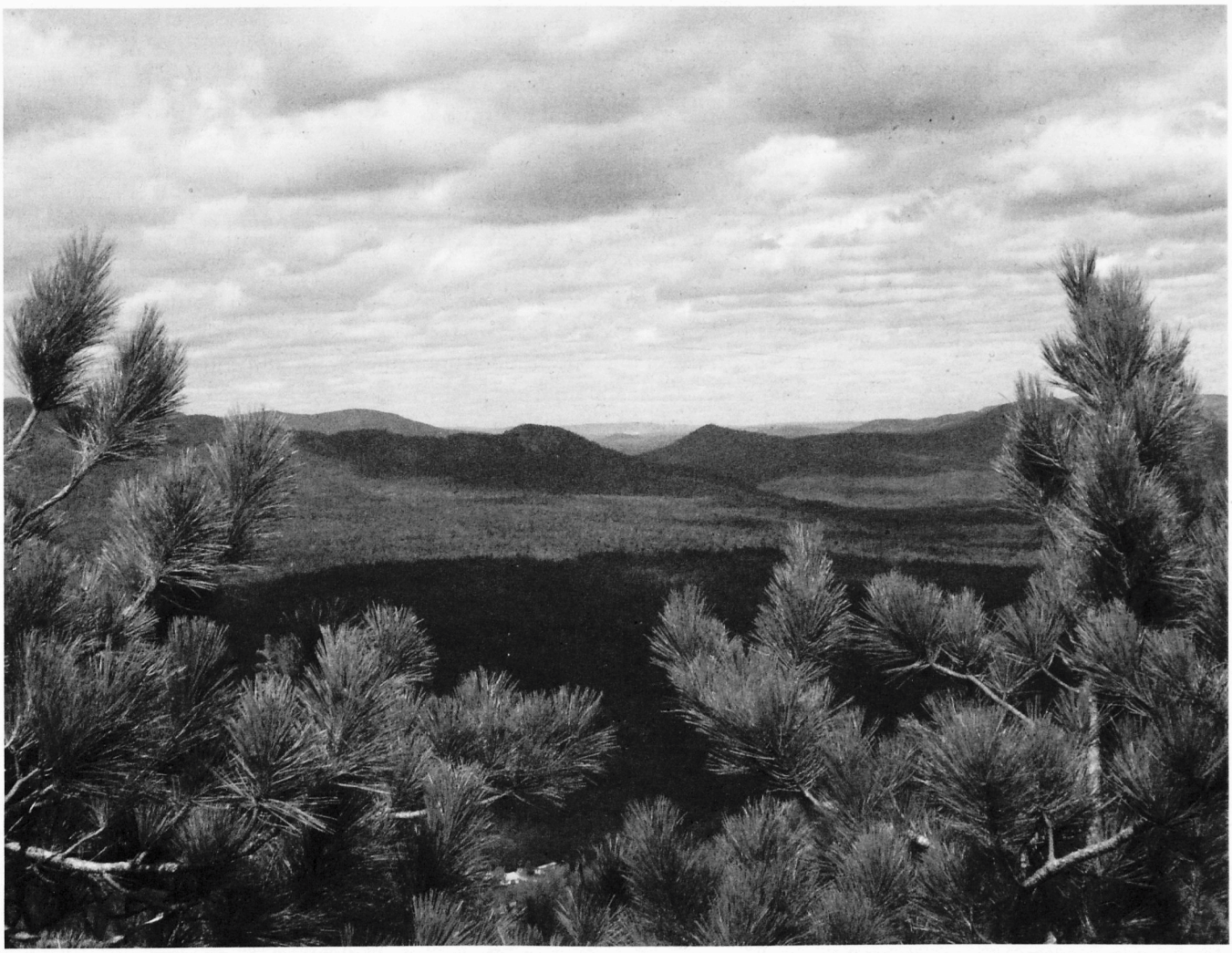
13 Fowler's website (http://www.campfowler.org) provides more information about their programs.

14 See McKibben's books *Hope, Human and Wild* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed, 2007).

15 *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1991).

16 An outstanding example of this potential is the Vineyard church in Boise, ID, whose environmental programs are described at http://www.letstendthegarden.org.

17 From "Getting Along with Nature," in Berry's *Home Economics: Fourteen Essays* (New York: North Point Press, 1987).



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