

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: The following passage is adapted from an essay published in 1970 by Eric Julber, a lawyer and former back-packer.

LET'S OPEN UP OUR WILDERNESS AREAS

The prevailing philosophy with regard to the use of some 40 million acres of America's magnificent wilderness has become what I term "purist-conservationist." Purists are, generally speaking, against everything. They are against roads, campgrounds, ski lifts, and restaurants. They have very, strong ideas about who deserves to enjoy natural beauty and, ideally, would reserve beauty for those who are willing and able to hike, climb, or cliffhang to achieve it. Purists believe that those who do not agree with them desire to "rape the landscape."

The purist standards were embodied in the Wilderness Act of 1964, which provides that in such areas there shall be "no permanent road..no temporary road.. no mechanical transport and no structure or installation." The practical effect of this philosophy, thus frozen into federal law, has been to make many of the most beautiful areas of the United States "off limits" to anyone who is not willing and able to backpack into them.

And what of ordinary Americans, those whose favorite recreations are driving, sightseeing, easy walking, and camping? What of the too-old, the too-young, the timid, the frail, the out-of-shape or the just-plain-lazy, all of whose taxes acquired and maintain the Wilderness areas? For this group—99 percent of the American population—federal agencies provide 73,700 acres of campgrounds and 39,100 acres of picnic sites: a total of 112,800 acres. And I believe that the areas provided to the common American are not the prime scenic areas; they are the fringes, the leftovers.

I feel I can speak with some authority as to purist philosophy, because I was once a purist myself. I have carried many a fifty-pound pack; I've hiked to the top of Mt. Whitney, there to think beautiful thoughts; I've hiked the two-hundred-mile length of California's John Muir Trail, running from Yosemite to Sequoia. And even in later years, when the press of law practice kept me physically away from the wilderness, in spirit I remained a purist. Keep those roads and crowds out, I said.

But no more. Recently I paid a visit to Switzerland, and what I saw there made a non-purist out of me. Not only was I overwhelmed by Switzerland's beauty, but I was amazed to find that virtually every part of it was accessible and thoroughly used by people of all shapes and ages. It was, in fact, exploited to the ultimate—crisscrossed with roads, its mountain valleys heavily grazed and farmed, hotels and restaurants everywhere. Where the automobile cannot go, railroads take you; where the going gets too steep for cogwheel trains, you catch an aerial tramway. People from all over Europe sit on Switzerland's restaurant patios, 10,000 feet high, admiring the magnificent views—views that in America would be excluded from 99 percent of our population.

The Swiss philosophy says, "Invite people in; the more the better." The purists say, "Keep people out." The Swiss say, "Let the strong climb if they choose (and many of them do), but let the children, the aged, the just-plain-lazy ride."

I, who have done it both ways, say this: my thoughts were just as beautiful on top of Switzerland's Schilthorn—9,757 feet up; restaurant lunch of fondue, wine, strawberry pastry, and coffee; reached by thirty-minute tram ride—as they were on top of Mt. Lyell in America's Yosemite—13,095 feet up; lunch of peanut butter sandwich; reached by two day hike. I conclude that the purist philosophy which keeps Americans out of their own land is an unwise misuse of our wilderness resources.

Let me propose an alternative philosophy. For want of a better term, let's call it an "access" philosophy. Consider as an example Muir Trail in California, with its magnificent Wilderness scenery—peaks, meadows, hundreds of lakes, even glaciers. Its southern end is 212 miles from Los Angeles, its northern end 215 miles from San Francisco. Under the present purist conditions, the Muir Trail is inaccessible to all except the hardest; to reach its most beautiful parts you have to hike over mountain passes averaging 10,000 feet in height, packing supplies on your back. Under the "access" philosophy, I would install aerial tramways at three or four locations within easy driving distance of Los Angeles. At the terminal of each tramway—after, say, an hour's ride—there would be restaurant facilities, picnic areas, observation points. A family could stay for a few hours or camp for weeks. General access would be year-round, as compared to the present ninety-day, snow-free period.

Why not also put a tramway in the Grand Canyon? I would install an aerial tramway in an inconspicuous fold of the canyon, so that visitors could ride from the South Rim to the bottom, and from the bottom to the North Rim, thus getting a feel for the canyon's immense depths. There's already a beautiful aerial tramway at Palm Springs, Calif., which carries visitors to the slopes of Mt. San Jacinto. Built in 1963, after 15 years of battle with purists, this tramway has taken 2.5 million people to a lovely area which before was a full day's arduous climb away.

It is my firm belief that if Americans were permitted access to Wilderness areas in the manner I have suggested, we would soon create a generation of avid nature lovers. If you question purists, you will find that what initially "turned them on," in almost every case, was an experience in which they were provided access to natural beauty by roads, buses, or other non-purist means. Yet, if purists had had the influence 100 years ago that they have today, there would be no roads or other facilities in Yosemite Valley, and the strong possibility is that neither I nor millions of other Americans would ever have seen its beauties, except on postcards.

I believe that the purist philosophy is unfair and undemocratic, and that an alternate philosophy, one of enlightened, carefully controlled "access," is more desirable and also ecologically sound. If the Swiss can do it, why can't we?

ESSAY TOPIC: For what reasons does Julber believe that an "access" philosophy about America's Wilderness areas is preferable to a "purist-conservationist" philosophy? What do you

think of his views? Write an essay responding to these questions; to develop your essay, be sure to discuss specific examples drawn from your own experience, your observation of others, or any of your reading—including "Let's Open Up Our Wilderness Areas" itself.