

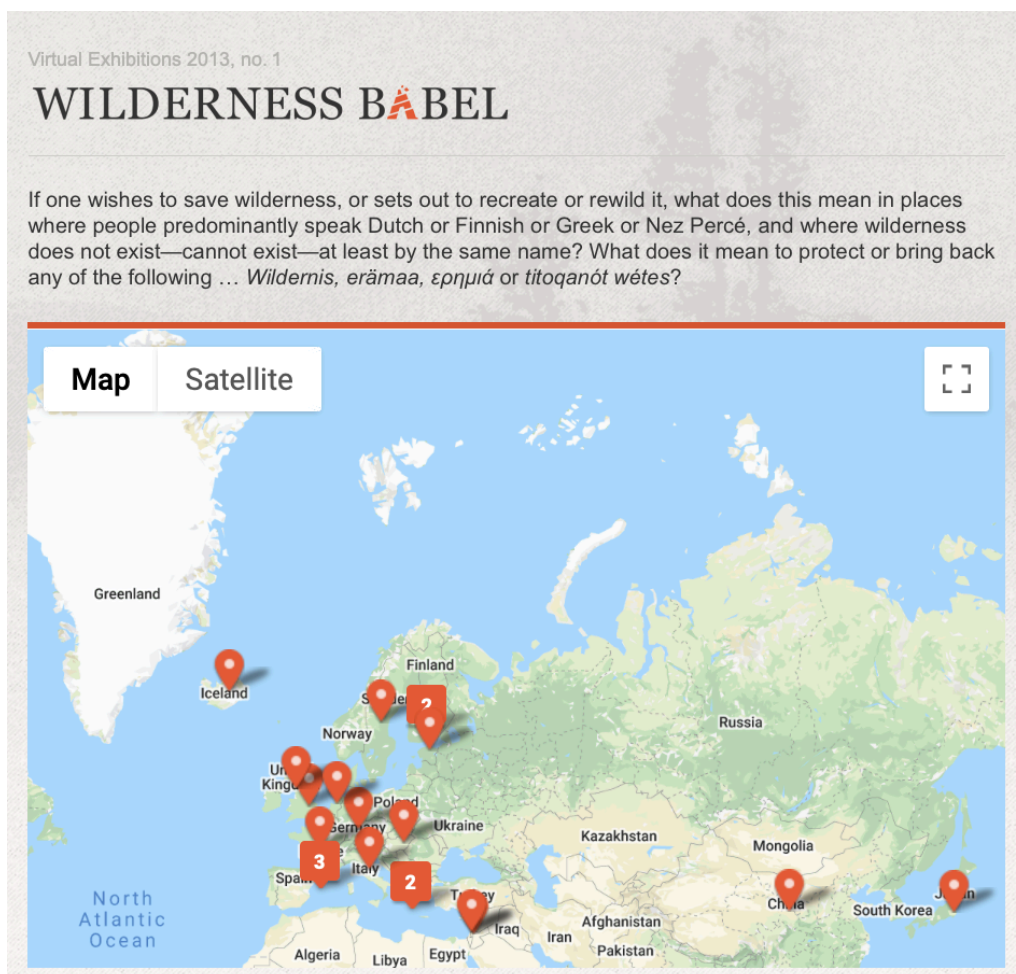


## Wilderness Babel: What does Wilderness Mean in Your Language?

Marcus Hall, ed.

Listen to words for “wilderness” and learn about their political and historical meanings in different regional contexts. "Wilderness Babel" is a collaboration with the Institute of Evolutionary Biology and Environmental Studies at the University of Zurich, edited by Marcus Hall. Its international contributions are still growing.

This is a compiled PDF of version 1 of the virtual exhibition, published in 2013 by Marcus Hall, ed and the authors. Version 1 included a navigation slider at the top (see screenshot). The exhibition was updated in March 2020 to make it responsive and archivable. You can access version 2.0 here (<http://www.environmentandsociety.org/exhibitions/wilderness-babel>).



Hall, Marcus, et al. “New Wilderness Babel: What does Wilderness Mean in Your Language?” Environment & Society Portal, *Virtual Exhibitions* 2013, no. 1. Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society. <https://doi.org/10.5282/rcc/3695>.



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**About the editor:**

Marcus Hall has written about the wild, wilderness, and rewilding in his books, *Earth Repair: A transatlantic history of environmental restoration* (2005), and *Restoration and History: The search for a usable environmental past* (ed., 2010). In pursuing these and other research projects, he has now lived in Europe (mostly Italy and Switzerland) almost as many years as he has lived in the United States, where he has become even more appreciative of how environmental messages depend on the languages in which they are expressed. Trained in biology, history, and environmental studies (Stanford, BS; Wisconsin MA, PhD), he teaches at the University of Zurich's Institute of Evolutionary Biology and Environmental Studies. His most recent book project is exploring the cultural history of parasites. Marcus wants to give special acknowledgement to all authors below, as well as to the whole team at Environment and Society Portal, especially to Wilko Graf von Hardenberg who offered numerous suggestions and improvements to this exhibit.

## Wilderness Babel - Exhibition overview

If one wishes to save wilderness, or sets out to recreate or rewild it, what does this mean in places where people predominantly speak Dutch or Finnish or Greek or Nez Percé, and where wilderness does not exist—cannot exist—at least by the same name? What does it mean to protect or bring back any of the following ... *Wildernis, erämaa, ερημιά* or *titoqanót wétes*?

This exhibit collects wilderness-equivalent terms and describes them in a few short paragraphs, discussing how they may be similar to or different from the wilderness that native English speakers know and admire. The subtleties of meanings encompassed by the above terms, say, between human presence or absence, or between love and fear for the wild regions, is what we hope to explore. Our focus in these webpages is less the history of wilderness than the linguistics of wilderness, even though word meanings have their own histories. Even across the English-speaking countries, a reference to “wilderness” may evoke different feelings, images, and sounds.

You may use the map to steer to your favorite language and see how it portrays wilderness, or offer your own comments and contributions there. We hope to expand our Wilderness Babel into a large and useful collection of ideas for land managers, policy makers, environmental theorists, outdoor recreators, and nature enthusiasts.

## Aims and methods

In its various meanings “wilderness” is considered to be a place without a people, nature in the raw, quintessentially uncivilized. A wilderness may be void of roads and buildings, at once the embodiment of God and the inspiration for the human soul. Yet wilderness can also include traces of humanity or at least a distinct human presence in the ways that we describe it or circumscribe it. As we look for wilderness in other lands, we realize that wilderness—in form or function—can vary quite dramatically according to region or century or language.

Whether “wilderness” is conceived primarily as a dangerous mountain to be avoided, an immense tundra teeming with migratory birds or a tropical repository of biological and pharmaceutical wealth, depends on our heritage, and such heritage is intimately linked to the words we use to describe it. Adjectives in English such as “pristine,” “primitive,” “old-growth,” “untrammled” describe wilderness but do not replace it. Wildlife dwells in this place, but sometimes so do wild, semi-human beings, at least in the places where they can be found. Trolls, leprechauns, satyrs, gnomes, and nymphs are all semi-humans nourished by the wild, and placed there by the imaginations of people who do not live in the wilderness.

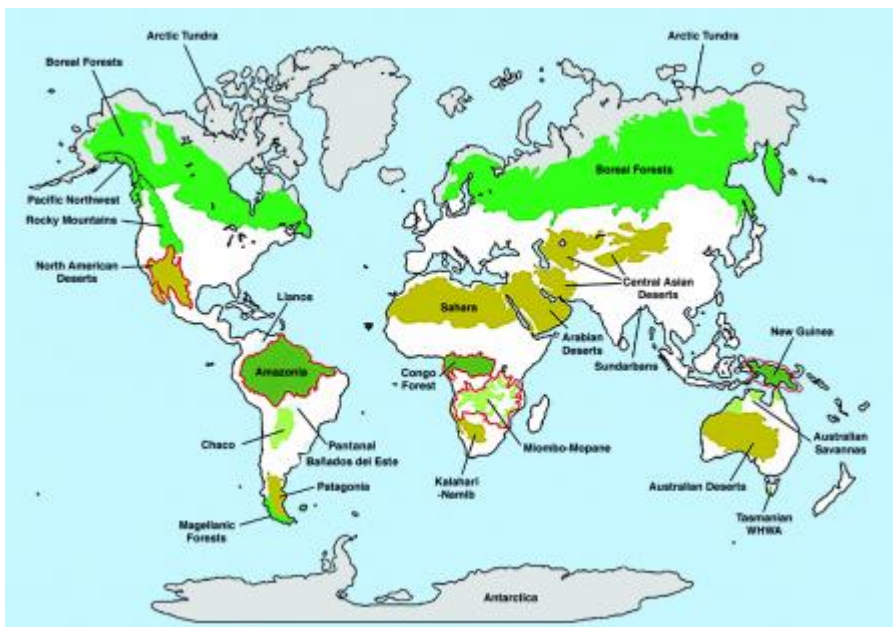
It is precisely the linguistic differences in wilderness that concern us in this exhibition. The stunning cultural heritage of Europe and the world has produced an equally varied wilderness heritage. Because language manifests culture—indeed, some say language defines culture—a linguistic map is a good way to navigate global wilderness, and may do so more effectively than a political map. Indeed every language and dialect can reveal insights into the complexity of the meanings of wilderness. Noting how these meanings may overlap across language groups and nation-states provides further insight into understanding this term and the people who live there.

Our goal in this exhibit is to offer short descriptions of wilderness in a sampling of the world’s many languages, while providing sensory corroboration of what these various wildernesses actually look, feel, and sound like. Wilderness Babel is not centrally about the history of wilderness, for that is another and larger project, yet it is implicitly historical, as all words are. As a key concept and term, “wilderness” has changed its meanings over time, taking on different connotations according to period and event, and evolving according to usage and interest group. We hope that the project will be ongoing, with regular supplements in the form of new comments or the addition and updating of entries. Raymond Williams tells us that “nature” is one of the English language’s most complex words, so that translating the essence of this nature, namely “wilderness,” into other languages may keep us thinking and contributing for years to come.

What began as a somewhat Eurocentric project, aiming at encompassing Europe's 23 official and 230 unofficial languages, can clearly be enriched by including descriptions of "wilderness" from the world's other languages—although expanding beyond Europe pushes the number of languages to over 7,000, depending on how one defines language. And yet the question comes up time and again: what does wilderness mean in non-English speaking places and in languages other than English?

## Mapping wilderness, mapping languages

The main aim of maps is to show the spatial distribution of natural and cultural features, be they rivers and mountains or cities, political borders, oil spills, and even wilderness areas and language groups. It seems that any phenomenon can be mapped if it can be placed unequivocally in space. Cartography has obviously evolved beyond drawings on paper, and there are tools and methods that allow us to represent spatial features in more complicated ways, especially through the development of digital visualizations and geographic information systems (GIS) that track layers of features, as well as temporal changes of these features. Needless to say, the examples of maps offered here should be taken with several large grains of salt.

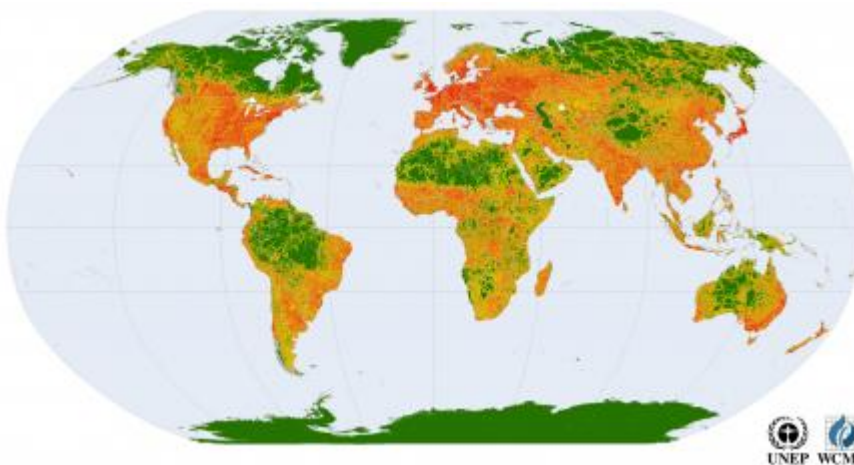


Extension of wilderness areas according to Mittermeier, R. A. et al. "Wilderness and biodiversity conservation", *PNAS* 2003;100:10309-10313. © 2003 National Academy of Sciences.



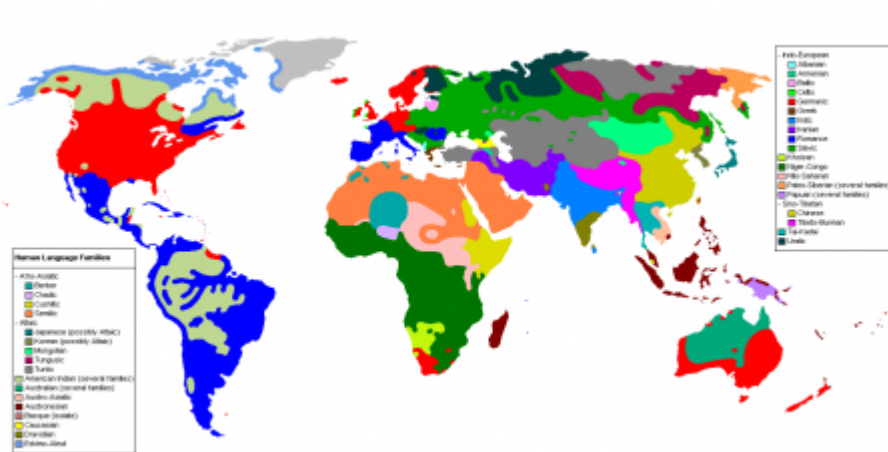
Shepherd's map of the worldwide distribution of European languages in 1911. Public Domain. Source: [University of Texas Library](#)

The mapping of both “wilderness” and “language” is a difficult task, since in both cases the feature being mapped has flexible and permeable boundaries; both depend enormously on precise definitions, and both display snapshots in time that do not reflect complexities of overlap and hybridity. Any graphic representation of wilderness and language will therefore be fraught with subjectivities. Therefore, in the exhibition navigation map we have decided to represent languages as points, instead of trying to draw their boundaries. Nonetheless, here we offer a few examples of such maps in order to show how others interpret and graph global wilderness and language, how such maps might generate new ideas about these phenomena, and how wilderness and language shed light on each other.



Dataset derived using the Digital Chart of the World 1993 version and methods based on the Australian National Wilderness Inventory (Lesslie, R. and Maslen, M. *National Wilderness Inventory Handbook*. 2nd edn, Australian Heritage Commission. Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra, 1995). It is possible to download the full dataset (for non-commercial purposes) in the form of an ESRI grid on the [UNEP-WCMC website](#).





Human language families. CC BY-SA 3.0 2005 User [Industrius](#) on Wikipedia. [View source](#).

In this regard we also suggest visiting the [Last of the Wild](#) project at Columbia University, the [Endangered Languages](#) website, and [Steve Huffman's language maps](#) based on the World Language Mapping System.

#### Websites linked in this text:

- <https://www.pnas.org/content/100/18/10309.full>
- [https://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/history\\_shepherd\\_1911.html](https://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/history_shepherd_1911.html)
- [https://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/history\\_shepherd\\_1911.html](https://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/history_shepherd_1911.html)
- <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/User:Industrius>
- [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Human\\_Language\\_Families\\_Map.PNG](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Human_Language_Families_Map.PNG)
- <http://sedac.ciesin.columbia.edu/data/collection/wildareas-v2/maps/gallery/browse>
- <http://www.worldgeodatasets.com/language/huffman/>

## Salvatge, verge, erm, and silvestre—Catalan

### Listen to pronunciation:

This is an audio file of the pronunciation of the Catalan term *Salvatge*.  
vocaroo\_s0phhgrctsu.mp3

Catalan does not really have a word equivalent to the English understanding of “wilderness” that specifically focuses on a place or condition completely free of people. Although Catalans do not have a specific noun for describing this state, they do have adjectives to describe wilderness. These adjectives may have somewhat different meanings in each of the different geographical regions where Catalan is spoken: Catalonia (or Catalunya), Andorra, the Balearic Islands, Valencia (or València), Northern Catalonia (in France), and L’Alguer (in Sardinia). Here we will focus on Catalonia.



The regions of Catalonia. CC BY 3.0 Marc Belzunces. Accessed via Wikipedia. View source.

Examples of Catalan adjectives denoting “wild” include *salvatge*, *verge*, *erm*, and *silvestre*. These terms can be translated as “wild,” “virgin,” “uncultivated,” and “wildness,” respectively.



A place of *salvatge*: Montserrat mountain, Catalonia, Spain. CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 Luis Fernández.

If we look more closely at these words one understands that *salvatge* denotes something that is natural and has not been influenced by humans, and also refers to something that humans cannot control. Catalans can also use the term *area verge* or virgin zone, which refers to an area where humans have not had any influence. The origin of the word *salvatge* derives from the Latin word *silvaticus*, which is a quality that derives from the forest. The adjective form of *salvatge* can be understood in the way that Joan Frigolé (2012) used it: “natura salvatge” which is similar to “naturaleza salvaje” in Spanish (Ordovas 2009). However, these terms are more precisely understood as *wild nature* rather than *wilderness*.

As pointed out, these wilderness meanings stem from adjectives, but Catalan can also use these terms to describe phenomena beyond wilderness as a place. For example, in the practice of heraldry—a system of designing and recording coats of arms of famous families—a “salvatge” is a figure depicted as a naked man holding a mace and sprouting leaves from head and hip.



National Park Alt Pirineu, Catalonia, Spain. CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 Maria Mas.

Lluís Duch (born 1936), a monk from the Abbey of Montserrat in Catalonia, refers to the myth of the “bon salvatge,” or “noble savage,” which is the personification of wilderness that is itself not tied to culture (Duch 2000). The bon salvatge is a person who is not influenced by human culture, being an expression of and behaving like nature, and commonly portrayed without clothing. Bougainville describes him or her as someone who does not eat meat. He or she is also associated with people living in small, isolated villages surrounded by natural bounty. Enciclopedia.cat describes the bon salvatge as someone strong and simple who lives in inaccessible places, inhabiting nature’s paradise.

In Catalonia, the Pyrenees are probably the best embodiment or location of wilderness. The first prehistoric tribes arriving to the Pyrenees were Iberians, who were followed in the ninth century BCE by the Celts. The Pyrenees make up 5% of Catalonia’s territory (Boada 2006); its highest point is Pica d’Estats at 3,143 meters. As is typical in mountainous areas, the Catalanian Pyrenees show a wide range of temperature and vegetation. One can consider the Pyrenees the “wildest” place in Catalonia, as reflected in the seven national parks located there. These national parks provide a legal mechanism for maintaining the area free of contamination and human development. For most Catalans, these mountains are a place where one can go to see nature undisturbed by excessive civilization. However, the popularity of these mountains attracts large numbers of tourists, which reduces visitors’ impression of being immersed in the wild. The Pyrenees can nonetheless be considered an uninhabited forest and they are home to the largest fauna in Catalonia, including brown bears and chamois.



Montseny mountain, Catalonia, Spain. CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 Luis Fernández..

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#### RELATED LINKS:

- Definition of “verge” in Enciclopedia.cat <http://www.enciclopedia.cat/EC-GDLC-e00141456.xml>
- Definition of “salvatge” in Enciclopedia.cat <http://www.enciclopedia.cat/EC-GDLC-e00121519.xml>
- List of 100 summits in Catalonia <http://www.icc.cat/cat/Home-ICC/Geodesia/100-cims/Llista-100-cims>
- Website about the Pyrenees <http://www.visitpirineus.com/>

Hall, Marcus, et al. “Wilderness Babel.” Environment & Society Portal, *Virtual Exhibitions* 2013, no. 1.

**Chapter:** Salvatge, verge, erm, and silvestre—Catalan

**Source URL:** <http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/7674>

**Print date:** 15 June 2020 12:21:34

## Huāngyě—Chinese

In the Chinese language, there are no exact equivalents of the word “wilderness.” In modern Chinese, “wilderness” is commonly translated as 荒野 (huāngyě). 荒 (huāng) and 野 (yě) can be considered as synonyms, indicating places where plants and animals are not cultivated by humans. In modern Chinese, this has been extended to include places that have not been subject to human influence. Since land that has not been tamed by humans may threaten human survival, 荒野 has also adopted a connotation of savage, violent, and dangerous. 荒 and 野 can be separated and paired up with other words, such as 地 (dì [land]), as in 荒地 [huāng dì] or 野地 [yě dì] or 原 (yuan [plains or original], as in 原野 [yuan yě], 荒原 [huāng yuan]) to describe wild land, wasteland, or fields that are original or primitive. 旷野 (kuàng yě) and 蠻荒 (mán huāng) are also sometimes used to describe wilderness. They convey additional connotations of vastness and spaciousness (旷 kuàng) and being savage and uncivilized (蛮 mán). With 自然 (zìrán) being the standard translation of “nature,” the phrase “wild nature” is often translated as 野性自然 (yěxìng zìrán) or 原始自然 (yuán shǐ zìrán); the first translation conveys the essence of not being domesticated while the second captures the sense of being original or primitive.

### Listen to the pronunciation:

This is an audio file of the pronunciation of the Chinese term Huāngyě.  
chinese\_wilderness.mp3

### Wild and Free

There have been few systematic investigations of the relationship between Chinese culture and wilderness but scholars in the twenty-first century have often associated classical Chinese “mountains and rivers” (山水 shan shui) poetry with wilderness appreciation. 山水 poetry originated in the third and fourth centuries CE. In such poems, wild nature functioned as much as a symbol as a concrete locality. They conveyed how poets wished to return to their original “wild” roots, where they could express their freely flowing emotions, sense their interdependence with all land and nature, and live their freedom and wildness away from the bondage of society. The mountain and river landscapes were depicted as sites of raw, original nature—not horrific landscapes of danger and violence, but places where one could sense the ubiquitous spirit in nature and pursue one’s spiritual enlightenment.

## Wild and Frightful

Outside 山水 poetry, wild nature was often depicted as frightful and treacherous. In poetry dating from around the second century BCE, wild animals and plants, hostile conditions, and barbarians made wild nature highly undesirable compared to the comforts of the city and human civilization. Nearly two thousand years later, in the seventeenth century CE, Chinese travelers to the newly annexed island of Taiwan also considered the impenetrable mountains, dense forests, and uncultivated lands to be worthless compared to comforts of their hometowns. The new island lay far away from the imperial center, in a region of 荒 (huāng), which was considered to be cultureless, savage, and chaotic. Given China's history as an agricultural nation, its ancient laws have always sought to promote the expansion of agriculture into hitherto uncultivated land. Only land that was tamed and shaped by humans could become productive or beautiful. Around the same period, the northeastern corner of China was coined the “Great Northern Wilderness” (北大荒 běi dà huāng). Migration into the region from the south was prohibited by imperial rule. The region was preserved as a private royal park, a storehouse of wild game and plants for consumption by the imperial court. Population was kept low and agriculture was not developed. In the late nineteenth century, it was still described as an unfortunate land of bleak desolation due to the absence of human settlement.



The “Great Northern Wilderness” encompassed vast areas in northeast China, including the wetlands of the Sanjiang Plains. Photo by W.C. Zhang. Used by permission.

## Hostile and Desolate; Beautiful and Pure

In modern times, Chinese people continue to bring their perceptions of wilderness with them in their engagements with wild nature outside their homeland. Research has shown that Chinese immigrants to the USA are generally less likely than white Americans to visit a federally designated wilderness area or to go hiking and



camping. To first- and second-generation Chinese immigrants settling in Vancouver, Canada, wilderness is often associated with places that are barren, desolate, hostile, undesirable, and abandoned. Immigrants from cities in China find the wide open spaces of the Canadian wilderness overwhelming. Their lack of familiarity with such spaces and lack of skills for wilderness survival make them fearful towards wilderness. Immigrants from rural China associate wilderness with the impoverished countryside in China where they (or their family members) walked, worked, and slept outdoors as a matter of toil and survival and not of spiritual escape or choice. Traveling to Antarctica, one of the world's largest wildernesses, Chinese tourists also bring with them their perception of wilderness as lifeless, hostile, and desolate—where humans cannot live and rarely visit. However, once there, they marvel at the abundant wildlife and beautiful scenery and support the idea of protecting Antarctica as a wilderness reserve where the development of infrastructure is limited. Nonetheless, they are more at ease at referring to Antarctica as “pure land,” instead of as wilderness. “Pure land” is also the name of a branch of Buddhism popular in Asia and is often understood as the land of bliss or enlightenment. Through their experiences with wilderness outside their homeland, some Chinese people have the opportunity to engage with alternative perceptions of wilderness.

### **Future Opportunities and Evolution**

Rapid industrialization in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in China has raised the standard of living of its citizens. Yet, it has been accompanied by pollution, deforestation, desertification, and other environmental and public health problems, which have, in turn, combined to bring about greater state-led and citizen environmentalism. Since 2007, the Chinese government has been incorporating the idea of “ecological civilization” into the country's development strategies, with the goal of building a harmonious co-existence between economic development and nature conservation. Writings about nature and environmental concerns have flourished. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, novels focusing on the relationship between humans and wolves in the wild became bestsellers and won widespread acclaim. The academic fields of ecocriticism and environmental ethics have matured since their beginnings in the 1970s and 1980s. After having focused on interpreting theories developed by authors from Western countries, including those concerning wilderness protection, scholars are now developing concepts applicable to the specific situations occurring in China. There have also been calls for further research into the social, cultural, and geographical aspects of wilderness in China and the feasibility of the establishment of a Chinese wilderness preservation system. If wilderness were to be measured by the metrics of remoteness and naturalness and population density, then the wildest parts of China can be found in the western part of the country on the Qinghai-Tibet plateau. At an average elevation of 4,000 meters above sea level, the Qinghai-Tibet plateau is the highest plateau in the world, supporting a range of ecosystems, including alpine shrubland, meadow, steppe, and desert. Humans settled permanently in the region more than 3,600 years ago. Parts of the plateau have been designated as nature reserves. Hoh Xil nature reserve was inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List in 2017.



The Qinghai-Tibet plateau situated in the western part of China has high remoteness, high naturalness, and very low population density. Photo by Tanya O'Neill. Used by permission.

This is an audio file of wind, rain, and silence.  
wind\_rain\_silence.mp3

The history of wilderness protection follows a similar trend in different countries. At the beginning, wilderness was often considered as undesirable or as wasteland by the first settlers. Public opinion started to change when the human footprint expanded so much that wilderness became a rarity, a commodity that was worth valuing. Is it possible that the Chinese people are following a similar trajectory? Only time will tell. With a population of 1.4 billion living in China and an estimated 50 million ethnic Chinese people living outside of China's mainland, it is likely that Chinese people hold many different perceptions of wilderness that have emerged from their personal and collective experiences and cultural influences. In an increasingly globalized world, as information becomes more easily accessible, and as people have more opportunities to meet and work with other cultures, new pathways may open for the evolution of perceptions of wilderness.

## Wildernis and woestenij—Dutch

The Dutch translation of the term “wilderness” is at first sight quite straightforward: *wildernis*. It denotes an area that is not visibly organized, structured or touched by the activities of mankind. The term denotes a “rough” area that is not easily accessible. This is expressed more strongly in the synonym for wildernis: *woestenij*. The latter term means “savage situation or area” (*woest* = “savage, fierce or ferocious”). This word, interestingly enough, is related to the word *woestijn*, which is used for deserts, and which also contains the root *woest*. So, a desert, in Dutch, is a “savage area,” with an emphasis on the harsh environment and the lack of human influences. The two words come from the same origin, but *woestenij* in current Dutch is broader; it incorporates savage land across the planet, whereas *woestijn* denotes a sandy region with high temperatures and little to no rainfall.

Ever since the urbanization of Western Europe, the Dutch have had less and less exposure to really pristine and untouched natural areas. The term *wildernis* is therefore used for areas that are not visibly and recently touched by people. Thus, a meadow can be called *wildernis* if it is devoid of signs from human intervention, even though meadows are not “natural” to the Dutch landscape and therefore show past human activity. *Wildernis* does not have a pronounced negative meaning in the Dutch language, but no positive associations are linked to it either. The term *woestenij*, however, is usually regarded more negatively. One can say about something that it is a *woestenij*, and mean that it is chaotic, unorganized and unstructured. In this sense, the word can also be used to refer to human-built structures or activities, and denotes that something is “disorderly,” rather than suggesting an absence of human activities. *Wildernis* is seldom used in such a setting; the word is almost exclusively used for nature-related issues.

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### RELATED LINKS:

- Etymology of *wildernis* (in Dutch) <http://www.etymologiebank.nl/trefwoord/wildernis>

## Wilderness—England's English

The particular history of the British Isles means that it is not possible to separate an English idea of “wilderness” from that of Scotland, Wales or Ireland. The Scottish clearances and the terrible toll of famine and emigration in Ireland in the nineteenth century not only emptied rural landscapes of people, but also reflected, and in turn contributed to, an essentially English romantic idea of wilderness. Within England itself, the idea of wilderness has evolved over time. The oldest meaning, drawing from the medieval Middle English word for “wild,” refers to land beyond the settled, farmed landscape, perhaps containing wild beasts or even wild men, land we might describe as semi-natural. Therefore wilderness was hazardous, lawless. The vast Royal Forests (many of them mostly consisting of open ground), set aside for hunting and subject to their own laws to protect game, were perhaps wildernesses: the remembered and retold story of Robin Hood epitomizes the mixture of threat and romance in a tale of masterless men opposing the corrupt rule of the state, although many current depictions of the landscape of Sherwood Forest reflect suburban Hollywood’s imagination rather than English landscape history. Later commentators on the English countryside like Daniel Defoe and William Cobbett in the eighteenth century continued to speak of land beyond the reach of the improver, although they spoke not of “wilderness,” but of “waste,” land allowed to languish.



Grains Gill, Seathwaite, Lake District, England.  Bill Adams.

With the Romantic Movement, inspired by English writers like Ruskin and Wordsworth, this dismissal of wild land changed dramatically. Now the stark wildness of nature became something valued, as was its emptiness and its lack of human presence (or rather, only the presence of dominated people living a traditional mode of life). Mountain landscapes especially offered a glimpse of the sublime for Victorian tourists and alpinists, a contrast to burgeoning industrial towns and the gathering onrush of modernity. This was the era when English romantic ideas of the wilderness of the Scottish highlands and its sparse but doughty tartan-clad inhabitants took hold.

In the twentieth century, open hill landscapes were central to the long campaign for national parks before World War Two. Advocates argued that such parks were needed for the health and well-being of poor urban factory workers. But the word “wilderness” was not central to this movement: the hills were places of nature, but also places of people. Ramblers engaged in mass acts of trespassing on private shooting estates in the Peak District in the 1930s, demanding right of public access on unenclosed land. All but one of the national parks created after 1949 were in the uplands (including the Lake District so beloved by Wordsworth, as well as the Peak District). Land in these parks remained private, rather than being acquired by the state, but was managed to harmonize economic use, recreation, and natural beauty. Access for citizens to other open land was only obtained when the

Countryside and Rights of Way Act was passed in 2000. By that time, the value of wild country underpinned the hugely popular activities of mountain and hill walking, although for many English people the best and wildest landscapes remained hills of Scotland and Wales. However, while walkers might speak of the wildness of mountains, in the crowded country of England, it was impossible to imagine a landscape empty of people and free of human influence. Land might look wild, and if managed appropriately, even feel wild, but was this ever more than an illusion, a reflection of clever park management? In the twenty-first century, the idea of “rewilding” gained ground. English conservationists began to talk about restoring nature, and about its capacity for self-direction. People now speak of the value of “self-willed land,” where the non-human agency of nature has free reign, in and around human society, but not subject to its will.

In the twenty-first century, “wilderness” might not exist in England, but “wildness” does, and is widely held to be precious.

## Wildeornes—Early English

In many cultures the idea of wilderness, in some sense, has been borrowed from the English-speaking world. As a consequence, scholars have paid particular attention to the history of the English word “wilderness” as expressed in writing. Nash (1982) famously argues that the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European settlers of New England feared and loathed wilderness, or viewed it as an arena for trials of the spirit, because English versions of the Bible rendered certain Hebrew or Latin words as “wilderness” and biblical wilderness was evil and hostile.

In considering what wild country may have meant to early speakers of English—let us say the non-Celtic inhabitants of what is now England, ca. 450–1400 AD—it is important to distinguish between literary (or “high”) culture and vernacular (or “low”) culture. Literary culture develops in small social circles and has an existence of its own, outside the speech and thinking of ordinary life. Vernacular ideas and words, although shared by everyone, may leave little or no trace in the written record.

There is good reason to believe that until recent times the word “wilderness” has belonged more to high culture than to the vernacular. Outside religious texts, Old English *wildeornes* is all but unattested. Even today, Anglophone Canadians, unless they grow up in big cities and are under the influence of US media, are inclined to speak of “the bush” rather than “the wilderness.” Similarly, although Bible-based aversion to nature goes back to the epic *Beowulf* in the seventh or eighth century, speakers of English may always have been ambivalent about wild places, aware of their good features as well as bad. In the Middle English masterpiece *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* the landscape in and beyond the Wilderness of Wirral is presented as harsh and threatening, yet amid the gloom Sir Gawain is said to ride “meryly” into a deep and very wild forest beside a mountain. Later, as the Green Knight and his party hunt a ferocious wild boar, their voices are, again, merry.

Oddly enough, even the derivation of “wilderness” is elusive. The word seems to have come from elements meaning “wild animal + place;” but another option is just “wild + place.”

## Metsik loodus, puutumatu loodus and põlisloodus—Estonian

In Estonia, one of the first things associated with the Anglo-American conservationist notion of “wilderness” is a primeval forest where no human paths or dwellings exist. Etymologically, the most common Estonian translation for “wilderness” is *metsik loodus* (literally: “forest-like nature”). Historically, big forests were called *kõrb* (analogous to Finnish *korpi*), but when the first official translation of the Bible was published in Estonian, this word was “taken over” to metaphorically render the idea of the “empty space” where Christ was sent to suffer (i.e., the desert), and as a result, in contemporary Estonian, *kõrb* means a desert, not a forest.

Abstract nouns denoting general categories regarding nature (such as *loodus*, Estonian for “nature”) are quite recent ones in the Estonian language. One of the possible reasons may be that Estonian culture and language have been very intimately intertwined with the landscapes and the natural conditions that the Estonian-language peasantry inhabited. Therefore, there are dozens of specific names for landscape patches with different qualities, indicating for example, what time would be suitable for making hay from a particular type of meadow, or for what species of domesticated animals would the hay be suitable as fodder in winter.

Approximately 1/5 of the territory of Estonia is covered with swamps and marshlands. Even the areas that could not be used for agricultural purposes often served pragmatic functions: old raised bogs were used as places for gathering medical herbs, mushrooms, and berries (cranberries, lingonberries), but also as secret shelters that were used by locals in turbulent times. So we can say that for the local peasantry, there never really existed a such thing as “wilderness” in the sense of an area which no paths lead to, from, or through. Even if clearly perceptible human traces are missing, there may be routes that are not evident as clear paths in the landscape, but rather as dotted lines of minute landmarks intelligible to an experienced eye.

Most of the popular books compiled to introduce the nature reserves and conservationist activities in Estonia state that there are no places in the country where the human impact is non-existent. The majority of the protected natural landscapes of Estonia are actually semi-natural landscapes where human impact has been modest but incessant—in some cases, e.g., wooded meadows, for more than a thousand years. The implementation of nature protection in such cases means that modest management, not total exclusion of human activities from the landscape, is an appropriate measure.





Aspen grove in a fen. © 2000 Veljo Runnel. Used by permission. [View image source.](#)

Audio file of birds singing in the aspen grove. © 2000 Veljo Runnel. (620.93 KB)

Google Translator offers *kõnnumaa* as the first equivalent in Estonian to “wilderness.” That is not quite correct, though. The *kõnnu* (nom. *kõnd*)-word is used in place names only in marginal Estonian dialects, referring to areas with limited capacity for supporting vegetation. *Kõnd* thus also has pragmatic implications—it is an area not quite suitable for agricultural use. It must be concluded that the notion of “wilderness” as “intact” (*puutumatu loodus*) or “primeval” (*põlisloodus*) nature with no pragmatic use whatsoever is a cultural construct that has been adapted into Estonian only recently. It would make more sense to speak about semi-natural or heritage landscapes in Estonia.

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#### RELATED LINKS:

- Loodusheli - Sounds of Estonian nature <http://www.loodusheli.ee/>

Hall, Marcus, et al. “Wilderness Babel.” Environment & Society Portal, *Virtual Exhibitions* 2013, no. 1.

**Chapter:** Metsik loodus, puutumatu loodus and põlisloodus—Estonian

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## Bundok—Filipino

The Tagalog word *bundok* translates literally as “mountain,” but its larger meaning as wilderness bears the inscription of global forces of war and empire.[1] *Bundok* is plentiful in the Philippines. A volcanically active archipelago, the nation consists of a cluster of hundreds of tiny islands, many little more than a rocky peak, interspersed with large islands where steep-sided, forested ranges loom over the coastlines.[2]



Corregidor Island with Mt Mariveles (Luzon) behind, Manila Bay. CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 Photo by Emily K. Brock, September 2013



Caballo island with Mt Palay-Palay (Luzon) behind it, as seen from Corregidor Island. CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 Photo by Emily K. Brock, September 2013

In the 1898 treaty ending the Spanish-American War, Spain ceded the Philippines to the United States despite the fact that the islands had declared their independence the previous year. The American military's attempts to take possession was quickly met with violent resistance from a populace ready to throw off three centuries of colonial rule. Many American troops in the Philippines had begun their combat careers in the so-called Indian Wars, domestic suppression of tribal insurgencies on the wide-open prairie lands of the Great Plains. While American forces acclimated to prairies might still feel in control along the edges of an island, they found they were less safe as they proceeded inland, up into the dense forests and rugged terrain of an island's mountains.

In any military conflict, topography and environment shape war, but importantly, the experience of war also shapes our perceptions of the environment. During conflicts in the Philippines, *bundok* could quickly become contested area, unpredictable and difficult to navigate for both invaders and defenders. While shorelines could be easily controlled by outsiders with naval superiority, the *bundok*, on large islands and small, held resistance forces employing guerrilla tactics. The centers of Philippine islands were thus the peripheries of American control.



Bundok behind rice fields near Lazi, south shore of Siquijor Island. CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 Photo by Emily K. Brock, October 2013.

*Bundok*, with its connotations of jungly impenetrability, remoteness, and unpredictable violence, became the military slang word *boondock*. For these soldiers *boondock* was the alien landscape, unknowable and violent as well as ecologically foreign. Once away from the Philippines, American troops applied *boondock* to landscapes of combat encountered worldwide. By the Second World War, the term was cemented in military language, as in *boondockers*, the field boots issued to Naval and Marine personnel.

Brought into nonmilitary use by returning soldiers, *boondock* was soon stripped of its military connotations. *Boondock* transformed into a descriptor of mysterious and remote, but not necessarily hostile, hinterlands. Today, the American term *boondock* retains little of the specific ecological and topographical descriptiveness that it had in its military context. *Boondock*'s wilderness today is societal and cultural rather than environmental. The wilderness of *bundok*, however, remains both mountainous and culturally remote, wild in spirit as well as in ecology.

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## Notes

[1] Well over a hundred indigenous languages are spoken in the Philippine archipelago, but the 1930s Commonwealth government deemed Tagalog, language of the Manila area, a “national language.” Filipino or Pilipino, a standardized form of Tagalog, is the *lingua franca* of the nation today, with English as the other of the Philippines’ two official national languages.

[2] Other Tagalog words which one could translate into English as “wilderness,” include *kagubatan*, *ilang*, *kawalan*, *kaparangan*, and *kasukalan*. As is the case with *bundok*, these terms most literally translate as specific types of landscapes, such as forest, thicket, or desert. *Bundok*, more than the others, has evolved since the late nineteenth century to evocatively carry meaning of both simple topography and societal remoteness.

## Erämaa—Finnish

The established translation and closest term to “wilderness” in Finnish is *erämaa* (“the land of *erä*”). It could be argued that *erämaa* is a central concept for understanding the traditional Finnish relationship with nature and use of natural resources. While the uses of *erämaa* as a linguistic term and physical space have changed over the centuries, the concept has typically denoted a vast area of boreal forest with plentiful fish and game, visited only seasonally. In the Finnish language there has not historically been a clear dichotomy between “wild” and “civilized” lands. While the seemingly wild *erämaa* is not permanently inhabited, it does not lie outside civilization—it is rather an area that one periodically enters in order to obtain his/her share of the bounty of nature, i.e., *erä*. *Erämaa* may be harsh and unforgiving, and dangerous creatures—both human and non-human—may dwell there, but it is a second home to a person who has mastered its ways.



View from the vicinity of the author's *erämökki* in Central Finland. CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 Mikko Saikku

Until early modern times, *erämaa* referred to a specified area that was seasonally utilized by a certain village for fishing and hunting purposes. Villagers in the south of Finland typically possessed their communal areas of *erämaa* in the north. These could be situated hundreds of kilometers from the permanent site of settlement. Typical uses of *erämaa* included fishing in the spring and early summer and hunting for both food and furs during the fall and winter. (During medieval times, pelts of the pine marten, beaver, red fox, stoat, and lynx were the Finns' most important export articles.) Finns furthermore levied taxes on the Lapp (typically Sámi) people they encountered in the *erämaa*. Prolonged use of a certain *erämaa* could result in permanent settlement and introduction of (swidden) agriculture, after which the area was deemed outside the commons and ceased to be *erämaa*.

In the mid-sixteenth century, the Swedish king Gustav Wasa declared all areas of Finnish *erämaa* to be the crown's property and strongly encouraged their permanent settlement. During the next three centuries, much of the *erämaa* was settled and the Lapp people either assimilated or were pushed northward in a process that in some ways resembled the North American frontier experience. However, vast areas remained uninhabited, especially in the north of Finland, and the traditional use of these areas as hunting and fishing grounds continued.

During the nineteenth century, *erämaa* became a powerful symbol for the rising Finnish nationalism. In the spirit of National Romanticism, painters, authors, and even composers championed *erämaa* as a cornerstone for Finnish identity. The *eränkävijä* ("wilderness hunter/fisher") became an epitome of idealized Finnish masculinity and, to a certain degree, has remained so to this day.



A view of the Pyhä-Häkki National Park. CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 Mikko Saikku

In contemporary usage, *erämaa* typically refers to a remote and roadless area that supports old-growth forest, undrained bogs, and undammed rapids. Examples of surviving *erämaa* can be found in Finland’s national parks and other protected areas, including the so-called *erämaa-alueet* (“Wilderness Areas”) that have been established in Lapland to preserve not only nature but also traditional Sámi culture. The concept of *erä* survives to this day in the Finnish language with common words and phrases such as *eränkävijä* (which now may also refer to a wilderness hiker), *erämökki* (“hunting/fishing cabin”), and *erätaidot* (“survival skills”). The vast everyman’s rights (or “freedom to roam”) in present-day Finland can similarly be traced back to the ancient culture of *erä*.

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#### RELATED LINKS:

- Palokärki (“The Great Black Woodpecker”) by Akseli Gallen-Kallela (1865-1931). Gouache on paper, 1893. Finnish National Gallery. <http://kokoelmat.fng.fi/app>
- Ilveksenhihtäjä (“Lynx Hunter”) by Pekka Halonen (1865-1933). Oil on canvas, 1900. Finnish National Gallery. <http://kokoelmat.fng.fi/app>

Hall, Marcus, et al. “Wilderness Babel.” Environment & Society Portal, *Virtual Exhibitions* 2013, no. 1.

**Chapter:** Erämaa—Finnish

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- The Pyhä-Häkki National Park <http://www.outdoors.fi/pyha-hakki>
- Wilderness Areas in Northern Finland  
<http://www.metsa.fi/sivustot/metsa/en/NaturalHeritage/ProtectedAreas/WildernessAreas/Sivut/WildernessAreasinNorthernFinland.aspx>



## The mapping of wilderness—French

Wilderness has no ready translation as a noun in modern French. The general concept is not exactly missing; it is rather left unnamed even when it is mapped.

On the allegorical “Carte de Tendre” by Madeleine de Scudéry (1654), wilderness is an isolated island on top of the map. Called *Terres Inconnues*, it is surrounded by the reefs of *Mer Dangereuse*. The same map shows another kind of wilderness in its northeastern corner. It is about 12 “Friendship Leagues” long, and consists of treeless plateaus, cliffs, and gorges. From this mountain without a name flows the Estime River, which can be crossed at the city of Tendre-sur-Estime. A smaller wilderness area lies in the West, separating *Mer Dangereuse* from *Mer d’Inimitié*.



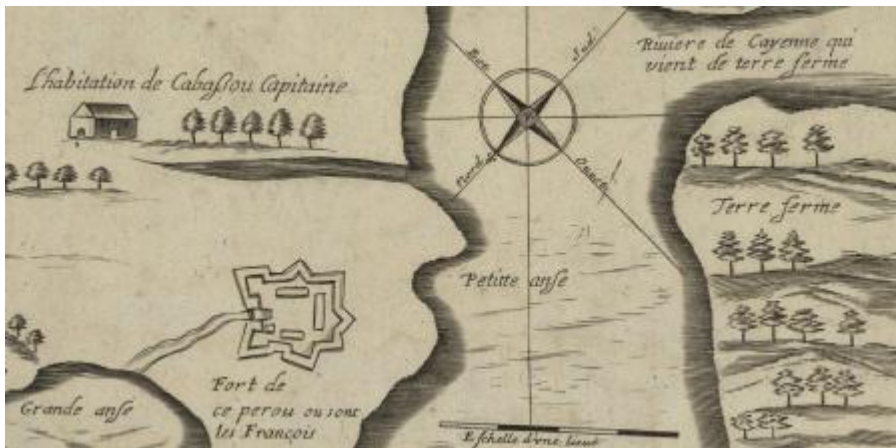
Detail of the “Carte du Tendre,” 1654. All rights reserved. Courtesy of Bibliotheque nationale de France (BnF).

Wild could be translated as *sauvage* (from the Latin *silva* or forest), and we could suggest for wilderness both *la nature* and *la barbarie*. Wilderness is primarily an isolated, dangerous, almost frightening place, a refuge for cruel bandits, moody poets, and misanthropic philosophers. Applied to specific areas, wilderness can mean jungle (*forêt vierge*) or desert, physically or metaphorically, or land lying fallow. In all cases it means an area empty of inhabitants that terrain, size, and climate have made unsuitable to agriculture. The badlands of the Southern French Alps and the rainforest of Guyana would be in that sense considered wilderness.



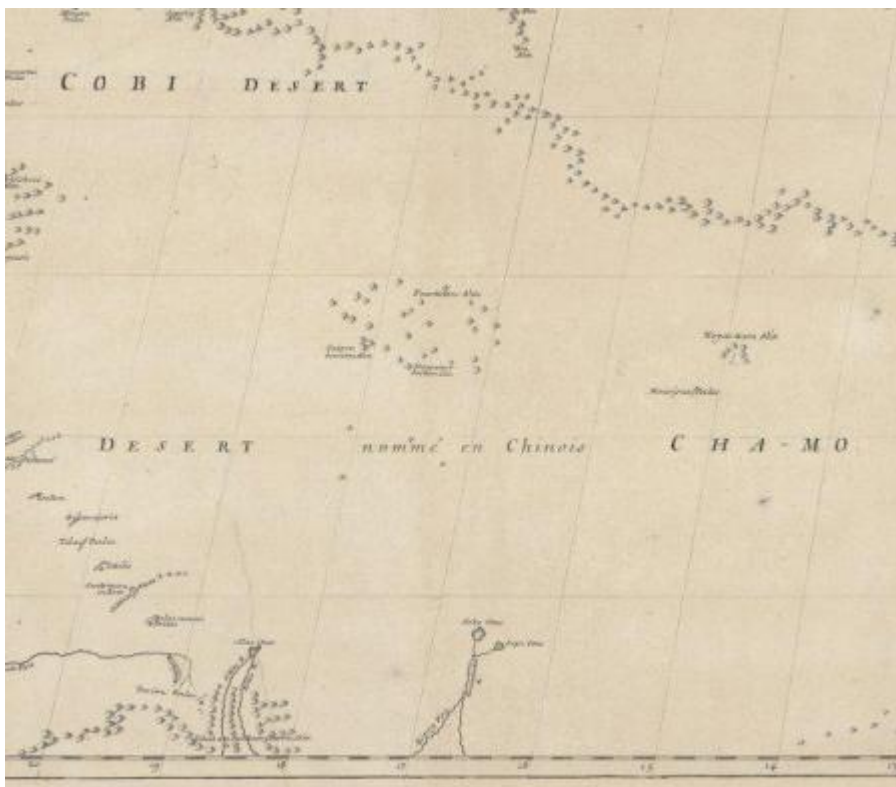
Detail of the “Carte du Tendre,” 1654. All rights reserved. Courtesy of Bibliotheque nationale de France (BnF).

In the “Carte de l’isle Cayenne” by Jacques Lagniet (1665), *coste sauvage* was another name for the El Dorado kingdom and the land of the Amazons. With its fort and barracks, seigneurial mansions, alignment of trees, and promises of order and wealth, the island of Cayenne stands in contrast with the poorly mapped rainforest of the mainland wilderness. Made a decade earlier, just when the French landed in Cayenne, another map of Guyana was more explicit on the natural bounties of the American mainland: “Terre propre au sucre, au tabac et au cotton; Ici on trouve des pierres semblables aux Rubis; Bois où il y a force perroquets et guenons.” (Land fit for sugar, tobacco, and cotton; Here one finds stones resembling rubies; Woods where parrots and monkeys are many.) Those French explorers and scholars who expected to find attractive the wilderness of the New World braced themselves for disappointment.



Detail of Jacques Lagnier's "Carte de l'Isle Cayenne," 1665. All rights reserved. Courtesy of Bibliotheque nationale de France (BnF).

Despite all its diversity, wilderness is beyond the comfort zone of French civilization. Roads do not lead to wilderness. For French classical geographers like Jean-Baptiste Bourguignon d'Anville, *premier géographe du Roi*, wilderness should be left blank on the map. In the "Quatrième feuille de la Tartarie chinoise" (1731), the wilderness of the Altai Gobi desert is expressed by the absence of any feature, apart from isolated hills and ranges far in the East of the oasis of Hami.



Detail of JBB d'Anville's "Quatrième feuille de la Tartarie Chinoise," 1734. All rights reserved. Courtesy of Bibliotheque nationale de France (BnF).

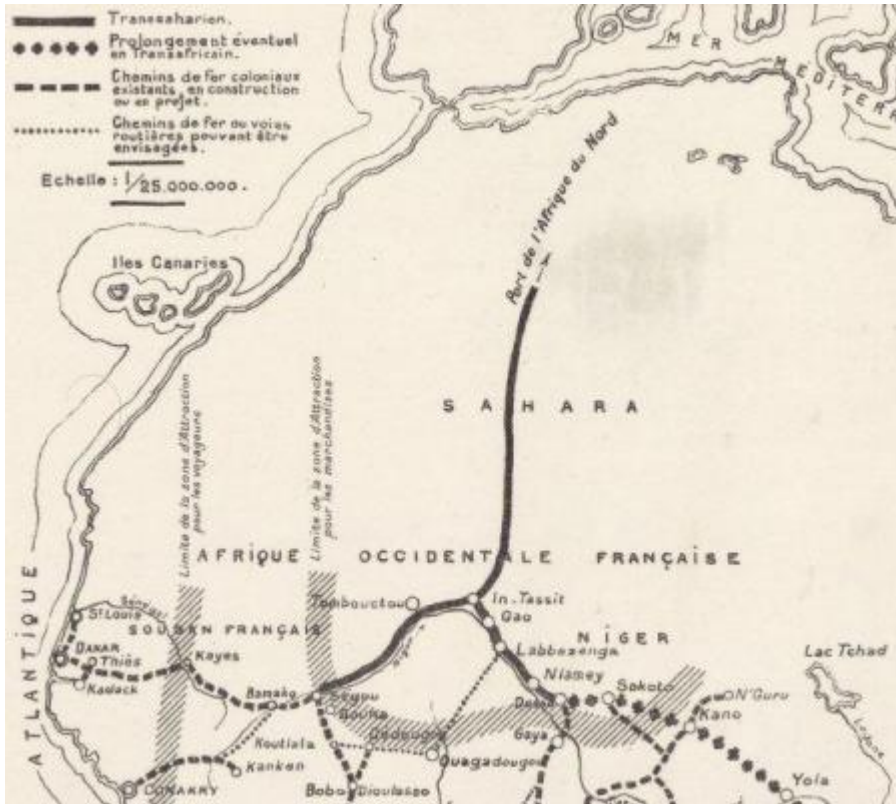
Hall, Marcus, et al. "Wilderness Babel." Environment & Society Portal, *Virtual Exhibitions* 2013, no. 1.

**Chapter:** The mapping of wilderness—French

**Source URL:** <http://www.environmentandsociety.org/node/5580>

**Print date:** 15 June 2020 12:21:00

Conversely, deleting *désert* or *sauvage* from the map title is enough to convert wilderness into a territory we can identify with. The map of “Zone d’attraction du Transsaharien” of the Cartographic Institute of Paris (1930) displays the planned railway network that will someday connect Dakar, Abidjan, and Timbuktu to Algiers. The thick *Transsaharien* line divides the Sahara and makes its vast emptiness irrelevant. Wilderness has been surveyed, mapped, tamed, conquered, and eventually deprived of its name.



Cartographic Institute, Paris. “Zones d’attraction du Transsaharien,” 1930. All rights reserved. Courtesy of Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF).

## Wildnis—German

(44.64 KB) **Listen to pronunciation:** This is an audio file of the pronunciation of the German term *Wildnis*.

Not surprisingly, the meaning of the German *Wildnis* has changed considerably over time. Within this history of meanings there is, however, one strong continuity: *Wildnis* has always been an “other place,” a place of difference, distinct by its very separation from society’s cultivated spaces. Thus, past and present accounts of *Wildnis* reveal more about contemporaries’ social imagination than nature’s physical features.



View of the Val Cluozza in the Swiss National Park (2007). CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 2007 Patrick Kupper.



The Bavarian Forest National Park. CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 Patrick Kupper.

Etymologically, *Wildnis* is related to the words *Wald* (forest) and *Wüste* (desert or wasteland). All these words share an original meaning of a land that is not cultivated. During the Middle Ages, *Wildnis* became most closely associated with dense forests, and later on with mountainous areas as well. The *Wildnis* was imagined as an unfriendly and dangerous place where wild beasts roamed, including wild men and demons of all kinds. It was definitely a place to avoid. In popular fairy tales children got lost in it, while it also provided the stage for heroic tales of knights displaying their courage by deliberately entering the *Wildnis* to rescue princesses and fight wild creatures.

Thus, *Wildnis* was associated with both imaginary spaces of wildness and more specific places surrounding or bordering the inhabited landscape. Starting in the seventeenth century, we start to see more positive connotations evolve. Similar to “wild nature” in other European regions, *Wildnis* could become something sublime: experiencing it was aesthetically fulfilling and morally uplifting. Romanticism strongly reinforced this trend, thereby paving the path for an ideology of nature conservation. *Wildnis* did not become a major topic in conservation practice, however, mainly due to the lack of places matching the idealized conception of *Wildnis*. There was some discussion about *Verwilderung* (reverting cultivated places to wilderness), but for most of the twentieth century, and in contrast to the term “wilderness” in the United States, *Wildnis* remained restricted to everyday speech. Only over the past few decades the term became incorporated into both scientific and outdoor recreation discourses, thereby reflecting a new emphasis in global conservation on the protection of natural places and processes.

## έρημος, ερημιά and άγρια/παρθένα φύση—Greek

(114.85 KB) **Listen to pronunciation:** This is an audio file of the pronunciation of the Greek terms έρημος, ερημιά, and άγρια/παρθένα φύση.

Conveying the meaning of “wilderness” into modern Greek is no easy task. Most online translators as well as printed dictionaries will return the words *έρημος* (literally meaning “desert”) and/or *ερημιά* (“desert-ness”). Translated as such, “wilderness” in Greek is to be perceived as an empty space, a place which is “deserted” and void of people, a wasteland where nothing of use to humans may be found, with hardly any flora and next to no fauna.



The Virgin Forest of Fraktos. This image is courtesy of the Management Body of the Rhodope Mountain Range. All Rights Reserved.



The Virgin Forest of Fraktos. This image is courtesy of the Management Body of the Rhodope Mountain Range. All rights reserved.

Another usual translation is *αγριότοπος* (literally meaning “wild place”). A “wild place” is not necessarily void of people or animals and plants, yet its inhabitants are untamed, uncontrollable, hard to cope with and so on: in a word, a “wild place” is an uncivilized place, a place where modern society and its paraphernalia have made little (if any) inroads. It is perhaps telling that the original meaning of the adjective *άγριος* (“wild”) was “of the fields.” What one will not find in most dictionaries are the notions of “wild/virgin nature” (*άγρια/παρθένα φύση*), yet these come closest to the notion suggested by the English word “wilderness.”

It is no coincidence that the adjective “virgin” is used to describe the area in Greece that comes closest to being “wilderness”: the Virgin Forest of Fraktos. Situated at an altitude of approx. 1,900 meters on the Greek-Bulgarian frontier in northern Greece, the old-growth forest of Fraktos has been “undisturbed” by human activity for the last 500 years. Covering an area of 1,100 hectares and including a host of rare and endangered plant and animal species, it was declared a “Preservable Natural Monument” (*Διατηρητέο Μνημείο της Φύσης*) in 1980 under Law 996/1971, meaning that no human presence or activity is allowed within its limits save for scientific research. This stance epitomizes what “virgin nature” (aka “wilderness”) stands for in the Greek mind: a place where Nature, with all her “wild” flora and fauna, follows her course free of any human presence or interference.



## Midbar, arabah and eremos—Biblical wilderness

Words translated as “wilderness” occur nearly 300 times in the Bible. A formative Hebrew memory is the years of “wandering in the wilderness,” mixing experiences of wild landscape, of searching for a promised land, and of encounters with God. The Pentateuch wandering takes place in the *midbar*, uninhabited land where humans are nomads. This common Hebrew word refers often to a wild field where domestic animals may be grazed and wild animals live, in contrast to cultivated land, hence, sometimes “the pastures of the wilderness” (Joel 1:19–20). Another word is *arabah*, steppe (Genesis 36:24), also translated as desert: “The land that was desolate [*midbar*] and impassable shall be glad, and the wilderness [*arabah*] shall rejoice” (Isaiah 35:1). Land that lies waste is *chorbah*; land without water is *yeshimon*.



The Negev desert. CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 William P. Brown

The wilderness is a locale for intense experiences—of stark need for food and water (manna and quails), of isolation (Elijah and the still small voice), of danger and divine deliverance (Hagar and Ishmael), of renewal, of

encounters with God (Moses, the burning bush, the revelation of the divine name, Mount Sinai). There is a psychology as well as a geography of wilderness, a theology gained in the wilderness.



A canyon in the Negev desert. CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 William P. Brown

Linguists will make the point that the Hebrews did not have an exact equivalent of the contemporary English word “wilderness.” Nevertheless, the Hebrews evidently knew the experience of confronting the wild.

Turning to the New Testament, which was written in Greek, not Hebrew, the word most often translated as “wilderness” is *eremos* (or *eremia*), an isolated place. The wilderness figures at critical junctures in the life of Jesus. Jesus is baptized by John and then is driven by the Spirit into the wilderness for forty days. The Devil is there, but so is the Spirit. “A great while before day, he rose and went out to a lonely place, and there he prayed” (Mark 1.35). This records a search for solitude, for self-discovery, for divine presence, but this process, crucially, seems to require the ambience of the natural environment.

## Arava, erez bereshit, midbar, and shmurat teva—Modern Hebrew

### Listen to pronunciation

This is an audio file of the pronunciation of the modern Hebrew term  
arava.mp3

### “Arava”

This is an audio file of the pronunciation of the modern Hebrew term  
erez\_bereshit.mp3

### “Eretz bereshit”

This is an audio file of the pronunciation of the modern Hebrew term  
midbar.mp3

### “Midbar”

This is an audio file of the pronunciation of the modern Hebrew term  
shmurat\_teva.mp3

### “Shmurat teva”

A bilingual dictionary offers a number of Hebrew synonyms for “wilderness,” including *Midbar* (מדבר), *Yesimon* (ישׁימון), *Arava* (ערבה), and *Shmama* (שממה). The Hebrew popular dictionary *Even-Shushan*

offers fuller definitions: *Midbar*—a desert; a dry and arid area, with less than 200 mm of rain per year and scarce vegetation but diverse animal species. *Yesimon*—a dry and desolate place. *Arava*—a dry land; a flat area with low-lying vegetation. *Shmama*—a wasteland.



The Negev desert. CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 Photo by Livnat Goldberg.

While the English concepts of “wilderness” focus on wildness, or perhaps rich biodiversity and the quality of being unmodified by civilized human activity, wilderness counterparts in Hebrew mostly emphasize dryness. The absence of humans is a secondary characteristic of Hebrew wilderness. In the Hebrew mind, wilderness suggests an uninhabited place lacking any water.

Intuitively, I would substitute “wilderness” by *praea* , (פראי) which might be translated back into English as “the wild.” In addition, when defining an “undisturbed” area, a Hebrew speaker would say *ezor lo mufar* לא אזור מופר , an unaltered space. In a more sentimental and romantic way, an undisturbed area could be described as *eretz bereshit*, or the land of Genesis. *Eretz bereshit* is associated with wilderness, yet the noun of wilderness still refers mostly to a desert land.

In 1968, one of the first Israeli environmentalists, Abraham Shaked, described the land of Genesis as an

untouched, undisrupted large area, where dimensions are part of its identity. In Israel, the desert and the Negev region meet this definition. It includes the area's natural flora and fauna and a few human inhabitants whose traditional land-uses have not disturbed the equilibrium ... [T]his region is valued for its physical, mental, and spiritual experience. Here there is a total freedom to live or die, to breathe clean air, to get lost in vast spaces without any purpose except for the experience itself, to feel the forces of nature, where an undisturbed equilibrium is the true expression of absolute morality.... [I]n the Land of Genesis, far from 'civilization', one experiences the primary sources, the foundations of creation, one's identity for understanding one's true values.... We are currently facing the extinction of these Lands of Genesis, here and across the entire planet, and so we are also losing forever this opportunity to experience these places.

Although not exactly the same as the land of Genesis, a close Israeli counterpart would be the nature reserve concept, termed *Shemurat Teva* (שמורת טבע), with its definition being “a land defined as protected from processes that may change wildlife, vegetation and inanimate characteristics.”

The first movement for creating a nature reserve for specifically preserving its natural traits happened around 1950, following the desiccation of a large lake called Hahula. This was the first of 375 nature reserves that now cover over 5,317 km<sup>2</sup>. However, in the south of Israel, in the Juda Midbar, in Negev, and in the Arava, one finds versions of the *Eretz Bereshit* (or romantic wilderness), which more closely approach “wilderness” in the sense it is used in English: these are *wild* deserts.



A rock formation in the Juda Desert. CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 Photo by Livnat Goldberg.

One reason why the term wilderness in Hebrew is closely associated with drought and dryness may be the fact there are no wholly wild areas in Israel, at least from an English speaker's perspective. Being a small country with a continuous flux of immigration, where every single bit of land is evaluated for its settlement potential, only the most arid areas are able to remain undisturbed by human activity. Almost any other area will in some way be fragmented and modified by human intervention.

In 1955, the first prime minister of Israel, David Ben Gurion, established the still commonly used Hebrew expression, translated literally as “the revival of wasteland.” This statement implies a negative view of wasteland, so that one must “give life” to it in order to make it more appealing for human habitation. His vision was that “the state of Israel cannot tolerate a condition of maintaining a desert inside it. If the state can't defeat the desert, then the desert might defeat the state.” Of course, his declaration needs to be viewed in the context of the day, shortly after the birth of the country, with its demographic challenges and immediate needs to settle new immigrants, many with a European background who became the founding fathers of the country.

Hall, Marcus, et al. “Wilderness Babel.” *Environment & Society Portal*, *Virtual Exhibitions* 2013, no. 1.

**Chapter:** Arava, erez bereshit, midbar, and shmurat teva—Modern Hebrew

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The desert is a popular allegory and subject in Hebrew poetry and songs. In most cases, the translation of wilderness—as desert, wasteland and sword—is used to describe the power of nature, solitude, emptiness, silence, modesty, and similar attributes.

### **Biblical Foundations**

The words used to denote wilderness in the Bible offer more clues to its meaning in Hebrew. In the Old Testament, a common term in this context is *Midbar*, which originally seems to denote “pasture,” a place where flocks are led. Other common words used for related descriptions are *Yesimon*, *Arava*, *Horbâ* (חורבה)—a wasteland—and *Shmama*, a word connoting desolation. *Eres siyyâ* , (ארץ ציה) or “dry land,” also functions as a synonym for wilderness.

“Wilderness” in the Bible refers mainly to two distinct locations: the desert area where the Israelites traveled between their Exodus from Egypt and their entry into the Promised Land of Canaan; and the relatively bare, uncultivated area in the south of the Promised Land known as the Judean Desert, or Negev. The Negev, or Judean Wilderness, is not empty desert but its rainfall is meager and scarce. References to this wilderness area are found throughout the Old Testament, especially passages which tell of David’s military campaigns (Samuel 1:21-30).

Apart from the descriptions of the Wilderness of the Wanderings and the Judean Desert, this wilderness also refers more generally to arid parts of the Earth. The people of the Old Testament were conscious of the wilderness which bordered their land. Psalm 17:29 proclaims that God, who gives strength and peace to his people, is also the God of nature. The thunder is God’s voice which shakes the whole of creation, including the wilderness, which it causes to “writhe.” The Book of Job (38-41) contains a wonderful, poetic description of the world of nature, which depends wholly on God and is quite beyond the power of humans to fully understand or control. Wilderness is wild, undomesticated, alien to human purposes, and at the same time is under the care of a loving God.



A fat sand rat (*Psammomys obesus*). CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 Photo by Livnat Goldberg.

The wilderness was largely uninhabited by people, occupied mainly by wild beasts. The only humans to be found there were nomadic desert people and travelers. Sometimes solitude in the desert was a welcome escape from uncongenial company. It might also be a welcoming refuge for outlaws and fugitives. But it was also a place of judgment and desolation. Wilderness could be a place of danger that might close in on people. Once there, a person could be at the mercy of one's enemies. Dying of thirst was a real possibility, for wilderness was a dry land, subject to scorching winds. Resources like food were also limited, as this was a place more suitable for a solitary hunter-gatherer like Ishmael than for a large band.

In the Bible, the prophets see the future differently, using the desert as an allegory from which people judge their own relations to it. Isaiah prophesies that the desert will become like Carmel, with a forest of low trees. In addition, Isaiah is afraid of the desolation produced by agriculture, which will eventually be replaced by wild plants, and where there were once orchards and crops, a forest will grow that will become a sort of wilderness, or *shmana*, as one of the wilderness terms above. From another perspective, Jeremiah in 4:26 predicts that Carmel will become a wilderness: "I saw, and behold, the fruitful field became a desert, and all its cities were destroyed



because of the Lord, because of His fierce anger.” In a different translation, Jeremiah says: “I beheld, and, lo, the fruitful field was a wilderness...” The future of this forested hillside was to be a desert. He accused the Israelis for not asking, “Where is the Lord, Who brought us up from the land of Egypt, Who led us in the desert, in a land of plains and pits, in a land of waste and darkness, in a land where no man had passed and where no man had dwelt” (Jeremiah 6:2). Jeremiah, more than all the prophets of Israel, is sensitive to an “awareness of the Desert.” The fear of destroying land and turning it into a desert is his nightmare; and he warns about it: “Many shepherds have destroyed my vineyard, they have trampled my field; they have made my delightful field into a desert waste” (Jeremiah 12:10) employing such “terrible” keywords as *Midbar*, and their equivalents.



The Hava Wadi. CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 Photos by Livnat Goldberg.

Today, the existence of wilderness in Israel is under threat. Fragmentation and human settlement are continuously endangering remaining wild areas, while mining and excavation projects are causing irreversible damage to others. Hebrew ideas of wilderness vary from a general notion of the outdoors to a more isolated wild place with little human intervention. Green movements and local residents’ associations have become stronger for protecting these areas and building awareness and appreciation for these areas.

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RELATED LINKS:

- Wikipedia article on “Nature Reserve” (In Hebrew)  
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- Wayne Blank on “Wilderness” on the Daily Bible Study <http://www.keyway.ca/htm2000/20000821.htm>
- Website of the Israel Nature and Parks Authority <https://www.parks.org.il/en/>
- An interactive map of national parks and nature reserves in Israel <https://www.parks.org.il/en/>
- A Hebrew - English Bible <http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt1104.htm>
- Ben-Gurion, David. “The meaning of the Negev,” 1955. (Click to download file) (In Hebrew) <https://www.google.com/url>
- The Complete Jewish Bible, Chabad. [http://www.chabad.org/library/bible\\_cdo/aid/15998](http://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/15998)
- Shaked, Abraham. 1982. (In Hebrew) <http://www.boker.org.il/meida/negev/sichot/sicha27.htm>

## Vadon and puszta—Hungarian

(56.08 KB) **Listen to pronunciation:** This is an audio file of the pronunciation of the Hungarian term *Vadon* and *Puszta*.

“Wilderness” has two equivalents in Hungarian: *vadon* and *puszta*. This has to do with ecology and linguistics. Some of Hungary falls into the forest zone of Europe and some into the forest-steppe zone; Hungarian is a Finno-Ugric language on which Slavic languages have had a very significant influence. *Vadon* (which is a Finno-Ugric word) refers to dark, impenetrable forests with wild animals, definitely a dangerous place. Such *vadon* areas were colonized in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries but lingered on (at least in popular imagination) in faraway places of the Carpathians until recently. The word *vadon* is rarely used in today’s language and is distinctly old-fashioned. Its place was taken over by *őserdő*, which is a translation of the German *Urwald* (“primeval forest”). *Puszta* (a word of Slavic origin), on the other hand, is treeless; it is wilderness in the sense of British moorlands or German *Heide*. Its original meaning is “a place deserted by people,” in fact implying previous settlement.



A wolf in the woods of the Carpathians.  2007 Tim Ellis. Accessed via flickr, view [image source](#)

Hall, Marcus, et al. “Wilderness Babel.” Environment & Society Portal, *Virtual Exhibitions* 2013, no. 1.

**Chapter:** Vadon and puszta—Hungarian

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Audio file of the sound of wind in the leaves (1.02 MB)

Because most abandonment of settlements in Hungary took place in the forest-steppe zone, *puszta* came to mean “steppe.” (In contrast, note that the Polish *puszcza*, for example, means something like the Hungarian *vadon*!) In the nineteenth century *puszta* became the national landscape of Hungary, representing the best Romanticism could imagine: rugged honesty. Most Hungarians today would still look at the *puszta* through nineteenth-century glasses.



Hortobagy, the most famous Hungarian puszta.  Peter Szabo 2005.

The *puszta* has extreme temperatures and is windy. It certainly has animals on it: “ancient” breeds of cattle, horse and swine. People also live there, but they have nothing to do with modern civilization. Both *vadon* and *puszta* are supposed to have covered vast areas in some distant past, but little of that remains. As a consequence, the concept of “wilderness” conservation is entirely missing.

External link to video of Hortobágy 1936. Watch here <https://youtu.be/E1WAHijtCLQ>.

Hall, Marcus, et al. “Wilderness Babel.” Environment & Society Portal, *Virtual Exhibitions* 2013, no. 1.

**Chapter:** Vadon and puszta—Hungarian


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## Víðerni and öræfi—Icelandic

In general the idea of wilderness in Iceland is directed towards landscape and uninhabited areas rather than wildlife, since the wild animals of the island regularly cross the borders between the natural and cultural landscape in finding their habitat. Birds live and nest in the cultivated countryside, the original Icelandic mammal, the fox, knows how to live and hide close to a human settlement, and the wild salmon and trout live in rivers which flow through the agricultural areas and towns. Even the river which flows through Iceland's capital Reykjavik is a natural fishing river.

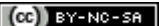


Oræfi Highland.  Unnur Karlsdóttir.

Today the Icelandic term *víðerni*, is most often used to embrace the modern meaning of the English word “wilderness.” It describes a vast area of wild (“untouched”) nature. It refers to natural landscape as a space, as a visual experience, sublime and aesthetic. And it emphasizes how small we are in comparison to Nature’s creation. In modern Iceland the term *víðerni* is used to signify the Icelandic central highland. This has to do with the geographical and geological nature of the country. Iceland is a relatively large island, just over 100,000 square km

in size. Most of the island is sparsely vegetated, due to volcanic ash and erosion following deforestation and grazing since the country's settlement in the ninth century. Around 75–80% of the island is considered uninhabitable, in particular the central highland, which covers roughly half of the country. The outlines of Iceland are shaped by mountainous peninsulas, fjords, and bays, and the habitable area is the narrow lowland around the coast and in the valleys. The highland (Icelandic *hálandi*) rises up in the center: a black desert, lava fields, mountains, glaciers, some vegetated zones and a few wetland oases. The heavily streaming, murky, milky-white glacial rivers cut through the landscape, having dug their way through rock and soil and created canyons and waterfalls on their way to the sea. The desert-like character of the highland is highlighted in the synonym used to describe it, i.e. the Icelandic noun *öræfi*, which refers to a region of no use and a hostile environment for humans and animals. The word *öræfi* is a name given to this kind of nature from the perspective of the farmers, who consider regions with no grass for their livestock to be a nature of no use.



Snæfell mountain.  Unnur Karlsdóttir.

Iceland was a wilderness when settled, and since Icelanders have a written narrative of the Nordic/Celtic settlement, we have a description of how the settlers perceived its nature and its resources and distributed it between themselves as a property and commons. In that story the central highland was not an inaccessible world unknown or unnamed. Names were given to its parts, to the mountains and glaciers. From early on people crossed back and forth across the highland while riding from one quarter of the island to the other. Furthermore, the use of the vegetated parts of the highland as a summer grazing area for livestock, sheep in particular, also brought humans in contact with this wilderness every year through the centuries. In the latter half of the

twentieth century, mountaineering and nature tourism brought this area into focus in a new way, both in an economical and ideological sense. In recent decades it has been praised for its remote and sublime nature and as an essential arena for outdoor experience and recreation for the modern citizen. Today the central highland is seen as an escape from the noisy and hectic world of techno-industrial modernity, an expression of contemporary wilderness romanticism. Thus, in brief, one can say that Icelanders have always had a practical and ideological connection to their country's wilderness.

## A language without wilderness—Italian

If one sets out to translate the English word “wilderness” into Italian, one’s first reaction is to assert simply that there is no such term that reproduces its exact meaning. But pondering the reasons for this inability to translate suggests that there is value in offering some general reflections on the subject. The best known English-Italian dictionaries offer four possibilities: a) *deserto*, *landa* (“desert”), b) *solitudine* (“solitude”), c) *riserva naturale* (“natural reserve”), d) *zona naturale incontaminata (incolta o disabitata)* (“natural uncontaminated area (unmanaged or uninhabited)”). Those with a passable knowledge of Italian and English realize that none of these translations capture the essence of “wilderness,” especially as it is used in US literature in particular.



The peaks of the Gran Paradiso massif. CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 Luigi Piccioni

Audio file of the sound of wind in glaciers (221.63 KB)

To begin with, *deserto* and *landa* are concrete, specific environments, which can be (and usually are) criss-crossed



and transformed by man and carry no sentimental or moral connotations connected to the positive idea of nature itself. On the contrary, *solitudine* suggests a generic psycho-physical condition, or else an individual moral value that has no specific relation with nature. The term *riserva naturale* is meant to describe a characteristically human institution that does not necessarily reflect a condition of special purity in the demarcated area, or one that manifests values or morals implied by such a state. The phrase *zona naturale incontaminata (o incolta o disabitata)* is one that best captures the physical and material aspects of the word “wilderness,” which refers to a primeval nature that is neither modified nor influenced by human presence. This sense is rarely used in Italian, and is a complicated and awkward substitute for the simple, elegant, and evocative English equivalent; when employed, it usually refers only to a few small-scale situations with few general applications. As if that were not enough, this last phrase completely lacks sentimental and moral connotations that are so striking in the English term, at least in the meaning of the US “wilderness debate.”

This English meaning, in fact, contains two elements that are strictly connected and inseparable: a nature that is uncontaminated, primeval, untransformed, *selvaggia* (“wild”), and one that denotes a sentimental and moral attitude of humans toward nature itself, offering a unique view of nature. All the various possible Italian translations are, on the one hand, unable to transmit this synthesis of natural phenomena and human visions, and on the other hand, are rather poor renditions of each of these elements taken separately. The challenge before us, then, is one of veritable untranslatability: our initial intuitive impulse is therefore justified.

The task remains one of explaining the semantic asymmetry between the English-speaking—especially US—and Italian worlds. I offer summary observations at two levels. At the material, “physical-geographical” level, there is fact that for many centuries Italy has almost completely lacked any natural areas that can be considered both inspirational places void of contamination and places wholly absent of any human traces. There are in effect sites that are largely primeval, but these are extremely rare, almost impossible to access, or are largely void of spectacular flora and fauna. It is difficult to imagine, for example, Henry David Thoreau or Aldo Leopold spending a few months or years of their life at the foot of the Grandes Jorasses and being inspired by nature....At the symbolic level, the crucial issue is a national culture that has never experienced, beyond a few very minor and recent exceptions, a relationship with a primeval nature that is intensely emotional and tinged with moral concerns for that nature.

## Defining wilderness—Japanese

The word “wilderness” is not easily translated or defined in Japanese. 荒野 (kouya) is the most direct translation; it literally means “rough and dry fields (or open space).” People associate it with large deserts and wastelands, even though these do not exist in Japan. As such, this word is very uncommon in the daily speech of most Japanese people.



The head of the Tokachi River in Hokkaido (northern Japan).CC BY 3.0 Satoshi Sawada 2009. View original source.



Forest on Yakushima Island in Kagoshima (southern Japan). CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 Genta Masuda 2007. View original source.

The term 原生 (gensei), on the other hand, may be used to mean “wilderness,” although its literal translation is “primitive.” For example, the term 原生保護 (gensei-hogo) is sometimes used for “wilderness conservation/areas.” The Japanese Ministry of Environment uses this term and defines these areas as places “... that preserve and maintain the original ecosystem and that are free of human influence.”

Currently there are only five areas classified as “wilderness areas” in the whole country; they amount to a total of 5,631 ha. Representing only two islands, two river headwaters, and one mountain, these areas cover only a small selection of the different habitat types within the large geographic range of Japan, which spans Hokkaido all the way down to Kagoshima. Other places, such as national parks, fall under the more general term “conservation area.” People may enter these areas for recreational use.



Wilderness Areas in Japan. Public domain. Vector data courtesy of Natural Earth.

Some Japanese companies offering outdoor experiences and first-aid courses refer to wilderness using the term 野外 (yagai), literally “outdoors.” And recently, with more and more English words being adopted into the Japanese language, people simply use a katakana version of the English word outdoors: アウトドア (autodoa). This understanding of wilderness as a place away from people and large towns can be seen in the famous and proudly displayed image of Mount Fuji. It is a place to be awed and respected all at once. Offering both the spiritual meaning associated with mountain tops and a perceived distance from everyday life, Mount Fuji is an interesting example of how ideas are changing over time. In the last decade the number of people climbing Mount Fuji every year has been pushed to the limit, with around 300,000 visitors making it to the top and 6 million more going up to the halfway mark by bus or car. On top of this iconic volcano there is now a growing village with noodle restaurants, souvenir shops, and even a post office.

Today’s ideas of wilderness in Japan seem to vary from a general notion of the outdoors to a more remote wild place with little influence from humans. This stems in part from traditional ideas in the Shinto religion, according to which nature and people’s lives are inexplicably linked. Gods are thought to exist everywhere: in plants and animals, in the wind and the waves, and in the mountains themselves. Shintoists believe in a harmonic balance between themselves and their surroundings. Hayashi (2000) suggests that this understanding of nature has changed with influences from China and America over the past few decades. While people originally believed that nature had the power to heal itself, they are now coming to the new belief that people need to manage nature. Management techniques of conservation and wilderness areas are often based on US models, like the Wilderness Act of 1964. No doubt the Japanese understanding of wilderness will continue to change as international conservation ideas spread and influence management techniques applied to these areas.



Mount Fuji as seen in the 1950s. CC BY-NC-ND 3.0 Joel Abroad, Series “8 photographs to benefit the Japan Orphan Aid Society, c. 1950.” View original source.

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#### RELATED LINKS:

- Protected Area Categories <http://www.env.go.jp/nature/biodic/kaiyo-hozen/guideline/06-5.html>
- Wilderness Education Association Japan <http://weaj.jp/>
- State of Japan’s Environment at a Glance: Wilderness Areas and Nature Conservation Areas <http://www.env.go.jp/en/nature/nps/wanca.html>

## Titoqanót wétes—Nez Percé

(54.88 KB) **Listen to pronunciation:** This is an audio file of the Nez Percé pronunciation of wilderness.

The Nez Percé, whose traditions tell how they were created from the land, honor and cherish their entire homeland and believe they are connected to its many ecosystems and terrains. Historically, with the coming of the first snow, the Nez Percé no longer visited the higher elevations of the Bitterroot Mountains in Idaho and Montana. The immense snowpack, lack of animals for hunting, and the unpredictability of the weather precluded any regular visits. The inaccessibility of these mountains for up to three seasons of the year contributes to the complexity of the Nez Percé relationship with the watersheds of the Selway and Lochsa Rivers. The Nez Percé consider it an important part of their homeland, which consists of approximately 27,000 square miles and three different ecological provinces. The Nez Percé idea of place includes all the land that they used and traveled through except the plains of the buffalo. The land was also a place to find their life's path.



Sunrise at Eagle Cap Wilderness Area.  Doug Geisler 2010. Accessed via flickr, [click to view original source](#).

When Nez Percé children came of age, they went through a complex rite of passage. The *wéyekin* is the most important part of the Nez Percé coming-of-age ceremony. Throughout their youth, Nez Percé children participated in the stories and the rituals of everyday life. During hunting, gathering and fishing activities, their elders told stories which the children remembered. When a child was thought to be ready, s/he was sent away for approximately one week to receive his/her *wéyekin*. Children, the Nez Percé believed, learned independently to take the final step to maturity when deprived of food and human contact. As the linguist Harold Crook related in an interview with the author, one of the places for receiving their *wéyekin* was called *titoqanót wétes*, the “peopleless land” or “wilderness.” Without food but educated in the stories of the Nez Percé, the child could experience his or her *wéyekin* through sight or hearing. Their *wéyekin* might appear as a vision of a particular animal or as a powerful natural event. The absence of humans and any traces of their everyday activities were important parts of the *wéyekin*. The trips to the “peopleless land” gave each Nez Percé his/her individual identity.

According to Nez Percé authorities, *titoqanót wétes* is a pre-contact word that has kept the same meaning throughout the years. In Haruo Aoki’s *Nez Percé Dictionary*, “desert” is also included in the meaning of the word. The Nez Percé of the Wallowa Valley may have used the desert for their *wéyekin*.



Landscape of Eastern Oregon.  Nick Perla 2010. Accessed via flickr, view original source.

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**Chapter:** Titoqanót wétes—Nez Percé

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## Wilderness as an adjective—Latin American Spanish

The dialogue about culture and nature has been critical to the development of Spanish-speaking Latin American societies since early times, though according to Diamond evidence suggests that this deep interaction with the environment has not always been successful. The notion of wilderness in this context is therefore broad and complex. It is challenging to define this term in Spanish since the language has such an extensive geographical distribution (including parts of the Americas, Africa, Europe and Oceania); more than twenty countries in the world have Spanish as their official language. Therefore, the definition that one gives for this term will vary depending on what it means in the region one is from. Practically speaking, the immense spectrum of variations in the significance and signifier of this term within the Spanish-speaking world makes it a rich and complex source of images. “Wilderness,” according to the *Oxford Dictionary*, means “uncultivated, uninhabited, undisturbed and inhospitable.” The common use of this term in a Spanish-speaking setting gives us *intocado*, *natural*, *pristino*, *virgen*, *en su estado natural*, *inhospito*, *salvaje*, *silvestre*. Since these Spanish terms are all adjectives, which describe the wilderness rather than naming it, one can use the article “*lo*” in front of each of these terms to describe wilderness itself: *lo intocado*, *lo natural*, *lo pristino*, etc.



Vulcanic Landscape. Sierra Negra Vulcano, Isabela Island, Galápagos, Ecuador.  María José Barragán Paladines.

For understanding this term in the Spanish-language arena, it is useful to recall the social construction of the wilderness term in general. Recognizing that, as Hubbard, Kitchin, Bartley and Fuller write, “places are produced by the complex intersection of processes that operate across spatial scales, from local to global,” facilitates the understanding of what “wilderness” images have been produced and how this is determined by processes and intersections at different scales, as in Latin America and the Caribbean. Considering the weight of the self-imposed ideas of culture, religion, and state that this region of the world went through during the conquest and colonization processes, it is certainly feasible that ideas of wilderness fall into opposing perspectives that are really different sides of the same coin: the image from the outsiders and the one from us, the locals.

The ideas of “wilderness” in Latin America and the Caribbean coincide with two alternatives: on the one hand, a sacral and religious idea of an “untouched nature,” as described by Diegues, and on the other, a more “mundane” concept of the wild. In fact, in the collective imagination of the Spanish-speaking societies in Latin America and the Caribbean, the term has an intrinsic association with the “not-touched-by-humans” concept.

During the late 1970s and 1980s, some Latin American Spanish-speaking areas were still rural regions switching to a neoliberal economic model applied to the so-called Third World. These practices included, among others, initiatives to “conquer” the “wilderness” that was wasted (i.e., did not provide benefits for human purposes) using several strategies (e.g., expanding agriculture frontier, colonizing “empty” lands). The tourist industry also started taking shape as an engine of economic machinery based on the supply and demand of a “wilderness”

concept promoting “undisturbed” and “pristine” destinations. One important example of this trend is the Galapagos Islands, which have been an icon for nature-based tourism since the 1960s. The Galapagos represent an emblematic destination of untouched wildness for tourists who are hungry for the “wilderness” feeling and are searching for an “authentic adventure in nature.”

In conclusion, conceptions of wilderness in Spanish are diverse as the variations of the language. The wilderness concept can be roughly grouped into a very religion-oriented idea of “wildness as the devil,” (a perspective found mainly in older generations), which stands in contrast to the idea of “wild, untouched” landscape, an alternative to mass tourism and a characteristic holiday destination for the present generation.



Tropical Forest, San Cristobal Island, Galápagos, Ecuador.  María José Barragán Paladines.

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#### RELATED LINKS:

- Definition of “wilderness” in the Oxford English-Spanish Dictionary <http://oxforddictionaries.com/translate/english-spanish/wilderness>

Hall, Marcus, et al. “Wilderness Babel.” Environment & Society Portal, *Virtual Exhibitions* 2013, no. 1.

**Chapter:** Wilderness as an adjective—Latin American Spanish

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## Vildmark and ödemark—Swedish

In Nordic mythology no wilderness exists. The elements are mirrored by the Gods, who are living parts of nature and live in the same way as human beings with their quarrels, love stories, hatred, and greediness. In the *Poetic Edda*, the creature that gives life to the first of the divine *Aesir* family (Swed. *Asaätt*) is the cow *Audhumbla*, licking the god free out of a rock. Thus agriculture is present from the very beginning when the world is coming into being.

In the Swedish context the term *ödemark* (“desert, wilds, waste”) is commonly used when describing large forested and sparsely populated backwoods, but not when referring to wild and uncontrolled areas. The forest wasteland is always described in the context of colonization, thus describing the wilderness in cultural terms, as something inherited in the culture of the people living in this sparsely populated area. A synonym for “wasteland” is the Finnish word *erämaa*; the root, *erä*, has “period” or “cycle” among its meanings. *Erämaa* thus describes the periodic use of forest wasteland and water resources. The term exists only in an ancient historic context in Sweden, but this manner of periodically using large unsettled areas is historically the same in Sweden and Finland.

The word “wilderness” is translated in Swedish as *vildmark*, i.e., “wild land,” and also conjures up the word *vilse* with the meaning of getting lost. The word *mark* is used to describe different kinds of frontier zones, so the wilderness represents a kind of borderland or interface between the cultivated and the uncultivated and between the settled and unsettled. Compared with the *ödemark* or *erämaa*, the *vildmark* is much more out of control and more frightening.

The contemporary notion of wilderness is used in a very particular urban context, depicting a kind of Golden Age when humans lived in the untilled nature under the same conditions as the wild animals, an era when life was unregulated by society. This urban, romantic concept of wilderness stands in contrast to the parallel concept of the wasteland as a sparsely populated area available for human colonization.

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### RELATED LINKS:

- *Svenska akademiens ordbok* (in Swedish) <http://g3.spraakdata.gu.se/saob>

## Credits

### **Coordinator and Editor:**

Marcus Hall has written about the wild, wilderness, and rewilding in his books, *Earth Repair: A transatlantic history of environmental restoration* (2005), and *Restoration and History: The search for a usable environmental past* (ed., 2010). In pursuing these and other research projects, he has now lived in Europe (mostly Italy and Switzerland) almost as many years as he has lived in the United States, where he has become even more appreciative of how environmental messages depend on the languages in which they are expressed. Trained in biology, history, and environmental studies (Stanford, BS; Wisconsin MA, PhD), he teaches at the University of Zurich's Institute of Evolutionary Biology and Environmental Studies. His most recent book project is exploring the cultural history of parasites. Marcus wants to give special acknowledgement to all authors below, as well as to the whole team at Environment and Society Portal, especially to Wilko Graf von Hardenberg who offered numerous suggestions and improvements to this exhibit.

### **Authors:**


- Catalan - Luis Fernández Fernández
- Chinese - Tina Tin
- Dutch - Britt Stikvoort
- English - Bill Adams
- English, Early - Raymond Chipeniuk
- Estonian - Kadri Tüür
- Filipino - Emily K. Brock
- Finnish - Mikko Saikku
- French - Philippe Forêt
- German - Patrick Kupper
- Greek - Iosif Botetzagias
- Hebrew, Ancient (Biblical wilderness) - Holmes Rolston
- Hebrew, Modern - Goldberg Livnat
- Hungarian - Péter Szabó
- Icelandic - Unnur Karlsdottir
- Italian - Luigi Piccioni
- Japanese - Natasha Yamamoto
- Nez Percè - Teresa Sabol Spezio
- Spanish, Latin American - María José Barragán Paladines
- Swedish - Lars Elenius

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