

# Wilderness: The Myth of Pristine Nature

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## The Wilderness Myth

America was seen as a pristine wilderness by Europeans arriving in this New World – intent on subduing the wilderness and cultivating the land.

“wilderness is a matter of perception – part of the geography of the mind”

Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967)



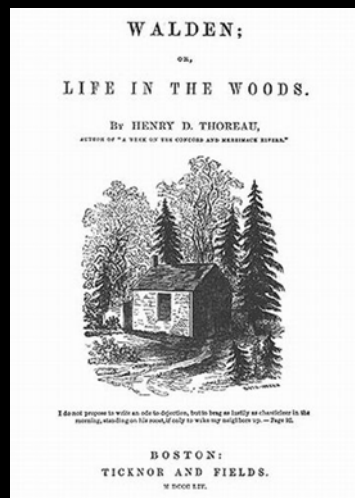
# American Nature - Wildness and Wilderness

Henry David Thoreau, "Walking" (1862)

The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world. Every tree sends its fibres forth in search of the Wild. The cities import it at any price. Men plow and sail for it. From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind.

Life consists with Wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued to man, its presence refreshes him. One who pressed forward incessantly and never rested from his labors, who grew fast and made infinite demands on life, would always find himself in a new country or wilderness, and surrounded by the raw material of life. He would be climbing over the prostrate stems of primitive forest trees.

Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps.



# Wilderness

The word derives from the notion of "wildness"—in other words, that which is not controlled by humans. The word's etymology is from the *wildeornes* meaning land inhabited only by wild animals, which in turn derives from *wildeor* meaning wild beast (wild + deor = beast, deer)

Nash – “The difficulty is that while the word is a noun it acts like an adjective. There is no specific material object that is wilderness.”

However, it is used to refer to specific material objects...

Samuel Johnson Dictionary of the English Language 1755 “a desert; a tract of solitude and savageness” [wasteland]

The Pilgrim leader William Bradford’s well-known description of the forbidding Cape Cod shoreline as seen from the deck of the Mayflower in 1620. He depicts it as “a hidious and desolate wildernes, full of wild beasts and wild men.”

Here the bias inherent in the Christian idea of nature as fallen—as Satan’s domain—effectively erases the humanity of the indigenous Americans. To Bradford they are more like wild beasts than white men.

The concept of satanic nature provided a useful foil for the sacred mission of the Puritan colonists.



...And these places



# Wilderness as Pristine Nature

## The Wilderness Act of 1964

“A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain”



# The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492

William M. Denevan

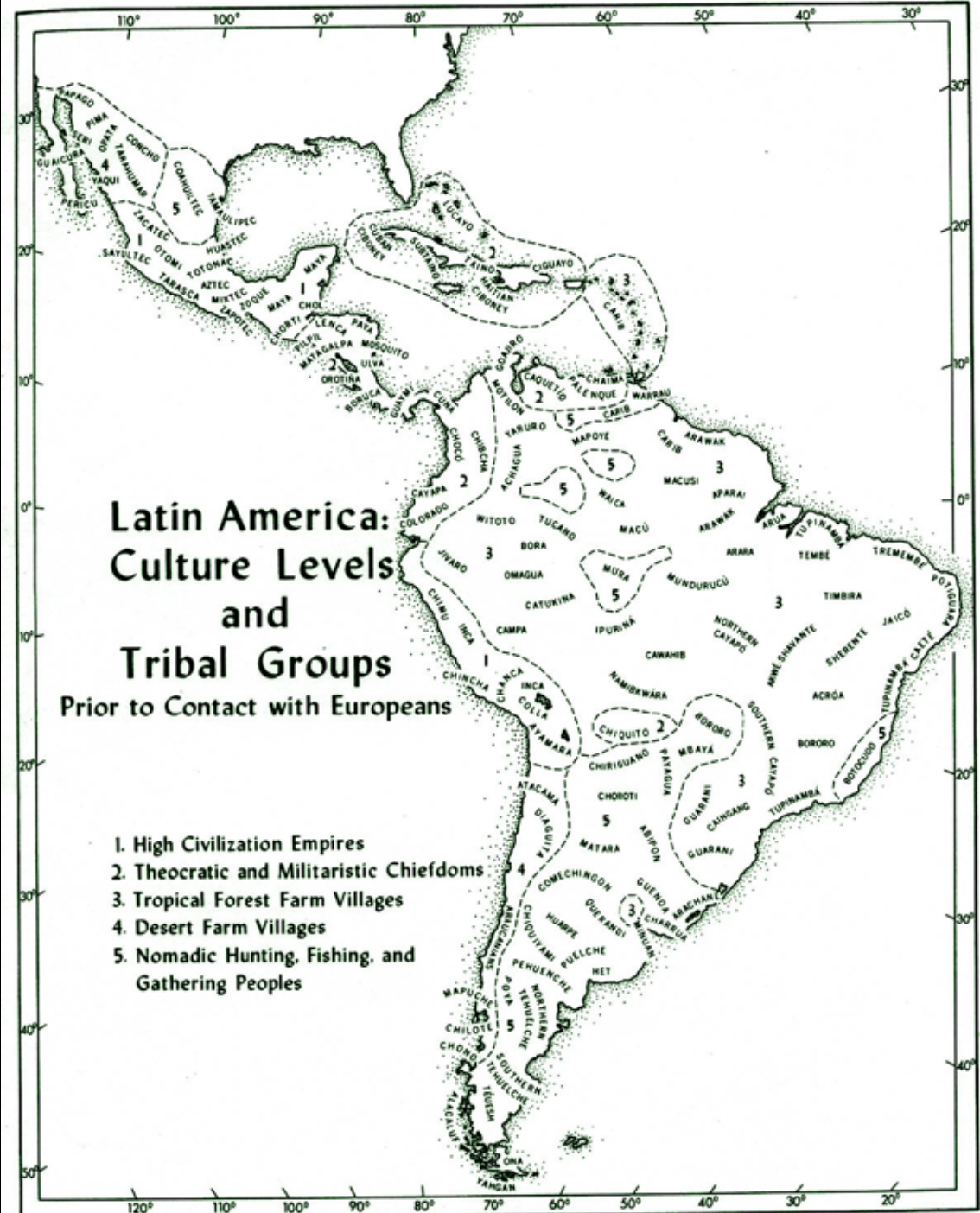
Department of Geography, University of Wisconsin

**Abstract.** The myth persists that in 1492 the Americas were a sparsely populated wilderness, “a world of barely perceptible human disturbance.” There is substantial evidence, however, that the Native American landscape of the early sixteenth century was a humanized landscape almost everywhere. Populations were large. Forest composition had been modified, grasslands had been created, wildlife disrupted, and erosion was severe in places. Earthworks, roads, fields, and settlements were ubiquitous. With Indian depopulation in the wake of Old World disease, the environment recovered in many areas. A good argument can be made that the human presence was less visible in 1750 than it was in 1492.

*Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 82,  
No. 3, The Americas before and after 1492: Current  
Geographical Research. (Sep., 1992), pp. 369-385.







# Discovery of Wilderness

Hispaniola  
1492



## Discovery of Wilderness

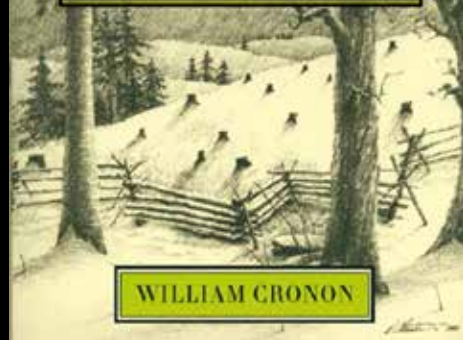
Jamestown 1607  
Plymouth Colony 1620



# CHANGES *in the* LAND

INDIANS, COLONISTS, and the  
ECOLOGY of NEW ENGLAND

"Free from jargon, it is interdisciplinary in the best sense."  
—*American Historical Review*

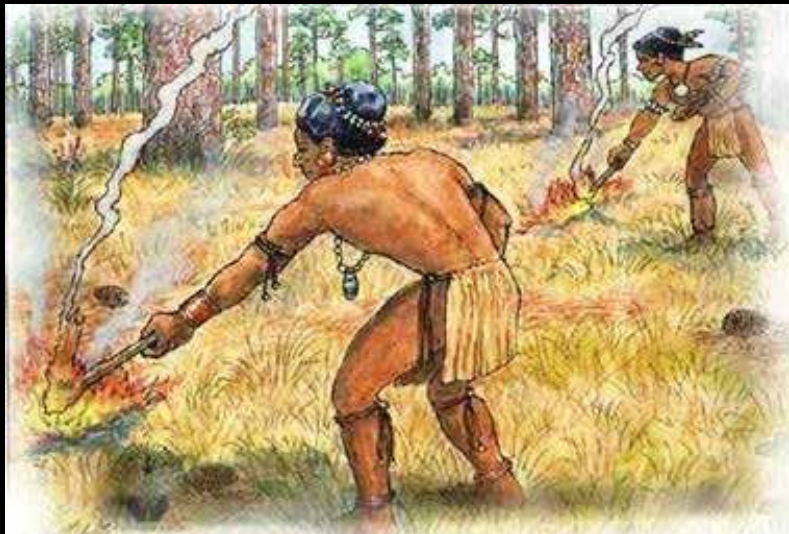


## Changes in the Land – New England and Appalachian Mountains

In southern New England they would burn large areas of the surrounding forest once or twice a year, creating forests that Europeans saw as “open and parklike.”

The fires would consume all the undergrowth so that the result was “a forest of large, widely spaced trees, few shrubs, and much grass and herbage.”

“Wherever Native Americans in southern New England lived, the English traveler (1633) William Wood noted, “there is scarce a bush or bramble or any cumbersome underwood to be seen in the more champion ground.”



In the first millennium A.D., the Indians who had burned undergrowth to facilitate grazing began systematically replanting large belts of woodland, transforming them into orchards for fruit and mast (the general name for hickory nuts, beechnuts, acorns, butternuts, hazelnuts, pecans, walnuts, and chestnuts)...

In Colonial times, one out of every four trees in between southeastern Canada and Georgia was a chestnut...

Within a few centuries, the Indians of the eastern forest reconfigured much of their landscape from a patchwork game park to a mix of farmland and orchards. Enough forest was left to allow for hunting, but agriculture was an increasing presence. The result was a new balance of nature." Mann, 1491



## Indian Corn-Hills in Massachusetts



"The next day [July 9, 1605] Sieur de Monts and I landed to observe their tillage on the bank of the river [Saco river]. We saw their Indian corn, which they raise in gardens. Planting three or four kernels in one place, they then heap about it a quantity of earth with shells of the signoc before mentioned [the horseshoe crab, *Limulus polyphemus*]. Then three feet distant they plant as much more, and thus in succession. With this corn they put in each hill three or four Brazilian beans [the kidney bean, *Phaseolus vulgaris*], which are of different colors. When they grow up, they interlace with the corn, which reaches to the height of from five to six feet; and they keep the ground very free from weeds. We saw there many squashes, and pumpkins, and tobacco, which they likewise cultivate.

The Indian corn which we saw was at that time about two feet high, some of it as high as three. The beans were beginning to flower, as also the pumpkins and squashes. They plant their corn in May, and gather it in September."

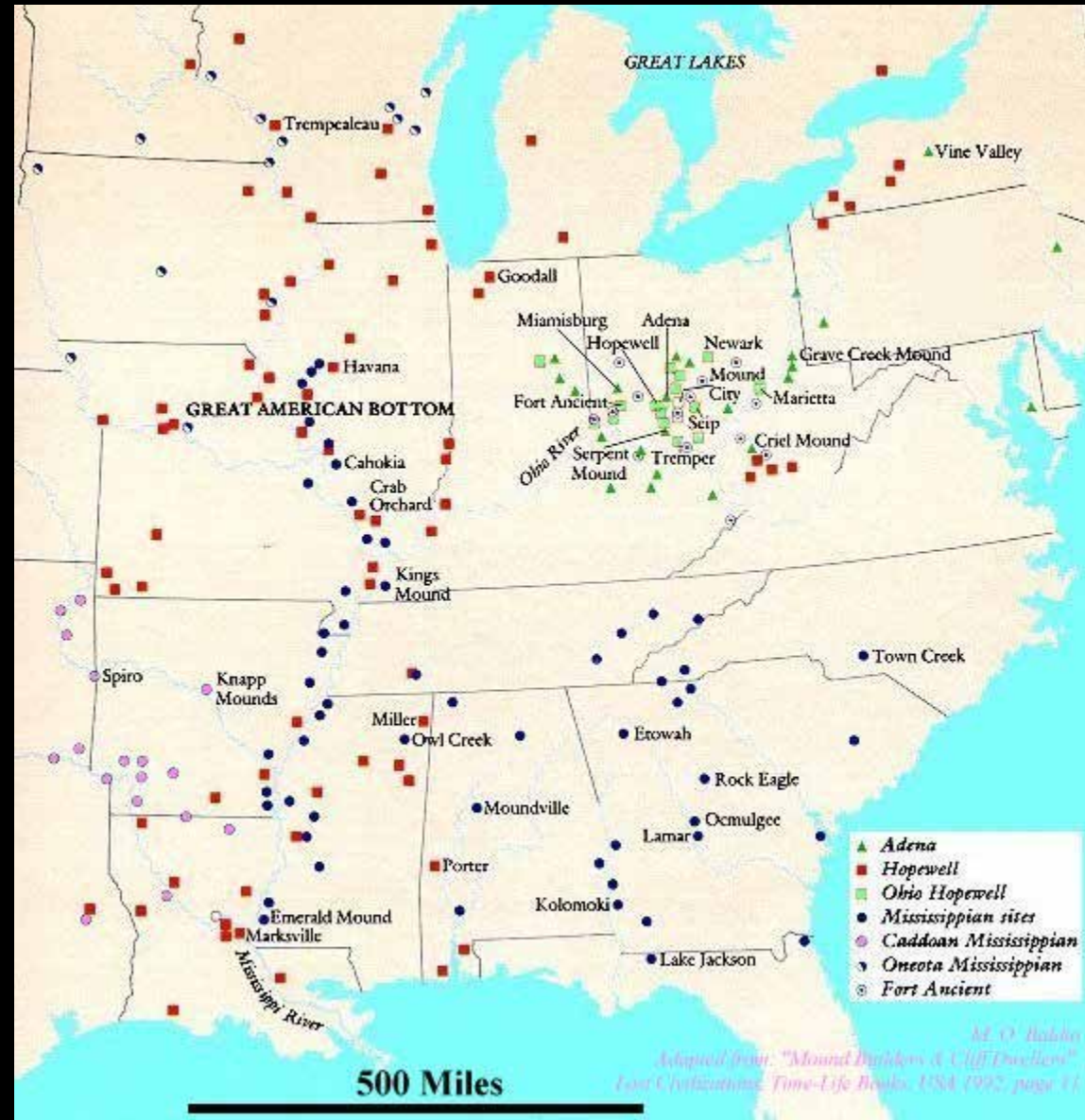
From *American Anthropologist* "Indian Corn-Hills in Massachusetts,"  
Delabarre and Wilder, July 1920.

# The North American Cultural Landscape 5000 years

They had a strong suggestion of influence from Mesoamerica.

Beginning with the construction of Watson Brake about 3400 B.C. in present-day Louisiana, nomadic indigenous peoples started building earthwork mounds in North America nearly 1000 years before the pyramids were constructed in Egypt.

Serpent Mound in southern Ohio is a 1,348-foot mound built about 1070 A.D.



M. O. Rabin  
Adapted from "Mound Builders & Cliff Dwellers"  
Lost Civilizations, Time-Life Books, 1984 (1992), page 11

The Mississippian Culture reached its climax about 1500 A.D.







One of the most notable temple sites was Cahokia, at St. Louis, where groupings of pyramids and burial mounds cover five square miles. The largest earthen pyramid is 104 feet high and covers 16 acres.

“Anyone who traveled up the Mississippi in 1100 A.D. would have seen it looming in the distance: a four-level earthen mound bigger than the Great Pyramid of Giza...Cahokia was a busy port...Covering five square miles and housing at least fifteen thousand people. Cahokia was the biggest concentration of people north of the Rio Grande until the eighteenth century.”

“To obtain fuel and construction material and to grow food, they cleared trees and vegetation from the bluffs to the east and planted every inch of arable land. Because the city’s numbers kept increasing, the forest could not return. Instead people kept moving further out to get timber, which then had to be carried considerable distances...Meanwhile...the city began to outstrip its water supply...”

Mann, 1491

# Cahokia

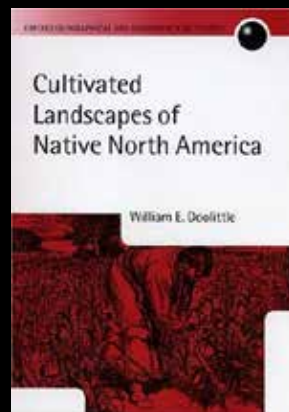
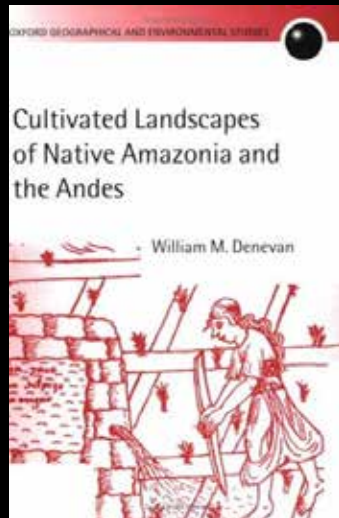
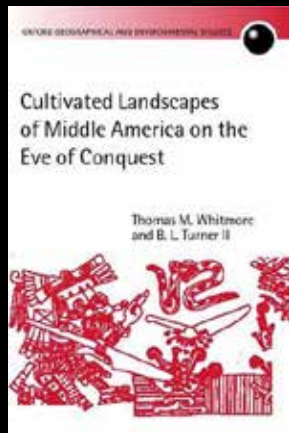




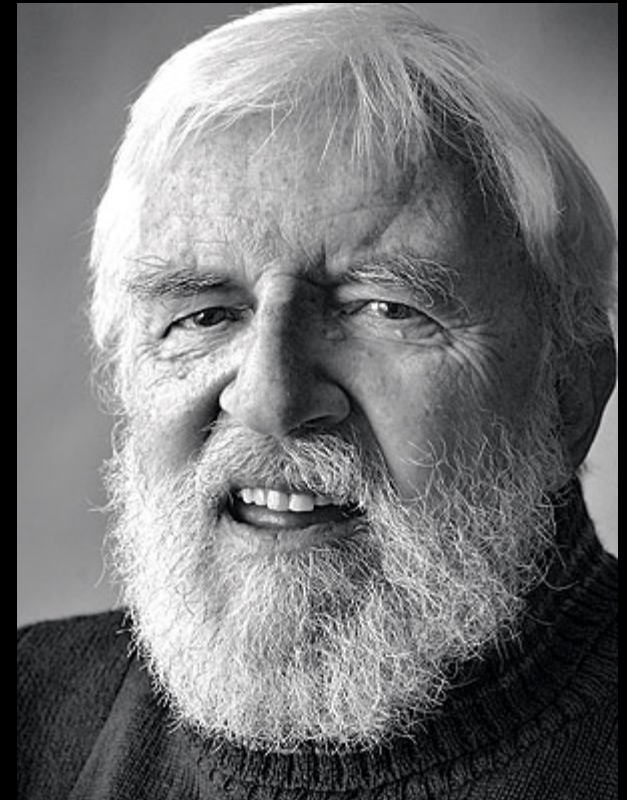
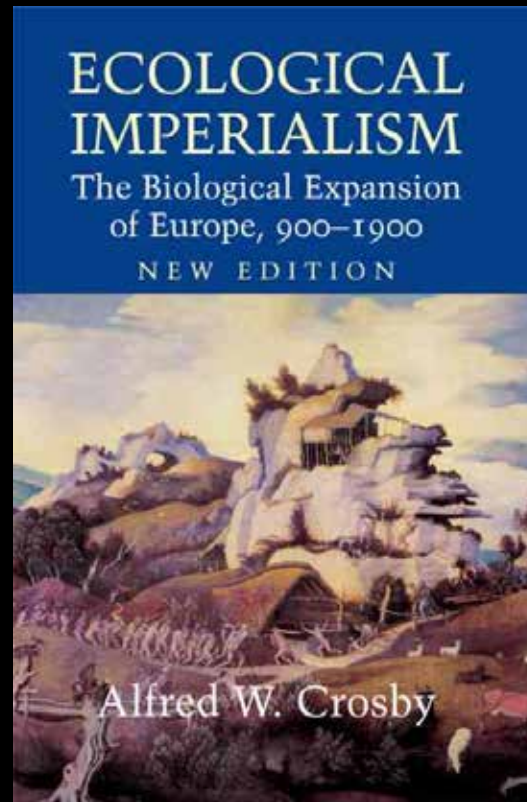
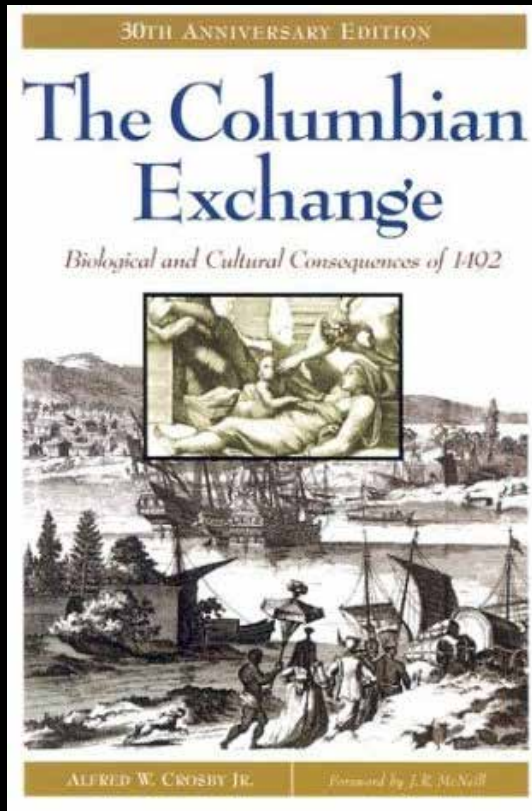
# Cultivated Landscapes of the Americas

The geographer William M. Denevan argued in 1976 that the American population in 1492 was around 55 million and that the population north of Mexico was under 4 million. These are among the lowest of modern estimates, but still dramatically higher than the nineteenth-century numbers.

Then in 1992 he published the essay – “The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492”



In 1972, Alfred Crosby described the near extinction of some tribes and the dramatic depopulation of others in *The Columbian Exchange* and the biological expansion of Europe in *Ecological Imperialism* published in 1986.

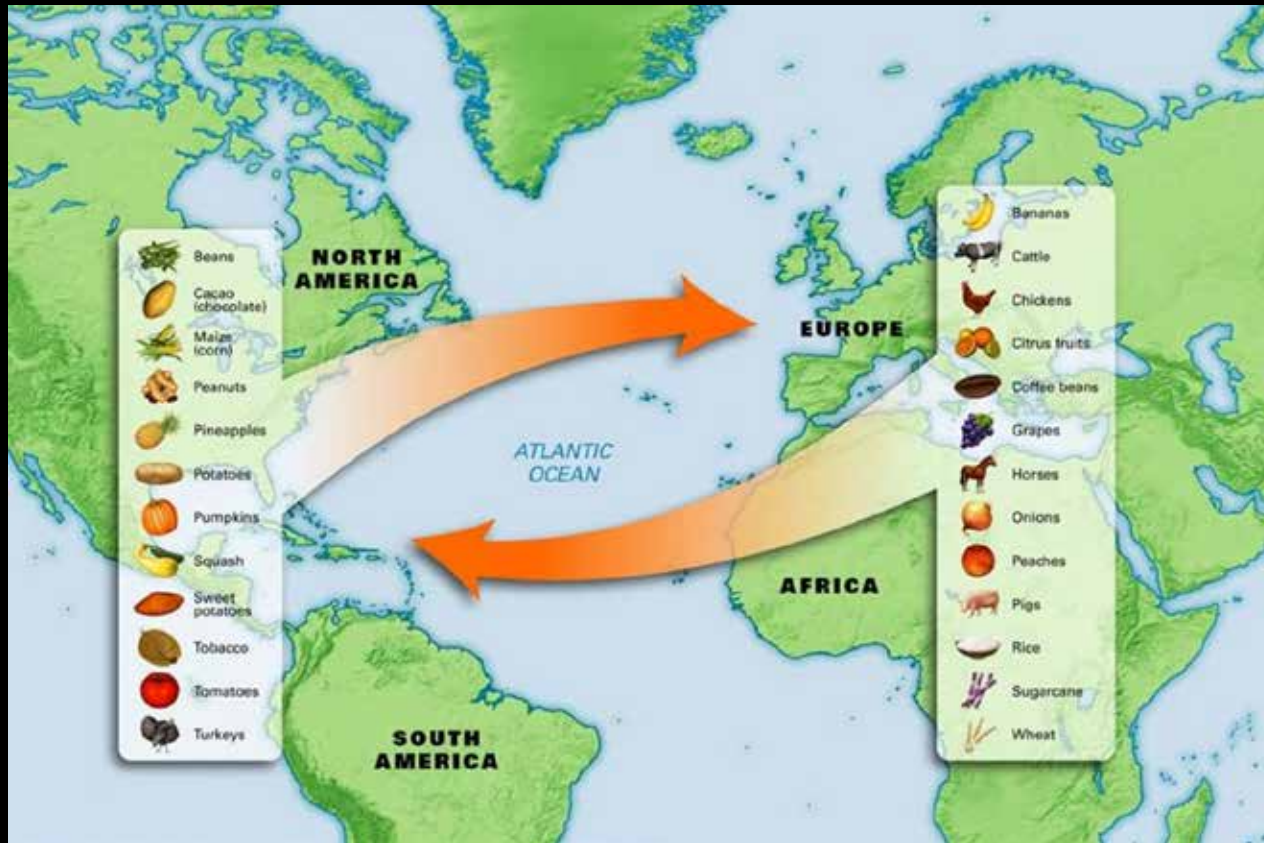
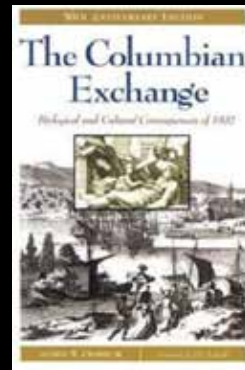


# The Columbian Exchange

“Until about 200 million years ago Eurasia and the Americas were a single landmass called Pangaea. It broke apart and for millions of years the parts had little communication. As Crosby put it, Columbus initiated the process of knitting back together the seams of Pangaea.

Ever since 1492, the hemispheres have become more and more alike, as people mix the world’s organisms into a global stew through the Columbian Exchange. ”

Mann, 1491



# The Columbian Exchange

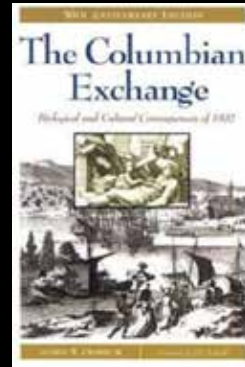
“Columbus set off an ecological explosion of a magnitude unseen since the Ice Ages.

Some species were shocked into decline (most prominent among them *Homo sapiens*, which in the century and a half after Columbus lost a fifth of its number, mainly to disease).

Others stumbled into new ecosystems and were transformed into environmental overlords: picture-book illustrations of what scientists call “ecological release.

Not all released species will become invasive. Most released species that don't immediately die out tend to find a small niche in the local ecosystem. Ecological release occurs when a species expands its niche within its own habitat or into a new habitat where there is little competition for resources.”

Mann, 1491

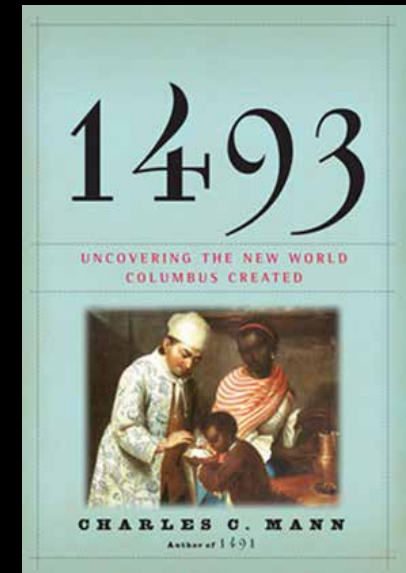
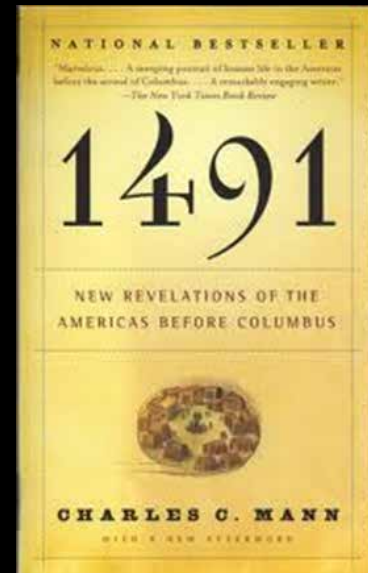


“Until Columbus, Indians were a keystone species in most of the hemisphere. Annually burning undergrowth, clearing and replanting forests, building canals and raising fields, hunting bison and netting salmon, growing maize, manioc, and the Eastern Agricultural Complex.

Native Americans had been managing their environment for thousands of years. As Cahokia shows, they made mistakes. But by and large they modified their landscapes in stable, supple, resilient ways. Some...areas have been farmed for thousands of years – time in which farmers in Mesopotamia and North Africa and parts of India ruined their land. Even the wholesale transformation seen in places like Peru, where irrigated terraces cover huge areas, were exceptionally well done.

But all of these efforts required close, continual oversight. In the sixteenth century, epidemics removed the boss...Not only did invading endive and rats beset them, but native species, too, burst and blasted, freed from constraints by the disappearance of Native Americans.”

Mann, 1491





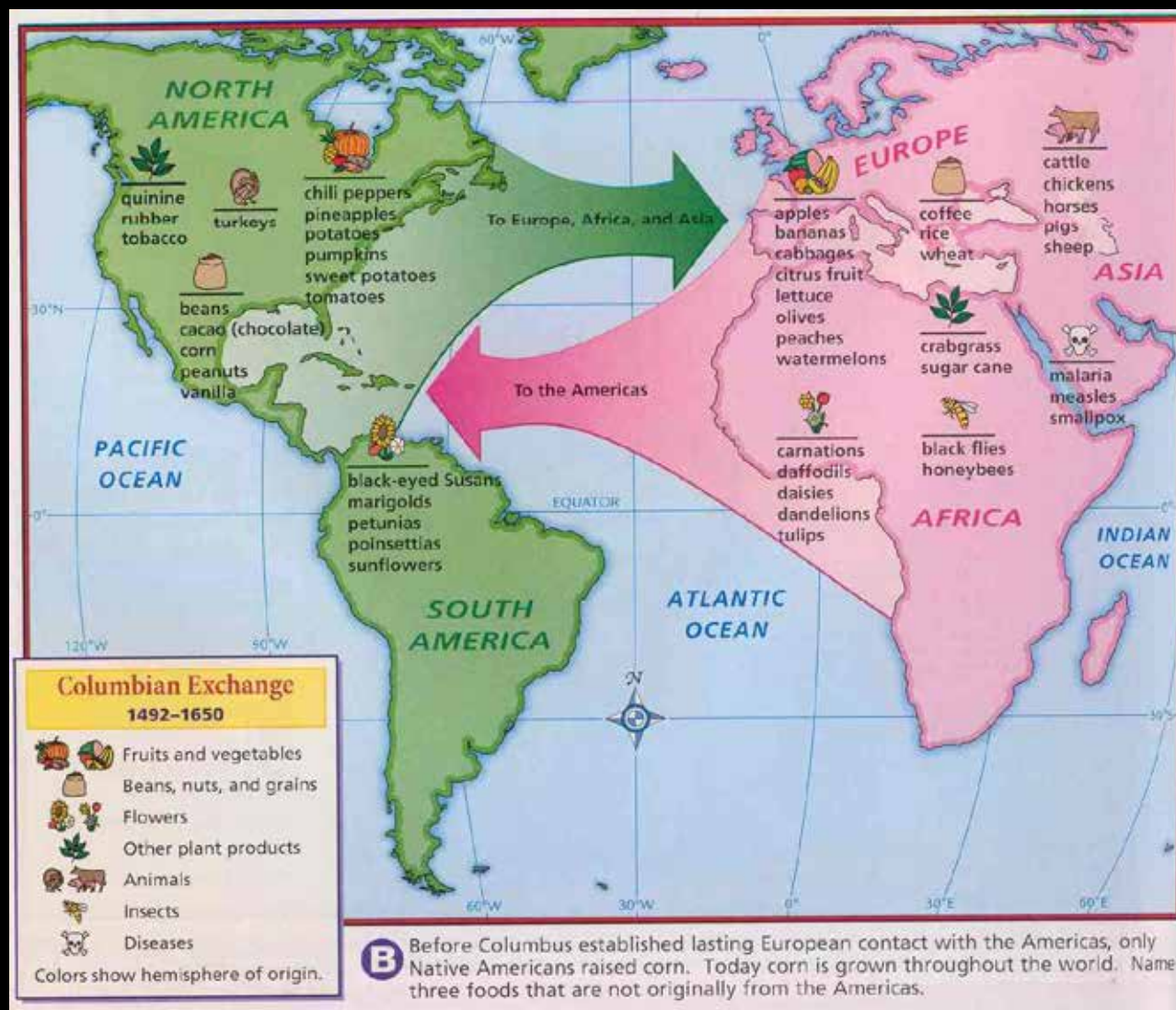
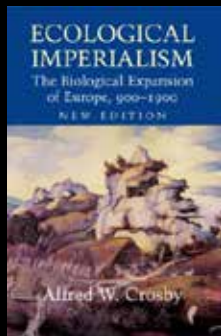
# Ecological Imperialism Invasions

Jamestown – rats, clover, bluegrass

Endive and spinach escaped from colonial gardens and grew into impassable six foot thickets on the Peruvian coast

Mint overwhelmed Andean valleys

In the Pampas of Argentina Charles Darwin found hundreds of square miles strangled by feral artichoke in the 1830s.



Darwin found that peach wood from invasive peach trees was the main supply of firewood for Buenos Aires.

Peaches invade the Southeast – 1700s farmers worried that the Carolinas and Georgia would be a “wilderness of peach trees”

## The Great Nations of Europe – Randy Newman

The Great Nations of Europe had gathered on the shore  
they'd conquered what was behind them and now they wanted more  
so they looked to the mighty ocean and took to the western sea  
The great nations of Europe in the 16th century

Hide your wives and daughters, hide the groceries too  
The great nations of Europe coming through

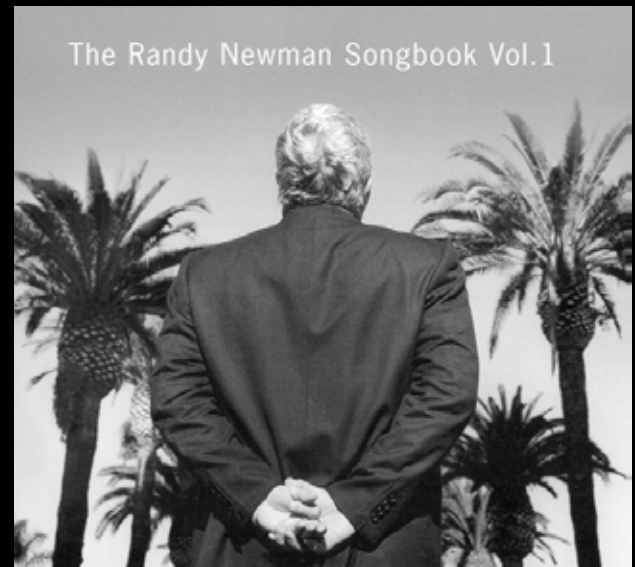
The Grand Canary Islands first land to which they came  
they slaughtered all the canaries there which gave the land its name  
there were natives there called Guanches, Guanches by the score  
bullet's, disease the Portuguese, they weren't there any more

now they're gone, they're gone, they're really gone  
you never seen anyone so gone  
there's pictures in a museum, some lines written in a book  
but you won't find a live one, no matter where you look

Hide your wives and daughters, hide the groceries too  
The great nations of Europe coming through

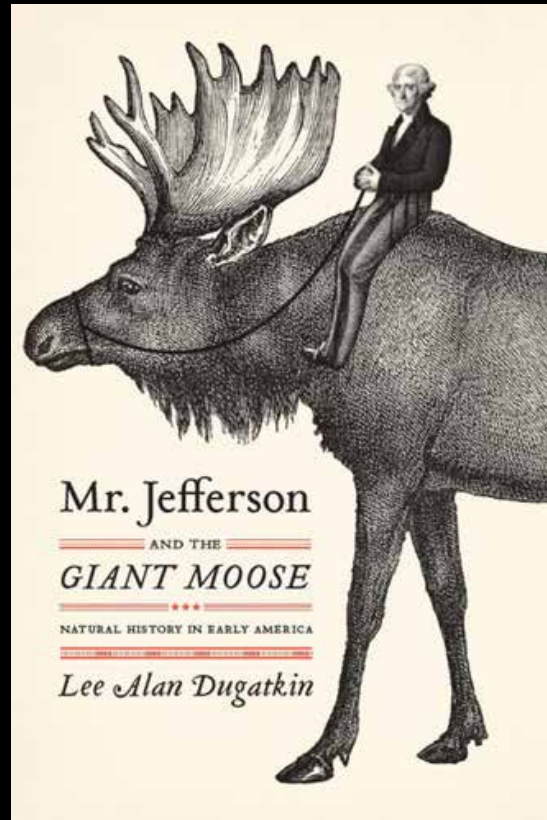
Columbus sailed for India found Salvador instead  
he shook hands with some Indians and soon they all were dead  
they got tb and typhoid and athletes foot, diphtheria and the flu  
'scuse me great nations coming through

On *Bad Love* (1999) and *Songbook Vol. 1* (2003)



## The Theory of Degeneracy and Jefferson's Moose

"The idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history."  
Raymond Williams, "Ideas of Nature"



## Comte de Buffon 1707–1788

French naturalist, mathematician, cosmologist, and encyclopedic author.

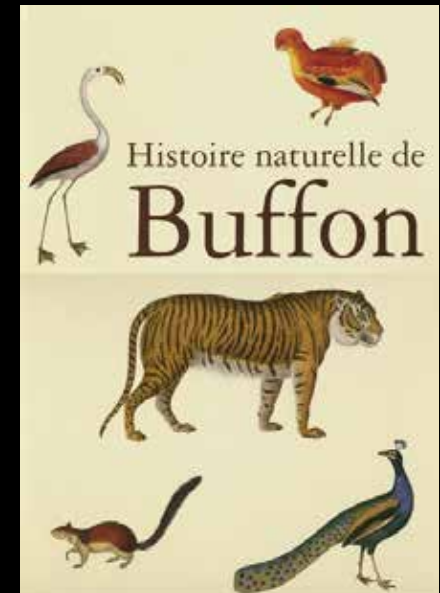
### *Theory of Degeneracy*

“In his massive encyclopedia of natural history, Buffon laid out what came to be called the theory of degeneracy.

He argues that, as a result of living in a cold and wet climate, all species found in America were weak and feeble. What's more, any species imported into America for economic reasons would soon succumb to its new environment and produce lines of puny, feeble offspring.

America, Buffon told his readers, is a land of swamps, where life putrefies and rots. “

Dugatkin, 2009



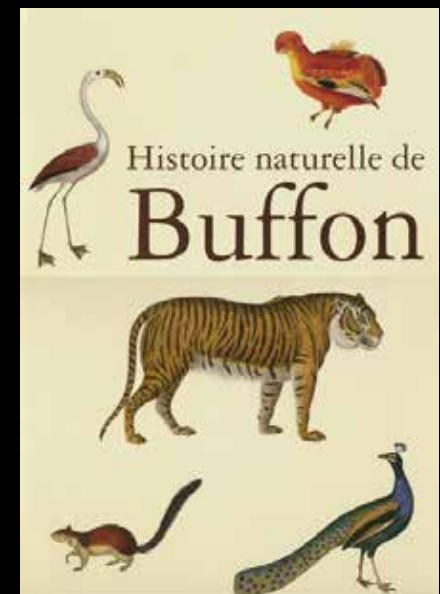
## The Theory of American Degeneracy (Environmental Determinism)

“There was no escaping the pernicious effects of the American environment - not even for Native Americans. They too were degenerate. For Buffon, Indians were stupid, lazy savages.

In a particularly emasculating swipe, he suggested that the genitalia of Indian males were small and withered - degenerate - for the very same reason that the people were stupid and lazy.

The environment and natural history had never before been used to make such sweeping claims, essentially damning an entire continent in the name of science.

They went on to claim that the theory of degeneracy applied equally well to transplanted Europeans and their descendants in America.



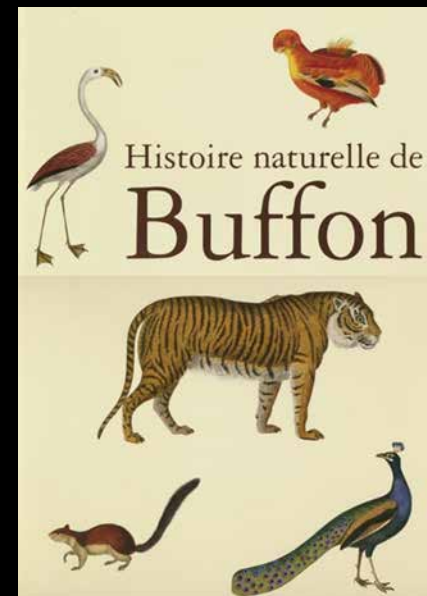
# The Theory of American Degeneracy

Kant – the climate in America produced a race “too weak for hard work, too indifferent to pursue anything, incapable of culture” (1788)

Hegel – “America has always been and still shows itself physically and spiritually impotent.” and animals in the New World are “in every way smaller, weaker and more cowardly” This inferiority applied to domesticated animals as well as wild ones, “a piece of European beef is a delicacy” compared to American beef. American birds were mostly mute and would only sing when they lived in a land that no longer “resounds with almost inarticulate tones of degenerate men.” (1816)

Keats – *Lines to Fanny* (1819)

Where shall I learn to get my peace again?  
To banish thoughts of that most hateful land,  
Dungeoner of my friends, that wicked strand  
Where they were wreck'd and live a wrecked life;  
That monstrous region, whose dull rivers pour  
Ever from their sordid urns unto the shore,  
Unown'd of any weedy-haired gods;  
Whose winds, all zephyrless, hold scourging rods,  
Iced in the great lakes, to afflict mankind;  
Whose rank-grown forests, frosted, black, and blind,  
Would fright a Dryad; whose harsh herbag'd meads  
Make lean and lank the starv'd ox while he feeds;  
There flowers have no scent, birds no sweet song,  
And great unerring Nature once seems wrong.



# Jefferson's Moose

In his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1785) Thomas Jefferson responded to Buffon's claims. His evidence included comparative tables of weights of animal species from America and Europe, lists of species endemic to each part of the world (the American list was four times as long) and even an explanation of why cattle were smaller in the New World than in the Old (farming practices, not climate conditions). He also included a passionate defense of Native Americans.

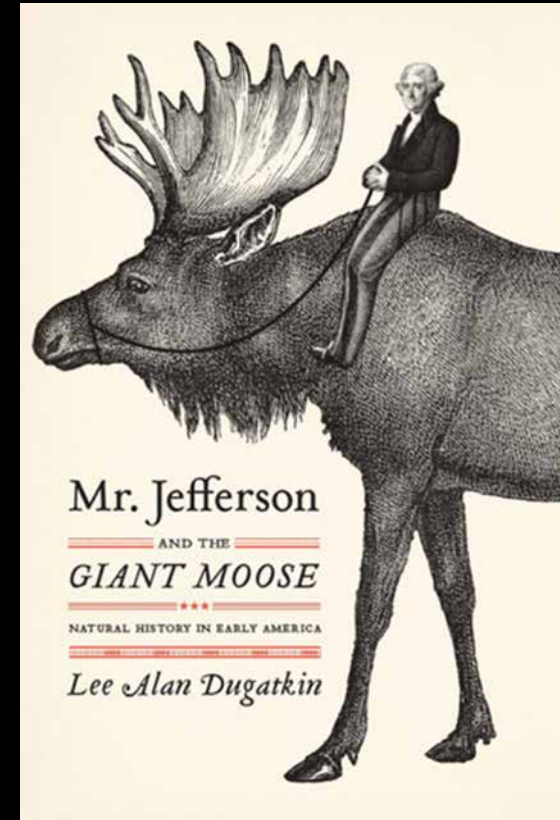
In addition, "Jefferson also wanted to present Buffon with tangible evidence...He tried with the skin of a panther, and then the bones of a hulking mastodon...but Buffon didn't budge.

Jefferson's most concerted effort in terms of hands-on evidence was to procure a very large, dead, stuffed American moose – antlers and all – to hand Buffon personally, in effect saying, "see."

This moose became a symbol for Jefferson – a symbol of the quashing of European arrogance in the form of degeneracy."

Dugatkin, 2009

If the theory of American degeneracy took hold in Europe the long-term consequences could impact trade with and immigration to the United States.



# Cultural Impact of the Theory of Degeneracy on the Idea of American Nature Wildness and Wilderness

Henry David Thoreau, "Walking" (1862)

"This statement will do at least to set against Buffon's account of this part of the world and its productions."

'We go eastward to realize history, and study the works of art and literature, retracing the steps of the race, — we go westward as into the future, with a spirit of enterprise and adventure. The Atlantic is a Lethean stream, in our passage over which we have had an opportunity to forget the old world and its institutions."

"If the moon looks larger here than in Europe, probably the sun looks larger also.

If the heavens of America appear infinitely higher, the stars brighter, I trust that these facts are symbolical of the height to which the philosophy and poetry and religion of her inhabitants may one day soar.

At length perchance the immaterial heaven will appear as much higher to the American mind, and the intimations that star it as much brighter.

For I believe that climate does thus react on man — as there is something in the mountain air that feeds the spirit and inspires. Will not man grow to greater perfection intellectually as well as physically under these influences?"





The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and what I have been preparing to say is, that in Wildness is the preservation of the world. Every tree sends its fibres forth in search of the Wild. The cities import it at any price. Men plow and sail for it. From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind.



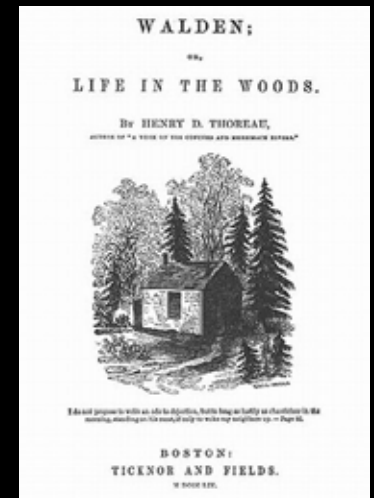
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Hope and the future for me are not in lawns and cultivated fields, not in towns and cities, but in the impervious and quaking swamps.

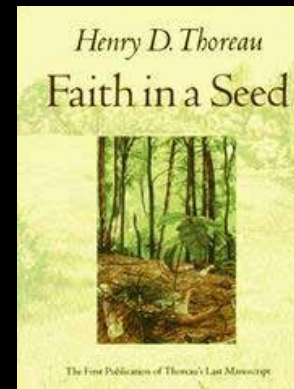
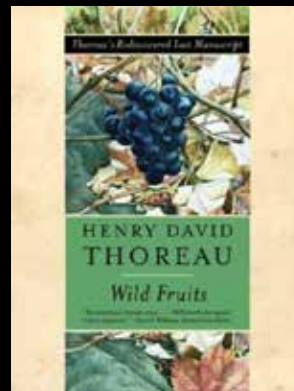
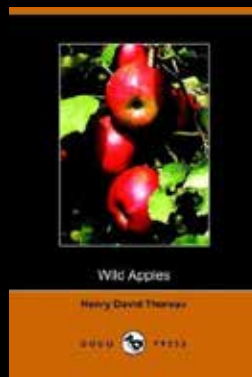
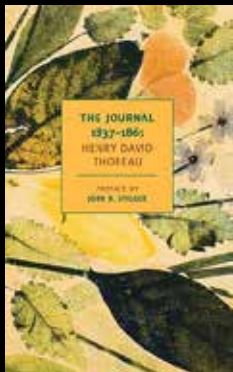
Yes; though you may think me perverse, if it were proposed to me to dwell in the neighborhood of the most beautiful garden that ever human art contrived, or else of a dismal swamp, I should certainly decide for the swamp.

When I would recreate myself, I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable, and, to the citizen, most dismal swamp.

I enter a swamp as a sacred place — a *sanctum sanctorum*. There is the strength — the marrow of Nature. The wild wood covers the virgin mould, — and the same soil is good for men and for trees.



Published 1854



## The Wilderness Myth

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Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (1967)



"The idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history."

Raymond Williams, "Ideas of Nature" 1983

