UNCOMMON GROUND

Rethinking the Human Place in Nature

William Cronon, editor
Foreword to the Paperback Edition

When Uncommon Ground was first published, we were dismayed but not entirely surprised by how controversial the book proved to be for some of its readers. These essays were written just before a powerful conservative resurgence produced a Republican-dominated Congress that quickly distinguished itself as the most hostile toward environmental protection in all of U.S. history. Americans who cared about the natural environment suddenly found themselves confronting what looked to be a political juggernaut committed to dismantling a quarter century’s worth of hard-won environmental legislation. Uncommon Ground showed up in bookstores when the anti-environmental assault still looked like it might prove horribly successful. Because the book is sometimes critical of certain widely shared modern beliefs about the human place in nature—beliefs that more than a few environmentalists embrace without always considering their full implications—some readers saw it as participating in the general backlash and so reacted angrily to its arguments.

Now, thankfully, as this paperback edition goes to press, we have clear evidence that the would-be counter-revolution has met much greater resistance than its supporters had hoped. There has been widespread public revulsion at efforts to gut the laws protecting air, water, endangered species, and the public lands. Legislators who at first thought they could make political hay by leading the anti-environmental charge have gone scurrying for green fig leaves to obscure their true intentions. Although the struggle to defend and extend our existing environmental protections is by no means over, the threat no longer seems as irresistible as it did when the book came out.

Given this new, more optimistic context, we hope we can be forgiven for asking our readers to resist any impulse they may have to react to Uncommon Ground as a hostile attack on the environmental movement. These essays were
meant to be quite the opposite. The criticisms we offer—whether of environmentalism in particular or of American ideas of nature in general—are intended to encourage greater reflection about the complicated and contradictory ways in which modern human beings conceive of their place in nature. Some of us come to these criticisms after long involvement with environmentalism and its political struggles, and the last thing we want is to undermine the movement or its long-term agendas. We believe that criticism is ultimately about building up rather than tearing down. Our goal is greater understanding and self-knowledge, qualities which, far from weakening environmentalism, should only strengthen and deepen the insights it has to offer.

These essays take as their starting point one key insight. It is simply that “nature” is a human idea, with a long and complicated cultural history which has led different human beings to conceive of the natural world in very different ways. Far from inhabiting a realm that stands completely apart from humanity, the objects and creatures and landscapes we label as “natural” are in fact deeply entangled with the words and images and ideas we use to describe them. Even when we travel through a beautiful mountain landscape in the Sierra Nevada or a remote rainforest in the Amazon—places that on their surface may seem as uncontaminated by humanity as anywhere on earth—we cannot help experiencing them not just as natural environments but as cultural icons. We turn them into human symbols, using them as repositories for values and meanings that can range from the savage to the sacred. At one moment they can stand for nature red in tooth and claw; at another, they can seem to be the purest earthly embodiment of sacred nature. What we find in these places cannot help being profoundly influenced by the ideas we bring to them.

Stated so simply, this hardly seems a radical proposition; it is in some ways so obvious that one might almost regard it as a truism. So why do some readers find it so threatening and objectionable? Three possible reasons suggest themselves. One is that environmentalism has often asserted its moral authority by invoking nature as an uncontested and transcendent category whose appeal is so compelling that no right-thinking person could resist it. As soon as we label something as “natural,” we attach to it the powerful implication that any change from its current state would degrade and damage the way it is “supposed” to be. But in fact we are rather selective about the parts of nature we choose to view in this way. It is in some sense “natural” that very large numbers of human beings should die from epidemic disease each year, and yet this does not prevent the vast majority of people—to say nothing of the entire infrastructure of modern medicine—from trying to resist that fate. Manipulating landscapes and growing seasons to produce agricultural crops is of course a profoundly unnatural enterprise, and yet almost all of the human race depends for its survival on doing just that. Indeed, civilization itself could hardly be less “natural”—even though it is civilization which has spawned modern environmentalism and taught us to value nature in the highly civilized ways we now do.

So one problem with asserting that “nature” is as much a human idea as a non-human thing is to undermine the uncontested nature of nature. If what we mean by “nature” reflects our own assumptions about the world around us, we must offer much subtler arguments to defend our beliefs about what we should and should not do with that world. It is not nearly enough to assert that something is “natural” and assume that this will end all discussion of what is to be done. Just as importantly, once we recognize that not all human groups and cultures view nature in the same way, it becomes at least more complicated to assert that one group’s ideas of nature should take precedence over another’s. At a minimum, we need to enter into a dialogue with other people about why they think as they do, and this can seem to make the work of protecting nature more difficult. But much as we might long for a world in which our own ideas were self-evident truths and those of our adversaries were false or downright evil, the world we actually inhabit almost never works this way. The essays in Uncommon Ground assert that we should be willing to question some of our own moral certainty in an effort to understand why we ourselves think of nature as we do, and why others do not always agree with us. Recognizing that “nature” may not be quite as natural as we think can be an important step in this direction, even if it threatens some of our dearest beliefs.

This leads to a second possible reason why Uncommon Ground has proven so controversial. Asserting that “nature” is an idea is far from saying that it is only an idea, that there is no concrete referent out there in the world for the many human meanings we attach to the word “nature.” And yet this is precisely the way some readers choose to interpret the message of this book. It is almost as if they believe that we must make a choice: either the world is made of pure matter, inhabited by objectively real plants and animals and objectively real landscapes that are completely unaffected by the ideas we may have of them, or it is made of pure idea, a fantasy we invent and carry around in our heads that has nothing whatsoever to do with anything other than ourselves.

The latter proposition is so ludicrous that it is hard to see how any sane person could hold it—and in fact none of the authors of these essays do. But at least for humanity, a world of pure matter is no less absurd, for ideas do exist and have real consequences in the world. Yosemite is a real place in nature—but its venerated status as a sacred landscape and national symbol is very much a human invention. The objects one can buy in stores like The Nature Company certainly exist in nature—but that does not begin to explain how they came to inhabit some of the most upscale malls in modern America. The bomb that exploded over Hiroshima could hardly have been more material, expressing as it did some of the most fundamental laws of matter—and yet it also could not possibly have existed without the human ideas that described those laws and applied them to this very particular piece of technology, so that nothing of the use to which that technology was put.

Some readers apparently fear that the critical perspectives offered in Uncommon Ground point toward a world in which anything goes, in which everything becomes relative to our own ideas and there is no stable ground on which we can hope to make a stand in defending the natural world. If one person’s
ideas are as good as any other’s, how can we defend some uses (and non-uses) of nature over others? How can we protect the environment if everything is up for grabs? The answer, of course, is that not everything is up for grabs, and not all ideas or uses of nature are equally defensible. There are very real material constraints on our ideas and actions, and if we fail to take these into account, we are doomed to frustration if not outright failure. The material nature we inhabit and the ideal nature we carry in our heads exist always in complex relationship with each other, and we will misunderstand both ourselves and the world if we fail to explore that relationship in all its rich and contradictory complexity. The essays in this book try to suggest some of the things we can learn if we reflect as much on nature as an idea as we do on nature as material reality. They suggest that environmentalism is as much a cultural prospect as a “natural” one.

There is perhaps one final reason why this book has provoked some readers into regarding it as an anti-environmental tract. We live in a time when political discussion favors extreme positions and sound bites. In the struggle to attract attention and support for one’s own views, the temptation is very great to caricature those of one’s adversaries. The result is a rhetorical landscape of polarities, in which stark oppositions arise and cartoons become our most common way of conducting what passes for reasoned debate. In such a world, you’re either for the environment or against it, and any inquiry that points toward more challenging or difficult ways of framing the discussion can seem threatening. The crucial task of self-criticism is all too easily avoided because it can seem to lend aid and comfort to the enemy.

Such aversion to criticism is understandable, but ultimately disastrous. There is no question that our purpose in writing Uncommon Ground was to ask hard questions that would encourage environmentalists and others to rethink some of their own most basic assumptions about nature and its meanings. Confronting such questions is never easy, and we do not claim to have answered them adequately in the pages of this book. We nonetheless regard this kind of self-criticism as crucial to the future of environmentalism, and to the human project of living on the earth in a responsible way. The struggle to live rightly in the world is finally not just about right actions, but about the ideas that lie behind those actions. At a time when threats to the environment have never been greater, it may be tempting to believe that people need to be mounting the barricades rather than asking abstract questions about the human place in nature. Yet without confronting such questions, it will be hard to know which barricades to mount, and harder still to persuade large numbers of people to mount them with us. To protect the nature that is all around us, we must think long and hard about the nature we carry inside our heads.

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