

Inscriptions of the Land

~ A Historical Sketch of American Nature Writing ~

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Some years ago, while attending a welcoming party for foreign students at the University of Virginia, a Japanese woman told me how much she admired America. She described how she had just returned from a fabulous plane trip, her small chartered Cessna having glided through the Grand Canyon. "America has such *wide* nature!" This somewhat bizarre way of putting it struck me at first as a misuse of an adjective; but then I mused. Wide? Can nature be measured? Is it quantifiable? The giant Sequoia trees of northern California are certainly wide, and the Mississippi River, the nation's longest, can be as wide as a mile across in some places. But nature itself? Someone else might just as well call it *long*, I thought, or even *heavy*. (And what would be the opposite: Can nature be narrow?!) But I thought about the variety of natural settings and landscapes found in America, the many wide rivers, the thousands of square miles of desert in the Southwest, and the huge swamps of the Southeast, the rolling prairies of the Midwest, and the great mountain ranges, and I thought after all that her term 'wide' was rather apt indeed, as it suggests expansive, and I would be the first to describe nature as an expansive entity, with its wide range of variety. I should have got over my fussiness and looked at the poetic truth of what she said; I would reply to her now: "Yes, nature is the widest thing we have in America."

It is difficult not to quantify nature, mainly because when the term is mentioned we tend to think of things like mountains, lakes and forests, which are all measurable and countable. Look at a topographic map of Canada, for instance, and so many thousands of small lakes appear dotted across the Great Canadian Shield west through Manitoba and north to Nunavit; the nature there seems uncountable; yet nevertheless we seem to want to try to quantify it. The vast, multitudinous snowy peaks of Alaska. Lots of nature there. How *much*? We seem to want to count or measure nature in one way or another; in the thousands of acres of forest in the Adirondack Mountains, in the miles and miles of Nevada desert, in the tons of water per second surging over Niagara, or in the weeks or months spent in hiking the Appalachian Trail through the states that once comprised the British Colonies, from Maine down south to Georgia.

To want to describe such an entity has always been a fervent activity of we humans, if only to try to convey to others the vastness, or the beauty, or the

uniqueness of the piece of the natural world we may be witnessing. There is a long history of expression by those witnessing nature in North America, and it is a history that parallels—and even documents—human interaction with the continent's natural world. These descriptions have taken the forms of essay, journal, story, poem, photograph, painting, and music. The expression has concerned all cultural groups: the Native American and the immigrant, the scientist and the farmer, the opportunist and the slave. The settings have been myriad: mountain, ocean, river, prairie, farm, swamp, desert, forest and even the garbage dump. The basis for such expression has been as varied as travel, scientific study, fishing, camping, hiking, environmental activism, residence, a visit to family, canoeing, exploring, and the spiritual trip. And the reasons are as varied as the people who have written about the American landscape.

Rarely do we find anyone writing about the American landscape who is content merely to rely on measurement and cataloging scientific data, quantifying what he sees, remaining in the lecture hall or laboratory rather than moving out into the landscape. Instead, it is the poetic sense that speaks to us when, benumbed by the tedious counting and the analysis, we step out of the lab or put down our book of facts, and leave it behind to seek out a more personal meaning of what the natural landscape can tell us. Let's turn to a poem by one of the greatest of American poets, Walt Whitman, where he writes the following as part of his vast collection *Leaves of Grass*:

When I Heard the Learn'd Astronomer

When I heard the learn'd astronomer;
 When the proofs, the figures, were ranged in columns before me;
 When I was shown the charts and the diagrams, to add, divide, and
 measure them;

When I, sitting, heard the astronomer, where he lectured with much
 applause in the lecture-room,
 How soon, unaccountable, I became tired and sick;
 Till rising and gliding out, I wander'd off by myself,
 In the mystical moist night-air, and from time to time,
 Look'd up in perfect silence at the stars.

The history of American nature writing begins with such people who would rather be 'rising up and gliding out,' people wandering away from their tedium for various reasons. It may be said that the first major nature

writing done in America, during the period when it had just become a nation after years under British colonial rule, was undertaken ostensibly as a scientific study by the botanist William Bartram (and I mention this as an irony to Whitman's stance on the matter; but soon we will see it as a good illustration of the point Whitman makes, as Bartram's experience moves from the mundane to the lyrical). He was the son of John Bartram, the premier naturalist of the day and botanist to Great Britain's King George III. In 1773, William Bartram was commissioned by the eminent London physician Dr. John Fothergill and other members of the Royal Society to explore the vast, uncharted lands ranging from North Carolina—the edge of urban life in the American Colonies at the time—to as far down into Florida and west to the unexplored regions as he could venture, 'for the discovery of rare and useful productions of nature' that he may find (Bartram 27). It must be said that he devoted a considerable part of his exploration to learning about the various Native American cultures he encountered (the Muscogulges, Cherokee, and Seminole, to name a few), writing extensively about their customs, dress, ceremonies, agriculture, housing, and community organization, and he may thus be considered one of the first ethnographers in the American Colonies. His journeys of exploration and contemplation ended in the momentous year of 1776, which marked the founding of the United States when its 'rebellious leaders' declared independence from Britain.

In Bartram's marvelous account *Travels through North and South Carolina, Georgia, East and West Florida*, followed by his *Travels in Georgia, Florida 1773-1774*, originally published in 1791, we read that not only does he approach his task from a naturalist's point of view, gathering data, making careful illustrations of what he observed, but he writes eloquently and with a great deal of sensitivity on the beauty, mysteries, and excitement of what he sees, often traveling solo in his little boat, drifting down streams and through swamps where very few white Europeans had ever ventured before. No mere scientist or removed observer, William Bartram writes about the natural world he is discovering with the passion of a poet of the landscape, and his accompanying illustrations of flowers and birds are done gracefully and with great artistic virtuosity. His writings were to have a profound effect on Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who based much of the imagery of his epic poem *Kubla Khan* and other works on Bartram's writings (Wright 76-80), as well as on William Wordsworth, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau (Fagin xii, 229), and on subsequent nature writers up to the present day. Here is an excerpt from his *Travels*:

My situation high and airy: a brisk and cool breeze steadily and

incessantly passing over the clear waters of the lake, and fluttering over me through the surrounding groves, wings its way to the moon-light savannas, while I repose on my sweet and healthy couch of the soft *tillandsia usnea-adsцитes*, and the latter gloomy and still hours of the night pass rapidly away as it were in a moment. Having some repairs to make in the tackle of my vessel, I paid my first attention to them; which being accomplished, my curiosity prompted me to penetrate the grove and view the illumined plains. What a beautiful display of vegetation is here before me!

(Bartram 141)

Here, then, is not merely the observant scientist in his laboratory; rather, Bartram is one who sees the overwhelming beauty all around him that a mere pedant scientist might obfuscate by pedantic measurements and cataloging. He is the personification of Whitman's character who would sicken and tire of the lecture, charts and diagrams and, as Bartram relates, leave his mundane tasks in order 'to penetrate the grove and view the illumined plains.' Several naturalists can claim Bartram as an ancestor as far as their humanistic, environmental approach to the study and writing of nature. Rachel Carson, a prominent author and biologist writing in the 1950's and 1960's, was responsible for initiating the present-day world-wide interest in our environment by calling attention to the pollution we humans are causing our land and seas. *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, warns of the death of wildlife that could come due to industrial pollution. Her observations are firmly based on scientific observation and data; yet her style is couched in a lyrical style not unlike Bartram's.

Another influential writer of the land at the time of the nation's birth was an immigrant from France, named J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, whose *Letter from an American Farmer* was published in London in 1782. He was an enthusiastic farmer who wrote of the virtues of his newly-found country, and the various customs of those who work the land for their own benefit. This idea was a unique way of life for de Crèvecoeur to witness—the independent farmer. The economic structure that was common at the time in many European agricultural systems was based on the existence of tenant farmers and peasants, who were beholden to a regional governing authority. "Europe contains hardly any other distinctions but lords and tenants; this fair country alone is settled by free-holders, the possessors of the soil they cultivate, members of the government they obey, and the farmers of their own laws, by means of their representatives." (de Crèvecoeur 53)

In addition to such chapter headings as “Situations, Feelings, and Pleasures,” and his descriptions of the inhabitants of Nantucket, Martha’s Vineyard, and other districts in New England where he lived (wherein he illustrates examples of their manners and customs of life in work and society), de Crèvecoeur devotes a great deal of his correspondences to the section, “What is an American”. We must recall that the country was still in its infancy, and as such, Mr. de Crèvecoeur, like all thinking citizens of those times, embarked on the attempt to define his domain. In particular, the new Americans were people who not many years before had lived and labored in Europe under quite different circumstances, which for the most part were non-democratic. Most of them, too, were poor. “The rich stay in Europe, it is only the middling and the poor that emigrate.” (de Crèvecoeur 58) He writes of distances in America being greater than they were in Europe, food being more plentiful both from the land as from the sea, and more importantly, the burden of one’s labors are undertaken solely for one’s own livelihood and self-improvement alone (de Crèvecoeur 58-59). His point of view is as a man beholding his lands in terms of the society in which he has now become an equal participant. And it is the land itself that offers the metaphor.

In 1831, a patriotic hymn was first sung at a Fourth of July celebration in Boston. It was written by Rev. Samuel Francis Smith, and has since become known to every elementary school student in the US, as it is usually sung at the beginning of the class day. Important for our purposes here is that it makes a clear connection between the land and the nation’s identity, suggesting that each is an integral part of the other. Below is the first verse of the hymn:

America

Oh beautiful for spacious skies,
 For amber waves of grain.
 For purple mountains’ majesty
 Above the fruited plan.
 America, America,
 God shed His grace on thee.
 And crown thy good with brotherhood
 From sea to shining sea.

Observers of the natural landscape also included the pioneers who sought new lands and opportunities, and who were often driven forward because they could not remain where they were: financial difficulties, political or religious

friction, or often enough, a universal belief that someplace unseen would surely hold a better promise for them.

For many, too, there was the need for a spiritual quest, such as the transcendentalists, a significantly important group of American writers in the mid 19th century. This was a time of great change in America, as the industrial revolution and economic expansion were increasing the sizes of cities, factories were spewing filthy smoke into the air, and daily life in general was threatening the common citizen with loss of freedom and dignity. The followers of transcendentalism, who were primarily New Englanders and who lived, for the most part, in the well-settled cities and towns of the northeastern US, sought the highest ideal of life and experience, with an eye toward rising above the mere commonplace and to seek beauty through direct sensual experience, rebelling against the impersonal and rational empiricism of the time. As such, the wilderness for them became a place of solace and introspection, the dark woods were transcended into a spiritual place of wisdom and light.

Looking back, the most famous member of this group was Henry David Thoreau, who is a figure well-known in American history for his beliefs in the high moral virtues of non-violent dissent, through his preaching of civil disobedience against unjust policies of government. His own protests were directed against the immorality of slavery that was still practiced in the southern states, and against the current US-Mexican War (which he considered unjust), along with subsequent disagreements with other policies of the US government. His observations and attitudes are reflected in his book *Civil Disobedience*, which had a profound influence on Mahatma Gandhi's and Martin Luther King's own beliefs in the power of non-violent dissent (McElroy 2005), and in *Walden*, named after a pond in Massachusetts beside which he lived for roughly a year and a half in a self-built cabin in the woods. He regarded this time spent beside Walden Pond an experiment in lifestyle, and there in his retreat, in his self-exile from society, he raised his own beans and contemplated the close relationship between man and nature, and how we need to re-acquire our links to the land and the natural world. Thoreau wrote in *Walden*,

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, to discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that

was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and to be able to give a true account of it.
(Thoreau 75)

Thus he, as had Bartram, sought to gain insight into life and nature by direct experience. *Walden* was, for many young people during that great period of social and political conflict in the 1960s, a model for a return-to-nature lifestyle, where many of those people chose to turn their backs on the more established, industry-based way of life in the US, and to seek a way to live that was closer to nature.

In 1858, the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson, a close acquaintance of Thoreau, led a group of transcendentalists to Follensby Pond in the Adirondack Mountains of New York State, calling it 'The Philosophers' Camp.' There they wrote poetry, fished, painted, swam, and generally communed with the forests and mountains around them, thereby delegating their surroundings as possessing great significance in the lives of those who would transcend the mean workaday world of the so-called progress of industrial America. (Jerome 56-7)

From 1880 to 1883, the magazine *Forest and Stream* published a series of letters and articles that had been contributed by an outdoorsman named George Washington Sears. He was a rather poor, tubercular, diminutive gentleman, slight of stature. Yet he was also a well-traveled, intrepid solo adventurer, as well as an important figure as one of America's first environmentalists, who goaded the common city-dweller to recognize the beauty of what a sojourn into the forests could offer, and to realize the need to protect the nation's natural heritage for subsequent generations.

At that time, it was an almost universal practice for anyone wishing to get out of the city and spend time in the woods to hire a guide for the purpose of cooking and carrying the gear. Very few people then would consider soloing into the forests. Sears extolled the virtues and corporal pleasures of setting out by oneself, with the lightest of equipment (his opinion certainly having been influenced both by his small stature and his reluctance to pay a for guide). With just a backpack, a little food and a light-weight watercraft, anyone might spend a few weeks drifting through the lakes and hiking the forests of the Adirondack Mountains.

Essentially a self-educated man, Sears also wrote poetry, and thanks to a faultless memory and a fine appreciation of good literature despite his lack of

formal education, he would carry in his memory great passages from Shakespeare and Dickens to quote to fellow woodsmen—and for that matter to anyone else—that he would meet in his solitary travels. Sears (who wrote under his adopted childhood name *Nessmuck* given to him by his Indian friends) insisted that if a person could go it alone and be self-reliant, such ‘a sojourn in the woods could provide an antidote to the pollution and crime of the newly industrialized cities’ for anyone wishing to escape such urban evils, thereby strengthening in that person a great sense of self-confidence that slaving away in the city might have dissipated. (Sears 16)

Sears also penned one of the first outdoor manuals for those who would “go in alone” without the so-called encumbrance of a guide. In his little book, called *Woodcraft and Camping*, he combines a rigorous set of instructions and advice on how anyone can build a fire, cook their own food, and construct a campsite; and he offers tips on the best (and worst) types of tents, with interjections of his own poetry and lyrical observations on the delights of the woods.

He includes the following poem in the Preface of his *Woodcraft and Camping*, exhorting the city-dweller to escape the suffering that industrialization and urban life bring, and to come to seek solace in the woods:

For brick and mortar breed filth and crime,
With a pulse of evil that throbs and beats;
And men are withered before their prime
By the curse paved in with the lanes and streets.

And lungs are poisoned and shoulders bowed,
In the smothering reek of mill and mine;
And death stalks in the struggling crowd—
But he shuns the shadow of oak and pine.

At the end of his outdoor manual he writes,

Let us be thankful that there are still thousands of
cool, green nooks beside crystal springs, where the
weary soul may hide for a time away from debts,
duns and deviltries, and a while commune with
nature in her undress.

(Sears 101)

Such a delightful way to encourage all such oppressed to leave the dismal dens of the city, with “the curse paved in with lanes and streets,” and venture,

at least for a while, into the luxuriant “shadow of oak and pine.”

Other writers have taken up the genre established by Nessmuck by writing “how-to” manuals for campers and hikers that encourage them to be self-sufficient. Calvin Rutstrum wrote his famous *The New Way of the Wilderness* in 1958, telling the amateur that “the actual risk that goes with a canoe journey in wilderness waters, a pack-horse trip into the mountains, or a trip by dog sled is no greater than that of participating in vigorous athletics.” (Rutstrum 2) Yet he goes on to explain that the key to one’s safety, and enjoyment, is in the preparation for the trip, and a knowledge of the basic skills necessary. “In the wilderness a set of principles applies of which some are best described as calculated risks. The success of any such calculation must, of course, be based on knowledge and experience.” (Rutstrum 3)

The canoe has factored into much of American nature writing, as it has been the most important mode of transportation throughout much of North America and Canada. Native people could travel hundreds of kilometers along rivers and across lakes, and carry their craft from one body of water to the next, with great speed and relative ease. Several authors have published works on the beauty and functionality of the craft. These include John McPhee’s *Survival of the Bark Canoe*, and Pierre Pulling’s *Canoeing the Indian Way*. The book *Canoeing with the Cree* was famed American journalist Eric Sevareid’s account of his 2,250-mile-journey, as a young man, from Minneapolis to Hudson Bay in Canada, with fellow voyager Walter Port. Until their trip, no one had made the journey successfully. Both were only 17 years old, and neither of them had ever traveled any distance in a canoe. Eddy Harris, in his *Mississippi Solo*, wrote about his journey as an inexperienced canoeist traveling down the Mississippi River, written from the point of view of a modern Afro-American navigating the country from north to south, and the racial and historical aspects that influenced his thoughts as he moved through the geography of the land, the river, and its people.

For the most part, contemporary American nature writers tend to be ardent proponents of the environmental movement, and are seen as the direct descendants of Nessmuck, Thoreau and Rachel Carson, in their dire warnings that the fragile land must be protected from the pollution resulting from so-called industrial ‘progress’. One writer in particular, anthropologist-turned-activist Ed Abbey, wrote extensively about the desert, and how vital it is to keep it as such, to preserve its indispensable identity. He abhorred the irrigation of deserts of the American Southwest and construction of cities there, such as Phoenix and Las Vegas. He believed that water has its rightful place and belongs only where it may be found in nature. Below is an example of this attitude, a dialog between himself and a visitor

from Ohio, taken from his celebrated work *Desert Solitude*:

“This would be good country,” a tourist says to me, “If only you had some water.” He’s from Cleveland, Ohio.

“If we had water here,” I reply, “this country would not be what it is. It would be like Ohio, wet and humid and hydrological, all covered with cabbage farms and golf courses. Instead of this lovely barren desert we would have only another blooming garden state, like New Jersey. You see what I mean?”

“If you had more water more people could live here.”

“Yes sir. And where then would people go when they wanted to see something besides people?”

“I see what you mean. Still, I wouldn’t want to live here. So dry and desolate. Nice for pictures but my God I’m glad I don’t have to live here.”

“I’m glad too, sir. We’re in perfect agreement. You wouldn’t want to live here, I wouldn’t want to live in Cleveland. We’re both satisfied with the arrangement as it is. Why change it?”

“Agreed.”

We shake hands and the tourist from Ohio goes away pleased, as I am pleased, each of us thinking he has taught the other something new.

(Abbey 112-113)

Dan O’Brien, a rancher who cherishes the remoteness of his home in the Black Hills of North Dakota, becomes rueful at the sudden appearance of a light that can be seen on the distant slopes. In his story *Life on the Myopian Frontier*, he writes:

When I sit on the steps of our ranch house at night I can see a single electric light somewhere near the top of the Black Hills. The light first appeared a couple of months ago and it annoys me because it creates the sensation that humans have finally elbowed their way to the top of the mountains that are, in many ways, the central feature of my life.

O'Brien, like many, is a person who jealously protects his isolation; such 'independence of personal space' can almost be characterized as an American natural resource. Nessmuck extolled its purifying virtues for the city-dweller, and for anyone who has sought so-called unspoiled beauty in the natural landscape, O'Brien's distress at seeing the light of another human being encroaching on his spiritual domain is understandable.

American nature writing is replete with efforts of people, if not seeking a more spiritual life, then at least culling some sort of insight from the natural landscape. The line that runs from Thoreau and others of that time connects to writers such as Gary Snyder and Jack Kerouac, who shared many adventures in the 1950's as part of the social rebellion known as the Beats. While the characteristics of these two figures differ significantly in their approach to subject matter and style, there is one important link that can be found in Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*. Based on a true account in his life, it takes the form of a spiritual journey for Kerouac as he seeks to identify his own values and of those with whom he comes into contact. Functioning pretty much as a loner with backpack and very little money, he hitchhikes and rides freight trains back and forth across the US throughout the book, carrying with him a kind of Eastern ethic grounded in self-fashioned Zen Buddhist and Hindu philosophies. While attempting to attain enlightenment, or *Dharma*, he gives himself up to a variety of 'tests' by which he can reckon his success. The landscape is always present in his story, either as he sleeps in a dry riverbed on the Mexican border, or as he travels to his mother's home, traversing the Southwestern US, the Midwest, and finally to the mountains of North Carolina, where he will spend the winter meditating in the woods behind his house.

It is Snyder who introduces Kerouac to the magnificence of the mountains of California. On one expedition, and Kerouac's first time to climb a mountain, Snyder is the joyful, wild priest who leads his *bhikhu* pupil from insight to insight, not by telling him but by guiding Kerouac to each step through discovery. Several events offer something towards Kerouac's enlightenment, such as where to step along the trail. Gary Snyder (in the book's character of Japhy Rider) tells Kerouac (as Ray Smith):

"The secret of this kind of climbing," said Japhy, "is like Zen. Don't think. Just dance along. It's the easiest thing in the world... The cute little problems present themselves at each step and yet you never hesitate and you find yourself on some other boulder you picked out for no special reason at all, just like

Zen.” Which is what it was.

(Kerouac 64-65)

Farther up the mountain they camp for the night. Kerouac marvels at the huge rock beside which they make their camp fire, as well as at the great hulks of mountains he can see all around. “Ray, when you’re up here you’re not sittin’ in a Berkeley tea room. This is the beginning and the end of the world right here. Look at all the patient Buddhas lookin’ at us saying nothing.” (Kerouac 68) While meditating on a cliff, Kerouac thinks to himself, “Rocks are space, and space is illusion.” (Kerouac 71)

The next day, as they pursue their way to the very top of the mountain, Kerouac becomes scared and stops, so that Snyder continues on his own to the peak. Kerouac is not yet ready to reach the goal, and so he is relegated to the role of apprentice, while the master continues to the crest, and picks him up on the way down.

At the end of the book, Kerouac does achieve his goal, by way of a summer spent isolated as a fire watch in a small hut perched high above the clouds. All the thoughts of his travels across the American landscape during the past year or so, and through the various aspects of American culture and society he had come into contact with, coalesce in his thought-stream as he contemplates himself gazing at the great mountains and valleys stretched before him. He summarizes his thoughts with, “But let the mind beware, that although the flesh be bugged, the circumstances of existence are pretty glorious.” (Kerouac 238)

Gary Snyder has established himself as a significant writer of the American landscape, and his poems and essays take into account the beliefs of the ancient people of this earth. In his book *Turtle Island*, he refers the title to:

“...the old/new name for the continent, based on many creation myths of the people who have been living here for millennia, and reapplied by some of them to “North America”... A name: that we may see ourselves more accurately on this continent of watersheds and life-communities—plant zones, physiographic provinces, culture areas; following natural boundaries. The “U.S.A.” and its states and counties are arbitrary and inaccurate impositions on what is really here.”

(Snyder Introductory Note, p. xi)

His writings have often made the association between what we find in the physical, tangible landscape—the pebbles we can hold, the mountains we can climb—with the meaning we can derive through our own sense of ‘being there.’ In the following poem, taken from *Turtle Island*, note how Snyder makes this connection between the human factor and the landscape:

Bedrock

for Masa

Snowmelt pond warm granite
 we make camp,
 no thought of finding more.
 and nap
 and leave our minds to the wind.

on the bedrock, gently tilting,
 sky and stone,

teach me to be tender.

the touch that nearly misses—
 brush of glances—
 tiny steps—
 that finally cover worlds
 of hard terrain.
 cloud wisps and mists
 gathered into slate blue
 bolts of summer rain.

tea together in the purple starry eve:
 new moon soon to set,
 why does it take so
 long to learn to
 love,
 we laugh
 and grieve.

(Snyder 112)

This particular poem has extended the path along which previous nature writers have taken us, from William Bartram, to de Crèvecoeur and Thoreau,

Nessmuck, and so many others not included here. It has been a trip through the physical aspects of the American landscape; today's American nature writers find themselves to have evolved into a way of thinking about the land in terms of the spirit, their own and that of others who have lived on the land before. Bill Mason, a filmmaker, painter and what may be most important, canoeist, traveled throughout the North American waterways—along rivers, across lakes great and small—and considered our place as a part of the natural landscape. In his film *Waterwalker*, the voice of an American Indian provides a point of view of how the Native people regarded their own place in the landscape:

Being an Indian means being able to understand and live in this world in a very special way. It means living with the land, with the animals, with the birds and the fish, as though they were your sisters and brothers. That is how we feel about our land. It is our flesh. Grass and the trees are our flesh. The animals are our flesh. This land is our blood. The land gives us life. We still live on the same land as our parents and grandparents, so it is just like they are still with us.

To me, the Earth is like a mother. She gives life. I am her child. Yes, the Earth is a good mother to me. And she is also so beautiful. Every day I look at her face, and sing in my heart.

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