

A walk on the Wildness side in the name of freedom.

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To commemorate Henry David Thoreau's 200th birthday on July 12, the *New York Times* last week featured an essay by historian Douglas Brinkley based on a complete misinterpretation of one of Thoreau's most famous quotes: "In Wildness is the preservation of the world."

Brinkley equates "wildness" with "wilderness," thereby connecting Thoreau with today's environmental movement. While that's a mistake I myself once made, in fact that is not what Thoreau meant at all.

Thoreau used the phrase in an 1851 lecture called "Walking" that was reprinted by the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1862. The lecture mentions both *wildness* and *wilderness* and it is clear they have two different meanings.

Thoreau would agree with today's environmentalists that *wilderness* is a state of nature, but he uses *wildness* to refer instead to a state of humanity. The lecture encourages people to be wild, which he equates with "absolute freedom" as opposed to the limited freedom available in a "culture merely civil."

Brinkley cites a variety of political and environmental leaders, including Theodore Roosevelt, John Kennedy, John Muir, and David Brower, who were inspired by Thoreau in general and this misinterpretation in particular to support government actions creating national parks, monuments, and wilderness areas. Yet it is not clear that Thoreau himself would have supported those actions, and it is absolutely clear that he would have opposed many policies promoted by environmentalists today.

This is important because Thoreau understood something about government that today's environmental leaders have forgotten: government itself is the greatest threat to the wildness, the human individuality, and the freedom that Thoreau cherished and most Americans still cherish today. In their seemingly desperate efforts to preserve things that are often relatively abundant, today's environmentalists are willing to sacrifice that individuality and freedom.

The whole idea behind wilderness and national parks is to freeze nature in one particular state. Yet Thoreau's most important scientific discovery was the theory of ecological succession, the idea that ecosystems are continuously changing. As modern-day ecologist Daniel Botkin says, "There is no balance of nature, but we keep acting as if there was."

Where today's environmentalists regard wilderness as something separated from people, Thoreau saw people as "a part and parcel of nature," and he valued nature and wilderness not just as ends in themselves but as ways for people to express their wildness or freedom.

Thoreau would have supported private efforts to preserve natural areas, such as the Trustees for Reservations in Massachusetts or Save the Redwoods League in California. Private property is the basis of capitalism, and unlike today's environmentalists who are often skeptical of capitalism, Thoreau relished it.

"What recommends commerce to me is its enterprise and bravery," he said. "It does not clasp its hands and pray to Jupiter." In other words, it is wild, and it is more likely that he would admire wild capitalists such as Richard Branson and Steve Jobs than communitarian environmentalists such as David Brower or current Sierra Club leader Michael Brune.

Thoreau was less likely to have supported programs setting aside government land as wilderness, as he was deeply suspicious of government. "Government never of itself furthered any enterprise, but by the alacrity with which it got out of the way," he said.

He would have absolutely opposed government regulation of private land, such as the Endangered Species Act or state land-use laws, aimed at protecting wildlife, scenery, farm lands, or other supposedly public values. Government regulators, he wrote, "deserve to be classed and punished with those mischievous persons who put obstructions on the railroads." Thoreau well knew what today's environmentalists have forgotten: that when you give a government power over others in the name of "the greater good," that government quickly becomes a dictatorship.

So the next time you read, "In Wildness is the preservation of the world," don't substitute the term *wilderness* for *wildness*. Instead, substitute the word *freedom* and understand that efforts to restrict freedom in the name of some greater good, whether open space, wildlife, or climate, are the greatest threat to the world.

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