



ESSAY

THE SPECIAL IMPORTANCE OF ORDINARY PLACES

By

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For at least the past generation, and probably the past hundred years, it is fair to say that the environmental movement in the United States has concentrated on protecting special places and special things. Notwithstanding the understandable attraction, and perhaps even the inevitability, of that focus, advocates for nature protection should be cautious about placing too much emphasis on it. Only by remembering, and communicating to others, the special importance of ordinary places and ordinary things can we hope to save much nature.

Let me concede at the outset that, as a matter of historical fact, the special places approach has been quite successful. It has provided the political foundation for a series of laws that have made the United States in many ways a model for the rest of the world in terms of protecting nature. We owe our national park system largely to the ability of people like John Muir to show us the uniquely spectacular wonders of places like Yellowstone and Yosemite.¹ We owe our wilderness system to the efforts of Aldo Leopold, Wallace Stegner, and Howard Zahniser,² who persuaded the American people, and ultimately Congress, of the importance of keeping some special places uniquely free of apparent human domination.

In addition to protecting a number of special places, this approach has successfully safeguarded some very special things. The bald eagle is about to wing its way off the federal endangered species list.³ It was helped along the way

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¹ See JOHN MUIR, *OUR NATIONAL PARKS* (1901).

² See Aldo Leopold, *The Wilderness and Its Place in Forest Recreational Policy*, 19 J. FORESTRY 718 (1921); WALLACE STEGNER, *THE SOUND OF MOUNTAIN WATER* 146-47 (1969); Howard Zahniser, *The Need for Wilderness Areas*, *LIVING WILDERNESS*, Winter-Spring 1956-57, at 37.

³ See Proposed Rule to Remove the Bald Eagle in the Lower 48 States from the List of Endangered and Threatened Wildlife, 64 Fed. Reg. 36454 (1999).

first by the Bald Eagle Protection Act,⁴ enacted to protect this special bird which we have made the living embodiment of our national identity, and later by the Endangered Species Act,⁵ which seeks to save all creatures that have involuntarily become special by reason of their status as the very last of their kind.

Notwithstanding its past successes, though, this strategy cannot be the complete solution to the problem of nature protection in today's world, much less in tomorrow's. It suffers from a crippling flaw: the rhetoric of specialness imprisons nature in a way that ultimately precludes extensive protection. Those of us who love nature, and who would like to ensure that nature persists for future generations to love, need to think about saving ordinary places and ordinary things. More accurately, since most of us probably do think about and care for the ordinary, we need to talk about ordinary places and ordinary things. Only by doing so can we convince others to share our concern. Moving away from the special places approach with which we have become comfortable will not be easy. It may even mean losing some battles in the short term. But it is essential to success in what must be a long-term struggle.

The special places approach has long attracted nature advocates because it seems to offer a shortcut to protection. It should be clear by now, however, that there are no shortcuts. The very features that brought past victories limit the future potential of this approach. Even if it succeeds as fully as we could possibly hope, the strategy of specialness is doomed to supply far less nature protection than we should seek.

The political power of the special places strategy is easy to understand. It gets people's attention and motivates them to action, two essential prerequisites to success in political battles. Merely by showing people Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon, or the Yosemite valley, in person or through the writings of John Muir or the photographs of Ansel Adams, we can convince many of them to support leaving the scenery in those places intact. A substantial number will even be inspired to take up the cause of those places themselves.

But the power of this strategy conceals serious shortcomings. The rhetoric of specialness sets up a dichotomy between special places, which are worth saving, and non-special ones, which by definition are not. If we truly want to protect nature, that distinction is ultimately untenable.

⁴ Act of June 8, 1940, Ch. 278, 54 Stat. 250 (codified as amended at 16 U.S.C. §§ 668-668d).

⁵ Pub. L. No. 93-205, 87 Stat. 883 (codified as amended at 16 U.S.C. § 1531 to 1544).

There are three problems with a strategy that calls for protection of nature because it is special, at least if that strategy swallows all others, as it has tended to do. Quantitatively, it assures that we cannot save as much nature as we should want, limiting us to a small number of special natural places. Qualitatively, it makes it difficult to save the things we have said we want, and impossible to save what we should want. Finally, a strategy focused exclusively on special places cannot build the support we will need from future generations to protect nature over the long term.

Past experience provides concrete examples of each of these drawbacks. First, take the quantitative problem. Special is a description that, by definition, can only fit a small percentage of the places and things in the world. Special things must be at least unusual, if not unique. Just as all the children in Lake Wobegon can't really be above average, all the places in the world can't really be special. By framing the argument for protection in terms of specialness, we invite the conclusion that, while some places or things are special enough to be worth protecting, many more are not.

We should not be surprised, then, that when we rely on specialness as the foundation for nature protection we are immediately hit with demands that we demonstrate that the resources we would like to save exceed some threshold level of specialness in order to justify their protection. The self-limiting quality of the special places strategy is actually an important element of its political success. Those who employ this strategy never seem to be asking for too much. So, for example, when he first proposed carving a wilderness system out of the national forests, Aldo Leopold pointed out that such a system would not threaten other forest uses, such as timber harvest, because it could never include more than a small proportion of the total forest acreage.⁶ Framing requests for protection that way makes them politically difficult to resist.

The problem, of course, is that protection of the most special places may come at the significant cost of sacrificing many more that are only slightly less special. The national parks offer an early illustration. When Congress set aside the Yosemite area as a national park, it included the Hetch Hetchy valley, a short distance to the north of the famous Yosemite valley. Shortly thereafter, however, the rapidly growing city of San Francisco decided that Hetch Hetchy would make an ideal reservoir site. John Muir and others resisted the grab for Hetch

⁶ Leopold, *supra* note 2, at 719.

Hetchy, arguing that its beauty was second only to that of the Yosemite valley. But they conceded it was second, and that turned out to be not special enough. The Hetch Hetchy valley disappeared under water.

Today, whether a place or thing is special enough to merit protection becomes an issue every time a wilderness bill is proposed or a national monument designated. The controversy over President Clinton's 1996 designation of the Grand Staircase area of Utah as a national monument, for example, has yet to subside.⁷ The extent of specialness becomes a political issue even when the law explicitly forecloses its consideration. The Endangered Species Act (ESA) directs the Fish and Wildlife Service to add any species in danger of extinction or likely to become so in the near future to the protected list; it leaves no room for the agency to decide that a species is not important enough to protect. Conservation opponents frequently attack the ESA by belittling particular protected species. The Delhi sands flower-loving fly, centerpiece of a recent dispute about the scope of federal power to protect species,⁸ provides an easy target. Although it is an interesting insect, hovering like a hummingbird while it slurps nectar through its long proboscis,⁹ it is just a fly, a member of a group most people do not consider special. The possibility that such an ordinary creature might complicate economic development has thrown conservation opponents into paroxysms of rage.¹⁰ Nature advocates should not be surprised by such attacks, which are invited by our overreliance on the rhetoric of the special.

The specialness strategy also requires that we articulate precisely what makes the places or things we want to save special. In the search for a quick political victory, nature advocates have frequently fallen back on the most distinctive features of the most distinctive places, emphasizing them in a way that unintentionally, but quite effectively, devalues other places lacking those unique features. Again the national park experience illustrates the type of trap this rhetoric sets. Advocates searching for ways to explain to the nation why Yellowstone and Yosemite ought to be protected relied upon the most striking features of those

⁷ For a thoughtful description of the Grand Staircase controversy in the context of the long-running dispute over wilderness designations in Utah, see James R. Rasband, *Utah's Grand Staircase: The Right Path to Wilderness Preservation?*, 70 U. COLO. L. REV. 483 (1999).

⁸ See *National Ass'n of Home Builders v. Babbitt*, 130 F3d 1041 (D.C. Cir. 1997).

⁹ See G. Ballmer et al., *Delhi Sands Flower-Loving Fly*, in *LIFE ON THE EDGE, A GUIDE TO CALIFORNIA'S ENDANGERED NATURAL RESOURCES: WILDLIFE* 416-17 (Carl G. Thelander Editor in Chief, 1994).

¹⁰ See, e.g., Ike Sugg, *Flies Before People*, WALL ST. J., Feb. 11, 1997, at A20; John Kass, *Out West, Flies Can Flit in the Face of Hospital Plan*, CHI. TRIB., June 25, 1998, at 3.

areas — their monumental, awesome scenery. That worked for those particular, uniquely scenic, areas, but it set up a commitment to monumental scenery that had to be overcome, with considerable difficulty, before places like the Florida Everglades or the California desert, offering unique but less spectacular scenery, could be seen as deserving of entry into the national park system.

There is an even more insidious danger in the strategic necessity of identifying special qualities that merit protection. Unwilling to trust the power of the “fuzzy” esthetic or moral arguments they themselves find most persuasive, nature advocates have frequently fallen back on claims of economic specialness as the justification for saving nature. The temptation to adopt this strategy is understandable. The Hetch Hetchy defeat taught nature’s defenders the risks of esthetic arguments. The appeal of those arguments depends upon individual taste or education, and it may be quite difficult to explain why one esthetic is preferable to another. Muir and his companions appealed to Hetch Hetchy’s beauty as grounds to save it, but were met with the claim that it would be even lovelier as an artificial lake than as an ordinary meadow.¹¹ Moral arguments face similar difficulties: it is hard to explain to those who do not already share the moral intuition that nature deserves protection why that view should determine public policy. Economic arguments appear to be grounded on a more solid, objective foundation. They appear to hold greater power to persuade an audience not already convinced of nature’s beauty or moral considerability.

But as the history of the parks demonstrates, economic value, though it may bring short-term political victories, provides a weak footing for long-term nature protection. When the scenery of Yellowstone and Yosemite did not immediately work to produce the national park system advocates sought, they added another argument: that the parks would bring economic prosperity to surrounding communities, and keep American tourist dollars at home. That argument convinced Congress to endorse the national park system.¹² But it has troubled the parks ever since, as they have struggled to live up to their economic promise without sacrificing the nature that makes them special.

¹¹ See *San Francisco and the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir*, *Hearings Before the House Comm. on the Public Lands*, 60th Cong. 13 (1908).

¹² See H.R. REP. NO. 64-700, at 2 (1916) (“The growing appreciation of the national assets found in the national parks and monuments is evidenced by the vast increase of visitors. The great trend toward the parks means retaining in this country the millions expended by our tourists in foreign travel previously spent abroad.”).

Arguments founded on economic value can sharply limit the extent to which we protect nature in many other contexts as well. Vast areas of nature have little apparent economic value. People will pay to see the spectacular Yosemite valley, for example, but not to see the far less striking Central Valley of California, just a few miles away. Of course, there are other kinds of economic value, but they do not get us much further along the protection spectrum. The discovery that the Pacific yew, once considered a junk tree of the northwest forests, contains taxol, a compound effective against some human cancers, made that tree suddenly seem valuable. But that value may be short lived; scientists quickly learned to synthesize taxol from sources other than yew bark.¹³ Moreover, there are many rarer plants with no such medicinal, or other material, bounty. The endangered Tiburon paintbrush, for example, found only on one small hill just north of San Francisco, is an inconspicuous plant with flowers that no one other than a dedicated botanist would call beautiful. It lacks any known or suspected human use. If we are committed to saving nature because, and by implication only to the extent that, it is economically special, both the Central Valley and the Tiburon paintbrush appear doomed.

Nature advocates who have recognized the shortcomings of the economic argument for nature have responded not by dropping that argument but by moving it to the most general level, denying that we know enough to evaluate it more closely. Some parts of nature, this refined claim runs, are surely essential to the material well-being, and even the survival, of humanity. Since we aren't sure exactly which parts those are, we had best keep all of nature around. The famous rivet popper story told by Paul and Anne Ehrlich provides a vivid example of this argument.¹⁴ The Ehrlichs put the reader in the position of a passenger about to board an airplane, watching with horror as someone pops rivets out of the plane's wings. Just as that passenger would be insane to board the plane, they argue, we as a society are insane if we allow rivets to be popped willy-nilly out of the planet on which we are all involuntary passengers.

¹³ See Faye Flam, *Race to Synthesize Taxol Ends in a Tie*, 263 SCIENCE 911 (1994) (reporting that two groups had announced the complete synthesis of taxol).

¹⁴ PAUL AND ANNE EHRLICH, *EXTINCTION: THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE DISAPPEARANCE OF SPECIES XI* (1981).

Again the power of this argument is apparent. It is in no small way responsible for our current Endangered Species Act, and a variety of other environmental laws at the federal and state level.¹⁵

But despite its power, the Ehrlichs argument is pernicious. By presenting species as simply rivets (the most ordinary, fungible piece of hardware we could imagine), it allows us to pop them without regret if we can be confident that they are not essential to the continued ecological functioning of the planet. And, contrary to one of the basic premises of this argument, it is increasingly apparent that there are many non-critical rivets. Ecological redundancy is common. In many ecosystems, many species perform the same roles. Furthermore, the alien species environmentalists spend much time and energy fighting can often perform those services just as well as the natives.

Consider a few examples. One defense of protection of the Delhi sands flower-loving fly has been to emphasize the value of native pollinators to agricultural crops.¹⁶ At the most general level, that defense undoubtedly has some merit, but it is far from clear that it has any application to the fly. The Riverside fairy shrimp, known only from a dozen vernal pools in southwestern California, is similarly esthetically nondescript, and almost certainly ecologically expendable. The fairy shrimp is a many-legged invertebrate less than an inch long that swims around upside down, consuming even smaller creatures from the water.¹⁷ It looks much like the common brine shrimp sold in dried form as fish food, and lacks any known unique ecological function.

Even many of the creatures fortunate enough to fall in the favored category of charismatic megafauna are undoubtedly ecologically redundant. The California condor provides an example. The condor's nine to ten foot wingspan makes it one of the largest North American birds.¹⁸ Undoubtedly it is physically special. But its ecological value is questionable at best. The condor subsists on carrion, scavenging the carcasses of large animals. That makes it a part of nature's crucial recycling system, freeing up nutrients from the last generation of creatures to make them available for the next. But there are plenty of other scaven-

¹⁵ See Holly Doremus, *The Rhetoric and Reality of Nature Protection: Toward a New Discourse*, 57 WASH. & LEE L. REV. 11 (2000).

¹⁶ See Michael P. Senatore, *People Still Come First (Over Flies)*, Letter to the Editor, WALL ST. J., Feb. 26, 1997, at A17.

¹⁷ C.H. Eriksen et al., *Riverside Fairy Shrimp*, in LIFE ON THE EDGE, A GUIDE TO CALIFORNIA'S ENDANGERED NATURAL RESOURCES: WILDLIFE 406-07 (Carl G. Thelander Editor in Chief, 1994).

¹⁸ See Mark Crawford, *The Last Days of the Wild Condor?*, 229 SCIENCE 844 (1985).

gers available to do that job, many of them far more abundant than the condor. The common turkey vulture is just as effective a recycler as the rare condor.

Rivet redundancy, in other words, is far more common than the Ehrlichs would have us believe, and we know far more about which rivets are redundant than they admitted. If we rely too much on the argument that the special economic value of nature justifies the costs of nature protection, even expanding economic value to include ecological services, we are likely to find ourselves with precious little protected nature.

The second problem with the special places approach is that it cannot effectively save either what nature advocates have openly said they seek to protect, or what they ought to be trying to preserve. Actually, nature advocates have frequently ducked the question of what aspects of nature merit protection and why, perhaps because they have been so focused on individual battles for special places and things. When they have faced up to the issue, they have talked about species, about biodiversity, and even about natural processes such as evolution. Unfortunately, a strategy limited to special places is not likely to protect any of those.

To understand that, we have only to examine the word "special." Special carries several meanings, among them exceptional and particularly valued. Those are powerful concepts, lending strength to the argument that we should commit resources to protecting the places or things we label "special." But special also means *un-usual* or *extra-ordinary*. When we commit to a special places strategy, therefore, we treat nature as the exception rather than the rule. We concede that it is properly distinguished from what is ordinary, customary, or usual. Once we make that concession, we are almost forced to agree that although nature is important in a few special places it can be forbidden in many others. That, in turn, sends us down the path of dividing the world into natural zones and unnatural, or nature-free, zones.

We are already further down that path than we may realize. We have raised expectations that nature will stay in its place, and not interfere with human interests in other places. Trying to meet those expectations, we draw arbitrary boundaries between areas where nature is permitted, and areas where nature cannot stray. Yellowstone National Park is the iconic example of a very large place we have explicitly set aside for nature. But today we work hard to make sure that the nature we have successfully nurtured in Yellowstone does not spill over to surrounding lands. A hundred years ago, bison numbers in Yellowstone

were so reduced that we had to restock with animals imported from other areas. Today, bison are plentiful in the park. But if they stray beyond its boundaries they are likely to be met by state officials with rifles.¹⁹ The gray wolf, once deliberately hunted out of Yellowstone, has been reintroduced. But the new Yellowstone wolves wear tracking collars, and are brought back if they stray outside the areas designated for them.²⁰

Similar boundary conflicts occur everywhere an area designated for nature butts up against one reserved for people. Outside the designated nature zones, people expect freedom from any limitations nature might impose on their daily lives. For example, those whose lands neighbor areas designated as reserves for endangered species under habitat conservation plans demand, and receive, protection against the potential regulatory impacts should those species stray onto their land. In California, a state agency responsible for issuing permits for restoration projects that involve planting within the flood plain has included a condition prohibiting the planting of elderberries, not because of any flood concerns but because elderberries might attract the endangered valley elderberry long-horn beetle. People even feel entitled to demand that neighbors who choose to invite nature to their land prevent any spillovers beyond the boundaries of their own parcels. Residents of urban and suburban areas expect nature to be somewhere else. When it intrudes into their daily lives, they complain about even the most seemingly trivial impacts, including noisy frogs and messy geese.²¹

A recent episode in Davis, California, the town I call home, is illustrative. Davis prides itself on its environmental consciousness, almost to the point of ludicrousness. The city keeps a quadricycle to show its commitment to alternative transportation possibilities. It incorporated a toad tunnel costing thousands of dollars (and ultimately proving unattractive to toads) at public expense into a road project. Nonetheless, many Davisites were not prepared to tolerate a colony of bats that took up residence in a crack in a building along a downtown alleyway. Despite the pleadings of ecologists, who pointed out that these Mexican free-tailed bats were great consumers of insect pests, the authorities, with substantial popular support, have stood by their insistence that the crack must be

¹⁹ See Dana Hull, *When the Buffalo Roam They May Not Get Home*, WASH. POST, July 22, 1997, at A1; Robert B. Keiter, *Greater Yellowstone's Bison: Unraveling of an Early American Wildlife Conservation Achievement*, 61 J. WILDLIFE MGMT. 1 (1997).

²⁰ See Holly Doremus, *Restoring Endangered Species: The Importance of Being Wild*, 23 HARV. ENVTL. L. REV. 1, 59-60 (1999).

²¹ See Doremus, *supra* note 15.

sealed against the bats. Expectations that nature will stay in its place and out of ours have become so well-rooted that even well-educated, environmentally aware people do not readily accept the presence of an unfamiliar piece of uncontrolled nature in the middle of their everyday world.

The demand that we divide the world into natural zones and nature-free ones is problematic because we cannot protect species, ecosystems, or natural processes through a system of rigid nature zoning. For one thing, nature requires large areas. Demanding that the zones dedicated to nature be entirely free of human impacts reduces the likelihood that we will muster the political will to designate sufficiently large areas.²² For another, the strategy of designating a few places for nature encourages us to believe that no more is required of us than leaving those special places inviolate. That is not true, however, because just as nature tends to leak out of reserves, human impacts leak in. Merely designating reserves is not sufficient to protect the nature within those reserves. To do that, we also have to limit our activities outside the reserves. Indeed, our past failures to restrain ourselves may mean that it is already too late for many of the areas we have set aside for nature to fulfill their purposes. We may already have set in motion global climate change sufficient to make many reserves inhospitable for the species they are supposed to protect. Only if their borders are quite permeable can reserves hope to protect nature over the long term. But if nature can leak out, it can harm or annoy people. Having tacitly communicated to people that they can expect to be free of such impacts, we may well find it difficult to teach them tolerance.

Beyond these practical problems, when we change our protective focus slightly we see that nature zoning is not even theoretically compatible with the type of nature protection we should desire. Although nature advocates have not often gone beyond arguing for species or for evolution, those are not the only things that warrant protection. It is important that we also work to keep nature wild. Wild nature, functioning without our direction and outside our control, moving to its own rhythm rather than to a cadence we impose, provides an important counterpoint to humanity. The special adaptive trait we have developed in the evolutionary game is a unique ability to manipulate, to control, the world around us. We are impressively good at that, so good that we have spread

²² William Cronon has pointed out other shortcomings of a strategy focused on the most pristine wildernesses. See William Cronon, *The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature*, in *OUT OF THE WOODS: ESSAYS IN ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY* (Char Miller & Hal Rothman eds., 1997).

over the globe to the most inhospitable of natural environments, and are in a position to vanquish many of the creatures which compete with us for the planet's resources.²³ Indeed, we are so good at controlling the world that we are in danger of forgetting that anything lies outside our control. Wild nature checks that arrogance by reminding us that there is a world beyond us. It can provide a humility of which we are deeply in need.

The deliberate choice to allow nature to be wild can also hone our other special quality, the ability to control ourselves and our manipulative urges, voluntarily limiting the scope of our evolutionary victory. Freely adopting restraints on our activities that the external world would not impose upon us sets us apart from other natural creatures in a very positive sense. Keeping wild nature in the world we confront daily offers us a chance to be truly special.

In light of the importance of wild nature, it should be obvious why the special places strategy cannot solve the nature puzzle. As explained above, focusing on special places leads inexorably to nature zoning. Nature zoning inevitably turns to nature confinement as we barricade the boundaries between natural and nature-free zones. By confining wild nature, we snuff out its wildness. We have reintroduced wolves to the Rockies, desert Southwest, and coastal Southeast, but as long as those wolves are collared and restricted to specified areas we have not returned wildness to those places.

The third, and fatal, flaw of a strategy focused exclusively on special places is that it will not generate the broad future support needed to make nature protection effective over the long term. The strongest argument in favor of the special places strategy is that it is the most effective method available to win quick protection for nature. Because nature is fast disappearing, it is easy to suppose that speed is everything, that all else can be sacrificed in order to ensure rapid action. But in fact nature protection is only meaningful as a long-term project. Lengthening the lifespan of a species by twenty, fifty, or even a hundred years means little on nature's timescale. Our goal should be to keep nature around in perpetuity, not just for a handful of human generations. With that goal in mind, trading away the potential of long-term success to secure short-term protection may be a Faustian bargain.

²³ Human beings are so good at the evolutionary game that several years ago it was estimated that people appropriate between 20 and 40% of the solar energy captured by the plants that are earth's primary producers. See EDWARD O. WILSON, *THE DIVERSITY OF LIFE* 272 (1992).

Long term protection of wild nature can only come through learning to live with nature's impacts. As the Davis bats illustrate, uncontrolled nature is messy, sometimes unpleasant, sometimes even threatening. We cannot avoid that problem through nature zoning, because doing so sounds the death knell for wild nature. We must, therefore, offer people a reason to put up with the problems wild nature inevitably brings. Economics offers a reason, but only a weak one. It can justify protection of only a small slice of nature. What can perhaps move us the next step along the protective path is affection. Affection for nature, with the accompanying sense that nature brings something positive to our lives, can motivate us to make the sacrifices, economic and other, that long-term nature protection will require.

Unfortunately, the special places approach does not sufficiently nurture an affectionate human relationship with nature. The experience of nature in special places surely can help cultivate a caring attitude toward nature. As John Muir taught a century ago, our most spectacular natural places can draw visitors, and can imbue them with a more general sense of the beauties and values of nature. But the more special we demand that those places be, the more limited the group that will visit them becomes. Our most special natural places are necessarily distant from the places most people live. Moreover, under the wilderness model, nature advocates often seek to maximize the physical challenge of accessing such places. Almost by definition, and certainly by design, few people can visit rugged, isolated wildernesses.

As a result, for all their value, those places cannot help large numbers of people develop emotional ties to nature. They preach to the converted; only people who already care deeply about nature will make the effort to seek such places out. Even among the motivated, only people with the economic resources to escape their ordinary lives will be capable of reaching those special places. If we place all our strategic eggs in the special places basket, then, we are likely to reinforce, not reduce, the current split between the wealthy, well-educated people who care about nature and the larger group who do not know nature well enough to care. In a nation where the fate of nature necessarily lies in the hands of the majority, nature's defenders cannot afford to rely on the small group that already keenly feels the importance of nature. We must reach out to a broader public if our quest is to be successful.

The rhetoric of specialness on which we have so long relied cannot get us to the future we should seek, one in which wild nature co-exists with humanity.

We should turn instead to the rhetoric of the ordinary. The message we should seek to communicate is that nature belongs in the world, including in the parts of the world we so thoroughly dominate. Nature is very special, something we should prize. But it is not, and should not be, un-usual. Nature is customary and ordinary. We should direct our efforts to keeping it so.

One small step we can take in that direction is simply to broaden the language we use to describe what is special about the places and things we seek to save. We should place less emphasis on their unique qualities, and more on their connection to the ordinary. When we want to have some land set aside, as a park, a wilderness, a wetland area, or a reserve for the spotted owl, red-cockaded woodpecker or some other species, we should not talk just about how spectacular, unique or rare it is. We should also make the effort to point out how ordinary it is. We can emphasize the similarities in soils, climate, and hydrology to surrounding, more developed, areas, and point out the extent to which those areas used to harbor the same flora and fauna, and perhaps someday could again. We should try to draw connections between our special places and the backyards of nearby settlements, using those connections to teach people to look differently at what they see at home. By choosing our special places and defending them with the explicit goal of educating as large a group of the public as possible about their very ordinary qualities, we can bring John Muir's dream one step closer to fruition. Only by making the connection between special natural places and the everyday can we translate affection for those special places into affection for all of nature.

We also need to emphasize what is special in the most ordinary nature. That means, for example, explaining that the vernal pools of California's central valley, with their endemic fairy shrimp and wildflowers, are wonderful because they belong there. We should treasure them, and encourage others to treasure them, as ordinary elements of their place, even if they are neither spectacular nor economically valuable.

Seeing the special in the ordinary also means taking some of the energy, time, and money we have historically devoted to wilderness and national parks, and putting it into neighborhood nature. Surely most fans of nature can trace the beginnings of their affection for the larger world to one or more ordinary places they were able to experience repeatedly and up close. For me, those places included a back yard supplied with bird feeders, the old fields returning to woods around that back yard, and an unprepossessing creek that ran just below a high-

way embankment. As my experience shows, pristine areas are not essential to cultivating affection for nature. All we need is areas that harbor enough nature to spark curiosity. It is essential, however, that those areas be within easy reach of large numbers of people.

To build affection for nature, we must, therefore, work to protect and re-vive such ordinary places as Debs Park, a county park in a modest, primarily Latino, urban neighborhood in Los Angeles. Debs Park sat unnoticed for many years, escaping the development most of the county's other parks experienced. It now harbors the remnants of a California walnut ecosystem that has virtually vanished elsewhere. The National Audubon Society is dedicating millions of dollars to Debs Park, working to develop a nature center capable of attracting the people of the neighborhood, many of whom would not or could not travel to distant parks or wildernesses. In the reverse of the process Muir hoped the national parks would set in motion, local, ordinary slices of nature like Debs Park can help ordinary people understand the value of nature both in their backyard and in more distant places.

In sum, the essence of our problem with nature today is that we have not learned how to co-exist with wild nature on this ever-smaller planet. We cannot reach the point of co-existence until we recognize and accept that nature, like us, belongs in the world. It belongs not just in extraordinary places or under extraordinary circumstances, but in ordinary places and as a matter of course. The rhetoric of specialness we have used in the past to justify nature protection can never teach that lesson. Only the message that nature is ordinary can do so. That may not be an easy message to convey, but those of us who consider nature protection a responsibility must learn to transmit it if we are to have any hope of retaining significant amounts of wild nature through the twenty-first century and beyond.