

2013

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David K. Leff

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Recommended Citation

Leff, David K. (2013) "Terraphilia: It's Time for a New Land Ethic that Values Even Mundane Precincts," *Appalachia*: Vol. 64: No. 2, Article 7.

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Terraphilia

*It's time for a new land ethic that values
even mundane precincts*

David K. Leff



Mountains of Love

As a late-teen test of manhood, I hitchhiked from Connecticut and began my first foray into the White Mountains, a Crawford Path solo trip across the Presidential Range with nights at Mizpah, Lakes of the Clouds, and Madison Spring huts. Besotted by spicy spruce air just a few minutes up the trail, my rite of passage was amped after passing the yellow Forest Service sign warning of bad weather, danger, and death above treeline. Ready for steep climbs promised by my map's clustered contour lines, white Appalachian Trail blazes fueled Georgia-to-Maine dreams. Here on America's oldest footpath, cut in 1819 by rugged hostler Abel Crawford, I felt my journey somehow connecting with generations past. What I didn't realize at the time was that I'd also begun connecting with a whole new way of looking at landscapes.

The next day offered stiff breezes and azure sky dotted with clouds. Along the ridge, astringent light revealed a roiling sea of green slopes punctuated with ashen ledges that seemed to break like ocean whitecaps. The trail moved through small trees, krummholz thickets, and lichen-crusting rocky plains where alpine plants grew in tufts and low mats. The natural grandeur grabbed me, and the path marked by crude cairns and sometimes edged with stones seemed to possess the nobility and timeworn quality of a Roman road.

At the hut the night before, I'd listened to old-timers' stories and made a brief raid on the small library, soaking up history, geology, ecology, and lore. So while my senses feasted on the stark and craggy terrain, my imagination wandered in time and space to grand hotels, logging railroads, wildfires, continental crashes, home-crushing landslides, blooming alpine plants, and Indian legends. Not limited merely by what I saw, I encountered a richer, denser world. It was love at first sight, manifestation of a phenomenon I've since called "terrabilia," love of terrain or place.

I'd fallen in love with places before, just never so suddenly. It was usually, even at such a young age, by long association—the wooded lots I wandered in the suburbs at home and my great uncle's chicken farm among others. But this time my infatuation was clear and precipitous.

We spend time in the Whites (and similar places) for recreation and physical challenge and to find respite from an ever-accelerating frenetic life. This "land of many uses" has been set aside for scientific study, wildlife, timber

The Park River runs underneath Hartford, Connecticut. Officials diverted it into culverts to stop flooding. Boaters occasionally commune with the power of water under a city. STEVE DUNCAN

harvests, and clean water and to protect geological marvels and historic sites. These reasons support conservation initiatives and appropriations, but they tell a junior part of the story. After all, many other places boasting such values remain unprotected. Ultimately, the political, financial, and social will to create and maintain the White Mountain National Forest results from deep affection by small cadres of activists and wide swaths of the public.

The federal Weeks Act that established national forests, the management plans, Wilderness designations, and all the hard work that has gone into creation and maintenance of the undeveloped forests are less the result of science, resource management needs, recreational desires, and tourist dollars than they are a matter of people's passion for a place. It's not just the deep quiet of the woods or austere beauty of the summits, but a history of human interaction from American Indians to the Crawfords to the Cog Railway to Pinkham Notch Camp and the Mount Washington Observatory.

If we are to protect such areas from invasive species, encroaching development, climate change, and other threats, it will take a revival of romance between people and places. This romance must take place not just at wild locations, but also in environments near where we live, in towns and cities where we form our attitudes toward land. Only by appreciating, understanding, and improving the everyday landscapes in which we live and work will we be able to ensure the future of the White Mountains and other special places.

After that first White Mountain journey, I longed to recapture the happy endorphin sensation of falling in love with a place, the adrenaline rush of sudden onset terraphilia. But as a mere hitchhiker well into my twenties, it was tough getting to remote, untrammelled destinations. So I began exploring locations closer to home such as western Connecticut's once famously polluted Naugatuck River (where no fish were living in 1966), Boston's Emerald Necklace and other city parks, and even the dark tunnels of Hartford's buried Park River. Remarkably, I found the exhilaration of terraphilia in such debased and degraded places, not just because of unexpected natural beauty, but because their long and tangled encounters with humanity added layers of intrigue.

"In wildness is the preservation of the world," Henry David Thoreau uttered in one of his lightening-bolt aphorisms. It's equally true, as some New Urbanist planners and sustainability experts have pointed out, that in the world of cities is the preservation of wildness.

Three Waves of Consciousness

America has experienced three waves of conservation consciousness. Scientists, politicians, artists, sports enthusiasts, and travelers have contributed to each wave, but writers have been the most influential. No wonder author Bill McKibben has observed, “An argument can be made that environmental writing is America’s single most distinctive contribution to the world’s literature.”

The first wave established an awareness of the beauty and diversity of nature, creating a realization that the natural world was not just something for exploitation. Although there are antecedents, in America this approach was pioneered by Thoreau, whose masterpiece, *Walden*, was published in 1854. The book is full of keen nature observation and acerbic critiques of society, but most significantly makes a compelling connection between human consciousness and natural objects and phenomena, the first stirrings of terraphilia. To some extent, all environmental writing is a footnote to Thoreau, but there are many clear-eyed and compelling authors in this first-wave tradition of awareness (although most also bleed into the next waves) including John Burroughs in the later nineteenth century and Edwin Way Teale in the twentieth. Among contemporary writers are John Hanson Mitchell and John Elder.

The second wave launched from the first, calling not just for understanding and appreciation, but activism to protect beauty, ecological functions, and other values. John Muir was the progenitor, advocating for creation of national parks and in defense of forests. His pleas to save Hetch Hetchy Valley and the redwoods remain moving, an expression of terraphilia through efforts to save places. This approach has included late 20th and early 21st-century authors as diverse as Edward Abbey and McKibben, but perhaps reached its zenith with Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (Houghton Mifflin), the 1962 book about pesticides that launched modern environmentalism.

A third wave introducing ethical conservation consciousness began with Aldo Leopold and his land ethic that (he wrote in the 1940s) “changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land community to plain member and citizen of it,” advancing terraphilia via a moral connection of people to places. Integral to that view is an ecological way of thinking. “Land, then, is not merely soil; it is a fountain of energy flowing through a circuit of soils, plants and animals,” he wrote in “The Land Ethic,” *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (Oxford University Press, 1949). Though

once termed a “subversive science,” an ecological worldview is today widely accepted though, unfortunately, less well practiced. Its best contemporary expression is in the writings of Kentuckian Wendell Berry who brings land vividly alive. It flashes through works of Scott Russell Sanders and Annie Dillard.

Awareness imbued with terraphilia could herald a fourth wave of conservation consciousness, encouraging us to prize not just pristine and magnificent places—the Yellowstones of the world—but more mundane precincts. The terraphilia sensibility maintains that if we consciously explore rather than sleepwalk through areas where we live, work, and visit, we will find them more intriguing than we’d ever imagined. Exploration will entice us to learn more, and as we come to know such places better, we will learn to appreciate them, one hopes even love them. And to the extent we appreciate and love them, we’ll recognize their value and want to invest our time, energy, and money to protect and improve them. If we come to value familiar places, distant wonders will only grow in our esteem.

Garnering inspiration from mundane places to protect singular ones may sound far-fetched, but it is exactly in the Leopold mode. Though Leopold worked and lived in some of the American West’s most fabulous country, it was a patch of worn-out land in an ordinary Wisconsin sand county on which he most lavished his love and found inspiration for world-changing ideas. Leopold explained, “The [human] individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts.” Likewise, terraphilia erases, or at least blurs, the lines between human and wild communities, between the built and natural environments, recognizing their linked ecology because “man is, in fact, only a member of a biotic team.”

An Ecology of Place

What we perceive at the scale of a wolf’s territory or the habitat of bog turtles, a skunk cabbage–filled wetland, and even at a watershed level, we tend to forget with regard to people, whether living in rural areas, suburbs, or large cities. Even those who have elevated Leopold to near-sainthood forget that he first explained natural communities by reference to their human analog, places where man’s “instincts prompt him to compete for his place in that community, but his ethics prompt him also to co-operate.” Despite notable exceptions, the world seems to be divided into those who enjoy the pulse of

urbanity and those who seek the flow of nature, those who often find the built environment too frenetic and ugly, and those for whom the natural world is dull and frightening. It is a chasm at least as wide as that perceived between science and the humanities in C.P. Snow's great 1959 lecture, "The Two Cultures."

Many great conservationists have been inveterate walkers. Foot travel is often the best means of reaching remote, uninhabited places. Inasmuch as what we perceive is often inversely proportional to how fast we move, going slowly also enables us to see and understand more, essential conditions for terraphilia. Walking is a great stimulant to thought. "The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts," writes Rebecca Solnit in *Wanderlust* (Viking, 2000).

Thoreau, Muir, and Teale are among many famous walkers who have shaped our understanding and love of nature. Few, however, know that the same is true of many great thinkers and lovers of urban areas such as twentieth-century social critic Lewis Mumford, who won the 1962 National Book Award for *The City in History* (Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961), or Alfred Kazin, a literary critic of the same era whose *A Walker in the City* (Harcourt, Brace, 1951) fuses personal experience with acute observation of architecture and the ecology of neighborhoods. Among contemporary writers, Harvard's John Stilgoe continues to explore city and suburb by foot and bicycle. Terraphilia teaches that built places can be just as beautiful, intriguing, and curious as natural marvels.

I explore both cities and wild places. I'm baffled that most of us treat the two realms as distinct islands. In an age where such "pristine" natural places as the White Mountain National Forest and Great Smoky Mountains National Park are often shrouded in air pollution and eaten alive by invasive species, this seems particularly puzzling. Likewise, discovering connections between geology and other natural endowments in the life of developed areas should take no more than a glance at the location of agricultural fields, placement of factories, and contour of roads. Consider our footprint on the planet. Books like David Owen's *Green Metropolis* (Riverhead Books, 2009) and Edward Glaeser's *Triumph of the City* (Penguin Press, 2011) make compelling cases that if you care about nature, you should live in the city.

Journalist Howard Mansfield captured the link between built and natural environments in his book *The Same Ax, Twice* (University Press of New

England, 2000). “The house is more like a natural landscape,” he writes. “You are looking at time. Seven generations of life represented by a notch on a girt, a paint chip on a summer beam, the way the head of an adze met the wood one winter day in 1664. Life flowed through here and like a glacier left its marks upon wood and plaster.” Such connections are the soul of terraphilia.

The Art of Looking

We can heal the divide between wild and built landscapes and revive interest in the conservation of unique natural and cultural places only by practiced looking. It will revive interest in exploring and appreciating environments near to home. Our landscape bubbles with stories. In its clues, we can read what has happened and what might be. Comprehension requires not some mystical sixth sense or specialized academic training, only knowing the simple language of terraphilia. The words are the landscape details we see every day, from a roadside rock cut to a swayback barn. The grammar of that lexicon is found in the way we weave those isolated details into sentences and paragraphs of meaning by joining one to another like jigsaw puzzle pieces. No artifact, whether a stone wall or a housing tract, is an isolated word or sentence in the story of humans and landscape.

We who care about places are obligated to tell stories that will excite those blind and deaf to the everyday magic animating both ordinary and unique areas. No place, not a brownfield wasteland nor a seemingly boring subdivision, lacks compelling tales and fascinating human and landscape confluences. We must be cartographers of imagination, drawing what William Least Heat-Moon calls a “deep map,” an amalgam of topography, history, biography, folklore, politics, geology, and natural history. Lovers of landscape are lovers of stories, so it is not surprising that some of our best nature and place-based writers have been adept at fiction—Wendell Berry, Edward Hoagland, Scott Russell Sanders, and William Howard Kunstler among them.

For many of us, our appreciation of landscapes and an impulse toward terraphilia begins where nature dominates, from mountains to beaches, black spruce bogs to floodplain forests. We focus on them because they are different from the areas where most of us live. But to be fully aware of and appreciate this world, our love must extend to working landscapes of farm and forest that provide food and fiber and offer a rich patchwork of trees, pasture, and cropland. We must embrace historic colonial towns with their broad greens,

and nineteenth-century mill villages with their fortress-like factories, as well as city neighborhoods and commercial and industrial districts.

Although they need no encouragement or protection, even strip developments with their garish signs, confusing traffic lanes, fast-food restaurants, filling stations, and big-box stores are part of our landscape along with interstate highways and sterile housing tracts. We may think some of these landscapes ugly and wasteful, but few of us do not use them. And I admit to feeling an occasional thrum of excitement in the busy commerce of a strip mall, or the cinematic movement of topography at 65 miles per hour. All these landscapes are places in which we live, work, and do business. They are places that deserve our interest and attention. The more we understand them, the more we will know what is needed to create better places.

Terraphilia raises awareness of what lies around us. It requires landscape consciousness, mindfulness about what we see. We must cultivate a purposeful way of looking. It demands more than a windshield tour or a plat-like view from a plane. "Ordinary exploration begins in casual indirection," writes Stilgoe in *Outside Lies Magic* (Walker, 1998), "in the juiciest sort of indecision, in deliberate, then routine fits of absence of mind. Walk three quarters of the way around the block, then strike out on a vector, a more or less straight line toward nothing in particular, follow the downgrade or the newer pavement, head for the shadow of trees ahead, strike off toward the sound of the belfry clock, follow the scent of the bakery back door, drift downhill toward the river."

Making Connections

People who care about places can light fires of enthusiasm under those around them. We can talk about the magnificence of distant regions, but we will be most effective if we start by generating interest in familiar spots, as Leopold did for his beloved patch of tired sand county. The first step is to steep ourselves in the natural and cultural history, science, legends, and lore of the everyday areas where we live, work, and play. We must tell stories that give meaning to places. This is the essence of terraphilia.

When in the woods, we need to extol old mill dams, faded roads, farm walls, abandoned quarries, changing plant assemblages, and odd rock outcrops that illuminate the "why" of a place. We must relate the story of primeval forest, farmers, early industry, reforestation, and development. While walking in our

neighborhoods, we must be attuned to architecture that speaks of fashion, money, and technology as we recall tales of quirky residents and past land uses. Street names alone often read like a completed crossword puzzle inviting us to pose the questions that they answer. We must make places personal by conveying that such stories are also *our* story—that we exist in the very continuum we describe.

Conservation is as much a matter of culture as nature. The need for balanced, diverse, healthy functioning systems transcends differences between built and natural worlds. Most times, we experience synergies between the two. “What we long for,” wrote the eminent biologist René Dubos, “is rarely nature in the raw; more often it is a landscape suited to human limitations and shared by the efforts and aspirations that have created civilized life.” Paradoxically, revival of the conservation movement and protection of our most magnificent places lies in understanding and appreciating those areas where natural values are not necessarily pure and ascendant.

Terraphilia is the joy of making connections among landscape objects and phenomena. Discovery will abound not by highlighting the pristine singularity of wilderness or the precious heritage of historic districts, but by showing how they support each other as well as the most plain places. It’s not just a matter of demonstrating that the economy and culture of cities are codependent on the complexities of natural habitats, but of revealing a relationship regardless of similarities and distinctions. We need ecological thinking in the built environment and an understanding of how culture affects the natural world. Love overcomes much in human relationships. Similarly, terraphilia will foster a deeper, more sustainable involvement with the planet and neighborhoods we call home.

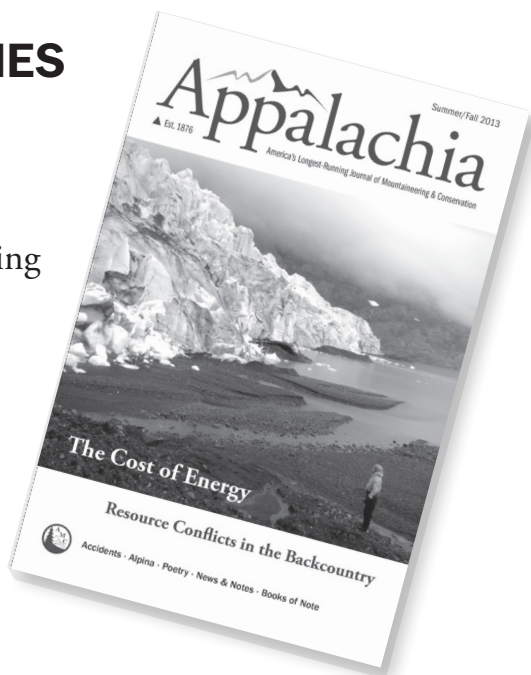
DAVID K. LEFF writes poetry, essays, and books about the natural and built landscape from his home in Collinsville, Connecticut. Visit him at davidkleff.com. He is a former deputy commissioner of his state’s environmental protection agency.

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