Creation Stories: Myth, Oil, and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge

Terre Ryan (*Fordham University)*[*]

A few years back, while prowling a university library in search of a quiet place to work, I stumbled into a corner of the Garden of Eden. I knew I had arrived in an outpost of Eden because floor-to-ceiling shelves of books contained either *Eden* or *Paradise* in their titles. The stacks in the library of the School of Mines at a desert university may seem like an unlikely paradise, but Eden has turned up in stranger places, including the floor of the United States Senate. In March 2005, Connecticut Senator Joseph Lieberman addressed his colleagues and argued against drilling for oil in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. The Refuge, or ANWR, is a 19-million acre parcel along Alaska's northern margin; eight million acres of the refuge "are designated Wilderness." For at least part of every year, ANWR is home to "45 species of land and marine mammals," including wolves, grizzly, polar, and black bears, wolverines, Dall sheep, and muskoxen (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service). U.S. Geological Survey scientists estimate that 230,000 shorebirds nest on ANWR's coastal plain ("Shorebirds Flock"). To the approximately 129,000 members of the Porcupine caribou herd, ANWR is the birthing ground where they deliver roughly 40,000 calves each year (Wallace). The scattered communities of the Kaktovik Inupiat include one settlement on the Refuge. And 1.5 million acres of the wilderness coastal plain harbor approximately 10 billion barrels-worth of "technically recoverable" crude oil (USGS "Arctic National Wildlife Refuge").

Senator Lieberman made a case for paradise. "Ninety-five percent of the North Slope in this part of Alaska is open for exploration, oil exploration and potential drilling. We drew a line. Our predecessors drew a line," Lieberman reasoned. He added, "This 5 percent should be preserved as a wildlife refuge, if you will, a small piece of Eden" ("Analysis").

Idaho Senator Larry Craig countered, "I'm always amazed when someone takes the coastal plain of Alaska, where today it might be 60 below and the wind may be 40 miles an hour, and call it an Eden? Well, that is not my vision of Eden" ("Analysis"). In fairness to Senator Craig, that is not my vision of Eden, either. But when Lieberman referred to ANWR as Eden, he was speaking out of an ancient tradition of landscape discourse that continues to inform American conservationist thinking.

Historian Carolyn Merchant writes that "[t]he Recovery of Eden story is the mainstream narrative of Western culture…[and] perhaps the most important mythology humans have developed to make sense of their relationship to the earth" (2). It is one of the defining stories of popular western conservation. "[I]nsert a probe into any body of environmental thought,"

[*]*Terre Ryan, English Department, Lowenstein Building, Fordham University at the Lincoln Center, 113 West 60th Street New York, NY 10023 teryan@fordham.edu*

writes Evan Eisenberg, "[and] you will find, somewhere near its heart, a firm if amorphous idea about Eden" (xv). But the American Eden is a messy paradise, hopelessly entangled with other myths. The Edenic creation story is one of the tropes—along with the Promised Land and the frontier—that have long figured in American controversies over land use and in American literature of place. Wallace Stegner saw literature as an "indirect but profoundly true [mirror] of our national consciousness" ("Wilderness Letter" 516). Lieberman's reference to Eden in the ANWR debate reflects how deeply the paradise myth remains embedded in contemporary environmental discourse, and it raises questions about the ways that environmental literature both reflects and informs the "national [environmental] consciousness" of the United States.

John Muir and Wallace Stegner are among the spiritual grandfathers of modern environmentalism in the United States. Although they are only two among an extensive canon of environmental writers, it is impossible to overstate the importance of their contributions to environmental literature and conservationist thinking. A brief glance at a few key texts from their extensive bodies of work provides some insight into the influence of Eden on contemporary environmental discourse.

John Muir's *My First Summer in the Sierra,* penned in 1869 and published in 1911, reads like an extended psalm to the mountains and their creator. Muir's Yosemite is a wild garden filled with "sacred fern forests" (41, 60). Its sugar pines are "gods of the plant kingdom, living their sublime century lives in sight of Heaven…" (52). For Muir, nature is an earthly paradise just a short distance from Heaven. Muir's paradise is also pastoral; he made that first Yosemite journey to accompany a shepherd and his flock. Perhaps because he had earlier been temporarily blinded in a workplace accident, Muir exulted in the pleasures of vision. He was so deeply indoctrinated in nineteenth-century landscape aesthetics that *My First Summer in the Sierra* reads like an aesthetic guide to the landscape of Yosemite. Muir notes where the scenery is sublime, beautiful, or picturesque; at least one of those terms appears on perhaps four-fifths of the book's pages, and Muir almost always associates them with the sacred. For Muir, nature is "sculptor," "architect," "painter," "gardener," and the text of "God's divine manuscript," and the ground of Yosemite is God's temple (101, 138, 203, 132). Many of these metaphors resurface in Muir's other writings, including his 1915 *Travels in Alaska*. Since *My First Summer in the Sierra* is among the benchmark texts of American environmental writing, it is easy to see why, for many environmentalists since Muir's time, scenic landscapes are sacred ground.

Wallace Stegner's essay, "Crossing Into Eden," memorializes the lost purity of a once pristine landscape in Utah's High Uintas wilderness. Stegner's elegy describes a place that he calls Eden as a "peaceable kingdom," a paradise, a sublime wilderness, and a pastoral retreat where visitors refresh themselves from their cares and emerge renewed on "Eviction Day" (40). In his 1960 "Wilderness Letter," Stegner writes that wilderness "is important…simply as an idea." He notes, "I want to speak for the wilderness idea as something that has helped form our character and that has certainly shaped our history as a people." He adds that "[w]e need wilderness preserved…because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed" (515). The tenor of Stegner's "Wilderness Letter" echoes Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 thesis, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," which attributes both individualism and American democracy to the physical challenges posed by making a home—or building an empire—out of frontier wilderness. If the frontier was paradise, it was also Canaan, or the Promised Land—a pastoral place and a *working* landscape.

What Richard Slotkin calls the Myth of the Frontier still carries, among other values, the develop-as-you-go ideology of Manifest Destiny. Alaska's state's nickname is "The Last Frontier"; the state's motto is "North to the Future," chosen in 1967 to "represent Alaska as a land of promise" (Alaska State). That Alaskan frontier is actually receding as the earth's temperature climbs and we may well find our future foretold in the north's melting ice. At the American Geophysical Union's conference in December 2008, NASA climate scientists reported that satellite data reveal that Greenland, Alaska, and Antarctica have collectively lost 1.5 trillion to 2 trillion tons of ice since 2003, and that sea levels may rise between 18 and 36 inches by the end of the twenty-first century (Grinberg). According to scientists at the U.S. Global Research Program, the "rate of erosion along Alaska's northeastern coastline has doubled over the past fifty years." One hundred eight native villages "suffer some degree of erosion" caused by melting permafrost (Yardley). Several are relocating; the Inuit village of Shishmaref, on Alaska's west coast, is moving inland because the permafrost is melting out from underneath it, and its coastline, bereft of its girdle of ice, is eroding into the sea (Carey 28). Melting permafrost may pose additional hazards. Permafrost stores methane, a potent greenhouse gas, and scientists speculate that further thawing of permafrost could accelerate global warming (Sample).

That day in March 2005, the Senate voted to open up the Refuge for drilling ("Analysis"). But Senator Lieberman would have lost that debate even if he had left Eden out of his argument. The myths of Eden, the pastoral Promised Land, and the sublime frontier are fluid and entangled rather than fixed and entirely distinct, and one person's paradise, or "idea of wilderness," is another's potential jobsite. No drilling is currently scheduled in ANWR and in June 2009, the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee voted against an energy bill amendment that would have tapped ANWR's stores (Bolstad). But proposals to drill in ANWR resurface periodically, with proponents arguing that ANWR drilling would provide oil for a thirsty nation. In 2000, we consumed 19.7 million barrels of oil per day. Consumption dipped slightly to 18.7 million barrels per day by the end of 2009 and may increase modestly in 2010—conservation forced by the economic recession (U.S. Dept. of Energy). Should the oil companies begin developing the coastal plain, it would take approximately 10 years before ANWR oil would be available to the public (Natural Resources Defense Council). Yet James Hansen, NASA's top climatologist, insisted in 2006 that we have as little as 10 years to reduce greenhouse gas emissions before "global warming reaches…a tipping point and becomes unstoppable" ("Rewriting the Science"). With so much at stake, it makes little sense to drill for oil in Alaska or elsewhere. But with 2008's "Drill, baby, drill" pre-election mantra still echoing in the media and U.S. unemployment topping 10% for a 26-year high, job creation through energy development, including coastal drilling, may become the creation story with the greatest clout (Goodman).

The myths of the frontier and the Promised Land gild complex social problems with dollars and the promise of jobs just as the myth of Eden garnishes them with wild apples and fig leaves. John Muir and Wallace Stegner were visionaries, and we benefit from what they accomplished for conservation. So much of their writing was far ahead of their times, and I am not blaming them or any other paradise proponents for ANWR's troubles. Yet for our times, some of the language of landscape is dated. Those of us who teach environmental literature might question what role the rhetoric of Eden plays in reinforcing cultural myths that no longer serve us so well. Those of us who are environmental writers and artists might take it as our mission to craft new metaphors for living with the environmental challenges of this millennium. I have used the Eden myth in my own writing, and while I have never traveled as far north as ANWR, I was convinced that I had wandered into God's backyard when I visited Alaska's Denali National Park some years

ago. But if I do not want Eden figuring in debates about public school science classes, then why would I want it informing contemporary environmental discourse?

"We need a new story in which we learn to value intimacy," William Kittredge writes. He adds, "Somebody should give us a history of compassion, which would become a history of forgiveness and caretaking" (*Who Owns the West?* 70). Carolyn Merchant calls for a new "set of narratives" powered by a "partnership ethic" similar to what environmental historian David Orr and philosopher Kathleen Dean Moore call a "moral ecology" (Merchant 240; Orr 79; Moore 65). All human cultures invest landscape with meaning. But a biocentric worldview—which I believe was what Senator Lieberman was advocating when he sought to keep the oil companies out of ANWR—would recognize that a wildlife refuge is more than a receptacle for Euro-American ideas about landscape. Writers such as William Kittredge, Barry Lopez, Sandra Steingraber, Rick Bass, Terry Tempest Williams, Mary Clearman Blew, Linda Hogan, Gary Snyder, Allison Hawthorne Deming, and many others—who both do and do not use paradise metaphors in their work—have given us a body of environmental literature that transcends the old myths. Their work recognizes the complex challenges confronting communities whose members may have conflicting goals. It addresses the complicated histories that human communities share with one another and with the other inhabitants of their places.

Kittredge says that "we have no choice but to live in community," and this brings me to another story (*Owning It All* 68). ANWR's coastal plain is the main calving ground of the 129,000-strong Porcupine caribou herd. Caribou are to the Gwich'in Nation of Northeast Alaska and Northwest Canada much what bison were to Great Plains peoples. The Gwich'in rely upon the caribou for subsistence, and their name for ANWR's coastal plain is "the sacred place where life begins." The Gwich'in creation story holds that the people and the caribou were once one, and that when they separated, the caribou kept a bit of human heart and the humans kept a bit of caribou heart (Gwich'in Steering Committee). The Gwich'in strongly oppose drilling in the Refuge. While 129,000 may sound like a healthy population for the caribou herd, Gwich'in wildlife biologist Matthew Gilbert reports that the herd's population has declined by approximately 50,000 in just ten years. Gilbert attributes the dramatic drop in caribou numbers, at least in part, to warming temperatures, which cause earlier thaws and make it difficult for cows to reach their birthing grounds and for calves to cross rivers that were once frozen or low. The caribou are shifting their migration route further north, making it harder for subsistence hunters to reach them. The Gwich'in believe that ANWR drilling will only accelerate global warming, and over the past 50 years, Alaska has warmed twice as fast as the rest of the United States (Gilbert; U.S. Global Research Program). Gilbert writes that the Gwich'in advocate international efforts "to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that threaten…all cultures everywhere."

It would be convenient to make a case for conservation by saying that the Gwich'in creation story trumps the myths of Eden, the Promised Land, and the frontier, but the story of ANWR is not that simple. Many of the Kaktovik Inupiat, whose settlements include one village on the Refuge, *want* the drilling and the temporary economic benefits it would bring. It is easy for me to argue against drilling in ANWR; I live in the Lower 48 and I have many more options than do the Kaktovik Inupiat.

There is no easy answer, so I keep researching. I surf the net, come across a 1998 United States Geological Survey assessment of ANWR's petroleum stores, and print it out. The report is

carefully crafted, with columns of typeface broken up by colorful photos, tables, and maps of this northernmost stretch of the nation. I skim the copy and scan the graphs, and then I notice something very different about these pages: two wilderness icons, here worked into the story of landscape and oil. Beneath the typeface, a ghostly wolf stands among arctic grasses. Alert, the wolf looks to its right, eyeing something beyond the margin of the page. Elsewhere, the faint outline of a grizzly bear sits on a bed of scree. A bar graph that plots “Volume of Oil, in Millions of Barrels” against “Technically Recoverable Oil Grouped by Accumulation-Size Class, in Millions of Barrels” obscures the bear’s right shoulder and flank. A square of typeface explaining the graph covers its head from the tips of the ears to just above the eyes. A photo of a man on the tundra obscures the bear’s left foot and a corner of the photo cuts a right angle just beneath the bear’s throat. These animal images are faint, as if obscured by fog, and it would be easy to miss them among the geological projections. Their wolf and bear cousins in the Lower 48 were trapped and hunted nearly to extinction because large predators did not belong on Eden’s frontier. I stare at the wolf and bear for a long time. I cannot decide whether this report was prepared by a public relations executive with no sense of irony, or if the ghostly wolf and bear were a graphic designer’s attempt to give the animals of ANWR a voice in the story of a nation that consumes—in a lean year—nearly 19 million barrels of oil a day.

References

Alaska State. Office of Economic Development. “Student Information.” n.d. Web. 15 Oct. 2007.

“Analysis: Senate Votes to Pave Way for Oil Drilling in ANWR.” Narr. Steve Inskeep, Renee Montagne, Brian Naylor.” *Morning Edition*. National Public Radio. KUNR, Reno, NV. 17 Mar. 2005. Transcript.

Bolstad, Erika. “Committee Votes Against Directional Drilling in ANWR.” *Anchorage Daily News* 9 June 2009. Web. 22 June 2009.

Carey, John. “Business on a Warmer Planet.” *BusinessWeek* 17 Jul. 2006: 28.

Eisenberg, Evan. *The Ecology of Eden*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.

Gilbert, Matthew. “Farewell, Sweet Ice.” *The Nation* 19 Apr. 2007. Web. 7 October 2007.

Goodman, Peter S. “U.S. Unemployment Rate Hits 10.2%, Highest in 26 Years.” *New York Times* 6 Nov 2009. Web. 5 Jan 2010.

Grinberg, Emanuella. “Ice Melting Across Globe at Accelerating Rate, NASA Says.” *CNN.com/technology*. 16 Dec. 2008. Web. 2 Jan. 2009.

Gwich’in Steering Committee. “Protect the Sacred Place Where Life Begins.” 2004. Web. June 2009.

Kittredge, William. *Owning It All*. St. Paul: Graywolf P, 1987.

---. *Who Owns the West?* San Francisco: Mercury House, 1996.

Merchant, Carolyn. *Reinventing Eden*. New York: Routledge, 2003.

Moore, Kathleen Dean. *The Pine Island Paradox*. Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2004.

Muir, John. *My First Summer in the Sierra.* 1911. Intro: Gretel Ehrlich. New York: Penguin, 1987.

Natural Resources Defense Council. “Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: Why Trash an American Treasure for a Tiny Percentage of Our Oil Needs?” n.d. Web. 13 Oct. 2007.

Orr, David W. *The Last Refuge: Patriotism, Politics, and the Environment in an Age of Terror.* Washington: Island P, 2004.

“Rewriting the Science.” Narr. Scott Pelley. *Sixty Minutes*. KTVN, Reno, NV. 19 March 2006. Transcript.

Sample, Ian. “Warming Hits ‘Tipping Point,’” *The Guardian*, 11 Aug. 2005. Web. 22 June 2009.

Stegner, Wallace. “Coda: Wilderness Letter.” *Nature Writing: The Tradition in English.* Ed. Robert Finch and John Elder. 1990. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2002.

---. *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs*. New York: Penguin, 1992.

Slotkin, Richard. *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America.* Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1998.

Turner, Frederick Jackson. *The Frontier in American History*. New York: Henry Holt, 1935. 1996. Web. 22 June 2009.

United States. Dept. of Energy. "North America: The Energy Picture." June 2002. Web. 22 June 2009.
---. Dept. of Energy. Energy Information Administration. "Short-Term Energy Outlook." 8 Dec 2009. Web. 5 January 2010.
---. Dept. of Interior. U.S. Fish and Wildife Service. "Overview: Arctic National Wildlife Refuge." *Arctic National Wildlife Refuge*. n.d. Web. 13 October 2007.
---. Dept. of Interior. U.S. Geological Survey. "Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, 1002 Area, Petroleum Assessment, 1998, Including Economic Analysis." USGS Fact Sheet FS-028-01. April 2001. Web. 17 October 2007.
---. Dept. of Interior. U.S. Geological Survey. "Shorebirds Flock to ANWR Coastal Plain." 23 February 2007. Web. 6 July 2009.
---. Global Research Program. *Global Climate Change Impacts in the United States*. 16 June 2009. Web. 24 June 2009.
Wallace, Scott. "ANWR: The Great Divide." *Smithsonian* Oct. 2005. Web. 6 July 2009.
Yardley, William. "Victim of Climate Change, a Town Seeks a Lifeline." *New York Times* 27 May 2007. Web. 8 January 2009.