

Raul Filipe<sup>1</sup>,  
Escola Superior de Hotelaria do Estoril,  
Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Cultura

Public intellectuals are generally people that, in ideological terms, are far beyond "the common Man". Most often they either comment on current controversies or offer general reflections on the direction or health of society (Posner, 2003). That is exactly the case of Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, the public intellectuals whose work I intend to focus in this essay and who I see as "masters of Al Gore.

Therefore the present work intends to approach the relationship which Americans develop towards Nature, analyzing Henry David Thoreau's and John Muir's theories and their respective ideological frameworks. It also focuses on the way these theories influenced people such as Al Gore in relation to the environment.

Before discussing the ideas that each of these authors defended regarding Nature, a few biographical notes will help us to locate both authors in time, allowing us also to draw a distinction between what might be their understanding of reality as people who had no contact with present day issues and problems. Obviously, my reading of both their texts and the realities they dealt with must be marked by a framework of ideas or even ideologies which at the time did not exist, or at least were not as acute as they are today.

Thoreau was born in 1817 and died in 1862. He was a pioneer in defending natural resources and fighting against the abusive use of them. This fact may be observed in the works I chose for this presentation: *Walden*, a text written during the period when he lived on

---

<sup>1</sup>Raúl Filipe is a Senior Lecturer with tenure at Escola Superior de Hotelaria e Turismo do Estoril / ESHTe (Estoril Higher Institute for Tourism and Hotel Studies) where he is currently the President of the Scientific Board and the Head of the Foreign Languages Department. He obtained his Ph.D. with a thesis on American Studies entitled "Manhattan, Capital of the World". At ESHTe he coordinated several Courses related with Tourism (e.g. Tour Guides and Tour Operators), supervised the International Relations Office and was President of the Pedagogical Board. He is a Researcher at Centro de Estudos de Comunicação e Cultura / CECC, the Research Center for Communication and Culture in the Catholic University of Portugal, and his major fields of interest are Tourism and American Studies.

Walden Pond (published in 1854) and *The Maine Woods* which resulted from the trips along the rivers Concord and Merrimack in 1839 (published in 1864).

John Muir, a later author, who was born in 1838 and died in 1914, was also a defender of Nature, and his theories had a much greater impact since he lived in a time when people were more concerned with Nature related issues. From this author I chose the book *A Thousand-Mile Walk to the Gulf*, a work which reflects his experience travelling from Indianapolis to the Gulf of Mexico, a trip started in September 1867 –actually, he planned to continue as far as the Amazon; however malaria prevented the completion of his journey, which instead ended in Florida. This work was published in 1916, two years after his death. The second book chosen was *My First Summer in the Sierra* (published in 1911). This volume contains the experiences he gathered while working for John Delaney as a hired shepherd in the summer of 1869.

Not only during the time that Thoreau lived in Concord but also on the expeditions he made in Maine, he tried to devise paradigms which might allow him to ideologically frame the need he felt to defend Nature. In fact, when reading Thoreau, we cannot expect to find a fully articulated framework of ideas to interpret Nature. He himself did not follow a single line of thought; thus, according to each situation or context, his reading of Nature can be quite different, balancing between what we may call a clearly preservationist attitude towards Nature and a utilitarian view. Thoreau nevertheless left one question unanswered – it is our task to try to find that answer. I believe that, basically, Thoreau had two paradigms – the pioneer and the mythical hero, but neither was good enough for him to explain the way Man should deal with Nature.

The idea of the mythical hero facing and trying to understand or conquer Nature is present in the use of clear references to myths: “It reminded me of the creations of the old dramatic poets, of Atlas, Vulcan, the Cyclops, and Prometheus. Such was Caucasus and the rock where Prometheus was bound. Aeschylus had no doubt visited such scenery as this. It was vast, Titanic, and such as man never inhabits” (Thoreau 1950, 271). His own journey to Nature can be regarded as an odyssey, an act of defiance to the gods. He, too, is the hero trying to conquer something, to find a paradigm where he might fit the immense Nature he could see. Mythical is after all what is “big enough” to comprehend such a thing as one, which cannot be described in plain words. Myth is the way out to interpret what Thoreau cannot accept as human – the human scale is too limited.

In Thoreau's second paradigm, the pioneer is presented as a pure man when compared with the city dweller. He is isolated from the evils of civilization: "But the former, the pioneer, is comparatively an independent and successful man, getting his living in a way that he likes, without disturbing his human neighbors" (*ibid.*, 169). The pioneer is then the individualistic type. He is pure when compared to the city dweller but he carries civilization in himself, being a transforming agent. His aim is to dominate Nature and take some profit out of it. Therefore, his perspective is utilitarian. The pioneer is at once regarded as a superior being because he conquers Nature (he wins the challenge), but at the same time he can no longer leave it "untouched". Whatever was once feared and respected in Nature, after being conquered may even be despised. Fear is the feeling, which eventually keeps Man away from Nature, the guarantee of leaving Nature in an absolutely pure condition. Man is criticized when his action destroys instead of civilizing: "They rapidly run out of these immense forests all the finer, and more accessible pine timber, and then leave the bears to watch the decaying dams, not clearing nor cultivating the land, nor making roads nor building houses, but leaving it a wilderness as they found it" (*ibid.*, 151).

The mythical hero and the pioneer have, after all, something in common. Both must surmount obstacles, but each of these paradigms is supported by different ideas. The mythical hero is an image, which can be accepted on a world scale while the pioneer is purely American.

The model that according to him is the nearest, the most perfect, and does not "hurt" Nature is the one that he finds in the Indian Joe Polis who travelled with him in Maine. Joe Polis is sometimes regarded as a model, since he understood and dealt with Nature in a different way (the native's way). This means that the Indian and Thoreau, being a white man, are mentally shaped by different cultural backgrounds. The Indian's approach, not dependent on the comforts of civilization, works as a key to a new understanding of a reciprocal advantage between Man and Nature. But even this one is not complete because it cannot be transported to the civilized World and because it is constructed only by one person and not by society and Thoreau did not live among the Indians.

Botany provides him with an objective element, but it also fails because, being a science, it does not include the spiritual aspects that Thoreau recognizes in Nature. Science also has similar shortcomings.

From the reading of the book, *The Maine Woods*, we get the idea that Thoreau sees Nature as something not human since it does not fit in any of the paradigms that he built. In this way, Thoreau's contribution to approaching the Man/Nature relationship is basically the

statement that Nature has to be preserved in its dimension of dignity as a Whole that integrates Man. Thoreau's contribution is more philosophical than practical. We must not forget that he lived in the 19th century, a time when Nature was considered something evil that had to be controlled and civilized by Man. It is only fair to say that people like Thoreau are the pioneers of ideas of the preservation of nature that lately have gained a more practical structure. Authors like Thoreau are indeed the philosophical references of the environmental movements of today.

On the other hand, John Muir builds a coherent paradigm, but he forgets that this paradigm is only valid for those who, like him, are willing to go to Nature in a solitary act, or at least, with only a few people. The massification of John Muir's paradigm results in its perversion.

Muir sees the Universe as an All, in which each animal or species has the right to exist in itself rejecting the anthropocentric vision of Nature. He was actively involved in polemical causes in defence of the environment and was transformed into a public figure characterized by pragmatism that is, sometimes, forced to make concessions to achieve his major goal, which was the preservation of Nature in its dignity, i.e. in its aesthetic, spiritual and religious dimension. Muir is betrayed by those lacking in the capacity to appreciate and enjoy Nature the way it is. Muir could even be considered the father of ecotourism and the three expressions the latter commonly deploys: leave nothing but footsteps, take nothing but photos, bring nothing but memories. It is our opinion that those expressions are what Muir had advocated while expressed in other words.

As a pragmatic man, Muir clearly defends experience as opposed to theory. In his own personal life he abandoned college, apparently with the conviction that the true source of knowledge cannot be found in books, but in Nature: "How interesting everything is! Every rock, mountain, stream, plant, lake, lawn, (...) seems to call and invite us to come and learn something of its history and relationship. But shall the poor ignorant scholar be allowed to try the lessons they offer?" (Muir 1988, 167) Muir reads nature as a religious object. Following the line of thought of the transcendentalists, Nature is conceived as a temple, God's creation. Thus studying and admiring Nature is studying and admiring God's work. As he puts it: "No wonder the hills and groves were God's first Temples, and the more they are cut down and hewn into cathedrals and churches, the farther off and dimmers seems the Lord himself" (*ibid.*, 102). In fact, he criticizes those who neglect Nature. When people destroy Nature, by destroying God's creation they are not only bringing a distance between themselves and God, but also

eliminating a path which enables them to meet Him and to undergo a process of moral, spiritual and even physical renovation.

Muir synthesizes two not always easy to reconcile paradigms: religion and science. On the one hand, Muir studies Nature in a scientific perspective (he studied, for example, the glacial origins of Yosemite Valley), but on the other hand, as we have already mentioned, he always observes Nature as God's work. Thus, science is a path to God.

Both Thoreau and Muir had something in common. Being both pioneers and possessing as individuals and public intellectuals a capacity for questioning things that most people would not understand, they are, in ideological terms, far beyond "the common Man". It is easy to understand why, for instance, some fellow citizens of Muir were not able to fully comprehend the value of his botanical activity because it was not productive and profitable.

Once again talking about the compromises that Muir was forced to accept, we must not forget that, at first, he had accepted the model presented by Pinchot for the management of the wilderness. Later on, Muir realized that this agreement was against his own ideas and his "rupture" with Pinchot marks the beginning of two very different attitudes towards nature: Pinchot's utilitarian preservation sustained that Nature had to be protected but "explored" and used by Man, whereas John Muir's notion of pure preservation claimed that nature had to be preserved and some areas should be left "untouched".

As we know, nowadays, it is the utilitarian attitude that was adopted in American National Parks. And it could not be otherwise, given the fact that anytime we start something for the "use and education of people", which is one of the main ideas of the National Parks policy, we must allow people to make utilitarian usage of the resources. Probably, when advocating the idea of the National Parks, John Muir had never thought that they would assume such a profitable role and be subjected to a mass phenomenon policy.

We can say that American National Parks are misrepresenting the real preservationist notion of Nature and are, indeed, a good example of utilitarian preservation, as we can easily see by the many infrastructures built for the entertainment of people. The notion of Nature as something not to be touched and that only by itself would serve for the aesthetic and spiritual enlightening of Man was totally lost. We have to agree with Alfred Runte, when he writes in his book *National Parks: The American Experience*:

It would be comforting to believe that the National Park idea originated in a big and uncompromising love of the land for its own sake. Such a circumstance -

much like the common assertion that Indians were the first 'ecologists' - would reassure modern environmentalists they need only recapture the spirit of the past to acquire wisdom and respect. But in fact, the National Park idea evolved to fulfill cultural rather than environmental needs. The search for a distinct National identity, more than what have come to be called 'the rights of rocks,' was the initial impetus behind scenic preservation. Nor did the United States overrule economic considerations in the selection of the areas to be included in the National Parks (Runte 1987, xx).

This issue of preservation/use is probably due to the fact that past generations, at that time, had not been confronted with the environmental questions we have to face today but also because the dichotomy itself is fallacious, since to preserve means to isolate from all human influence. The National Parks are an example of a widespread attitude towards Nature, which consists of regarding it as an object to be observed during a certain time, followed by a quick return to the City.

Probably Thoreau, though without knowing it, pointed to the way of preservation when he talked about "Inhuman Nature". In fact wilderness only exists like that; we may assume that inhuman is something that has not yet been subjected to the changing action of Man. Hence, creating reserved areas of wilderness would mean restraining the systematic and mass access of Man to those areas. All those who opted by going to the wilderness would have to submit themselves to their natural system and assume the consequences of this act.

Bearing in mind what both authors have written about Nature, let us now think of the American National Parks and try to assess what we can find there, not focusing on their historical development, but briefly describing what the parks have to offer. Most parks are open all year round and receive millions of visitors, attracted by natural attractions such as valleys, waterfalls, a rich flora and hundreds of bird, fish and mammal species. Apart from enjoying uncountable natural beauties, visitors can also find several man-made attractions, for instance, visitor centers, museums and programs with lessons about the human and natural history of the park. In terms of entertainment, there are also guided tours through nature, fishing, mountaineering, horse riding and trekking. Visitors are allowed to swim and sail in several lakes and rivers, with the exception of sources of human water supply. In terms of accommodation the visitor may choose between cabins, camp grounds, hotels and caravan parking areas. A wide range of services is also available: besides the usual food & beverage

services, there are also souvenir shops, health centers, kennels, laundries, mail stations, restrooms, warehouses, transportation, and even religious services.

Correspondingly, the question we ask is: do we still have wilderness in the United States of America? If we do, it is not situated in the national parks that face problems such as overcrowding and traffic congestion, which would have been unthinkable for Thoreau and Muir in their historical time.

We have said that Americans may have found in the greatness of wilderness the substitute for an architectonic heritage that they did not have because the history of the United States is a recent one (but older than that of some European countries). But it is only fair to say that nowadays there are lots of examples of undeniable monumentality. In a country where a Neo-Gothic cathedral is built in the Centre of New York, there is no such need for finding in Nature what you do not have in terms of buildings. Thus, in my opinion, the historical motivations have lost their value as justification for the National Parks.

We have to assume that the preservation of Nature is an ideal that demands too much from people, since man is unable to recognize in the beauty of a landscape reason strong enough to justify his trip into wilderness. We must not forget that the common man is not an expert and needs to be educated in the appreciation of wilderness. The objectives of promoting education by Nature are, today, as important as they were in the beginning. A trip to a national park must be, ideally speaking, not only an act of tourism but above all a process that involves learning and sensibility. It is very important to find a balance between public and little or no impact in the environment. Nevertheless to change all national parks into "untouchable reserves" would be to forbid access to such beautiful places and destroy the possibility of millions of people having contact with the Parks.

Al Gore is drawing people's attention to the environment but lives in a huge house, drives a big car and could not live without air-conditioning. In 2009, more than 500 business leaders polluted the environment, travelling by plane, car and other means of transportation to gather in Copenhagen, for the World Summit on Climate Change, to listen to Al Gore saying:

The market signals of energy are badly misleading and wrong. We do not take into account the cost of pollution. (...) If there is no cost to be paid for the indiscriminate dumping of pollution into the earth's atmosphere, then it should be a surprise to no one that today we will dump another 70 million tons of global

warming pollution into the thin shell of atmosphere surrounding our planet.  
(Murphy 2009)

It is my opinion that politicians have to find a way to provide the National Parks with the necessary means so they are not dependent on the number of visitors that they receive. We could tell people, as some environmentalists do, that the best way to protect Nature is to go to a shopping centre or to a soccer game on weekends instead of heading to the mountains. This would be quite a difficult task and not the solution because no National Park would survive developers and bulldozers without visitors, it would not be successful, and we know that in the United States; even the success of a church is sometimes measured by the number of cars parked outside on days of religious service.

In this historical period, when environmental questions are gaining ever more evidence, it is important that we learn from the mistakes of our ancestors. It would be very interesting to see Thoreau and Muir living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and realizing what we had to learn from them. It is vital to study the thought of public intellectuals like Henry David Thoreau and John Muir to understand the evolution of environmental philosophy as a cyclic and continuous line that cannot be separated from the history of mankind because, as these authors have written, in their individual mentalities and sensibilities - we are all part of a huge "All" called Nature.

### **Bibliographical References**

- ADAMS, Ansel. 1992. *Our National Parks*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company.
- ALBRIGHT, Horace M. 1986. *The Birth of the National Park Service*. Salt Lake City: Howe Brothers.
- BLACK, Jeremy. 1992. *The Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- CAMERON, Sharon. 1985. *Writing Nature: Henry Thoreau's Journal*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- CAMERON, Robert and Cameron, Gillian, Harold. *Above Yosemite*. San Francisco: Cameron and Company.
- CAVELL, Stanley. 1981. *The Senses of Walden*. Chicago: The University Chicago Press.
- COHEN, Michael P. 1984. *John Muir and the American Wilderness*. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- CRONON, William. 1983. *Changes in the Land*. New York: Hill and Wang.

1995. *Uncommon Ground, Toward Reinventing Nature*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- DAVIDSON, Rob. 1993. *Tourism*. London: Pitman Publishing.
- D' AMORE, J. Louis. 1992. Promoting Sustainable Tourism. *Tourism Management*, 3/13 (September): 258-262.
- ELDER, C. John. 1981. John Muir and the Literature of Wilderness. *Massachusetts Review*, 22/2 (Summer): 375-386.
- ESTES, Carol. 1996. Trading Parks Futures. *National Parks*, 70/9-10 (September/October): 47-48.
- EVERHART, William C. 1972. *The National Park Service*. New York: Praeger Publishers.
- GOLDSTEIN, Milton. 1988. *The Magnificent West: Yosemite*. New York: Arch Cape Press.
- HARDING, Walter. 1992. *The Days of Henry David Thoreau*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- HOWARTH, William. 1993. More from Walden Pond. *The New York Times Book Review*, 2/13 (May): 12-13.
- KLEMM, Mary. 1992. Sustainable Tourism Management. *Tourism Management*, 2/13 (June): 169-180.
- LOWRY, William R. 1994. *The Capacity for Wonder, Preserving National Parks*. Washington: The Brookings Institution.
- LUCAS, Alec. 1954. *Thoreau Field Naturalist*. University of Toronto Quarterly, 23 (April): 227-232.
- MELBO, Irving Robert. 1973. *Our Country's National Parks*. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc.
- METZGER, Charles R. 1956. Thoreau on Science. *Annals of Science*, 12: 206-211.
- MILLER, M. Sally. 1993. *John Muir, Life and work*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- MOORE, Stewart and Bill Carter. 1993. *Ecotourism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. *Tourism Management*, 2/14 (February): 123-130.
- MUIR, John. 1988. *My First Summer in the Sierra*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- MURPHY, Karen, *Democratic Examiner*, May, 25, 2009, Accessed on: Jan/29/2010, <http://examiner.com/x-11343-DC-Democrat-Examiner~y2009m5d25-Al-Gore-> <accessed January 29, 2010>.

- NASH, Roderick Frazier. 1967. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- 1970. The American Invention of National Parks. *American Quarterly*, 22 (Fall): 726-735.
- 1989. *The Rights of Nature*. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- PEEBLES, Robert Lawson. 1990. *Landscape and Written Expression in Revolutionary America*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- POSNER, Richard A. 2003. *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*, Harvard, Harvard University Press.
- RIDENOUR, James. 1994. *The National Parks Compromised*. Merrillville: ICS Books, Inc.
- ROBERTSON, James Oliver. 1980. *American Myth American Reality*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- RUNTE, Alfred. 1987. *National Parks: The American Experience*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- 1990. *Yosemite: The Embattled Wilderness*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- SIMONSON, Harold. 1978. "The Tempered Romanticism of John Muir". *Western American Literature*, 13: 227-241.
- TALLMADGE, John. 1991. "John Muir and the Poetics of Natural Conversion". *North Dakota Quarterly*, 59 (Spring): 62-79.
- TEATLE, Edwin. 1954. *The Wilderness World of John Muir*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company Boston.
- THOREAU, Henry David. 1950. *The Main Woods*. New York: Bramhall House.
- TOWNER, John. 1988. "Approaches to Tourism Industry". *Annals of Tourism Research*, 15: 47-62.
- TURNER, Frederick. 1937. *Rediscovering America in his Time and Ours*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.
- WOLFE, Linnie Marsh. 1945. *Son of the Wilderness: The Life of John Muir*. Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press.
- YOUNG, Cameron. 1996. "Into the Last Grizzly Strongholds". *International Wildlife*, 26/6 (December): 38-47.

