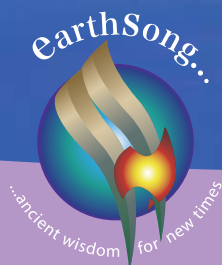
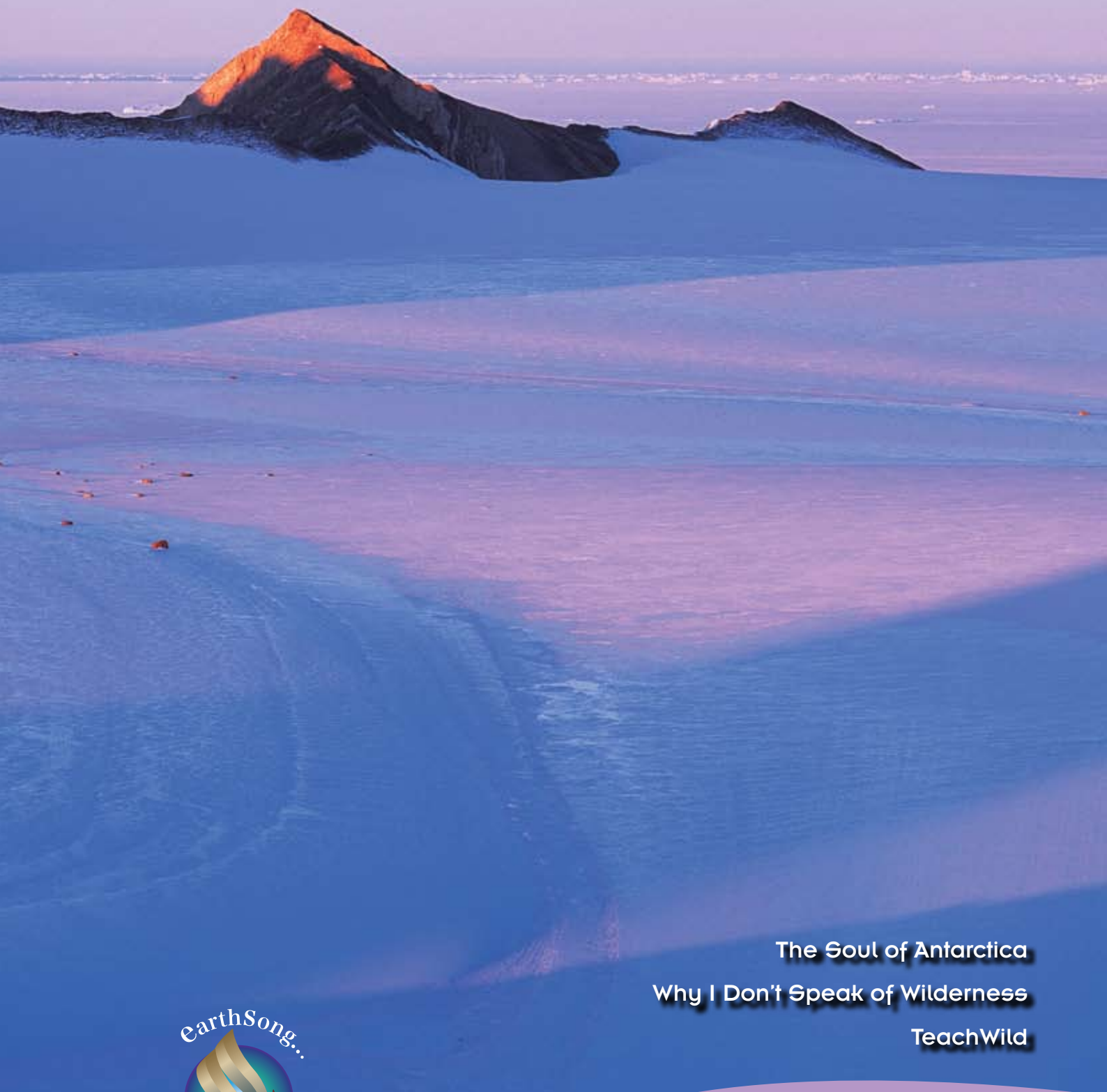


EarthSong

ECOLOGY, SPIRITUALITY AND EDUCATION

VOLUME 2 ISSUE 4, SPRING 2012



The Soul of Antarctica
Why I Don't Speak of Wilderness
TeachWild

The Call of the Wild

EarthSong

Perspectives in Ecology, Spirituality and Education



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WHY I DON'T SPEAK OF WILDERNESS

Deborah Bird Rose

Calm Country Photo: Deborah Bird Rose



FEATURE

I have always enjoyed David Brower's delightful description of wilderness as 'a place where the hand of man has not yet set foot!'

This positive vision of places where human impacts have not destroyed the nonhuman character of the place speaks powerfully to us in an era when the hand of man is becoming ever more toxic. This industrial hand is reaching out to alter soils, flora, fauna, atmosphere, oceans, and indeed the great cycles of nutrients and carbon in ways that are unknowably destructive and potentially lethal to much of life on earth. As Bill McKibben argues, there is probably nowhere on earth unaffected by the hand of modernity. A longing for wilderness seems both understandable and important to us in this era of destruction. And yet ...

The Australian indigenous notion of wilderness contrasts sharply with that of a western culture in which the 'wild' might represent the 'untamed' or the place that has not yet been taken over by human presence. In this article we are offered a significant insight into an entirely other perception.

Aboriginal people in Australia and elsewhere have rightly objected to a definition of wilderness that excludes human impacts because it necessarily excludes them and all the generations of their people who lived in country and took care of it. David Claudie, a Cape York man whose home country is between the Wenlock and Pascoe Rivers, made this point in relation to 'wild rivers'. When I visited him a few years ago, he said he objected to the term because his rivers are not wild. They have been properly taken care of by generations of his old people, and he absolutely did not want them to be designated 'wild'.

Another aspect of these issues was brought vividly to my awareness during a trip I made many years ago with some of my Aboriginal teachers in the Victoria River District of the

Northern Territory. We stopped to film an area of serious erosion; standing beside the truck, we looked out upon bare soil that was washing away down the gullies, at crevasses that were cutting into the land, at dead trees, scald areas and sickly cattle. I asked one of my teachers, Daly Pulkara, what he called this country, and he looked at it heavily. In a low voice he said: 'It's the wild. It's just the wild.'

I had read Eric Rolls's account of the detrimental effects of cattle on country: how their hooves hammer soils that previously had only known padded feet, how their grazing differs from that of native herbivores, how they trample waterholes and batter pathways down to the rivers. I imagined that the wild was caused by cattle. Not so, according to Daly and other teachers. Not so at all. It is the

humans who brought them here and are failing to take proper care who are the problem. In the course of many conversations, Aboriginal people were explaining that settlers saw the world primarily (if not exclusively) in terms of themselves and their cattle. They didn't think about anything else, not even the ecosystems that would have to thrive if they and their cattle were going to thrive. In the course of such conversations, another teacher, Riley Young, would ask: 'What's wrong with Whitefellas, they crazy or what?'

I came to understand that the wild, in Daly's terms, is a form of

It is easy to see the wild as a set of processes that are happening outside the human

wilfulness gone mad. It is easy to see the wild as a set of processes that are happening outside the human; in the scientific terms of the west, the wild is a failure of functionality, an escalation of entropy, a landscape problem to be fixed. I propose, in contrast, that the wild is the convergence of multiple ambitions. The wild Daly was pointing to was the end result of Whitefellas remaking the country to conform to their vision of landscape and economy, through both wilful and negligent destruction of the ecological integrity of the former life of the place. Daly's use of the term wild calls up images of lawlessness – of people and cattle running amok, and the resulting loss of the integrity of living beings.

Western science confirms Daly's vision of waves and waves of suffering that do not really exempt anyone in the long run. As many people are by now aware, we are in the midst of the sixth major extinction event on Earth, and the first one to be caused by a living species. Ours is the species doing all of this. As E.O. Wilson admonishes us, we are entering an 'Age of Loneliness'. This is happening very close to home. The rate of extinctions of mammals in Central Australia is the highest in the world, and the waves of extinction, like ripples from a pebble, are on the move. The encroaching wild is dealing death all over the place – to plants and animals, to fresh water systems and

soils, and even more widely – to the ecological fabric of the living world.

Judith Wright, among many others, drew our attention to an older meaning of the term 'wilderness'. Formerly, for millenia, wilderness meant hostile country. It was beyond the boundaries of settled agricultural lands, and it presented a challenge to be overcome. The Neolithic transformation of wilderness into agricultural lands through settlement was invested with religious and moral worth as well as with subsistence and economic value. This fundamental, worldview-altering shift was integral to recent Australian history. Most of the continent was seen as wilderness by early Anglo-Celtic settlers. So Daly's comment had a double barb: in conquering 'wilderness' and filling it with cattle, Whitefellas did two things. First, whether wilfully or in ignorance, they ignored or expunged the fact that generation upon generation of Aboriginal people had been taking care of the country. Second, whether wilfully or in ignorance, they set about wrecking the country. There seems also to be a third, more recent, barb – reframing the term 'wilderness' so that it comes to designate country to be valued, there is yet another potential to elide or expunge Aboriginal people's care.

Questions of 'wilderness' take us way beyond terminology, pressing us to consider underlying social and ecological ethics.

Yet again, an arena of dispossession opens up, and Aboriginal people are potentially erased. It is a relief to be able to say that co-management of National Parks is one notable effort in overcoming the violence that can lurk within the term 'wilderness'.

Questions of 'wilderness' take us way beyond terminology, pressing us to consider underlying social and ecological ethics. The conjunction of ethics is a matter dear to my heart, and present in much of my writing. I am often drawn to Aldo Leopold's discussion of a land ethic. Leopold realised that the problem for a land ethic is how to tell right from wrong. He offered this wonderful definition: 'A thing is right when it tends to

preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.' This incredibly provocative definition goes against economic rationality, against instrumental reason, against the idea that humans are outside of nature, and against the idea that nature exists to serve humans.

Daly Pulkara would have understood this perfectly. He contrasted 'the wild' with what he called 'quiet'. In Aboriginal pastoral English the wild is that which is running lawless; quiet, in contrast, is in communication, in relationship. In the context of country, the term 'quiet' speaks

... flourishing country is a participatory achievement brought about by a myriad living things.

to a broader domain of lawfulness. Quiet country exists where life flows through many species, and where recursions of mutual benefit form loops of entangled and emplaced connections. Quiet country expresses the very heart of how the living world really works.

The point is clear: in Australia, quiet country is flourishing country; it is what was there when Aboriginal people were at home, taking care of country. Damage is what you get when you take people away, when they're no longer allowed to take care of country, or when they just can't do it anymore. Damage is what you get when you knock the stuffing out of country's ability to be self-repairing and self-renewing. And damage is what you get when you dull your own sense of what flourishing country is really like.

Quiet country is lawful. It is country where the lives that come and go contribute to integrity, beauty and stability. The term 'functionality' lacks all sense of the joy and exuberance that (more-than-but-including-human) living beings bring to life in country. It has its place, though, because it does signal this important point: that flourishing country is a participatory achievement brought about by a myriad living things. From this vantage point, we can see that to instigate the wild, to promote destruction and desolation (even under names like 'progress'



Wild Country Photo: Deborah Bird Rose

and 'development'), is to betray all the life that has contributed to the flourishing lawfulness of country.

In thinking seriously about quiet country, we are drawn to understand that the wild is not a metaphor; it is a glimpse, a sudden flinch-making demonstration, of the lawless rampage of modernity and how it leads directly to a bare gully where life washes away or bleeds out, where betrayal replaces connectivity, and where less and ever less care remains.

Had Daly been more familiar with the nuances of contemporary English, he might have said something like: you call it wilderness, we call it quiet country. In the midst of all this wild, Daly and his people were longing to see quiet country. They longed and grieved for the ecological signatures of the old people and all the others; their desire was to see country still holding itself together.

Leopold writes that we can only be ethical in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in. His emphasis on the experiential quality of the land ethic suggests that we all need quiet country. Furthermore, his words suggest that it takes time and knowledge to come to perceive and love quiet country. So, I agree that there is country we should be treasuring because it is relatively undamaged. And I agree that the love of flourishing country is both deep and difficult – deep and difficult because of the way love exposes us to vulnerability. Deep and difficult because we are hedged in by legislation, pressured by threats, and often denigrated by the powerful.

So be it – love is what keeps us working for country. We in Australia must find better ways to talk about

flourishing country. This is our real, situated, historically shaped, and ecologically manifest challenge: the history of Australia is unique, the systems of Aboriginal care are unique; they produced what may be unique levels of biodiversity. This continent is incredibly special; we know it, we live and breathe it, we want to take care of it and protect it, and we need language that really helps us do that. We need language that helps us honour the unique participatory qualities of the place while at the same time seeking to protect, restore, and renew the country. Our love, too, needs protection and renewal, and here, too, language matters. It is our choice: we can use language that inspires us or that dulls our senses, that brings us home or that re-invigorates concepts from elsewhere. Our language will only succeed in honouring country and honouring love if it also honours the Indigenous people of the country, and if it honours the participatory connections of more-than-human living beings ■

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