Wilderness Paradigm
To Understand Environmental Justice

- We need to know the history of the concept.
- To do that we need to think about America’s relationship with wilderness.
Wilderness
• Yosemite 1890s
• Yosemite 1890s
Wilderness

- An important theme in US environmental thought
- US Environmental movement has its intellectual roots in wilderness preservation
• Frederick Law Olmstead (1822-1903)
Frederick Law Olmstead

- Famous US landscape architect, urban designer
- Created Central Park in NYC
  - Inspired by Birkenhead, England.
- Created parks and park-like suburbs for US, Canadian cities
  - Including Mount Royal Park, Montreal
- Designed 30+ US university campuses
- Helped persuade US government to set aside Yosemite as the first National Park
  - Helped invent the National Park
Central Park NYC
John Muir

- US naturalist who famously wandered through America’s wild places
  - Wrote about his experiences
  - Popularised wilderness preservation
- Helped persuade US to set aside Yosemite
- Founded the Sierra Club
Aldo Leopold 1887-1948

• US naturalist who researched and wrote about the vanishing wild places of the USA
  – Perhaps especially tall grass prairie
• Promoted wildlife management, environmental ethics
• His *Sand County Almanac* published posthumously
  – Need to preserve wild, intact ecosystems
Aldo Leopold

- A professor of the environment who hunted and fished
Ralph Waldo Emerson

- Influential C19th US poet, essayist, speaker
- Wanted an independent US literature, intellectual culture
- Transcendentalist philosopher
  - contact with nature brought contact with the divine
Nature and US Intellectual culture

• Transcendentalist influence:
  – Nature reveals the divine
  – Contact with nature is good for the soul

• Therefore we should
  – Preserve wilderness in National Parks
  – Give city-dwellers contact with nature in city parks
Nature and US Intellectual culture

• Wilderness part of US exceptionalism
  – Frontier of free land created freedom and US democracy

• Encounter with wild places part of US nationalism
  – John Muir meets Teddy Roosevelt?
  – Wilderness national parks “preserve America’s soul”?
- John Muir meets Teddy Roosevelt
The Administration's Promises Have Been Kept

1896 - 1900

Gone Democratic.
Gone Republican.
Run on the Bank.
Spanish Rule in Cuba.

The "American Flag Has Not Been Planted in Foreign Soil to Acquire More Territory But for Humanity's Sake."

McKinley, July 12, 1900.
Wilderness Paradigm

• Late C19th, early C20th America is becoming urban, industrial, multi-ethnic
  – It has deep social and racial divisions
• But Anglo US culture fantasises about wilderness
  – As the true birthplace of America
  – As an attractive, rugged place of nationalism
  – Wilderness worship part of the culture of ‘whiteness’?
DISCOVER

Yosemite
NATIONAL PARK

ENJOY SOME OF THE MOST SCENIC AND BEAUTIFUL VISTAS IN THE WORLD

CALIFORNIA - U.S.A.
Ansel Adams

• Took iconic photos of the American wilderness
  – Large format cameras, zone system for exposure
• His pictures resonated with US nationalism, environmentalism
  – He took awful pictures of cities
The Adams Wedding 1928
Wilderness Paradigm

• Helps create the classic US environmental organizations
  – Sierra Club (1892)
  – National Audubon Society (1905)
  – National Parks Conservation Assoc. (1919)
  – Izaak Walton League (1922)
  – Wilderness Society (1935)
  – National Wildlife Federation (1936)
  – Nature Conservancy (1951)
What’s wrong with this?

• Elite white American men construct a nationalist ethic of wilderness that is
  – American
  – Divine
• A wilderness to be preserved from human intrusion
• An America without cities, industry, ethnics, class or race conflict
Wilderness

• Became a cultural construct
• Against the challenge of an urban, industrial, racialised America
  – The elites create a nationalist fascination for wilderness
• Did wilderness ever really exist?
• Was it just an elite nationalist fantasy?
US Environmental Movement

• Deep intellectual roots in wilderness preservation
  – Part of its political appeal to the US public

• US mainstream environmental movement followed a wilderness paradigm
  – Sierra Club campaigning to preserve wild spaces, wild life
Rachel Carson

• Opposed the rise of the chemical pesticides.
  – They rupture ecosystems and lead to a *silent spring*

• Found the US public sympathetic in the early 1960s
US Environmental Movement

• Recruited from concerned members of white middle class
• Harboured some anti-urban feelings
  – Developed out of concern for wilderness and rural settings
  – Unfolded a powerful wilderness & rural activist paradigm
  – Its main campaigns were outside the city
Two critiques of the wilderness paradigm

• From the social justice movement
  – The environmental justice movement

• From the academy
  – Deconstructing wilderness as an elite invention
  – Wilderness does not exist
Environmental Justice Movement

• Emerged in the 1980s because conventional US Environmentalism was so wilderness obsessed, run by white men
  – Need to take on the environmental issues of poor, racialised America
US Social Justice Movement

• Some socialist roots
  – but old-style white working class had shifted to the suburbs

• Strong racial justice component
  – Racialised US urban communities seeking better conditions 1960s onwards
US Social Justice Movement

• When faced with urban environmental injustices
  – Noxious facilities being deliberately sited in black neighbourhoods
  – Workplace health & safety

• Mainstream US environmental movement seemed to offer little support/sympathy

• By the later 1980s the rift is public
  – Accusations of “environmental racism”
US Social Justice Movement

• Early 1990s challenge US “Group of Ten” leading environmental groups to dialogue on “environmental racism”
October 1991 Summit I

- First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit in Washington DC
- Fashions 17 principles of environmental justice
17 Principles of Environmental Justice

- Available here
- Focus on social inclusivity of activism
  - Activism to be racially inclusive
- More concerned with the desirable social process than with environmental issues.
Aftermath

• Mainstream US environmentalism embarrassed by the complaints
  – Scholars fascinated

• Some work on the issues in the Clinton era
  – A presidency whose political culture was apparently open to racialised communities
Critique

• You can make the case that the 1980s Sierra Club was ignoring the immediate environmental concerns of America’s poor and racialised communities

• But many environmental concerns are not social justice issues
  – Is it ‘racist’ to save the whale?
Critique

• Some environmental causes will conflict with social priorities
• A proper response to climate change might
  – require the elimination of the trucking industry
  – terminate many of Ontario’s automaking jobs
  – May not seem socially just or fair
  – Politically difficult
Canadian context

- Some analogues with the US
- Rural/wilderness preservation paradigm has been strong in Canada
  - Group of Ten have their Canadian equivalents
- Some aspects of the social cleavage is shared (class, race issues)
  - But much is not
Sierra Legal Defence Fund

- Founded in Canada 1990
  - Lawyers, scientists, activists funding legal challenges to environmental policy
  - Showed interest in the environmental issues faced by aboriginal and urban Canada
Sierra Legal Defence Fund

• Changed its name to EcoJustice.ca in Sep 2007
  – Campaigns for a justice based on environmental equality
• Makes prominent use of the environmental justice banner
  – But the 17 principles of environmental justice are not really its basis
Haluz-Delay & Fernhout 2011

• Suggests that a great many Canadian environmental groups are not following the 17 principles of environmental justice
  – Having trouble with social inclusiveness?
Eden/Wilderness Metaphor

• Deep roots in US environmental culture
• Corrupted by the agendas of nationalism, white male elites
  – Aids environmental injustice
Wilderness and Environmental Justice

• Two different but connected conversations
  – Preserving wild spaces
  – Delivering justice for people

• Urban environmental change is complex in meaning