

Problems with Progress: The Human Place in Ecosystems

The notion of progress is often assumed to be inherently positive, but progress can present various challenges and have negative effects for us, individually, and collectively as a society. Especially in the Western world, with the rise of the Industrial Revolution moving forward up to the current Digital Age, certain presuppositions tend to govern our thinking: 1) progress is necessary 2) progress is always positive 3) natural resources are commodities, utilized to make progress possible. These governing ideas follow an anthropocentric view of human existence, that is, humans are the central focus of existence, and the Earth's resources are considered valuable only as they help humans progress.

This *LTAI* theme offers a rich variety of reading that qualifies this notion, and in some cases, outright challenges anthropocentricity and unlimited progress. For one thing, progress too often comes at the expense of the Earth's natural resources. As the authors in this series point out, this exploitation of the Earth's ecosystems also takes its toll on humankind. They demonstrate that society, as a whole, pays a severe price when its individuals find themselves out-of-tune with the ecosystems in which they inhabit. Spiritual, emotional, and even physical health suffers when the rhythms of the natural world are ignored.

This theme provides a list of books and multiple authors who value, and situate, the human place within various ecosystems. Each of the books show and/or explain difficulties that we bring on ourselves when we abandon a shared coexistence within the various ecosystems of our world. The series offers four standard, classical texts in environmental literature, and a fifth, newer work, which is sure to soon be recognized as such. Each of the books in this series are expressly lyrical. The authors write wonderfully descriptive prose. Each of the books suggest multiple, positive experiences when a human closely aligns her/himself with the rhythms of nature. Regardless of the authors' religious or philosophical positions, each recognizes the need for stewardship and caretaking of Earth's ecosystems. Each provides a meditative, reflective style, both as personally experienced by the authors, and as the writers comment on society. Unjaded by progress and human failure, these authors maintain humility and a sense of awe. They help us see and emotionally experience the splendors of nature. Readers will be enthralled with the observations, as depicted, while simultaneously engaging intellectually to thoughtfully consider the human place within ecosystems.

A River Runs Through It

by Norman Maclean

The series begins with Norman Maclean's accessible memoir, *A River Runs Through It*. The story renders two brothers who grew up in Montana in the early twentieth century. Along with their father, a Presbyterian minister, Norman and Paul spend much of their time fly fishing the trout waters of the Big Blackfoot River, which they were blessed to call home. Maclean wistfully writes: "In our family, there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing."

Maclean's father, "a Scot and a Presbyterian, ... believed that man by nature was a mess and had fallen from an original state of grace ... To him, all good things – trout as well as eternal salvation – come by grace and grace comes by art and art does not come easy." This discipline formed the author, but he was also nurtured by the concept of beauty – one of the significant themes of the book.

The story recalls the younger brother Paul's self-destructive tendencies. Though he is beautiful in many ways, especially when he is on the river, he is ultimately a tragic figure. Both the narrator and his father fail to help him. One of the primary themes is the inability to help – that "most haunting of instincts" – trying to be a "brother's keeper."

Though Maclean's father had suggested that Norman write about the loss of his brother, Norman did not write this memoir until 60 years after his brother's death, long after their father had passed. One can only wonder at the depth of pain he must have felt for so many years until he was able to write this hauntingly beautiful story of loss, countered by memories of harmonious adventures on the Big Blackfoot River, in their younger, more innocent days.

Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

by Annie Dillard

Next, we read the 1975 Pulitzer Prize winner for nonfiction. Though only 29 years old when she won the Pulitzer, the jury referred to Dillard as an "expert observer in whom science has not etiolated a sense of awe ... Her book is a blend of observation and introspection, mystery and knowledge." She writes:

Unfortunately, nature is very much a now-you-see-it, now-you-don't affair. A fish flashes, then dissolves in the water before my eyes like so much salt. Deer apparently ascend bodily into heaven; the brightest oriole fades into leaves. These disappearances stun me into stillness and concentration ...

Like the other authors in this series, Dillard's prose is often lyrical. Her observations are traced with wonder, yet affirmed with historical reference and scientific appreciation.

The book is the result of Dillard's journaling and her astute observation of Tinker Creek in the Blue Ridge Mountains near Roanoke, Virginia. Due to the abundant, rich variety of her many observations and reflections, readers will enjoy discussing a variety of philosophical, theological and societal responses. Indeed, Dillard's book is often viewed as a successor to Henry David Thoreau's famous *Walden*, whose natural philosophy anticipates contemporary literary ecology and environmental writing.

A Sand County Almanac

by Aldo Leopold

Published in 1949, Leopold's book has long been one of the foundational texts in environmental literature. Similar to other authors in this series, Leopold's book is the result of his close observations while in relative isolation on a "sand farm in Wisconsin." Leopold unapologetically introduces his book:

There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot. These essays are the delights of one who cannot.

Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them. Now we face the question whether a still higher 'standard of living' is worth its cost in things natural, wild and free. For us of the minority, the opportunity to see geese is more important than television, and the chance to find a pasque -flower is a right as inalienable as free speech.

A naturalist by philosophy and temperament, Leopold worked in the forest service before being appointed Professor of Game Management in the Agricultural Economics Department at the University of Wisconsin, the first such professorship of wildlife management. At the same time he was named Research Director of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Arboretum.

Divided into three sections, the book concludes with a series of essays that logically and emotionally substantiate the author's observations and claims presented in the first two sections. His most famous essay, "The Land Ethic" offers a timeless voice of passionate reason concerning human experience within an ecosystem.

Let There Be Night: Testimony on Behalf of the Dark

edited by Paul Bogard

The fourth book in the series presents 29 short, personal essays from authors around the country. Each of the five sections of the book is introduced by a one-page synopsis which sets up the issue discussed within the following section. As the title indicates, these essays are testimonials of individuals recalling personal, often magical experiences with dark sky, stars, and planets. Many of the essays have a spiritual tone, as the authors recognize both the grandeur of the universe above and around us and the internal feelings that compel humans to gaze upward.

Bogard's concern with "light pollution" is vitally connected to land, water, human and animal life, and thus, connects with the other authors in this series. It is surprising, for instance, how important darkness is for migrating songbirds, not to mention the psychological health of humans.

In his "Introduction" to this collection, Bogard emphasizes that dark sky is "about holiness and beauty" before offering his own brief testimony:

On calm midnights I often take our ancient aluminum canoe out among the stars. I paddle slowly, pulling myself toward the center of the lake, looking back to see the house receding through steam, the smooth water warmer than air. A barred owl calls from dark shoreline, loons from the south bay. A bat flickers by, bits of leaves and broken bugs mix with stars in still water, a handful of amber cabin lights linger in the pines. I lean back on the bow and the Milky Way bends above me, one horizon to the other, there as it has always been.

Oklahoma readers will find plenty of shared experience with the great variety of authors in this collection.

Goodbye to a River

by John Graves

The final book of the series reconstructs John Graves' elegiac, three-week canoe trip down the Brazos River, the river of his childhood. Graves feels the urge to make this rustic journey when he learns that portions of the river will be dammed. Accompanied by his faithful dog, Graves paddles and camps his way downstream, recalling boyhood memories, while encountering new and familiar experiences and places.

The book is marked by the personality of its author, at times defiant, maybe belligerent, but often ironical, elegiac, and finally a voice of resignation is heard:

What is, is. What was, was. If you're lucky, what was may also be a part of what is. ... I needed to go to tell my stretch of the river goodbye. I'd made the trip and it had been a good one, and now they could flood the whole damned country if they liked, chasing off the animals and the birds and drowning out the cottonwoods and live oaks and sloshing away, like evil from the font, whatever was left there of Mr. Charlie Goodnight and Santana the White Bear and Cooney Mitchell, and me. ... We've learned to change unchangingness...

Clearly the author is troubled by the "progress" that is forever changing his river, and in his attempt to make peace with this new reality, he considers not only his place in history along this river, but also Native people, and other settlers, who have preceded him. The book provides, therefore, a sample of natural and cultural history of place, even as it represents the author's grieving for a special place soon to be lost.

Further Reading

Walden, Henry David Thoreau

Desert Solitaire, Edward Abbey

Silent Spring, Rachel Carson

Ecocriticism & the Environment, edited by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm

Upstream, Mary Oliver

Talking to the Moon, John Joseph Mathews

The Earth is Enough, Harry Middleton

The River White: A Confluence of Brush & Quill, Ken and Duane Hada

The End of Night, Paul Bogard

Round River, Aldo Leopold

The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American

Culture, Lawrence Buell

This theme was developed in 2022 by Dr. Ken Hada, a professor and poet at East Central University. In addition to his work in Literary Ecology, Ecocriticism and Regional writing, Ken is the author of ten collections of poetry. He is the winner of the 2022 Oklahoma Book Award, the 2017 South Central Modern Language Association Prize for poetry, and the 2011 Wrangler Award from the National Western Heritage Museum and Cowboy Hall of Fame.

