

IN PATAGONIA, PART 2: ON NATURE

Kingsnorth on the Tompkins' and the "myth of nature"

Paul Kingsnorth is a British writer and environmentalist known for his anti-globalization stance and his doomed-yet-hopeful perspective on the collapse of global society. Kingsnorth's writing has been featured in a variety of publications including the Guardian, Independent, Daily Telegraph, BBC Wildlife, and the Ecologist. He has published several books, including *One No Many Yeses* (2003).

In 2009, Kingsnorth co-founded **The Dark Mountain Project** with fellow writer and activist Dougald Hine. The Dark Mountain Project quickly evolved from a self-published manifesto into a world-wide collaboration of thinkers dedicated to understanding and addressing the "ecocide" humanity is currently waging against the planet. From the Project website:

The Dark Mountain Project is a network of writers, artists and thinkers who have stopped believing the stories our civilisation tells itself. We see that the world is entering an age of ecological collapse, material contraction and social and political unravelling, and we want our cultural responses to reflect this reality rather than denying it.



Below is an excerpt from one of Kingsnorth's recent articles reflecting, in his unique style, on his recent journey to Patagonia, during which he met with Doug and Kris Tompkins at Parque Pumalin. "I was hugely impressed with the work that the Tompkins' are doing," Kingsnorth writes, "it is one of the few truly inspiring things I have seen in a very long time." Read on for the full story.



Paul Kingsnorth
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I'm currently reading Gary Snyder's book of essays [The Practice of the Wild](#). Snyder is a fascinating writer, fully immersed in his subject, unafraid to reflect emotionally as well as analyse rationally, and mostly able to do so without coming across as a terrible old hippie.

In [Uncivilisation](#), we rejected the whole notion of 'nature' in the sense in which the word is often used in this culture. We wrote:

The myth of progress is founded on the myth of nature. The first tells us that we are destined for greatness; the second tells us that greatness is cost-free. Both are intimately bound up with each other. Both tell us that we are apart from the world; that we began grunting in the primeval swamps, as a humble part of something called

'nature', which we have now triumphantly subdued. The very fact that we have a word for 'nature' is evidence that we do not regard ourselves as part of it. Indeed, our separation from it is a myth integral to the triumph of our civilisation. We are, we tell ourselves, the only species ever to have attacked nature and won. In this, our unique glory is contained.

The 'myth of nature', in this context, is the falsehood – long established in the modern world – that humanity is somehow not natural; we are apart from everything else, destined to control it, above it, or perhaps below it, but not integral to it or related to it in any sense but the scientific. While I stand by this notion, I have also more recently come to prefer the word 'nature' to the word 'environment', by which it

has been largely replaced. ‘Environment’ is a technocratic, dry, pseudo-scientific word, which strips the natural world of any sensuous or living qualities, and reduces it merely to the backdrop of human activity. In Dark Mountain book two (which [you can buy here, and really should](#)) Rob Lewis, in his essay *The Silence of Vanishing Things*, does an incisive job of exposing the language of contemporary environmentalism as part of the reason why that movement has hit a wall. The reclamation of the word ‘nature’ by its practitioners might be a starting point if we were looking for some change there.

Snyder has another take on nature, though, which I very much like. In his essay *The Etiquette of Freedom*, he explains that he uses the word ‘nature’ in its broadest sense, to mean ‘the physical universe and all its properties.’ The word ‘wild’, on the other hand, he uses to denote those portions of the physical universe which remain free from the agency of humanity. Snyder writes that this definition of wild:

Come very close to being how the Chinese defined the term Dao, the way of Great Nature: eluding analysis, beyond categories, self organising, self informing, playful, surprising, impermanent, insubstantial, independent, complete, orderly, unmediated, freely manifesting, self authenticating, self willed, complex, quite simple.

The undomesticated animal; the self propagating plant; the land unfarmed or unmanaged: the food crop growing unbidden rather than in forced regiments; the human societies ‘whose order has grown from within and is maintained by the force of consensus and custom rather than explicit legislation’ – these are wild. In this context ‘we can say,’ writes Snyder, ‘that New York City and Tokyo are natural but not wild. They do not deviate from the laws of nature, but they are habitat so exclusive in the matter of who and what they give shelter to, and so intolerant of other creatures, as to be truly odd.’

I take you on this long etymological diversion because much of my time in Patagonia was spent in genuinely wild places, where humanity intruded only slightly. One of these places was [Parque Pumalin](#), in northern Patagonia. Pumalin is one of the last significant areas of temperate rainforest in South America – and increasingly in the world. It is an incredible place, and it had a strange effect on me. It is around the same

latitude in the southern hemisphere as Britain is in the north, so while a visit to a tropical rainforest, for me, is a truly alien experience, a visit to the temperate forests of Chile was a comforting one. I seemed to recognise much of the flora and fauna, even though it was different: the same niche was being filled, the same atmosphere was being created. Pumalin is an incredible landscape of huge old trees, steep green mountains, sea fjords full of dolphins, porpoises and sea lions. The air is clean, the galaxies can be seen at night, you hear no industry, no cars. It is what much of Britain must have been like before the Neolithic revolution. In some deep, old, primal part of myself, I felt I had come home.

The preservation of Pumalin is the work of [Doug](#) and [Kris](#) Tompkins, hugely ambitious conservationists who are pioneering a number of similar projects across South America. Their aim is to conserve, or in some cases recreate, vital natural habitats, on a scale which makes that conservation meaningful enough for the survival of threatened ecosystems and species. Both [deep ecologists](#), they are raising a flag for the importance of preserving natural systems in an age of global ecocide. The transcript of a conversation with Doug and Kris, which I recorded in Pumalin, will appear in Dark Mountain book 3 later this year.

I was hugely impressed with the work that the Tompkins’ are doing – it is one of the few truly inspiring things I have seen in a very long time. Regular readers will know that I have long come to the conclusion that it is now going to be impossible to prevent serious climate change, more destruction of habitats and species or the continued expansion of the human Empire. That Empire currently affects 93% of the Earth’s surface. The environmental movement, despite a huge amount of work and passion, and despite being right about most of the big picture for forty years, is failing to prevent the ongoing destruction. I don’t believe that anything will prevent much more of it now, bar the collapse or winding down of the industrial system or the running dry of the sources of fuel on which that system operates.

This is a bleak view to hold, but despite wanting to find it, I haven’t found anything which convinces me it’s not the correct one. On the other hand, thinking like this does not lead me to believe that ‘nothing can

be done.’ Plenty can be done, to try and protect what we have left; but we need to do it in the context of the unravelling of the wild, and not in the context – the unravelling of the wild, and not in the context – common up to this point – of a ‘campaign’ to put all the pieces back together again when so many of them have already been washed away by the sea.

It seems to me that if we value the wild, as Snyder defines it, the most important task on our hands now is to preserve whatever aspect of it we can. Most of us will never be able to do anything like the work that the Tompkins’ do, but all of us can do something, whether it be physically preserving land that we own, or spreading the word, or learning useful skills to teach others, or working to keep safe what remaining wild things and places can be kept safe from the gathering storm.

There is something of a fashion, currently, for predicting the end of the wild – or for suggesting that it has already ended. The first shot was fired nearly 25 years ago by Bill McKibben in his pioneering book *The End of Nature*, in which he suggested, correctly of course, that globalised impacts of the human Empire such as chemical pollution and climate change meant that there was no genuine wildness left, in the pre-human, pristine sense. Recently, there has been a new slew of [books](#) and [websites proposing](#) that we are entering the ‘Anthropocene’ era, and that we must now take our rightful place in the pantheon of gods, pulling the levers of the natural world in order to to preserve a living planet.

This dubious [neo-Wellsianism](#) is, I suspect, simply a manifestation of a growing panic in a culture which feels it is losing control. While we are, in one sense, clearly facing the end of the wild world we have known, we are not going to be taking control of it any time soon. Given that we can’t even control our own economies, or plan our transport systems effectively, or indeed manage our individual lives in most cases, it takes a strange kind of blind optimism to imagine we can ‘manage’ an entire planet.

But, fantasies aside, we are in any case still left with very large areas of the Earth – such as that preserved by Pumalin – which are still effectively primordial.

Will they survive climate change and the growing human appetite for more shiny things? We don’t know. But we have to hold on to them as if they will, because there is, at this stage, nothing else to do.

I suspect that the best hope we have now – hope for a living planet, hope for the continuation of beauty and wildness and ecological diversity and our own sanity as a species – is to protect as much of the world’s wildness as we can, try and carry it through the coming storm and just hope that on the other side we will have found some accommodation with ourselves and with the wild. Any such accommodation, if it ever comes, won’t happen in our lifetime. But we have a flame to keep, in case it ever does.

In the first Dark Mountain book, I wrote a long essay entitled [Confessions of a Recovering Environmentalist](#), in which I tried to analyse my reasons for falling out of love with green activism. This essay has been reproduced this month in the [US-based Orion magazine](#), and last week I had an [hour-long online discussion](#) about it with the American writers Lierre Keith and David Abram. David Abram has been a friend of the Dark Mountain Project for some time, and I find him one of the wisest thinkers on the nature of wildness and humanity.

In this conversation, David said two things that struck me in particular. Firstly, he talked about the ‘metamorphosis’ which our civilisation needed to go through if we were to have any hope of understanding the real meaning of the wild world – and he didn’t suggest that this would be easy, or even possible in our lifetimes. The second thing he said took me right back to the temperate forests of Chile, and to the passion and determination that I felt when I walked in them. ‘The way that nature exceeds us,’ he said, ‘is so necessary.’

The way that nature exceeds us: I find a kind of dark hope in this thought. Somehow, in whatever form, nature will always exceed us; this is the fact that our culture cannot face but is going to have to. I came back from Patagonia with a new determination to do what I could to carry something wild and precious through this storm. I don’t see that there is a better or more important project than that right now.