# Fay's quandary revisited

**By Nat Scrimshaw**

> *Fay's quandary is exactly that: a quandary, a logistical cul-de-sac, a clash of interior values, and there is no fully satisfying answer. The clash of wilderness preservation and use and enjoyment by thousands is inherently unresolvable. But that does not absolve any of us from striving to resolve it, from doing the best our generation can to protect the spirit of wildness.*
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> — *Wilderness Ethics,* Waterman and Waterman

I first read the *Fay's Quandary* chapter from Waterman and Waterman's *Wilderness Ethics* when it appeared in the *Sandwich Range Journal* shortly before the book was published. I continue to feel as I did then that Fay's Quandary gets at something essential in our understanding of the human relationship to the natural world. *Fay's Quandary* and *Why the Lorax Lost* are the two chapters from *Wilderness ethics* that I read again and again. I often use the Vaclav Havel quote at the start of the *Lorax* chapter in my presentations. I consider it to be a core message from *Wilderness Ethics:*

> *If there is going to be a minimum chance of success, there is only one way to strive for decency, reason, responsibility, sincerity, civility and tolerance: that is decently, reasonably, responsibly, sincerely, civilly and tolerantly.*

My focus on these chapters is not to diminish the importance of the others in *Wilderness Ethics.* What attracts me to these are their attention to more universal points that can be carried into other places, other times and other communities. Fay's quandary is the place of departure for an on-gong and essential dialog on the human relationship to wildness, a dialog that can best occur if we heed Havel's advice. We need to foster a capacity for listening that the Suess' Lorax did.

*Fay's Quandary* speaks of *interior values.* The *interior* is the human experience of mind and

emotion, of what is *inside us* in contrast to what is outside. The outside world, both human-created and non-human, comes to us mediated, through our senses and through the tools and instruments that extend our senses. We further filter the experience of the exterior through our accumulated experience. The idea we call 'objective' asks us to differentiate the outside from the influence of this accumulated interior experience, from our language, culture, and values: our subjectivity. This is the foundation of the scientific method, a very powerful tool for understanding the world. However, science can only inform our decision-making, not make decisions for us. In our judgments we use the information we get from the outside, empirical knowledge, and from within the horizon of our culture and our values, we use this wondrous thing that has emerged in evolution — language — to discuss, agree, disagree, and sometimes build consensus. So the interior is essential. Even when values diverge, communities of varying sizes can peacefully act in concert even while accepting a range of differences. The 1964 Wilderness Act reflects a kind of national consensus on this mixture of an idea (interior) and an outside condition (exterior) that we name Wilderness. This is a relatively large-scale consensus. This process occurs at different levels of community, including a temporary community of hikers walking a trail: we choose to stay on the trail or not walk on fragile alpine soils and plants. It even occurs in the interior monologue/dialogs we have regarding our actions: I walk along in the mountains and wonder whether to make that fire here, or take that bushwhack there in what might be a fragile place.

No matter how impressive the scope of what we learn about the world using the scientific method, or how clearly we have designed our management strategy, or how sure we are in our values, we will achieve very little without dialogue, without engaging our communities large and small in a conversation about the human relationship to the non-human world. The idea of wildness — *that we value and want to be in places that are defined precisely by the lack of human presence* — creates a unanswerable quandary for us, Fays Quandary. This quandary is the starting point for the most

important dialogue of out time.

Visitors, Users, Customers, Stewards

A number of years ago I wrote an essay entitled, *Stewards and Customers: Language and Land Management*. There I examined what to me was a startling change in the way the Forest Service referred to people. I was accustomed to the term 'visitor' and sometimes 'user,' but I was now (or rather then) seeing in Forest Service documents and hearing in Forest Service conversations the term 'customer.' Those who ventured into the mountains were no longer visitors, but customers, and Forest Service employees were asked to beef up their 'customer service.' It was the Reagan era, after all, and experiments in the privatization of public resources were all the rage. If not privatize, at least run a public agency like a for-profit business: visitors are customers.

The gist of my essay was to suggest that the language we use, the way we refer to things or people, can affect the entire way we think about the world. The word ‘visitor’ connotes a relationship of respect for the place being visited. As our mothers (and some fathers) taught us: be a good guest. Respect the home or community you visit. Don't impose too much. Give something back — wash the dishes, help stack fire wood, weed the garden. Hosts also have a responsibility, to be welcoming, friendly and inviting.

A customer is an entirely different beast. A customer has bought or is buying a product or service. The result of the transaction is the ownership of that product or service. No need for politeness here: if I don't get what I paid for I should get my money back! Rather than a humble guest, the demanding customer is always right, and the host is no longer sharing her home, but is instead managing the shop.

Under the neoclassical economic vision, our interactions with each other are primarily based on self interest. Through the interplay of supply and demand, chaos is averted by the ‘invisible hand’ of

the market. As we experience on a daily basis, markets and market forces do work quite magically in certain spheres and with certain restraints and corrections, but do we want the market to determine all aspects of our lives? What are consequences of turning visitors into customers?

Then there are ‘users,’ perhaps the linguistic precursor to customer. In my great-grandfather's day, before the creation of the White Mountain National Forest, the sorts that ventured into the mountains included people who walked (hikers) or snowshoed in winter for pleasure, usually coming from the cities and growing suburbs of the South. Then there were hunters, trappers and fishers. The nineteenth century also brought painters and writers, and my great grandfather used a newfangled device to create images of his adventures, the camera. He also spent his time with compass and transect mapping his beloved White Mountain valley, discovering along the way innumerable places never touched by trail.

Whatever number of activities we unearth from this era, these were not ‘users.’ These folk were not dividing the forest and mountains into consumptive and non-consumptive resources — painters did not see themselves as 'using a visual resource.’ Perhaps the seeds of future discord can be seen here. Painters were certainly not happy to see their pristine scenes become clear-cuts. Loggers most likely had little use for foppish transcendentalists.

Users coalesce into ‘user groups,’ collections of individuals that line up behind their favorite activity. Combined with the self-interest of the market mentality (though here ‘self’ becomes corporate, a group), users lobby hard, but there is no magic of the market in the National Forest. Instead there is the more visible hand of land managers who do their best to balance out the sometimes competing interests. At a landscape level, the forest may divided into areas for distinct uses, segregating feuding users. Uses and users multiply in a society that is always looking for the new product to market, a new 'thneed' to use *Lorax* terminology.

I suggested a fourth term: steward. My premise was that in a National Forest, owned by all of

us, the national community, we all share in the responsibility for caring for the land. Taking my cue from Aldo Leopold, I extended the community concept to the land:

> *All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts. His instincts prompt him compete for his place, but his ethics prompt him also to cooperate...the land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, water, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land.*

A steward is a member of a community, which encompasses both human communities and natural communities. Rather than buy a product or service, or join an interest group and lobby for a preferred use, the steward considers her responsibility to both her fellow humans and the land. Dialogue is key here, as is consensus building, and respect for differences.

Anecdote of a mountain flower

> *Phenomena in ecology, as in science in general, are manifestations of change; there can be no phenomena if everything is constant...*
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> *Anyone by seeking the real scale of nature will generate much detail without general application. The better way to go about gaining insights starts with defining the universe of discourse and the type of question to be addressed. Then let nature manifest the scales that it will in that defined universe.*
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> Timothy F.H. Allen and Thomas W. Hoekstra, *Toward a Unified Ecology*

To take a side trail for a moment, here's a story from my days as a summit steward on Welch Mountain. One afternoon as I adjusted the stones that encircled the islands of fragile plants and soil, a hiker came by and stopped and asked what I was doing. I explained the Sandwich Range Conservation Association's efforts to protect these outcrop community islands from hiker's boots, and went through

the evolution of the project, from our initial attempts to use signs, various efforts to direct hikers (blazes, brush, etc.), until the accidental discovery of the use of stone to delimit the fragile areas. His response was brief and stunning, *"Why bother, all of this will disappear during the next ice age."*

I had no immediate answer for him — he was right. I took the logic a bit further, and what I discovered was bleak. Someday the sun will burn out, and our earth will become a frozen wasteland. Even if the clever human species manages to avoid the catastrophe of our time — human induced climate change — and somehow carry away a genetic library to repopulate some new earth (the story of Noah has some distance to it), the second law of thermodynamics guarantees that the universe will end in a cold, chaotic dispersion of all matter. There is some hope: it looks like the universe may collapse in itself and start the whole show again.

Given this truth, how could my work become meaningful again? The word *meaning* is central. Meaning is a human creation, an individual and interior experience, but it also reaches out to others through language and touches the outside world through our actions. Most importantly, meaning is produced rather than discovered, produced as we converse, when we read and write, through the action of painting and singing, when we work and when we play. It is inherently interactive, and disappears or is transformed moment to moment. Do words mean precisely the same thing each time we speak? Is rereading a book or essay a simple repetition of the same experience? In each reading do we find new meaning? Do all of us experience the same meaning in a conversation? Just as the flow of material forces in the world is phenomenal, so is the interior experience of meaning.

This does not imply that there is no relationship to the outside world, that we must succumb to an entirely relativist or solipsistic universe of meaning. Just as language is social, so is meaning. Our experience of meaning guides our actions. Our actions change the world. For my fellow hiker, the work on Welch Mountain was meaningless, there was no reason, given his vision, *not* to walk on the fragile mosses and lichens, the mountain sandwort and three-toothed cinquefoil. As we know from

observing the deterioration of the soil islands, the action by many hikers of walking across these areas would eventually result in their disappearing. His sense of the meaning (or the meaninglessness) of protecting these soil islands if shared by enough others would mark the landscape over time, destroying what little is left of the soils and plants in this place.

Yet, I could not say that my fellow hiker was wrong in any 'objective' sense. Even putting his argument aside as so impossibly expansive that it left no room form any meaningful action in any area of the environment or society, it opened up a problem for me. Grasping at seemingly objective criteria I sought to defend my actions by some ecological reason, but this was hard to do. I could not claim that the loss of islands would cause some ecological disaster: there were no keystone species here whose loss would result in a collapse of the ecosystem. Yes, this sub-alpine environment was less common than some others, but it can be found in many other places, including some trail-less peaks where there is no danger from hikers. Even on Welch and Dickey itself, there are other areas off trail that exhibit the same ecology. Indeed, here was good argument to make these ledges with their beautiful views a 'sacrifice area.'

There were other problems as well. The solution we had come up with was visually startling: rings of stone that diverged radically from the back-country esthetic that many of us hold. I cringed every time a beginning hiker would declare. "What beautiful rock gardens!" and felt guilty when I could see behind the glance of a seasoned tramper disdain for this human intervention. That most hikers who passed were somewhere between these two extremes did nothing to relieve my unease.

What is missing here is a recognition of the scale of our concern, Allen Hoekstra's 'universe of discourse.' The efforts of the Sandwich Range Conservation Association were clearly focused on a finite set of ledges, creating a clear spatial scale for the project. The temporal dimension was less clearly bounded, we hoped to see results in a matter of seasons (years rather than decades, centuries or millennia). We saw the deterioration of this place and intervened to reverse damage. Was it the right

thing to do?

A land manager who is working at a larger scale may need to ask whether the time and energy taken here is appropriate given the larger issues of protecting alpine and sub-alpine environments and limited funds. For a neighbor to this mountain, someone who has watched the deterioration over many years and loves the ledges, the ledges themselves may be enough of a 'universe of discourse' to justify action. The question of the aesthetics of placing stones around the soil islands to protect them is quite a difficult topic; here we dig deeper into interior values. The dialog continues.

a dialogical ecology and the ecology of dialogue

Any level of human presence in wild areas brings us to *Fay's quandary*, "a logistical cul-de-sac, a clash of interior values, and there is no fully satisfying answer... The clash of wilderness preservation and use and enjoyment by thousands is inherently unresolevable." Rather, it is temporarily resolvable in dialogue. Just as there is no final word in true conversation, our temporary resolutions on on the idea of wildness must be constantly revisited.

A last thought: if this seems too human-centered, let me suggest a different way of looking at dialogue, one that encompasses Leopold's community concept, and that seeks to go beyond 'interior' values. What if we considered dialogue as encompassing ecology, ecology not just as the *subject matter* (the object) of a discourse, but as another speaker, another *participating subject* with a voice: a dialogical ecology.

The idea of a dialogical ecology is neither profound nor original. Most simply it is the notion that human action 'speaks' to the environment, leaves its mark, and that environment 'speaks back' through the many forces of plants and animals, climate and other interrelated physical forces (tides, erosion, volcanos, the sun's activity, etc.). Patterns of human and environmental interactions can be observed on the landscape at various spatial and temporal scales.

I often use the example of my persistent annual mowing of the unused pastures on our old mountain farm in Sandwich Notch: each year poplar and rogue apples appear, and each year I brush-hog them down along with a variety of introduced and native grasses, native low-bush blueberries and other plants and even lichens. The surrounding forest seems to argue vigorously with me, suggesting that these pastures should return to forest. I stubbornly suggest otherwise, and we revisit this point every year. I am not the only one engaged in this sort of debate locally: the beavers up the road have their own running conversation with Atwood Brook and the surrounding forest. I prune suckers from apple trees so that the tree will produce larger, low-hanging fruit, resulting in a sculpted canopy with an umbrella shape that contrasts sharply with unpruned trees. The apple responds with new suckers in the Spring. Of course, different apple trees speak different dialects (Macintosh, Cortland, Granny Smith) that are the product of a long conversation between humans and this fruiting plant. Larger patterns of agriculture and silviculture, resource extraction, villages and towns, and massive human artifacts such as cities have their own narratives and conversations.

I am most accustomed to speaking to the backcountry with my feet, tramping on and off trail. Delicate paths emerge where I walk more than once. I sometimes have a serious dicussion of heavily traveled trails, interjecting a waterbar or soil-retaining step. To some this may appear to be an expletive, too much of an artifact in what we wish to be purely wild. But over time the conversation settles down to a more civil tone: the slippery almost white log grays; debris softens the obviously human-placed granite. The waterbar fills with silt and leaves; I clean it with fire rake. My conversation with the trail continues.

*Is this human action, a voice and narrative that so dominates the world at this time, unnatural*? I would say no. Human action, as well as the unusual mix of instinctual behavior, mind, language, and culture that inspires human action, is a product of nature.

Perhaps it is better to ask whether humans are shaping up to be a catastrophic force in nature.

Clearly, human action is now contributing to a catastrophic decline in the number of species in the world and accelerated climate change. But disturbance and catastrophe have occurred before without us. Disturbance is part of a sustainable ecosystem and can contribute to greater biodiversity — wind, fire, landslide. Even catastrophic disturbance has its upside: looking at the fossil record, over the expanse of geological time, each catastrophic decline of species has been followed by accelerated speciation with an overall trend toward more species over time. Perhaps humans are the equivalent of a large meteor striking the earth: like the dinosaurs, we may disappear, but there's surely more to follow.

Considering that catastrophe is 'natural,' does this mean that anything goes for humans, that we can be feel justified in our possibly apocalyptic role for this time? My answer is a clear and emphatic no. I believe we have a unique responsibility to use our science, art and technology to engage in a creative and long-running conversation with non-human nature. We can choose when and where to apply artifice, and when and where not to. Our dialog with the earth need not be cut short.

My own dialogue happens through conversations with other people and the things I write and create, whether they are essays, poems, letters, drawings or scientific journal articles. Most importantly and concretely, I converse through my physical actions: trail work, gardening, mowing fields, cutting fire wood, raising a timber frame.

We have our instincts and other biophysical constraints, but through language and culture there is an enormous variability in the ways we organize our affairs and act. If we see that the result of individual and collective action is leading to an end that we do not want, and if we are able to critique our way of living, we *can* change. Individually, it may be a matter of conscience; collectively it is a matter of dialog.

There are certain 'keystone' ideas that are important to the interior/exterior dialog that is about nature and that is with nature. Wildness is a keystone idea, and Fay's quandary is a key to the

keystone.

I speak and write of wildness and wilderness. I walk in woods and climb mountains, puzzle over scat and tracks. I look across a softly jostled sheet of forested hills and hollows that fill with shadow as the day ends, and drain of shadow as the day begins. I meet another walker and we talk a moment, or we don't. There is much to hear in silence.