

Open Spaces of Democracy: Connecting Students, Wilderness, and Community through Experiential Learning

Eric J. Morgan

University of Wisconsin-Green Bay
Morgane@uwgb.com

Abstract: Chronicling a semester-long civic engagement project, this essay explores the efforts of a senior seminar course to collaborate with a local wilderness preservation organization. The essay reflects on the role of students in their communities, their connections to wilderness, and the challenges and rewards of civic engagement.

Keywords: Civic engagement, experiential learning, higher education, service learning, sustainability, wilderness

Eric J. Morgan is an assistant professor of Democracy and Justice Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, where he teaches a variety of courses on modern American and African history. His scholarship has been featured in Diplomatic History, Enterprise & Society: The Journal of Business History, Diplomacy & Statecraft, The History Teacher, Passport: The SHAFR Review, the Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television, and the Dictionary of African Biography.

We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. . . . That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics. That land yields a cultural harvest is a fact long known, but latterly often forgotten.

—Aldo Leopold¹

Wilderness is not a luxury but a necessity of the human spirit, and as vital to our lives as water and good bread. A civilization which destroys what little remains of the wild, the spare, the original, is cutting itself off from its origins and betraying the principle of civilization itself.

—Edward Abbey²

The story of Hetch Hetchy is well known in environmentalist lore. Once renowned for its stunning natural beauty, the Hetch Hetchy Valley lays within the northwestern section of Yosemite National Park in California and was beloved by John Muir, the conservationist and founder of the Sierra Club, who wrote of the valley, “no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man.”³ The valley consisted of 1,200 acres of lush pine forests and meadows that surrounded the winding Tuolumne River and its tributaries, with waterfalls and rocky granite domes and spires dotting the majestic landscape. In 1906, after an earthquake and subsequent fire devastated San Francisco, the Secretary of the Interior granted permission to build a dam in the valley to provide water to the beleaguered city. This decision commenced a seven-year struggle led by Muir and the Sierra Club to preserve the valley, which brought national attention to the grandeur of Hetch Hetchy. Muir and his followers were not successful in their efforts, as the valley was ultimately drowned in a reservoir, but the battle proved a crucial moment in the nascent environmental movement, illustrating the potential of the citizenry to come together for the protection of America’s rich natural resources. My capstone senior seminar course began with the tale of Hetch Hetchy, which I hoped would inspire my students to think about not only their relationship with the natural world, but also of the responsibility of Americans to act responsibly towards the land. To accomplish this goal I endeavored upon an experiential learning project that strove to connect students with both wilderness and their community.

I am a historian, though my university is interdisciplinary in nature, a structuring that allows for unique collaborations and experimentations in our classrooms and research. My department espouses a particularly strong ideological commitment, one that encourages students to become educated and critical citizens and ultimately agents of positive change in their communities. Despite our lofty rhetoric, I had grown frustrated that, in my experience, a significant gap seemed to exist between the discussions we had in the classroom, where authors and theories and history abounded amidst admittedly engaging debates, and actual on-the-ground collaborations between faculty members, our students, and the larger community. I decided, then, to live the ideals we so strongly believe in, engaging in a pedagogical experiment by asking my students to move beyond texts and arguments and to embrace what I called a civic engagement project.

Having run numerous seminars in the past that followed the basic model I experienced in advanced undergraduate classes and most frequently in graduate school—lots of readings,

informal roundtable discussions on those books and articles, and a final research project—I decided to try a slightly different pedagogical approach. While the course would engage with a good deal of readings and a few relevant films, we would also discuss citizen activism and engage in an actual project of our own, learning experientially. My hope was that the course would connect students to both wilderness and their communities, inspiring them to think deeply about the role of citizens in a democracy, specifically the future of our shared environmental resources, and to enact change through a project of their choosing. Rather than only *studying* the history of environmentalism or activism, I wanted by students to *become* engaged citizens, connecting with historical environmental luminaries like John Muir and Aldo Leopold. We would not only read and reflect upon the words and deeds of these historical actors, but also attempt to embody their ideals within our own community. Whether or not the project succeeded was not as important to me as the students experiencing various aspects of civic engagement and activism, including failures and triumphs.⁴

My senior seminar was titled “Wilderness, Conservation, and Land Ethics in America,” a topic that emerged in my consciousness over the past several years as I became increasingly interested in humans’ relationship with the natural world. After spending two summers hiking through various national parks, mainly in the U.S. West, I had begun to think about how Americans (including myself) see wilderness and their relationship to it. Several years ago I read *A Walk in the Woods*, Bill Bryson’s comic yet touching memoir of hiking the Appalachian Trail, and was inspired by a passage where Bryson noted that Americans separate “nature” from the rest of their lives, whereas in, say, Great Britain, a hiking trail would meander through forests, farmland, and small villages. In the United States, however, our trails are “out there” in “wilderness,” whether in state or national parks, national forests, or designated wilderness areas.⁵ As I was continuing to work out my own thoughts on the proper relationship between humans and nature, I decided to engage my students in this discussion.⁶

We began the class by discussing the ideas of both wilderness and democracy. On the very first day of class I had the students reflect on what wilderness meant to them, allowing students half an hour of quiet time alone to write. As Wisconsinites, most of my students had at least some kind of relationship with nature, and many wrote about childhood experiences fishing, hunting, or spending time in the vast Northwoods region of the state, where there are few people and little development and plenty of deep forests, luminous lakes, wandering hiking trails, and scenic vistas. Initially most students saw wilderness as a place for recreation, a natural haven for purely human consumption and enjoyment. Throughout the course we would enter into dialogue with many of America’s great environmental thinkers and actors, including Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Benton MacKaye, Howard Zahniser, Edward Abbey, Rachel Carson, Roderick Nash, William Cronon, and Bill McKibben, who would all challenge my students’ conception of wilderness. Nash’s *Wilderness and the American Mind* gave us an excellent survey of the idea of wilderness throughout American history, and provoked discussions on what, exactly, wilderness even is and why it is important. Wilderness, of course, can mean different things to different people. As Nash writes, “one man’s wilderness may be another’s roadside picnic ground. The Yukon trapper would consider a trip to northern Minnesota a return to civilization while for the vacationer from Chicago it is a wilderness adventure indeed.”⁷ The Wilderness Act of 1964, signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson, provided a legal definition: “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate

the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”⁸ Regardless of its shifting definitions, wilderness as both an idea and place has increasingly become a focus of conservation efforts over the past century due to the fact, as Nash argues, that “wilderness plays a critical role in environmental ethics; it is the best place to learn that humans are ecologically and ethically involved in the larger community of life. Wilderness preservation is a gesture of planetary modesty and a badly needed exercise of restraint on the part of a species notorious for its excesses.”⁹

To introduce students to concepts of intermingling democracy and wilderness, our seminar’s first book was Terry Tempest Williams’ *The Open Space of Democracy*, a concise but thoughtful meditation on how wilderness exemplifies the deep ideals of democracy in the United States. Williams’ text inspired discussions on the role of citizens in a democracy and what kind of influence citizens can have, particularly in our current post-*Citizens United* age of powerful corporations and political action committees seeming to drown out the voices of the rest of us. Explaining the connection between wilderness and democracy, Williams writes, “In the future, brave men and women will write a Declaration of Interdependence that will be read and honored alongside the Declaration of Independence: proof of our evolution, revolution of our growth and understanding. The open space of democracy provides justice for all living things—plants, animals, rocks, and rivers, as well as human beings. It is a landscape that encourages diversity and discourages conformity.”¹⁰ Williams concludes her book with a statement that my students were strongly drawn towards: “I do not believe we can look for leadership beyond ourselves. I do not believe we can wait for someone or something to save us from our global predicaments and obligations. I need to look in the mirror and ask this of myself: If I am committed to seeing the direction of our country change, how must I change myself?”¹¹ Williams’ eloquent words presented a challenge to my students, and allowed us to think deeply about participatory democracy and how we could best enact positive change within our own community.

I left the process of contemplating and deciding on an issue completely to the students. I was available for consultation, but ultimately I wanted them to find a cause that they cared about; I did not want to mandate anything. Students were given two weeks to break into smaller focus groups and to research and discuss potential issues, bringing their suggestions back to the seminar as a whole, which would then vote on which project to engage with. I was unsure if the class would decide on a local issue or a larger, national issue, something perhaps from a Sierra Club or National Resources Defense Council campaign. One contentious issue that a group brought forward was the proposed opening of a taconite mine in northwestern Wisconsin, an extremely divisive political issue in the state. The mine would be the largest open-pit iron-ore mine in the world and has drawn criticism from both environmental and Native American groups.¹² During our initial discussions we talked about the pros and cons of a local versus national project, issues, like the mine, that were more political than others, and the types of activism that were possibilities given our limited timeframe and resources, from fundraising to letter-writing campaigns.

To give students an idea of the type of activism and tangible change that is possible at the local level, I contacted the Baird Creek Preservation Foundation, which is the steward of the Baird Creek Greenway, a small but ecologically diverse area of the parks system in Green Bay. Baird

Creek is a thin but extended stretch of land surrounding a meandering rust-colored stream that contains old growth forest and a diverse array of trees, plants, and animals. It is the host of hiking, biking, and snowshoe trails, various other recreational opportunities, and serves as an important site for ecological research by local college professors, science teachers, and students.¹³ I invited Charlie Frisk, the president of the foundation's board and an area high school science educator, to visit my seminar with two of his former students. They gave a wonderful multimedia presentation on Baird Creek and the work that young people from area schools have done there over the years. It was clear that the students had learned much through their research at Baird Creek—both noted that they wanted to become science teachers—though Charlie commented that collaboration between area schools and the Baird Creek Preservations Foundation had waned in recent years.

The story of Baird Creek was both instructive and inspiring for my students. In 1996, a controversy arose over the future of a 35-acre parcel that was known as Baird Creek Heights, which was located adjacent to a different city park near the Greenway. The land was zoned as parkway and the city had intended to purchase the land and add it to the existing Baird Creek Park system. But in 1996, the City of Green Bay received pressure to rezone this wooded area as residential land, which would be divided into smaller parcels and turned into expensive housing by a developer. Charlie provided our class with a letter he wrote to the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* where he lambasted the city's political leadership for choosing the interests of the so-called "homeless wealthy" over the preservation of "a spectacular piece of land with oaks, hemlocks, and white pines bigger than any" he had seen in Northeast Wisconsin.¹⁴ Motivated by the potential loss of this land to housing for the rich, the Baird Creek Preservation Foundation, founded in 1997, raised awareness and hundreds of thousands of dollars that prevented the land from development, and ultimately it was added to the Greenway. The campaign was a massive success and illustrated to my students several things, including the importance of being connected to one's land and the power of citizens to successfully pressure various formidable institutions.

The week after Charlie's presentation, the seminar voted on their project. Groups presented four potential campaigns. One group proposed a campus cleanup day after the spring thaw of both the four-mile arboretum that rings our campus and the campus as a whole, perhaps also integrating a campaign to increase recycling efforts on campus. A second proposal suggested working with our local wildlife sanctuary, volunteering with its rehabilitated native animal species. The third suggestion was a letter-writing and consciousness-raising campaign focusing on the aforementioned taconite mine. Finally, several groups put forward Baird Creek as the project's focus. Baird Creek won handily on the first ballot, as students were greatly moved by Charlie Frisk's presentation as well as some of the readings we had engaged in to that point in the semester, particularly a story from Terry Tempest Williams. Reflecting on an effort of citizens in Castle Rock, Utah to prevent the development of precious desert lands, Williams noted, "We had no money. We had no power. We had only our shared love of home and a desire for dialogue with the open spaces that defined our town."¹⁵ Drawing inspiration from both Baird Creek and Williams' inspiring words, the seminar chose local engagement as the direction they wanted to go. My students named their endeavor the Wild Phoenix Project, combining our seminar's focus on wilderness with our university's mascot who, of course, is modeled after the long-lived bird of Greek mythology that is constantly reborn.

After deciding on its project, the first thing the seminar had to do was determine what, exactly, the Baird Creek Preservation Foundation needed from our group. Sometime in April, near the annual Earth Day celebration, a Restoration Day event would be held to clean the Greenway after the end of the long Wisconsin winter, and the Foundation asked our seminar for both volunteers as well as \$150 to purchase Yellow Indiangrass seed (*Sorghastrum nutans*), which we would plant during Restoration Day. My students also hoped to reconnect high school students to Baird Creek, as Charlie had noted in his presentation that such relationships had lapsed in recent years. The project's goals, then, were threefold: to connect our students and campus with the outside community; to reach out to area high schools; and to raise enough money to purchase grass seed.

I decided to have the students divide tasks and to form committees to tackle the various aspects of the project. A social media group created Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts to promote the project, while a fundraising committee brainstormed on events and ways to raise money for the grass seed. Another subcommittee worked on advertising, creating flyers and t-shirts for our class to wear to promote the project. Several students acted as liaisons between our group and the Baird Creek Preservation Foundation, and a Wilderness Day committee began planning our campus consciousness-raising event. A final committee worked to reach out to area schools.

With nineteen students, the task of dividing responsibilities equally proved challenging and frustrating at times, though I left the process of figuring out the group dynamics to the students. Part of the challenge in our project's nascent weeks was that we dove into the endeavor fairly early in the semester before we had delved too deeply into our readings on wilderness, which meant that the seminar's major ideas surrounding conservation and land ethics were not entirely clear or well-developed to some students from the outset. As one student noted, "There were some struggles with students feeling other students were not completely participating. I believe this struggle had something to do with students still trying to wrap their brains around the class topic and where they fit in that. I struggled at the beginning of the semester to make sense of my role in the project because my previous understanding about my interactions with the Earth was ambivalent. I did not believe my minimal non-sustainable actions impacted the degradation of the planet much." Another concurred, writing, "A major struggle that I have seen in my other leadership roles in activist projects is that engagement may suffer when participants do not have a good understanding of the project's objectives and goals. For our semester topic, the ideas surrounding land ethics and conservation of wilderness are multi-faceted and take time to wrap our brains around, especially when our nation's leaders cannot wrap their brains around it. This may have affected class participation in our project." I don't think that I would have done anything differently in the way the course was organized, though, as we were faced with a short timeframe and a real deadline. And so the seminar learned as it went along. Finally, students observed the difficulties of trying to effect change with a large group, particularly given the array of leadership styles and diverse personalities, from boisterous to shy. A student observed, "Those who are more reserved may not have felt their voices were heard amongst the more verbal students during the development stages of our project. This often leaves potential group participants no longer invested in the project as they may feel ignored or left out. This issue often impairs projects until active listening and effective communication occur."

Each week, before we discussed our readings for that class meeting, students broke into their committees. I stressed to them that much of the work would have to be completed outside of class, and I did worry early on that the project would potentially fizzle out. As with most group work, some students engaged more than others, though ultimately I was pleased with how many students took ownership of the project. Some of that had to do with the way the course melded activism with ideas, as students were able to take crucial themes from our readings and applying them to our project. While some students began the course confused or with skeptical interest, the seminar and larger project gained momentum and meaning as the semester progressed. As one student reflected, “Now after our readings, class discussions, and the civic engagement project, my understanding is that the proper relationship and interaction between humans and Earth is land ethics seen in sustainable practices.”

Perhaps the most influential text we read during the semester was Aldo Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac*. Leopold’s seminal text, which is often compared to Henry David Thoreau’s *Walden*, was published in 1949 and has become one of the foundational texts in the environmental movement. Leopold, who was born in 1887, was a forester, ecologist, environmentalist, and professor of game management at the University of Wisconsin who purchased a severely degraded sand farm in Baraboo, Wisconsin during the Great Depression. *A Sand County Almanac* incorporates natural history and philosophy, and puts forth Leopold’s idea of a responsible relationship between humans and the land they inhabit, which he called the land ethic. Leopold wrote, “A land ethic, then, reflects the existence of an ecological conscience, and this in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of land....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.”¹⁶



The Leopold Shack in Baraboo, Wisconsin

To help better connect my students to the idea of wilderness and the land ethic, I offered an optional excursion to the Aldo Leopold Center in Baraboo, Wisconsin. On an overcast and drizzly morning, eleven of my seminar students joined me for the two-hour drive down to Baraboo. Amidst the bucolic setting of rolling hills and deep woods we toured the LEED-certified center building and, most memorable, were given a private guided tour of Leopold’s famous shack and surrounding farm, where Leopold spent much of his time on weekends and during the summers with his family rehabilitating the land, embodying his ideal of the land ethic.

My students simply loved connecting with a place they had only read about, and the experience was successful in helping students to understand the idea of the land ethic. “Like no other place I have visited,” one reflected, “the Aldo Leopold Center...is a model for a positive and lasting relationship with our environment.” Another commented, “The excursion to the Aldo Leopold

Center and shack was an exercise in transporting myself to the pilgrimage frame of thinking, the immense work the Leopold family has done for the scientific community, and viewing my natural surroundings with reverence for the natural beauty that Leopold saw and envisioned daily.” Finally, a student was moved to act, writing, “As a group standing in a position where Leopold lived with nature, and reading from *A Sand County Almanac* about what kind of signature we as individuals of a collective-thinking community want to leave on this land, I felt empowered with a renewed sense of appreciation for my classmates and the wild.”

Beyond land ethics, another theme we thoroughly discussed was the commodification of nature, particularly within the national parks. One of the reasons I believe students chose Baird Creek as their focus was because of its location within our city. It was a place they could actually visit, where their feet could walk on the paths and their hands could touch the grass and trees. Baird Creek was not merely an idea, a pretty panoramic “out there” in the wilderness, rather a real, tangible place. Proximity is important in connecting with a cause. One of my frustrations—also noticed by many of my students—in visiting national parks is how they can occasionally veer towards an amusement park feel (anyone who has been stuck in a bear or bison jam in Yellowstone or who has battled crowds at the lodges, restaurants, and bookstores will know what I mean), with thousands of Americans and foreign visitors driving through the parks in their cars or massive tour buses, simply peering out the window at “nature.” As Aldo Leopold observed, “Our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language.”¹⁷ We debated the effectiveness of such industrial tourism, and came to the conclusion as a group that people need to better challenge themselves and separate from their cars, to get off the road and onto the trail and to move beyond merely observing the “pretty” from behind windshields. As Edward Abbey wrote in *Desert Solitaire*, his classic meditation on his experiences as a seasonal National Park Service ranger in the Southern Utah wilderness: “Get out of your damn car....Take off those sunglasses and unpeel both eyeballs, look around; throw away those idiotic cameras!....Take off your shoes for awhile, dig your toes in the hot sand, feel that raw and rugged earth....Stand up straight like men! Like women! Like human beings! And walk—walk—WALK upon our sweet and blessed land!”¹⁸ The growing popularity—and indeed overabundance and reliance upon—of the automobile was one of the reasons that the Wilderness Society was founded and Congress passed the Wilderness Act in 1964, which forbade vehicles in designated wilderness areas.¹⁹

While we talked extensively about land ethics and other issues surrounding our various relationships with nature, fundraising was the primary goal of the Wild Phoenix Project, and my students successfully raised funds for Baird Creek in several ways. First, they established a campaign on GoFundMe, an online fundraising site. Second, students held a fundraiser at a local tavern where two of my students worked. This event was a fun and low-key way to talk about Baird Creek and the seminar’s project with local denizens who stopped by the tavern for a drink that evening, many of whom had, surprisingly, never heard of the park. Every such conversation was also an opportunity for consciousness-raising, and perhaps some of those residents will find their way to Baird Creek. Students also reached out to several campus organizations, including the Student Government Association, which generously donated funds to our effort. Finally, the class held a Wilderness Day event on campus, which raised money by selling ice cream for \$1. Baird Creek had asked us for \$150 to purchase the grass seed, and my students raised over \$400

through their various efforts, easily covering the requested contribution. The additional funds would help to purchase further supplies and tools, such as rakes, to maintain Baird Creek.

Connecting with local high schools proved more difficult than raising funds. I had hoped that this project would create some permanent links between our university, Baird Creek, and local schools. As with many universities in our state, enrollments have been declining due to demographic changes as fewer students are graduating from high school every year. I had ideas that this project could in a small way help to recruit area students to our campus by showing them the type of hands-on learning and community engagement that our classes practice. But the seminar students who reached out to schools did not have much success—many schools were not interested in collaboration and following up with those that did proved difficult—though ultimately we did recruit a small handful of local students to join our efforts on restoration day. One of the lessons my students (and I) learned is that organizing, even for such a small project as ours, takes a long time and making permanent connections is challenging, particularly given how brief a semester really is. A more extended timeframe would have potentially allowed for further outreach.



What Does Wilderness Mean to You?

The penultimate event of the semester's project was Wilderness Day. Two weeks before we would plant the grass seed, students rented a room in our campus union, where the event's theme revolved around a deceptively simple but ultimately complex question: what does wilderness mean to you? Visiting students, staff, and faculty could purchase ice cream, answer the event's question on a wilderness tree, play nature-related games, vote for the best wilderness picture in a photo contest, and learn more about Baird Creek. Students worked very hard to create a welcoming and fun atmosphere, where visitors

were greeted by upbeat music and a large flat screen television alternating between beautiful pictures of wilderness and quotes from our semester's readings. Dozens of people stopped by throughout the afternoon—the event raised nearly \$100 in ice cream sales—and the event was a success in both raising funds and awareness about Baird Creek. Even if the event would not bring many additional students to the restoration day gathering, several dozen members of the campus community spent at least a few minutes of their day thinking and talking about wilderness and learning about Baird Creek, which was the ultimate goal of the consciousness-raising festivities.

Two weeks later, on a cool and overcast morning at the end of April, my class joined dozens of other volunteers from our community for the Baird Creek Preservation Day event. Various other groups were tasked with removing trash and detritus from disparate areas of the Greenway, while our collective spent the morning planting Indiangrass seed along the Mars loop trail, a multiuse path for both hikers and mountain bikers. While half the class and our other volunteers and friends worked to remove a top layer of branches and dead grass with rakes, the other helped to

mix the grass seed. We then laid the seed throughout the area on both sides of the trail, finishing the project by covering the seeds with grass and straw. The planted seeds will grow within a year to become a miniature tall grass prairie interspersed with native wildflowers, which will replace various invasive plant species.

The seminar clearly succeeded in two of its three goals. My students raised more than double the amount of funds the Baird Creek Preservation Foundation requested and successfully planted grass seed, embodying Leopold's land ethic philosophy. \$400 is, admittedly, not a substantial amount of money, but my students set a goal, however modest, and not only achieved it, but surpassed it. I cannot help but be proud of that achievement. And, in the end, that \$400 will truly go a long way for the Baird Creek Preservation Foundation, much further than had we raised a similar amount for a national conservation campaign. The Restoration Day event was a lot of fun, and the satisfaction on my students' faces when we completed our task was wonderful to see. As one student proudly remarked, "To finally see our hard work come to fruition was the greatest feeling. The couple months we spent attempting to raise funds and awareness finally was actualized. To be honest, I wanted to get the seed planting done with, not because I did not want to be there but because I felt I was my duty to work hard. We busted our humps raking the field and planting grass seed but we also completed the job two hours before it was expected to be completed. To learn that we overachieved in the eyes of the Baird Creek Foundation was a very good feeling." We were not successful—at least for now—in creating a sustained link between our university and local high schools, and through this setback students learned the difficulty of maintaining a prolonged movement. Students were clearly proud of their efforts, and while most would soon be graduating, many hoped to visit Baird Creek in the future to see the fruits of their labors.



Celebrating the Successful Restoration Day Event

As a coda to the project, the seminar met on the final evening of our course with Charlie Frisk at Baird Creek, where we shared an hour-long hike through the area that the Foundation had fought to preserve nearly two decades ago. The hike brought together everything we had read, learned, and engaged with throughout the semester. As we traversed the rolling trail surrounded by oak and hemlock trees, Charlie told some great stories about the park's history and provided information on the surrounding flora and fauna, including the edible trout lily (*Erythronium*

americanum), which most of us tasted. Several of my students were embarrassed to admit that they had never before hiked in Baird Creek before even though they had lived in Green Bay for years. Many vowed to return over the summer, when the greenery would expand and the flowers would be in full bloom, bringing friends and family with them. The hike connected students to a small part of their local community that they had helped to preserve. A student reflected, "The thing that impacted me the most was our hike through Baird Creek. We had read about

wilderness and nature and everything in between in the books that were assigned, but this took it a step further and put actual physical objects that I could interact with to the words that I read.” Another wrote, “At the end of the seminar, we were able to enjoy the fruit of our efforts by taking a walk through the Baird Creek reservation and to see and hear the story of the park’s founding and where it stands. The reservation is a beautiful area, and remains untouched by loggers and contractors despite its history. My emotional attachment for wilderness carried on into our readings over the semester, and I found myself attached to authors that expressed emotional attachments to wilderness. Authors like Terry Tempest Williams, Aldo Leopold, Edward Abbey, and many others shared this emotional attachment to wilderness, and I was able to connect much more easily to these works to propel my work in the Wild Phoenix Project.” Visiting the park they worked so hard over a semester to maintain, students realized that they had become true stewards in the tradition of Aldo Leopold, and they understood the power of wilderness as well as the importance of preserving such spaces for others both today and in the future.

Ultimately the course and its civic engagement project were a success. My students did an impressive job of pulling together what they read and we talked about in our course texts and came together to make a difference, however small, in our local community. I appreciated that students were able to take away a great deal from the readings that also overlapped with the seminar’s larger project. It was a perfect coalescence of classroom and experiential learning. Civic engagement, students learned, need not occur on a massive scale, and taking care of one’s own community matters. A student came to this conclusion, reflecting: “Through my involvement with the Wild Phoenix Project I was able to witness how activism plays an important part in being a member of a community. It is important to create ties to one’s community through engagement and not simply through conversations about what needs to be fixed within the community. Becoming an engaged citizen is essential to the strength of our democracy because through activism individuals can affect the path that our democracy follows....During the process of the Wild Phoenix Project I witnessed how empowering civic engagement can be as my classmates and I used our talents to build awareness about our cause and create a positive change within our community. This experience has influenced me to become more concerned with my relationship to wilderness and nature. It has also inspired me to find an organization or cause that I am passionate about to get involved with.” Another student was so moved by the course and project that her life goals had potentially changed. She confessed: “I am going to law school in the fall and I am still fairly unsure about what type of law that I want to practice. Before taking this class I had never even considered environmental law. Now, I am starting to think that it would be something I would really enjoy. This class made me want to make a change, though I struggled to discover what that change would be or how I would go about making it. Our civic engagement project allowed me to be part of a small change, but now that it is over, I have to find a way to create this change on my own, in my own life.”

Other students took away new appreciations for civic engagement and the importance of becoming involved in issues that matter to you. One reflected, “This class was definitely a learning experience. I would go so far as to say that I learned more in this class than any other class in my college career. I did start out thinking when will I ever need to know about wilderness and conservation in my real life, but this class turned out to be so much more than

that. The civic engagement project really taught me how difficult it is to work in a group when there are people who are really not interested in the cause. The class made me more aware of my every day actions and how they affect the planet and climate change.” Another offered, “The whole project gave me a new perspective on social activist movements. Activist movements are made up of many individuals attempting to change the world for the better. It is each person's responsibility to donate what time and skills they can in order for the activist project to succeed. Others have more to donate but everyone can donate something....Many people think that we as a society will eventually change because some movement or some leader will gain momentum and change all that is necessary. However, if everyone were to think in this manner than there would never be leaders or social movements. It is up to us as individuals to become involved a movement that we are passionate about....Regardless of what an individual is concerned about, it is necessary for that individual to get involved any way they can. I was not the most enthusiastic about our project to begin with but I donated a little time to it. As the semester progressed, I found myself caring more and more about our project. This led me to devote more time into it. Ultimately, this project has taught me that if you want to see anything get done, you must donate whatever you can to the cause of getting that particular thing done. In other words, be the change you wish to see.”

Finally, the project helped students to mature as individuals as they began to think about their role in the larger world and responsibilities as a global citizen. One reflected on these themes: “I believe that our civic engagement project helped me grow as a person. It taught me a lot as well as opened my eyes to the environmental issues we are currently facing in the U.S. and around the globe. As a society, we honestly don't spend enough time thinking about our own impact on the world around us. We are too focused on ourselves and the present. As a consumer and capitalistic society, we are too absorbed with the idea of success and conquering all that we see. Much like the pioneers, we hoard our resources with little thought toward their eventual extinction. We also ignore the signs that our planet is slowing dying due to our destructive relationship with it.”

This course and its civic engagement project were successful in connecting students to both wilderness and their communities. Baird Creek no longer needs saving, but students connected to their community in ways they never had before. They learned that our shared resources matter and that they need dedicated people to help preserve them, not only for human use but also as part of an ethical relationship between humans and the land. As Aldo Leopold so eloquently wrote more than a half-century ago, humans and land are not separate, but rather part of a larger ecological community. “When I began this course,” a student wrote, “that is what wilderness meant to me—a place where I could go to find solitude from my busy life. From this course I learned that although wilderness is a place for me to do this, wilderness means much more. Most importantly, I learned that although it can give us these moments of solitude, this is not its only purpose. Wilderness, although beautiful and peaceful, is not there to serve us. In fact, it is something that we need to serve, by protecting it and cherishing it in ways that humans have neglected to do in the past and continue to today as well.” By connecting students to both wilderness and their community through civic engagement, they experienced a greater connection to both, learning how to become stewards and engaged citizens. I have no doubt that many of them will continue to become further involved in their communities, and know that their views on wilderness have been changed through deep thought, discussions, and actions.

We began the class with the story of Hetch Hetchy, the Yosemite valley whose grandeur, despite valiant efforts by John Muir and the Sierra Club, disappeared over a century ago and is now a reservoir. It can never return to its former beauty. While not planned to happen this way, I feel our course came full circle with our chosen focus and ultimate project, as we learned about a local effort to save precious land that would have been used for development and then worked, in the tradition of Aldo Leopold's land ethic, to help preserve that land. Baird Creek is not Hetch Hetchy—it does not have the stunning vistas of that former valley and its preservation campaign did not attract any national attention—but it is a place worthy of continued conservation and it is, most important, ours. The experiential learning project succeeded in connecting my students to wilderness as an idea and place as well as to their local community. Charlie Frisk could not have been happier with the effort that my students gave to Baird Creek, and my students can be proud of what they accomplished. I hope to continue offering students similar opportunities in the future, helping in a small way to connect students to Aldo Leopold's ethic of responsible stewardship, furthering the idea that we are a part of the natural world—a member of its large and diverse ecological community—not separate from it.

¹ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), viii-ix.

² Edward Abbey, *Desert Solitaire: A Season in the Wilderness* (New York: Touchstone, 1990), 169.

³ John Muir, "Hetch Hetchy Valley," *The Yosemite* (New York: The Century Co., 1912), 197.

⁴ On experiential and service learning, see: Dan Butin, *Service-Learning in Theory and Practice: The Future of Community Engagement in Higher Education* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Susan Benigni Cipolle, *Service-Learning and Social Justice: Engaging Students in Social Change* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010); Jerry W. Robins and Gary Paul Green, *Introduction to Community Development: Theory, Practice, and Service-Learning* (London: Sage, 2011); Scott D. Wurdinger and Julie A. Carson, *Teaching for Experiential Learning: Five Approaches that Work* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010); Jay W. Roberts, *Beyond Learning by Doing: Theoretical Currents in Experiential Learning* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Colin Beard and John P. Wilson, *Experiential Learning: A Best Practice Handbook for Education, Training, and Coaching*, 3rd ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Kogan, 2013); Christine M. Cress, Peter J. Collier, and Vicki L. Reitenauer, *Learning Through Serving: A Student Guidebook for Service-Learning and Civic Engagement Across Academic Disciplines and Cultural Communities*, 2nd ed. (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2013); and David A. Kolb, *Experiential Learning: Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, 2nd ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2014);

⁵ See Bill Bryson, *A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail* (New York: Broadway, 1998).

⁶ The literature on wilderness is relatively new but growing, particularly on the idea of wilderness as a contested space. See Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 5th ed., (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014); Michael Lewis, ed., *American Wilderness: A New History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Max Oelshlager, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991); Donald Worster, ed., *The Ends of the Earth: Perspectives on Modern Environmental History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Mark Fiege, *The Republic of Nature: An Environmental History of the United States* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012); James Morton Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness: American Environmental Politics since 1964* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2013); and William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in Char Miller and Hal K. Rothman, eds., *Out of the Woods: Essays in Environmental History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997), 28-50.

⁷ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 1.

⁸ Wilderness Act of 1964, Public L. 88-577, 16 U.S.C. 1131-1136, § 2 (c). On the Wilderness Act, see Mark Harvey, *Wilderness Forever: Howard Zahniser and the Path to the Wilderness Act* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2007).

⁹ Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, ix.

¹⁰ Terry Tempest Williams, *The Open Space of Democracy* (Barrington, MA: The Orion Society, 2004), 9.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 88.

¹² “Proposed Taconite Mine in the Penokee Range,” Sierra Club, accessed 9 June 2014, <http://wisconsin.sierraclub.org/Penokeemine.asp>.

¹³ “About Us,” Baird Creek Preservation Foundation, accessed 12 June 2014, <http://bairdcreek.org/about-us/>.

¹⁴ Charlie Frisk, Letter to the *Green Bay Press Gazette*, 1996, author’s personal collection.

¹⁵ Williams, *The Open Space of Democracy*, 74.

¹⁶ Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 221.

¹⁷ Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac*, 96.

¹⁸ Abbey, *Desert Solitaire*, 233.

¹⁹ See Paul S. Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).

