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How to cite:

Kelsey, Robin. "Sierra Club Photography and the Exclusive Property of Vision." In: "Eco-Images: Historical Views and Political Strategies," edited by Gisela Parak, *RCC Perspectives* 2013, no. 1, 11–26.

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Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN 2190-8087

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Robin Kelsey

Sierra Club Photography and the Exclusive Property of Vision

As executive director of the Sierra Club from 1952 to 1969, David Brower used photography to transform a California climbing and recreation group into one of the most influential environmental organizations in the United States. Under his direction, the Club issued photographic books, cards, and calendars featuring charismatic images of nature in a state of pristine grandeur or untrammelled intimacy to expand its membership and promote its environmentalism. This historic use of a darkroom art for the sake of preserving outdoor spaces established, through a curious series of trials, a new visual rhetoric for celebrating and defending nature as form.

The Sierra Club Discovers the Power of Photography

In the spring of 1951, the Sierra Club broadcast its national ambitions when it changed its statement of purpose from “explore, enjoy, and render accessible the mountain regions of the Pacific Coast” to “explore, enjoy, and preserve the Sierra Nevada and other scenic resources of the United States.”¹ Two years later, Brower began fulfilling these ambitions by launching a campaign against federal plans to build dams in Dinosaur National Monument in Colorado. Brower believed deeply in the persuasive power of images and shaped the campaign around them. He had films made to represent a trip through the Monument and convinced Alfred Knopf to publish, and Wallace Stegner to edit, a photographically illustrated book extolling the scenic wonders threatened by the dam.² Brower distributed copies of the book, *This Is Dinosaur*, to members of Congress and other influential persons.³ When the federal government dropped its dam-building plans in Dinosaur the following year, the political triumph and its confirmation of the power of image-driven lobbying permanently transformed the Club.⁴

1 Michael Cohen, *The History of the Sierra Club, 1892–1970* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), 100.

2 Wallace Stegner, ed., *This Is Dinosaur: Echo Park Country and Its Magic Rivers* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955). See Edgar Wayburn, “Sierra Club Statesman, Leader of the Parks and Wilderness Movement: Gaining Protection for Alaska, the Redwoods, and Golden Gate Parklands,” interview by Ann Lage and Susan R. Schrepfer, Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, 1985, 194.

3 Richard L. Fradkin, *Wallace Stegner and the American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 189; Cohen, *History of the Sierra Club*, 168–71.

4 Richard Leonard later recounted, “Dave [Brower] changed the whole course of the Club’s political effectiveness in this campaign. It was at that time that the Sierra Club became a truly national organization.” Richard Leonard, “Mountaineer, Lawyer, Environmentalist,” interview by Susan R. Schrepfer, vol. 1, Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, 1975, 112.

Photographs take pride of place in *This Is Dinosaur*. It opens with 36 pages of them, mostly in black and white but a handful in color, taken by several photographers, including Philip Hyde, Martin Litton, and Harold Bradley. The title of the book operates as an introduction (i.e., Dear Reader, “This is Dinosaur”) but also as an index or caption (i.e., “*This is Dinosaur*”). The demonstrative pronoun of the title—*This*—points not to the Monument directly but rather to the book’s photographically driven representation of it. Or rather, the title assumes that pointing to that representation is equivalent to pointing to the Monument. In this respect, the title piggybacks on the photograph’s status as a representation beyond language, inherently laminated to what the photograph is of. As Roland Barthes once said with a touch of hyperbole, “the Photograph is never anything but an antiphon of ‘Look,’ ‘See,’ ‘Here it is.’”⁵ *This Is Dinosaur*: the title promises a showing rather than a describing, a presentation rather than a representation. If you want to see what will be ruined if dams are built, the title insists, here it is.

The Sierra Club’s use of photographs as a substitute for first-hand experience of places targeted for conservation assumed that the value of those places was primarily visual. The new mission statement had more or less explicitly affirmed this assumption in the phrase: “the Sierra Nevada and *other scenic resources* of the United States” (italics added). Centuries ago, the words *scenic* and *scenery* had little to do with natural places. On the contrary, *scenic* derives from the French *scénique*, a word that in the fourteenth century meant “of or belonging to the stage or drama.” By the late seventeenth century, the English word *scenery* came to be associated more specifically with the decoration of a stage rather than with the drama as a whole. With the rise of the picturesque in the late eighteenth century, scenery and its cognates came to be applied to views in nature.⁶ To speak of “natural scenery” or “scenic resources” is to speak as if nature were a theater set, a motionless array of visual features awaiting human action and intended for a human audience. Photography, which emerged out of the picturesque and bore a reputation for faithful replication of the visual world in a still image, was a promising means by which to assess, communicate, and promote nature as scenery.

5 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 5.

6 The Sierra Club’s mission statement under Brower drew on a long history of associating land preservation with the preservation of scenery. In his foreword to *These We Inherit: The Parklands of America*, Brower quoted a passage from Frederick Law Olmstead written in 1865: “The first point to be kept in mind . . . is the preservation and maintenance as exactly as is possible of the natural scenery; the restriction, that is to say, within the narrowest limits consistent with the necessary accommodation of visitors, of all artificial constructions and the prevention of all constructions markedly inharmonious with the scenery or which would unnecessarily obscure, distort, or detract from the dignity of the scenery.” Ansel Adams, *These We Inherit: The Parklands of America* (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1962), 9.

The photographs in *This Is Dinosaur* represent the Monument as a recreation area. We encounter pictures of its headquarters, a display of local fossils, and many scenic views. Although some of the views contain no human figures, most include a small group of hikers, kayakers, or river rafters. Some views are distant, revealing a majestic landscape that dwarfs the figures; others bring us close to the recreational fun they enjoy. As Stegner said in his foreword, the purpose of the volume was “to survey [Dinosaur’s] possibilities for human rest and recreation and inspiration, in the belief that the people and Congress of the United States should have a very clear idea of what they would be losing if they chose to sacrifice this National Monument to make a reservoir.”⁷ *This Is Dinosaur* was a way of educating people on the values that the Monument made available, but it was also a way of photographically supplying a spectacular virtual experience of these values. Brower understood the importance to the Club and to its mission of mingling the pleasure of looking at beautiful photographs with the imagined pleasure of being in a beautiful place. The conflation of these pleasures would become a mainstay of the Club’s efforts at advocacy and self-promotion.

This Is Dinosaur mainly construes recreation as a re-creation of the exploration of the American West. The notion that wilderness recreation was an invigorating way to reconnect to frontier experience was a core principle of the US environmental movement in general and of the Sierra Club’s program of conservation in particular.⁸ Most of the essays in *This Is Dinosaur* recount and celebrate the exploration of the Colorado River region by US government explorers such as William Henry Ashley and John Wesley Powell. Many of the photographs follow suit, offering us images of sublimity that echo those made by early survey photographers such as William Henry Jackson. The paddlers in the photographs may use neoprene rafts, but they still exemplify the exploratory spirit of earlier days.

A pamphlet tucked in the back of *This Is Dinosaur* advocates resistance to the federal dam project in more explicit terms. In it, we find the Club supplementing certain photographs with graphic notations to overcome the difficulty of using photography to convey hypothetical or counterfactual conditions. This begins with the pamphlet’s cover, which

7 Wallace Stegner, foreword to *This Is Dinosaur*, v.

8 On the role of frontier re-creation in wilderness preservation generally, see William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), 69–90; see also Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), 29–62.

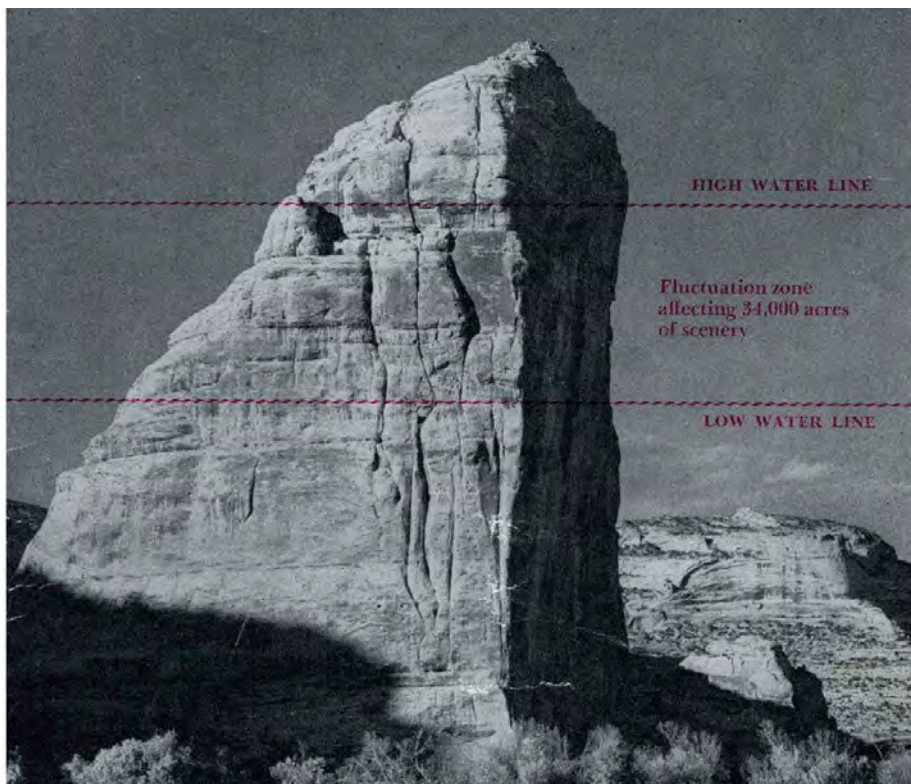


Figure 1:
Photograph by
Martin Litton,
untitled (1955).

bears a photograph of Steamboat Rock, rising as a colossal mass above the canyon floor (fig. 1). Superimposed on the photograph are two wavy lines and captions indicating what the low and high water lines of the reservoir would be if the dams were built. Another caption designates the area between the lines a “fluctuation zone” that would affect “34,000 acres of scenery.” The cover image thus combines the reality effect of the photograph with the visual clarity and hypothetical reach of graphic displays. The photograph vividly depicts that which is, while the graphic marks prompt us to imagine what *would be* were the dam project to go forward. The visual richness of the scenery depicted below the lines thus becomes a rhetorical measure of our possible loss.

Elsewhere in the pamphlet, the Club pits textual and graphic messages against a photograph to suggest a gap between government assurances about Dinosaur and the probable effects of the proposed dams. A quotation from Secretary of the Interior

Secretary McKay: “What we have done at Lake Mead . . .



Figure 2:
 Photograph
 by Harold C.
 Bradley, Lake
 Mead (1954).

Douglas McKay runs across the top of the page: “What we have done at Lake Mead . . . is What We Have in Mind for Dinosaur.” Lake Mead was the reservoir created by the construction of the Hoover Dam and thus an indication of what the new reservoir in Dinosaur might be like. McKay had been using Lake Mead as an exemplary model, but the photograph below the quotation in the pamphlet depicts it as a dry and silt-choked lakebed (fig. 2). To accentuate the disparity between federal promises and actual outcomes, the Club adorned the photograph with a smattering of little graphic fragments illustrating the pleasures of aquatic recreation, such as boating and water-skiing, that the reservoir could provide if full. In the rhetoric of the composite image, the special truth-value of photography (no, Mr. Secretary, *this* is Lake Mead) consigns the sketches to the flimsy status of wishful thinking.

The Exhibit Format Series and the Taming of Text and Image

In the wake of the successful Dinosaur campaign, Brower and the Sierra Club initiated the Exhibit Format series, large volumes combining high-quality photographic images with short passages of text. Whereas *This Is Dinosaur* was a means to arouse opposition to a particular dam-building scheme, Brower intended the Exhibit Format books to foster a broader environmental ethos in support of the Club and its conservation program. The photographer Ansel Adams and the curator and writer Nancy Newhall collaborated to produce the first volume in the series, *This Is the American Earth* (1960), based on an exhibition they had organized under the same title.

Today, *This Is the American Earth* seems a ponderous piece of Cold War propaganda, bearing a title that elicits snickers from globally minded undergraduates. It patches together a pop cosmological attitude for the atomic age, offering up photographs and snippets of text as epiphanies concerning the sacred mysteries of nature and humankind. Even when it was published, one reviewer called the title “repellent” and warned that the “effusive overstatement” of Newhall’s text lent itself to mockery.⁹ The book makes cosmic symbols of a dizzying array of photographic subjects, from a spiral nebula to a flock of geese, and the text hammers each big noun—*life, music, habitation*—as if it were a gong to call the faithful. As the book progresses, these echoing beats of reverie give way to a jeremiad against the rapaciousness of economic development and the “Hell we are building here on earth.” This critique ends in a humorous photographic anticlimax, in which the moral tale is cast as an intrastate rivalry: Los Angeles, via pictures by William Garnett of smog and housing developments, appears to be Hell, while San Francisco, in a picture by Adams, receives the glorious role of the city on the hill.

What feels most remarkable—and perhaps most dated—about *This Is the American Earth* is its unbounded faith in photography as a means of re-enchanting the world. The book suggests that the magic of nature is to be found in its beautiful forms, which are to be perceived and communicated through photography. Even the heedless force of evolution, acknowledged by the text to entail a brutal winnowing of the weak, is redeemed as an engine of formal refinement. “Forever the forms survival chooses,” Newhall remarks, “become more beautiful, sensitive, diverse.” Below her words are two photographs by

9 Edward S. Deevey, book review, *Science* 132, no. 3441 (1960): 1759; Deevey, letter to the editor, *Science* 133, no. 3456 (1961): 844, 922.

Cedric Wright proffered as a revelatory correspondence: the swirled wood of junipers at timberline and a newborn fawn still curved into a fetal circle. This is nature as god the designer, who gives us the wondrous spiral.

This faith in the photographic revelation of form now appears naïve or disingenuous. The relationship between the twisting of junipers and the curling of fawns is far from clear (the junipers are not conserving heat), and evolution produces plenty of monstrosities that *This Is the American Earth* ignores, such as hideous parasites that devour their hosts' organs. What purports to be a natural disclosure of an evolved beauty is really a photographically constructed ideal. Moreover, the book begs the question of its own place within the moral scheme it imagines. Books are, after all, industrial products, and film photography entailed the mining of silver and the disposal of various toxic chemicals (Kodak was routinely listed as a top corporate polluter in the United States during the last few decades of the twentieth century). But in *This Is the American Earth*, photography is treated as nothing but a transparency, a way of seeing, a point of view. This dematerializing treatment enables the book to perpetuate the myth that photography belongs to the wild and pastoral landscapes it is asked to celebrate.

Despite these blind spots and stumbles, *This Is the American Earth* is a serious book. Its seriousness derives from its double ambition to invest relatively undeveloped lands with sacred value and to establish an unexpectedly lively relationship between text and image. Both aims are evident in the book's prelude, which begins with a page bearing the words "THIS IS THE AMERICAN EARTH" punctuated with an en-dash that draws us into a two-page spread of Adams's famous *Sierra Nevada from Lone Pine, California*. Below the picture, a caption reads: "This, as citizens, we all inherit. This is ours, to love and live upon, and use wisely down all the generations of the future."¹⁰ By suggesting that the visual plenitude of nature is something inherited by the citizenry, the text gives it the status of property passively and rightfully received from the state, a formula that suppresses the history of conquest by which it was violently wrested from others. The assertion of collective ownership in the prelude is more radical and adumbrates a critical grappling with the economy of landscape aesthetics, and its

¹⁰ The picture has been a source of special interest because Adams later admitted that he had assistants "spot-out" the initials of the town, which had been spelled out in white stones on the hillside. See Errol Morris, "The Chimera of the Perfectionists," *Cartesian Blogging, Part Three, Opinionator, New York Times*, 12 November 2008. So the very first photograph in the Exhibit Format series of books had been adjusted to make the landscape more pristine.

incompatibility with the routine operation of markets. The role of photography as a proxy for scenic resources is established by the repetition of the titular “this,” which reinforces the indexical bond of text to image, and image to referent.



Figure 3:
Photograph by
Ansel Adams,
Nevada Fall, Yo-
semite National
Park (1946)
(Source: Collec-
tion Center
for Creative
Photography,
University of
Arizona ©The
Ansel Adams
Publishing
Rights Trust).

The next two pages juxtapose text by Newhall and a low-angled photograph of Yosemite’s Nevada Falls by Adams (fig. 3). The text reads:

“In all the centuries to come
Always we must have water for dry land, rich earth be-
neath the plow,
 pasture for flocks and herds, fish in the seas and
 streams, and timber in the hills.
Yet never can Man live by bread alone.

Now, in an age whose hopes are darkened by huge fears –
– an age frantic with speed, noise, and complexity
– an age constricted, of crowds, collisions, of cities
 choked by smog and traffic,
– an age of greed, power, and terror
– an age when the closed mind, the starved eye,
 the empty heart, the brutal fist, threaten all life
 upon this planet –

What is the price of exaltation?”

Newhall thus posits our inherent need for the pastoral—the rich earth, the pasture for flocks and herds—but suggests that we need or desire something beyond it. But what is that something? The facing pages offer two possibilities for the sublime that must supplement our pastoral sustenance. One is the sublimity of nature, as represented by the photograph of Nevada Falls. The other is the sublimity of modern society and its industrial infrastructure, as represented by the text. The ambiguity concerning which sublime lies beyond “bread alone” returns in the final question: What is the price of exaltation? If we interpret the exaltation in question as arising from our contemplation of the majesty of nature (the waterfall as sublime), then the question concerns the cost

we must bear to preserve the natural wonders of the West. If, on the other hand, we interpret the exaltation as arising from an unrelenting desire to control nature (modernity as sublime), then the question is about the cost of exalting ourselves and our modern powers over nature, as paid out in environmental impoverishment. The remainder of the book does not resolve this ambiguity. In defense of the first interpretation, one could point to a passage in which Newhall alludes to the traditional sublime of nature: “You shall see storms arise, and, drenched and deafened, shall exult in them.” In defense of the second interpretation, one could point to a passage in which Newhall admonishes humankind for its arrogant pursuit of the industrial sublime (our desire to be “borne up on vast abundance and colossal waste”). At the outset of the book, the notions of sublimity and its price oscillate restlessly between photograph and text, between the cascade that Adams depicts and the accelerated depravity of modern life that Newhall describes. This toggling renders the waterfall an ambivalent sign, standing both for nature’s refreshing antidote to modernity and for the uncontrollable torrent of modernity itself.

Other writings by Newhall suggest that this semiotic instability was no accident. In a brief essay included in the first issue of the journal *Aperture* (1952), she sketches out a theory of the caption. She begins by speculating that, “The old literacy of words is dying and a new literacy of images is being born.” Great photographs, she writes, “speak a language beyond words” that derives its power “from the same deep source as music.” According to her, relatively few people, such as photographers and editors, have learned to read this new language, most people still need “verbal crutches to see with.” To understand these verbal crutches, Newhall proposes a taxonomy of four caption types. She derives the first three from the regular practices of the news media. The fourth and newest form, and the focus of her essay, is what she terms the additive caption, which “leaps over facts and adds a new dimension.” According to Newhall, the additive caption “combines its connotations with those of the photograph to produce a new image in the mind of the spectator—sometimes an image totally unexpected and unforeseen, which exists in neither words nor photographs but only their juxtaposition.” By defending the additive caption in these terms, Newhall renews the aspirations of the interwar avant-garde. The new additive caption, she remarks, “may be one of the many rare and fantastic forms those intrepid explorers, the Surrealists, domesticated for the rest of us.”¹¹

11 Nancy Newhall, “The Caption: The Mutual Relation of Words / Photographs,” *Aperture* 1 (1952): 17–19.

In *This Is the American Earth*, the play of text and image has certainly been “domesticated” beyond the standard set by the Surrealists. The book has nothing like the jarring relations between text and image that one finds in André Breton’s *Nadja* or in the pages of *La Révolution Surréaliste*. Indeed, in many places, its words and photographs dovetail to deliver a clear and predictable message. But in some parts of the book, such as the prelude passage about the sublime, Newhall successfully ventures into semiotic instability to produce unexpected mental images. When one compares *This Is the American Earth* to other photographic books of the day intended for American coffee tables, such as Edward Steichen’s *The Family of Man*, this ambition to open up the play of meaning becomes all the more striking. Brower deemed *This Is the American Earth* the greatest success of his publication program at the Club. “It really hit,” he recalled in the 1970s. “No other book has had that response.”¹² He attributed much of the success to the “counterpoint” in the book between the photographs and the poetic passages, which had “its own power” and “got through to people.”¹³ He recognized and supported Newhall’s provocative style. “Newhall chose a method of presentation that she hoped would jar readers out of the Conventional Response,” he wrote soon after the book was released. “The result may not be comfortable,” he added, “but then it wasn’t intended to be.”¹⁴ By venturing into semiotic instability in image/text relations, Newhall had harkened back to the revolutionary tactics of the interwar avant-garde; and by questioning the capacity of economic thinking to recognize the value of wildness, she had anticipated and fostered strains of discontent that would intensify as the 1960s progressed.

The provocations of *This Is the American Earth* appealed to the zealous Brower and helped to mobilize support for the Wilderness Act of 1964, but they also stirred up controversy. As Finis Dunaway has noted, some supporters of wilderness preservation found the book’s dire tone and broad indictment of modernization and industry to be gratuitous, scientifically unsound, and otherwise misguided. Many longtime members of the Club were industry executives who believed that wilderness preservation had been made possible by a modern economy and its efficiencies. To them, the antagonism that the book posits between modern technology and wilderness preservation made no sense.

12 David Brower, “Environmental Activist, Publicist, and Prophet,” interview by Susan Schrepfer, Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, 1975, 269.

13 Ibid.

14 David Brower, letter to the editor, *Science* 133, no. 3456 (1961): 844.

After *This Is the American Earth*, the Club issued a spate of less controversial books in its Exhibit Format series. Later in 1960, it published *Words of the Earth*, a book edited by Newhall of photographs by Wright, Adams's friend and mentor. The book adhered to the same basic format as *This Is the American Earth*, with Newhall variously combining Wright's black and white photographs with passages selected from his writings. The photographs offer a resplendent view of scenic Northern California, with many backlit, silver-lined clouds and reflecting waters. We come across a couple of trail signs and a few figures communing with nature, but we otherwise see few indications that the world has any human history. Wright's prose, as selected by Newhall, is full of cosmic murmur and natural wonder. In both photographs and text, *Words of the Earth* largely echoes the upbeat and untroubled parts of *This Is the American Earth*, while eschewing its contentious subjects and semantic ambiguity.

In 1962 the Club issued *These We Inherit: The Parklands of America*, a book featuring photographs by Adams from the national parks and other scenic places. *These We Inherit* includes brief writings by Adams at the beginning and end, but the bulk of the volume consists of photographs with captions in a tiny font, identifying only the subject and location of each image. The photography, like that of *Words of the Earth*, is narrow in scope. No park headquarters or exhibits appear, and we see no kayakers or hikers. Aside from the modest inclusion of a few particularly harmonious traces of civilization—a rustic wooden fence running through a grove of redwoods, a ribbon-like highway hugging the coast near Point Reyes, and Anasazi ruins in a cliff wall—the photographs suppress the existence of human life and industry. The camera moves in to capture droplets on a leafy plant, and backs out to take in a mountain vista, but the framing of most scenes carefully maintains the feel of Eden. In format, *These We Inherit* is conservative, alternating throughout the bulk of the book a caption page on the left and photograph on the right. Between the publication of *This Is the American Earth* and the publication of *These We Inherit*, the Exhibit Format series rapidly shed its radical forms of layout and argument.

The Emergence of the Calendar Aesthetic

Later in 1962, the Club issued the fourth book in the series, *In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World*. *In Wildness* was the first of the Exhibit Format books to feature



Figure 4:
Photograph
by Eliot
Porter, *Maple
Leaves and Pine
Needles* (1956)
(Source: Amon
Carter Museum
of American
Art).

color photography, as well as the first to focus on landscapes outside California and the West. In it, color photographs by Eliot Porter of intimate Eastern woodland scenes are paired with short passages from the writings of Henry David Thoreau to take the reader through the seasons, one chapter each, from spring to winter (fig. 4).

In layout, Porter's book follows the simple alternating structure of *These We Inherit*. Apart from the pages introducing each chapter, a Thoreau passage appears on each left page and a single Porter photograph on each right. The format gives the seasonal cycle of the book a calendrical regularity, marking time in rectangular increments. But the aesthetic bounty of the different seasons is unequal: spring is allotted 22 photographs and autumn 24, whereas summer receives 17, and winter only 10.

The photographs of *In Wildness* are both like and unlike those of the preceding Exhibit Format books. Like them, they have a discriminating scope. No people and few traces of civilization appear. One or two winter hillsides offer subtle hints of a pastoral past, and we encounter a nest of swallows in the corner of a barn, but otherwise we remain in Eden. (Well, I suppose that a reader with the necessary expertise might recognize

invasive species or evidence of past logging in some pictures, but most of us will detect no sign of human history in them.) The photographs of *In Wildness* are unlike those of the earlier books in their adherence to depicting a particular ecosystem with great intimacy. We encounter one forest scene after another, none offering a view into the distance, and most pressing the foreground to our noses, inviting us to inspect the lovely detail of bark, leaf, blossom, and moss.

The shift from the West to New England of *In Wildness* thus entails a curious shift in photographic comportment. While Adams and Wright occasionally brought their camera in close to capture a twisted juniper or a tuft of mountain wildflowers, they always drew back again to offer a majestic vista. The persistent myopia of Porter's pictures seems a natural consequence of the intimate beauty available in the eastern woodlands, as if the exquisite particulars along the forest floor drew the camera in. More skeptically, one could interpret the proximity as a necessary accommodation of the greater visibility of human activity and infrastructure in the East. In other words, there are numerous mountains in New England, but if you want to suppress all signs of civilization, you had better not look very far. Taking advantage of scenic resources requires a discriminating eye, and what is kept out of the frame is every bit as essential as what is kept in. When undeveloped land is scarce, bring the camera in close.

Was Porter, by interweaving his photographs with passages from Thoreau, training readers to look at nature or to look at photographs, or both? If the correct answer is "both" (and I suspect it is) then can we really know where the one training ends and the other begins? If the correct answer to that question is "no" (and I suspect it is), then we need to understand better the implications of this confusion. Equating photographic beauty with wilderness value was a cornerstone of the Sierra Club's efforts under Brower to extend its membership and political reach. How might we take the historical measure of this conflation?

Porter's care in pairing photographs and text could not entirely suppress the gap between his photography and Thoreau's nature. For example, beside a photograph of a pond, a passage reads, "Our vernal lakes have a beauty to my mind which they would not possess if they were more permanent. Everything is in rapid flux here, suggesting that Nature is alive to her extremities and superficialities." Elsewhere, a kindred passage opposite a photograph of leaves in a shallow pool contains this dictum: "If we see Nature as pausing, immediately all mortifies and decays; but seen as progressing, she is beautiful." Thoreau's

emphasis in these passages on nature's ceaseless flux is consonant with the seasonal cycle that organizes the book as a whole but discordant with the photographs as individual pictures. Contrary to Thoreau's philosophical preference, the photographs force nature to pause, to become more permanent. In these instances of friction between text and image, *In Wildness* seems as blind to photography's technological limits as *This Is the American Earth* seems to its material economy. In both books, photography is passed off as a natural way of looking in a way that now seems jejune.

Although Brower clearly thought the argument of *In Wildness* less weighty than that of *This Is the American Earth*, the newer book sold well and was deemed "an immense success."¹⁵ This success would mark a watershed for Sierra Club publications. In the course of publishing its Exhibit Format Books, the Club had stripped its texts of contemporary political bite and its photography of signs of human civilization; it had idealized nature as a regular seasonal cycle of encounters with exquisite form and color. The result was an eminently marketable symbolization of its mission. In a telling shift, members of the board and staff of the Club began using the term "propaganda" to describe the publication program. August Frugé, a longtime editor of the University of California Press and a member of the Club's Board of Directors, called *In Wildness* "general nature propaganda."¹⁶ A few years later, when the Club's publications committee began discussing a possible price increase for Sierra Club books, the sales manager John Schanhaar responded: "I am certain I do not have to point out to you the club's obligation to see the greatest possible number of books [sold] because of their propagandistic function."¹⁷

A Cheaper Line of Wilderness Images

The brilliance of the Club's pictorial campaign was widely noted and admired. A writer in the *Collector's Quarterly Report* wrote: "The Sierra Club's peculiar effectiveness in this new climate is largely traceable to a series of publications through which it has successively celebrated America's natural and scenic resources with unparalleled

¹⁵ Wayburn, "Sierra Club Statesman," 194. Brower interview by Susan Schrepfer, 269.

¹⁶ Quoted in Cohen, *History of the Sierra Club*, 296.

¹⁷ Report by John Schanhaar, sales and promotion manager, to the publications committee, n.d., 3, Sierra Club records, carton 304, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, CA. At issue was whether to postpone a price increase from 1 September 1967 to 1 January 1968.

beauty. Fresh from the perusal of Club books like Ansel Adams' photographs of American parklands or Eliot Porter's record of the changing seasons, almost any responsible citizen can be looked upon as a potential vigilante in the protection of the American wilderness."¹⁸ The membership numbers bear this out. The Club grew from fewer than seven thousand members when it launched the Dinosaur Monument campaign in the early 1950s to 55,000 by 1967.¹⁹ According to Wayburn, the books "undoubtedly . . . played a great role" in this expansion, making the Sierra Club "a nationwide organization before its membership did."²⁰

Despite strong sales, critical praise, and swelling Club membership, Brower's publication program was a mixed success. Publishing such high-quality photographic books was exceedingly expensive and ran the Club into debt. As the operating losses of the program swelled from \$14,665 in 1963 to \$119,144 in 1966, tensions mounted between the autocratic Brower and the Club's Board of Directors, some of whom contemplated cutting the program to keep the Club out of bankruptcy.²¹ In an effort to appease the Board and salvage the publishing program, Brower began to issue cheaper paperback publications, as well as color posters and calendars. He hoped in this way to make profits that could offset his expensive hardcover ventures, as well as to promote the Club and its activities.

When the Board decided to begin producing photographic calendars in the fall of 1967, it was pursuing an idea that had been around for years. In 1957 Club photographer Philip Hyde had suggested in a memorandum that the Club should issue "a Conservation Calendar, made up of a fine reproduction for each month, of simple and dignified layout, with a short conservation message."²² In the early 1960s, the Club began selling sets of "Wilderness Greeting Notes," featuring photographs by Adams, Porter, Hyde, and others. The photographs on the cards were drawn from, and expressly linked to, the Exhibit Format series of books. In this way, the Club sought to make profitable sales from a cheap line that in turn would boost demand for its more expensive publications. By 1967, however, the pressure to disseminate promotional

18 Preprint from *Collector's Quarterly Report*, 1963, Sierra Club records, carton 304, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, CA.

19 Wayburn, "Sierra Club Statesman," 194–95.

20 Ibid. Cohen concludes that by 1969, "Brower's publishing program had made the Club a national force." Cohen, *History of the Sierra Club*, 429.

21 See Cohen, *History of the Sierra Club*, 345, 410; Wayburn, "Sierra Club Statesman," 196.

22 Jonathan Spaulding, *Ansel Adams and the American Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 442–43, note 78.

imagery more efficiently had intensified. Brower launched a series of colorful posters that sold well. In September, the board accepted the offer of the publisher Ballantine to assist in the production and distribution of “a Sierra Club Wilderness Calendar.” In the notes from the meeting in which the Board approved the plan, Brower noted that the calendar would be “designed by us from Exhibit Format books to sell at \$3.95.” When Brower noted that production would begin in mid-October, Board member Martin Litton chimed in, “Should be a sure-fire seller.”²³

Although the Wilderness Calendar was introduced as a supplemental way to raise funds for the publication program, in many ways it represented a culmination. The calendar form extended the program’s tendency over time to shrink the text and its importance. In the calendars, the text consisted at most of a single page inside the cover, invisible once the calendar was hung on a wall. Adhering to the precedent set by Porter, the photographs were in vivid color and followed the seasons; and like the photography of the Exhibit Format books after *This Is the American Earth*, they represented scenic places as though human civilization did not exist. In this way, the calendars established scenic beauty as the antidote to ordinary life. Each image appeared above the monthly grid, in which quotidian appointments—“3pm dentist,” “Judy’s recital”—could be recorded. Rising above this monotonous geometry and mundane scribbling, the gorgeous views offered an elegant and untainted world, a sanctuary apart from the daily grind, a beckoning reconciliation of the eternal and the momentary. The Exhibit Format books came to an end, but the wilderness calendar became an enduring emblem of the Club and its mission. Even today, it offers the perfect confusion of ideal nature and ideal photograph. Propaganda, indeed.

23 Minutes of the 5 September 1967 board meeting, Sheraton-Palace Hotel, San Francisco, Sierra Club Records, Carton 54.