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Illustrated Essay: Bridgewater's Third Nature and the Re-Wilding of the Landscape

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Bridgewater’s Third Nature and the Re-Wilding of the Landscape

_Brian Payne_  
*With photographs by Karen Callan*

The Great River Preserve in Bridgewater is a web of contradicting yet interdependent forms of land use. Located just a few miles from the Bridgewater State campus, the Preserve consists of 124 acres of Wildland Trust land and is part of the larger 410-acre Taunton River Wildlife Management Area. What makes the Preserve fascinating is the varied history of its layered landscape. Today, the Preserve’s ecology consists of open fields, mixed pine and oak forests, and a mile of waterfront that provides a diverse habitat for wildlife.

Historically, the Preserve is a remnant of the region’s agrarian and industrial past. Like most of southeastern Massachusetts, Bridgewater’s land-use history is both agrarian and industrial. The rural feel of the Preserve is profound and it is easy to visualize the farmscape that once dominated the land. Seventeenth-century English settlers were attracted to Bridgewater due to the diverse eco-zones, including lowland marshes that provided grasses for winter fodder, sandy uplands for orchards, and a rich middle ground for grain crops. This mixed husbandry dominated agrarian strategies throughout colonial New England. The Taunton River, in contrast, is one of New England’s many industrialized environments. Human “improvement” of the river began in the seventeenth century, when it was dammed to provide power for an iron foundry. In the 1700s, industrialists began mining the banks of the Taunton for ore, and during the nineteenth century, the Bridgewater section of the river became a site for shipbuilding. Today, despite this industrial past, the Taunton River is classified as one of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s “Wild and Scenic Rivers.”

The Great River Preserve tells us more than a little about the varied history of human relations with the nature in our midst. What appears today as a wild oasis of open fields, forests, and waterfront was once a heavily utilized environment. The result, in Bridgewater as in much of New England, is what University of Maine historian Richard Judd calls the “blended landscape.” In his recent book, _Second Nature_ (2014), Judd explains: “The region’s long
post-pioneer settlement experience provides a panorama of shaped environments in which the layers of interaction between people and the land are so interwoven that culture and nature cannot be isolated” (x). It is too facile, in other words, to view a landscape’s history as either purely unaltered “nature” on one hand, or wholly “cultivated” and civilized, on the other.

The agrarian landscape is now part of Bridgewater’s past more than its present. A good many Bridgewater farms, like others throughout New England, went bankrupt during the second half of the twentieth century. Although the post-1970 back-to-the-land movement and the post-1990 commitment to local, organic, or “natural” food production revitalized some of the region’s agrarian landscape, vast acreage of former farmland remains meadows and young forest or built-over suburban cul-de-sacs. Strangely, our region is actually more heavily forested now than it was throughout most of its history as “New England.” The seemingly random stone walls we find as we hike through the woods of New England are historical artifacts of its agrarian past, fleeting evidence of abandoned farms taken over by a resurging nature.

Other remnants in the landscape reveal something about New England’s lost industrial might. Smoke stacks, dams, and red-brick industrial buildings now serve as museums, expensive condos, or office buildings. To some, this is a sad story of post-industrial and post-agrarian economic change that left New England trailing far behind compared to the agrarian output of California and the industrial output of the southern hemisphere. Lost jobs and dislocation were the results of this transition, this late twentieth-century “de-industrialization” that gripped much of the American northeast and midwest. The collapse of agriculture and the crumbling of industry provide an opportunity for the return of “nature;” something Judd calls a “re-wilding” of the landscape. On one edge of Bridgewater, the once heavily industrialized Taunton River now
meanders through one such re-wilded place, a seemingly natural ecosystem of woods and fields.

In his pathbreaking 1992 work *Nature’s Metropolis*, environmental historian William Cronon introduced the concept of “second nature” as a place “designed by people and ‘improved’ toward human ends, gradually emerged atop the original landscape that nature – ‘first nature’ – had created as such an inconvenient jumble” (56). Here, Cronon uses the term “second nature” to suggest that modified landscapes have become so “natural” in our minds that we cannot easily fathom the world without them. They become second nature in both physical and intellectual meanings of that phrase. Although Cronon was interested specifically in how railroads changed American nature, other scholars have since applied the concept of “second nature” to a wide variety of modified landscapes.

Historians of New England’s farmlands note that early farmers consciously sought an ecological balance that allowed for sustainable food production without dramatically affecting the region’s “natural” rivers, forests and wild species. Brian Donahue writes in his book *The Great Meadow* (2007) that colonial New England agriculture “was an ecologically sustainable adaption of English mixed husbandry to a new, challenging environment.” Combined with a Puritan ethic that stressed commonwealth over individual profit, New England colonial farmers “bound by a set of ecological and cultural constraints that guarded against unbalanced exploitation of land” (xv). In this way, the agrarian “second nature” became both a product of economic practice and an intellectual construct; a means of cultural self-definition among New Englanders. In light of Judd’s, Cronon’s, and Donahue’s historical analyses, the pastoral nature that so dominates the “unused” lands around Bridgewater is part of a massive rewilding of New England’s second nature, which represents a profoundly new yet sustainable, accessible, and rewarding relationship with nature.
The collapse of agriculture and the crumbling of industry provide an opportunity for the return of “nature;” something Judd calls a “re-wilding” of the landscape.
But the concept of second nature might be inappropriate for a place like the Great River Preserve. Cronon and Judd each argue that the agrarian landscape of the fields and the industrial use of the river represented a second-nature modification of the pre-Columbian first-nature forests. If so, then the re-wilding of that landscape in the form of a “wildlands trust” would represent a third nature, one that opens new possibilities, and problems, for environmental stewardship and wilderness preservation. While there remain virtually no accessible first-nature landscapes east of the Mississippi River, there are potentially thousands of third natures, or re-wilded places that give us culturally and emotionally rewarding interactions with nature; that re-invent and echo the wild places of our past.

Even today, many environmentalists continue to define “nature” narrowly, to see wilderness only in pristine mountainscapes or large tracts of unimproved acres. Like any other intellectual concept, our societal definitions of wilderness have profoundly changed over the course of American history. Early colonials, especially Puritans in New England, saw wilderness as the very real stomping ground of the devil and his witches. Throughout most of United States history, Americans viewed the wilderness as a place to be conquered and transformed into more productive environments. Although there were plenty of early exceptions—naturalists such as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, or George Perkins Marsh—mainstream American culture saw conquering the wilderness as a form of progress, the triumph of the civilized over the wild.

The public rhetoric began to change during the Progressive Era (1900–1920) when popular writers such as John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, and Aldo Leopold began to champion the “wilderness” idea and became active agents for the preservation of “wild” places. The National Parks Service, the U.S. Forest Service, and a host of state and local land agencies set aside large tracts of land in these years to be designated as wild places and protected them from development. Epic political battles raged around Yellowstone, Yosemite, Hetch-Hetchy, the Colorado River, and the Grand Tetons that in the end redefined America’s understanding of and appreciation for wild places. The movement culminated in the Wilderness Act of 1964, which specifically defined wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”

More recently, our ideas about nature have begun to change. Wilderness, historian Roderick Nash reminded us in his 1967 book Wilderness and the American Mind, is an intellectual creation that does not necessarily reflect any true ecological reality. Although Nash noted that “wilderness was a basic ingredient of American culture,” he concluded that “there is no specific material object that is wilderness” (xi). Wilderness is a state of mind that we project onto physical places. Building
upon this work, William Cronon notes that there is trouble with idealizing wilderness in the way that the Progressive conservationists did: “[i]dealizing a distant wilderness too often means not idealizing the environment in which we actually live, the landscape… we call home.” In other words, we need a middle ground between the categories of “wild” and “cultivated,” between use and preservation that aims at “some kind of balanced, sustainable relationship” with the land we actually live with on a daily basis (Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness” in Out of the Woods [1997] 45). His critique did not seek to dismiss wilderness as an important goal of the environmental movement, but only sought to broaden the goals of that movement to better reflect the reality of most Americans, who cannot travel to these wilderness places. The ideal of wilderness preservation is by its very nature exclusive, if not elitist, and allows us to avoid too easily the more pressing problems of environmental decay in our own backyards. A sole dedication to wilderness, Cronon fears, “may teach us to be dismissive or even contemptuous of such humble places and experiences” (46) that can be found in the more common agrarian or semi-rural landscape that surrounds us.

Today, a great many American landscapes east of the Mississippi River fall into this middle ground, this “third nature.” In Bridgewater, the Great River Preserve exemplifies well these “humble places and experiences” whose subtle layers of history are visible, legible to a discerning eye. The Preserve, to paraphrase Cronon, is neither wholly “human nor nonhuman, unnatural nor natural”; it is both. The beauty of the Preserve forces us to “embrace the full continuum of a natural landscape that is also cultural, in which the city, the suburb, the pastoral, and the wild each has its proper place, which we permit ourselves to celebrate without needlessly denigrating the other” (49).

The nuanced definition of nature that the Great River Preserve presents to us takes us beyond this “bipolar moral scale” and allows for rewarding experiences with a third nature that can become the seedbed for a more comprehensive environmental ethic.

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