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Protecting Walden Pond: A Step Towards Defending Ordinary Nature in the United States

By: Jessie Magee

Henry David Thoreau wrote his literary masterpiece, *Walden; Or, a Walk in the Woods*, while living at Walden Pond, just outside of Concord, MA, for two years, two months, and two days beginning on Independence Day, 1845. The book was first published as *Walden; Or, a Walk in the Woods* in 1854, and is now published simply as *Walden*. In the years since its release, *Walden* has been hailed as the conservationist's prime model for the thoughts and beliefs behind conservation. Due to the book's acclaim, conservationists fought for the preservation of Walden Pond until the National Park Service designated it as a National Historic Landmark in 1962. Although Walden Pond is not a wilderness area, its protection was a vital step in conservation and preservation history because it symbolically allowed an area of land to become more natural than it perhaps ever was, and because it is an iconic area so its protection demonstrated the United States' support for the preservation and conservation of the nation's important lands.

In general, conservation and preservation history in the United States is complicated. Often in the United States, land that becomes protected by the National Park Service, US Forest Service, or grassroots conservation groups is either ecologically distinctive or it has an important, if brief, cultural history important to the United States. Land can be protected in a variety of ways by the United States government, and from levels anywhere from Recreation Area to Wilderness Area to National Historic Landmark. Walden Pond is a classic example of a piece of land that was ultimately protected because of the historical and cultural contributions that came from the area, rather than because of its unique natural qualities, which it lacks.

On December 29, 1962, it was decided that Walden Pond would be designated as a National Historic Landmark. The National Park Service defines National Historic Landmarks as, “nationally significant historic places designated by the Secretary of the Interior because they possess exceptional value or quality in illustrating or interpreting the heritage of the United States” (“National Historic Landmarks Program: National Park Service”). Designating it as a National Historic Landmark protects the land from being altered beyond developing the necessary safety and sanitary facilities related to the landmark. The distinction is also fairly uncommon (there are fewer than 2,500 in the country), and hard for an area to receive because a member of the staff at the National Park Service must nominate all of the landmarks. (“National Historic Landmarks Program: National Park Service”) The Walden Woods Project, a conservation group, fought hard to protect Walden Pond, eventually convincing the National Park Service of its need to be protected after hundreds of beer cans and bottles were found on its shore. The National Park Service decided Walden Pond would receive designation as a National Historic Landmark “both as an open space and as a tribute to one of the seminal thinkers of the American conservation movement” (“National Historic Landmarks Program (NHL).”). Officially owned and protected by the United States Government, Walden Pond was on its way to restoration.

Walden Pond was designated as a National Historic Landmark in order to preserve the piece of American history and culture Henry David Thoreau carved out while living and writing at Walden Pond. Efforts for further preservation and use have continued throughout the years. If not for Thoreau and his words, Walden Pond would have been, and was, an ignored piece of land seen as unimportant. During the 1950s, battles erupted about a bad erosion problem on the shores of the pond. According to W. Barksdale Maynard in his book *Walden Pond: A History*, in

October 1958, the “Concord residents voted 603 to 38 in a ... town meeting to build a new municipal dump just a few hundred yards from Walden....the vote suggested how little affection the average Concordian had for the memory of Thoreau” (Maynard, 282). Plenty of people in the area did not care that Walden Pond was being degraded, nor did they care if it was degraded more by a nearby landfill. Without the efforts of certain vocal people to preserve the land, it would likely have been developed even farther into Concord, as the pond is right on the outskirts of the town.

Walden Pond has a long history of land use that is not necessarily the most environmentally friendly. In fact, at the time when Henry David Thoreau lived at Walden Pond in a cabin that he built himself, Walden Pond was by no means a wilderness area. Of course, it is difficult to define exactly what a wilderness area entails, but, by almost any definition, Walden Pond was pretty degraded land during Thoreau’s inhabitation there: the land was a woodlot that was divided into sections and owned by Concord citizens who would come get wood to heat their homes. According to Maynard, “The sterile, sandy uplands south of town [near Walden Pond] were disappointingly infertile but provided bountiful cordwood. They were immediately divided into small woodlots that were passed down in families through the generations” (Maynard, 17). The local townspeople bought parts of the land and did what they wanted with it after that. Ralph Waldo Emerson, another writer, citizen of Concord, and friend of Thoreau, allowed Thoreau to live on his part of the land surrounding Walden Pond for the two-year period. (Maynard)

The path to protecting Walden Pond after Henry David Thoreau made it famous was a long one. It took years of arguing about possible use of the land and why the land mattered culturally before an agreement was found. During the 1960s, following increased environmental

consciousness due to a wave of environmental writing and activism – most notably Rachel Carson’s information about the dangers of DDT in *Silent Spring* – people began considering the effect humans were having on their environment. Thoreau and *Walden* were ancestors of the writers and conservationists in the 1960s, inspiring many to take action in the name of nature. Thoreau’s work indirectly helped pave the way for increased preservation and conservation of the United States, just as the preservation and conservation movement helped memorialize Thoreau and Walden Pond.

A bill was introduced to Congress in 1956 – during the turbulent, trashy times at Walden Pond – entitled the Wilderness Bill, but it was stalled and was ignored for many years. Six years after the bill was first introduced, in May 1962, the one hundredth anniversary of Thoreau’s death was celebrated; by December 1962, the National Park Service officially protected Walden Pond as a National Historic Landmark. “The Wilderness Society took advantage of the occasion to draw attention to the Wilderness Bill” (Maynard, 266). After the protection of Walden Pond by the National Park Service in 1962, and with increased environmental awareness across the United States, the Wilderness Act was passed in 1964. (Maynard)

While defining wilderness has been difficult for scholars and writers such as Thoreau, it is something the United States government has had to do. With the passing of the “Wilderness Act” of 1964, Congress was forced to determine legal status for wilderness areas. Congress defined wilderness as follows:

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. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature,

with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.

The definition of wilderness is very exact, only including lands that have been “untrammeled by man” in a variety of ways. Therefore, according to Congress’ definition of wilderness, Walden Pond would not have been considered a wilderness area during Thoreau’s time, despite its natural beauty and cultural history.

When Henry David Thoreau lived at Walden Pond, “Several of [the wood]lots touched the pond shore” (Maynard, 17); if the clear-cutting that took place on these woodlots to sustain heat for the citizens of Concord reached the pond’s edges, the shoreline was essentially degraded by man’s dominance. Additionally, people would come gather their wood regularly, certainly making the land trammed by man. If Walden Pond were a wilderness area, the land’s “primeval character,” referenced in the Wilderness Act, would not have been clear-cut lands, but rather untouched tree-filled lands. Finally, Thoreau’s extended time on the land immediately would have disqualified the land as being designated wilderness. For these reasons, no one contends that the land surrounding Walden Pond should be legally designated as “wilderness.”

Despite the actual circumstances of Walden Pond’s land, however, Thoreau documents in *Walden* what to him was a wilderness experience – and develops images in the reader’s head of serene, untouched wild lands. This could perhaps be attributed to one of Thoreau’s more notable qualities, which was his ability to find wilderness all around him, no matter if it was a yard behind a friend’s home, or something more expansive like the Grand Canyon. He concluded that, “You only need sit still long enough in some attractive spot in the woods that all its inhabitants may exhibit themselves to you by turns” (*Walden*, 137). In other words, he fully believed that

being outdoors – anywhere outdoors, whether it is a yard, atop a mountain, or beside a creek – one can sit quietly and be exposed to everything wilderness or nature is. Because of this, he was able to thoroughly examine the natural elements of the area around Walden Pond and further define for himself, and the conservationists he inspires, what wilderness really means, why it is important, and where one can find it.

In *Walden Pond: A History*, however, Thoreau is quoted saying he has become too accustomed to Walden Pond, and recognizes its cultivated qualities. “I now see it mapped in my mind’s eye...as so many men’s wood-lots;...I fear this particular dry knowledge may affect my imagination and fancy, that it will not be easy to see so much wildness and native vigor there as formerly” (Maynard, 133). This quotation is interesting because it is very far from what one usually hears quoted from Thoreau about his adoration of Walden Pond’s wilderness. Maynard, commenting on Thoreau’s words, ponders “how great an extent his experiences in Walden Woods were ones of ‘imagination and fancy’” (Maynard, 133). In his book *No Man’s Garden*, Daniel B. Botkin writes about how he believes Thoreau defined the term wilderness:

To Thoreau, cutover but unimproved land was still wilderness, whereas to us it is no longer wilderness in the sense of land untrammled, untouched by human hands. ... We must understand that for him, *wildness* was a *spiritual state* arising from the relationship between a person and nature, whereas *wilderness* was land or water unused at present by people and thus a *physical state of nature*.... Wilderness, the physical entity, was a place, then, where a person would experience wildness” (Botkin, 120-22).

It seems that Thoreau knew he was creating a wilderness area in his head out of the land surrounding his cabin at Walden Pond, but it also seems that was his ultimate goal in *Walden* considering the wilderness Thoreau created for his readers, which further helped future conservation efforts. It also seems inconsequential when one reflects on the attention he brought to Walden Pond’s degraded shores which he would later, unknowingly, help get protected by the National Park Service.

Today, Walden Pond is still not a wilderness area by the definition Congress developed for the Wilderness Act of 1964, and it never will be. On a personal visit to Walden Pond in May 2007, I noted the bath houses, which are connected to a concession stand, access points for boats to cruise the pond's waters, and trails on the surrounding lands, not to mention the visitors flocking to the location during the summer months, both to use the land for recreation and to discover the wonder Thoreau discovered before them. I also witnessed, however, conservation efforts all around the pond and its facilities. There were newly created paths farther away from the shoreline, which allowed for the eroding path right on the water's edge to regenerate and reduce the drop off into the water. It seemed the National Park Service's efforts were really having an effect on the quality of the land surrounding Walden Pond, despite its sometimes visible parking lots, train tracks, and similar features of civilization. Also, Thoreau was everywhere: there is a recreated cabin near the entrance of the area, markers at the site of the original cabin (because after Thoreau's inhabitation in the cabin he used the wood for his fire), and all of the trails are, of course, named after him. The markers and plaques give the visitors insight into who Henry David Thoreau was while he was alive and what he did on the land.

(Magee)

Perhaps more importantly, the work the National Park Service has done on Walden Pond has allowed for an atmosphere in the area that makes it much more than a pond, even though small boats and swimmers use the pond for usual pond recreation. Visitors can also really sense the spirit of Thoreau and what his life's work has come to mean for the world: lines from *Walden* appear everywhere in combination with the markers dedicated to current conservation and preservation efforts. One of these efforts, the Walden Woods Project, states on its website its Conservation Mission:

Preserving and protecting the landscapes of Walden Woods and Thoreau Country in recognition of their worldwide literary, historical and environmental significance, and their capacity to motivate others to identify, study and protect the Waldens that exist in their own communities. (Walden Woods Project Conservation)

With such a mission for even just one of the many conservation groups involved with Walden Pond, perhaps the National Park Service did the world a large favor by protecting Walden Pond if it inspired so many people to take an active role in conservation.

It seems the argument against Walden Pond being protected – because it is not a wilderness area – should rather be used as an argument for its being protected. The National Park Service, by designating Walden Pond as a National Historic Landmark, showed its support for protecting land despite its once-degraded state – or because of its once-degraded state – in order to defend the land’s important historical and cultural significance.

Too often it seems natural lands are destroyed by developments or in order to use the wood or other resources found on the land. It also seems there are people at each of the locations marked for the next clear-cut who desperately want the land to stay wild, often for historic or cultural reasons. Even if the land is not as significant in parts of history or culture as Walden Pond is, there is an argument to protect it for local history or culture, and for the need for recreation. In the dedication of his last manuscript, *Wild Fruits*, which was rediscovered and published after his death, Thoreau himself argued every human needed land nearby that is reserved for these purposes:

I think that each town should have a park, or rather a primitive forest, of five hundred or a thousand acres, either in one body or several, where a stick should never be cut for fuel, nor for the navy, nor to make wagons, but stand and decay for higher uses—a common possession forever, for instruction and recreation. All Walden Wood might have been reserved, with Walden in the midst of it. . . . (*Wild Fruits*)

Thoreau thoroughly believed that areas “for instruction and recreation” are vital to a healthy, happy life. He believed lands should be protected just so they would be there if anyone wanted to

use the land, and so the wildlife would be allowed to thrive. Modern society in the United States seems to demand concrete reasons not to develop on such lands, because development has almost become our society's natural instinct. Land needs to be true wilderness because it is seen as the only land deemed important enough for protection; if it is not a true wilderness it must, instead, be declared beautiful in imagery and flowery language by someone important – someone like Henry David Thoreau, a recognized and glorified writer.

Henry David Thoreau, with his masterpiece *Walden*, created a wilderness out of Walden Pond. With his words, Thoreau brought serious attention to an area he held dear, even though the land itself would not be considered special; he also helped bring attention to lesser-known areas' needs for conservation. Conservationists and avid readers of *Walden* demanded Walden Pond be protected, which ultimately improved the land on which Thoreau lived beyond what he might have imagined it could ever look like. By protecting the land, the National Park Service has allowed the land to become more of a wilderness than it ever was in his lifetime, during which he envisioned a wilderness at Walden Pond that no one else saw, both on the land and within himself. Out of the wilderness Henry David Thoreau created in his mind came a movement towards better conservation and preservation practices in the United States.

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