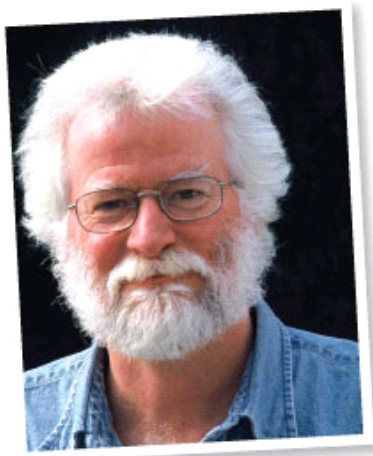


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Human. Nature.

John Friel



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If you love the natural world, it's easy to admire the uncompromising conservation ethic of the late Edward Abbey. The author of "Desert Solitaire" and "The Monkeywrench Gang" wrote, "Growth for the sake of growth is the ideology of the cancer cell."

Abbey came to mind as I looked through old notes. A few years back, two boneheads toppled a hoodoo—a boulder precariously, improbably balanced atop a skinny stone pedestal—in Utah. Wind and water spent hundreds of millions of years carving it.

Of one such object, Abbey wrote, "One of these days that rock will fall—in ten, fifty or five hundred years." Hey, let's make it 30 seconds! Their next bright idea was to boastfully post footage of the desecration on social media. A judge gave them reason to regret both choices.

If you've seen those rock formations, you know. They conjure genuine awe as one contemplates the monumental, patient forces, the sweep of eons that created them and are creating them still. One senseless act deprived generations of that heart-healing, hubris-quelling inspiration.

Here's the human paradox: When we believe we can improve on nature, we can do really stupid things. And really splendid ones.

You know what to do if life hands you lemons. But if someone handed you locally grown lemons in a Pennsylvania winter in the 1920s, you were probably a friend or relative of Pierre DuPont.

Long before the global cold chain existed, an immensely wealthy man wanted to give out citrus fruit at Christmas. So he built an orangery and Longwood Gardens was born. DuPont first bought the land to save some magnificent trees from the sawmill, but there's no clever saying that starts, "If life hands you hardwood ..."

The belief that we not only can, but **MUST**, improve on nature underlies many human endeavors. Example: Our whole industry, i.e., ag and hort.

California's central valley is fertile, but arid. But with a system of dams and a gazillion miles of canals, we can grow strawberries, artichokes and lettuce by the square mile in the erstwhile desert—more food per acre than anywhere else on the planet. Now you're talking!

On a smaller, more personal scale: Purple coneflowers were fine for millennia, but wouldn't they be even finer in orange or red? Thanks to human intervention, echinacea now occurs in nearly every letter in the mnemonic Roy G. Biv.

It's what we do. We change things, small and large, to suit our needs and whims. We're like the landscaper, gazing out across the Grand Canyon, musing, "I'd have done this differently." Or George Bernard Shaw describing William Randolph Hearst's estate: "This is what God would have built if He'd had the money."

In a remarkable book, "The Control of Nature," John McPhee examines extreme examples of man vs. natural forces. Exhibit A: The Army Corps of Engineers' war with the Mississippi River. Since prehistoric times, Old Man River has periodically rerouted itself. But by the 20th century, it was too vital a shipping route to allow further meanderings. As McPhee put it, "The nation couldn't afford nature."

Congress ordered the Corps to freeze evolution, maintaining the channel as it existed in 1950. This requires ever-higher levees and massive floodgates that the river tests frequently. So far, they've held—sometimes just barely. It's still the Truman Administration in Naw'lins. A Corps honcho said, "Man against nature. That's what life is all about." But nature bats last.

On one level, that Corps honcho is obviously correct. On another, the very concept of man vs. nature is flawed. Man is part of nature. We stand not apart from our fellow creatures, or above them, but among them. Fighting nature = fighting ourselves.

Back to Edward Abbey: His love of nature, unfortunately, manifested itself as a knee-jerk hatred of most things civilized. He also wrote, "Bricks to all greenhouses! Black thumb and cutworm to the potted plant!" Hey, Ed: Can't we all just get along? **GP**

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