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“Taking the SUV to a Place It’s Never Been Before”: SUV Ads and the Consumption of Nature

by **Melissa Aronczyk**
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From Henry David Thoreau to John Muir to Aldo Leopold, seminal thinkers in the American environmental tradition cite wilderness as one of the distinguishing marks of American culture. The image of an unspoiled natural setting as a regenerative haven and a palliative to the stress of urban life is stamped on the country’s literary and historical texts. But if wilderness is the refuge of the true American spirit, the other emblem of American identity is how we get there – by car. The question, “What do you drive?” as an interrogation of identity demonstrates the profound sense of self that is lodged in our personal means of transportation. We are willing to let our cars stand for who we are. Indeed, the history of the automobile in America is fundamental to our conception of self and of our environment; and despite the obvious contradiction inherent in using a car to “get back” to nature, our current conception of nature, and the social movements to protect it, are shaped in large part by the social history of the automobile. Without cars, wilderness as we know it could not exist.

One of the most poignant ways in which this relationship has been expressed is in advertisements for automobiles. Cars have been depicted in nature settings in ads since the end of World War I. Part of our current fascination with sport-utility vehicles (SUVs) is their image as a means of transport to hitherto uncharted locales. Even the names of these vehicles – Land Rover’s *Discovery* and *Freelander*, Subaru’s *Forester* and *Outback*, Ford’s *Excursion*, *Expedition* and *Escape* – underline the motorist’s journey as one of an intimate connection with the natural environment. If capitalism created the modern environmental movement, as Mark Dowie argues in *Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century*, how do automobile ads serve to reinforce and perpetuate this claim? I contend that current advertisements for SUVs resurrect a particular kind of wilderness, one that harkens back to the Romantic era. In these ads, wilderness appears as a kind of gated community, preserved and protected from the environmental problems of the outside world and accessible only by those with the means to purchase transport. If this view allows us to continue to claim wilderness as a defining element of the American self, it also serves to reflect and perpetuate a general apathy toward environmental issues. The debate that has developed around the SUV phenomenon underlines the incongruence of notions of nature and what to do about it. Here I want to examine the imperfect fit between wilderness as a space of relaxation and wilderness as a space of conservation, and suggest that since their inception, car ads have served to nurture that inconsistency, by blurring the boundaries between where nature begins

and human intervention ends.

The Great Escape: Cars, Wilderness, and the Formation of American Identity

Keep your damn hippie tree-hugging hands off of my car. You may think you're helping Mother Earth, but you are just wasting recycled paper. [1](#)

Boston artist John Tagiuri has been receiving notes like this one ever since he embarked on a personal campaign in his hometown of Somerville, Massachusetts, to let SUV owners know that he disapproves of their purchase. His method is simple: he places orange-coloured pieces of paper designed to look like parking tickets on their windshield, with the message, "Violation: Earth." This is one of the tamer battles in the war waged between SUV owners and environmentalists in recent years. Less tame acts – such as the August 2003 torching of three SUV dealerships by a group called the Earth Liberation Front (ELF); and more recently, the U.S. Senate's decision in March 2005 to begin drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, while refusing to regulate SUV gas consumption² – maintain the issue in the media as a hot button of controversy. Emotions run high in popular media portrayals, with invective labeling of SUVs as an "ecocidal obscenity," "axles of evil" and "Yank Tanks."³ Media commentary on the SUV polemic voices two related views: SUV owners are either perceived as ignorant of the environmental hazards incurred by their vehicles, in which case they must be educated; or indifferent, in which case they must be reformed. Either

way, the message is clear: one cannot be concerned about the environment and drive an SUV. [4](#)

In this context of debates over the future of the American environment it is indeed hard to imagine anything more incongruous than an SUV in a nature setting. Insofar as we still consider nature to be something “natural,” the SUV represents something innately unnatural, both in its dimensions – its outsized frame, exorbitant cost, and excess of features – and in its known noxious effect on the environment.

According to a recent study, driving one SUV a year produces about 8000 pounds more carbon dioxide than driving a car. [5](#)

But although cars and wilderness seem unlikely bedfellows, they originated from a common conceptual scheme. Their histories can be charted along similar lines.

Until the mid-nineteenth century, wilderness was seen as the antithesis of paradise – a place of alienation and immorality, where no civilized person would dare set foot. In 1854, Thoreau’s *Walden* represented one of the first attempts to spiritualize and humanize wilderness, marking the beginning of a sea change in attitudes toward this previously inhospitable space. Thoreau helped re-create nature as pabulum for the soul, a haven for the solitary meditations of the individual disgruntled with society’s failings. Nash offers a useful way to understand this romanticized viewpoint:

Wilderness appealed to those bored or disgusted with man and his works. It not only offered an escape from society but also was an ideal stage for

the Romantic individual to exercise the cult that he frequently made of his own soul. The solitude and total freedom of the wilderness created a perfect setting for either melancholy or exultation.

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Although Romanticism served to idealize wilderness as a place of escape, at the end of the nineteenth century wilderness was still “wild,” in the desolate, godless sense of the term given to it by the earliest settlers of the New World. It was a force to be reckoned with and rendered submissive at the hands of frontiersmen and pioneers. 7 With the onset of industrialization, however, and the attendant shift of the population to urban settings, the frontier way of life began to cede to a more “civilized” way of being. And since it is often only as things disappear that we feel their absence, Americans suddenly became aware of the importance of the frontier mentality to their character; and wilderness became something to long for, a nostalgic emblem of bygone days. 8 Nash describes how the image of the pioneer contributed to this nostalgia:

Long a hero of his culture, the pioneer acquired added luster at a time when the pace and complexity of American life seemed on the verge of overwhelming the independent individual...the growing perception that the frontier era was over prompted a reevaluation of the role of primitive conditions. Many Americans came to understand

that wilderness was essential to pioneering: without wild country the concepts of frontier and pioneer were meaningless.

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The historical essays of Frederick Jackson Turner, published in such national publications as the *Atlantic Monthly*, did much to perpetuate the connection between wilderness and the American ethos, imbuing wilderness with the rugged, independent traits of the national character. Wilderness was what set Americans apart from the Europeans, Turner exhorted, claiming: “The fact is, that here is a new product that is American.” 10 In 1911, John Muir’s seminal work, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, took up Turner’s claims, celebrating and sacralizing the American wilderness for a public increasingly disenchanted with civilized modern society. By this time, Nash explains, “the appreciation of wilderness had spread from a relatively small group of Romantic and patriotic literati to become a national cult.” 11 When American ecologist and radical land ethicist Aldo Leopold came on the scene in the 1930s, deftly combining the scientific logic of ecology with the rhapsody of Romantic sentiment, the stage was set for the early nationalist strains of environmental conservation; and for what would become a proactive environmental movement.

At around the same time, another major shift in the industrializing world was taking place that would drastically alter the shape of American national identity. A thumbnail sketch: In 1908, the first successfully mass-produced cars, Henry Ford’s Model Ts, started rolling off the assembly lines.

Promoted as a dependable family car, at a price that “any man can afford to pay,” the Model Ts sold faster than they could be manufactured. ¹² Ten years later, with post-World War I prosperity and an increased desire for recreation among the American population, a new class of society was created; and with it, new needs and desires. Owning a car became a distinguishing mark of mobility, both upward (in social class) and onward, riding a never-ending march of progress. With the timely invention of the motorcar, then, a particular breed of humans came into existence: that of the “motorized American traveler,” all dressed up with nowhere to go.

It would not take long to turn “nowhere” into a very particular destination. In 1918, on the heels of a glowing report commissioned by the United States Forest Service on the recreational potential of wilderness areas, the National Park Service began attracting attention to the parks as appealing tourist sites. ¹³ In 1921, the Federal Highway Act encouraged and furthered this mission by beginning the process of creating a network of roads connected to national parks. ¹⁴ By physically linking roads to wilderness areas, a symbolic link was fused in the American imagination: nature was no longer a place to escape *from*; it became a place to escape *to*. As more and more people moved to urban areas, the ability to get away from the city and enjoy leisure activities became the defining mark of status and class. Wilderness came to be seen as a separate, distant space, a palliative to the complex conditions of an increasingly industrialized and alienating society. Nature now represented a place that people could get back to and remember the values of their valiant forebears, while the city was

increasingly somewhere to get away from. Nature was now not only restorative and recuperative, but also accessible by car.

“See the USA in your Chevrolet”: The Thrill of Discovery

There is a third, distinctly American phenomenon which intersects this twin cultural evolution of car and wilderness and imbues it with deeper meaning. At the turn of the twentieth century, as industrialization made the mass production of goods possible, something was needed to present this plethora of products to the public, to differentiate increasingly similar goods in the saturated mind of the consumer. Enter the practice of mass advertising. In an age when choosing what to buy became for the first time a matter of preference rather than need, the power of the product – its usefulness and relevance – gave way to the power of the imagination. Reviled as hucksters in a pre-industrial age, advertisers gained credence in their ability to move more and more mass-produced goods in a growing consumer economy. As factory-made vehicles became a central feature of this new ideology of mass consumption, advertisements strove to reflect the potential of these cars for the buying population. In 1920, there was one car registered for every three households in the United States. By 1929, there was one for every 1.2 households. ¹⁵ It was not surprising that auto companies quickly became advertisers' most lucrative clients. Ad expenditures for automobile companies leapt from \$3.5 million to \$9.3 million per year in the four-year period from 1923 to 1927. ¹⁶

With the opening up of national parks to

tourism, new horizons were set for a population hungry for adventure, and advertisers seized on the potential of vehicles to offer drivers a new and untried experience. Bolstered by the rising interest in leisure activities as a noble pursuit, advertisements strengthened the link between cars and wilderness access. Wilderness, set apart from the city and invested with the Romantic values of individuality and sacredness, came to embody the very values that more civilized spaces once had. As the cultural theorist Colin Campbell explains, “Romanticism provided that philosophy of ‘recreation’ necessary for a dynamic consumerism: a philosophy which legitimates the search for pleasure as a good in itself.” ¹⁷ From the time that cars were available to the masses, then, advertisers sought to portray these vehicles as purveyors of independence and mobility. For the first time, the average American had the means to own a car, and with ownership came a sense of individual freedom, pride, and personal achievement. Ads of the period engendered this ideal, using the rugged pioneer spirit as a call to individualism. The ideal values of the American character – patriotism, independence, utilitarianism – were held up by ads of the time. An ad for the Jordan Motor Car Company in 1920, for example, features a shaded drawing of the car on a quiet road at night. The copywriter waxes poetic about the driver’s experience [Fig. 1]:

Out in God’s country at twilight.
Nature in Autumn’s costume.
An alluring road. A crescent
moon. A party of your own
choosing. And a Jordan
Silhouette. You stop a moment
to enjoy it all. Then you settle

back – and touch the throttle.
Smoothly, silently, the
Silhouette slips away. Through
secluded villages and sleeping
fields. There's a new life in the
air – a new tingle in the blood.

Note the emphasis on a personal journey,
and its intimate, seductive appeal. The ad
continues:

No longer the blasé driver of
yesterday. You are the
companion of a new kind of car
– answering the call of the
open country – yielding to the
whims of the moment – a royal
vagabond traveling the road to
Everywhere.

With car as “companion,” accompanying us
along the sublime road to Everywhere, both
the car and where it takes us is personified
and glorified. 18

A 1927 newspaper ad for a Wolverine
automobile takes the connection between
humans and their environment one step
further, likening the car itself to a wild
animal:

North of the last frontier, north
of the white man, you'll find
him on the go – the wolverine.
Fearless, amazingly strong, the
wolverine pushes his way
across uncounted leagues of
wilderness woods – a king of
his domain by right of his ability
to go where he pleases, to take
what he wants when he wants
it...he gives his name now to

something new in the smaller car field, a car that is thoroughly American in design and construction, a car made for Americans and for American conditions. [19](#)

Whether human or animal, the idea of the car as conquering, civilizing or penetrating wilderness was dominant.

The following decades would maintain this juxtaposition of car and wilderness, to ever more lucrative ends. Even in wartime, nature still beckoned for the hardy motorist. A 1940 advertisement for Studebaker buoys up the offer [\[Fig. 2\]](#):

This spring, rediscover America in a Studebaker... Overseas travel is out of the question this spring of 1940, of course. So why not decide to see your own America at its loveliest? Enjoy the fascinating spectacle of Nature awakening from her winter slumber. Get started now, before the highways are thronged. [20](#)

By the 1950s, the marriage of cars and wilderness was sealed in the American imagination. The call of the wild lured Americans in droves to discover and recreate in this pristine environment. A colorful ad for a Nash extols its virtues in the wild, both inside and out [\[Fig. 3\]](#): “This Nash is eager to take you to those unspoiled secret places of the world, where roads and hills keep lesser cars away...there’s a new kind of engine whose pick-up will match any scared jack-rabbit you meet.” One image

shows the car next to a waterfall while a family swims; another shows them at a picnic site, gazing at the view while a couple of bears devour their picnic. And as an added bonus: “There’s even a Convertible Bed! So that you can sleep near your favorite trout stream.” [21](#)

Fifty years later, little has changed in the universe of automobile advertisements. Despite vast technological changes in the automobile industry and equally revolutionary shifts in the methods of the advertising industry, contemporary ads for cars have defied renewal. The figure and ground of the ads – that is, car and wilderness – have remained remarkably constant. And so have their slogans. From Ford’s “The Car that Put America on Wheels!” in the 1920s, to “See the U.S.A. in your Chevrolet!” in the ‘50s, to the twenty-first century’s metaphysical “Taking the SUV to a Place It’s Never Been Before,” car ads provide an epigrammatic history of the modern American wilderness experience.

Wilderness through the Windshield

In a country where bigger continues to be better, the SUV is the behemoth. Ads for these vehicles capitalize on the “size matters” mantra at every opportunity, the headlines and copy describing an orgy of SUV features and capabilities. And like their predecessors, they fetishize the fantasy of the Great Escape for another generation of people who want to get away from their daily existence. An ad for the GM Cadillac SRX “luxury utility” claims [\[Fig. 4\]](#): “Beyond measurable advantages are immeasurable sensations” in a wild place “where physics and metaphysics converge.” The Nissan

Pathfinder generously provides “Enough Surf for everyone. Enough mountains for everyone. Enough seats for everyone,” while the Land Rover Freelander, equally magnanimous, proffers “Mountains, deserts and vast rolling hills, now exceptionally priced.” The SUVs of today even bring nature inside the vehicle: in addition to “cross-linked Electronic Air Suspension that provides unprecedented comfort and capability over almost any terrain,” the Range Rover offers “the special alchemy of its luxurious waterfall-lit wood and leather interior that indulges the soul” (a nod, perhaps, to the wood-paneled station wagons of old?). Finally, an ad for the Acura SUV features the ground-breaking slogan, “Taking the SUV to A Place It’s Never Been Before,” [Fig. 5] noting that with an “Acura/Bose Music System with 6-disc CD changer, you could end up almost anywhere.” Nature, it seems, even has a soundtrack.

These examples point to an important distinction in ads for SUVs, one that I think is paramount in defining the stakes in the car–wilderness debate. In the current climate of ecstatic SUV prose, the environment outside the car has become less important than the environment inside the car. If the “philosophy of recreation” that infused earlier automobile ads portrayed wilderness as an external landscape to be discovered, the leisure philosophy of SUV ads today is more about inner discovery – that is, the discovery of the vehicle itself. In the triangulated relationship of human, vehicle, and wilderness, the role of the mediator has shifted over time. Formerly, automobile ads promoted the interaction of human and wilderness, mediated by the automobile. Current ads for SUVs promise

the interaction of human and technology, set against the backdrop of a wilderness setting. This new relationship is reinforced by a curious detail: in most of the ads, people are rarely shown outside the vehicle. Frequently not even a shadow of a head can be perceived *behind the wheel of the car*, even when it is shown in movement. The human element has been removed from the equation.

This expresses a singularly important idea about how we relate to the environmental movement. By focusing on the experience inside the vehicle rather than the well-known environmentally destructive implications of driving the SUV outside, car ads offer a way out of the contradiction that makes our relationship with wilderness such a conundrum. If we can take humans out of nature, we remove the anthropomorphic element that renders us responsible for environmental destruction. The SUV appears to navigate through nature like a self-driven suit of armour. The most common complaint leveled at SUV owners is that despite their awareness of the bad gas mileage, the threat to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, even the safety problems built into the vehicle's structure, they continue to drive with a sense of entitlement and impunity. To what degree is this phenomenon related to the ads, which show no demonstrable human effect on the environment? The appropriation of wilderness imagery in SUV ads can be seen as a direct response to the anti-automobile ethos of the wilderness preservation movement. By showing wilderness in a primeval state, and an SUV moving through it silently and unmanned, the ads reinforce not only the idea that we are not disturbing nature, but also that we are not even part of

the story. By eliminating human agency, thus attenuating the role of SUV owners, SUV ads offer protection -- not for wilderness, but for our dearly held *idea* of wilderness.

Clearly, there are a number of problems with this kind of reasoning, along the lines of the “guns don’t kill people” rationale. My aim here is not to identify the guilty party, human or technological. I simply want to point out that since we are not even sure what we mean by “wilderness,” it is hard to level blame for its so-called destruction. The debate is not limited to the views of SUV owners versus those of non-SUV owners; the reasons behind our ongoing failure to adopt a more proactive environmental stance are considerably more complex. William Cronon, in an article aptly titled, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” offers a way into this complexity. He argues that to continue to see wilderness as unadulterated, uninhabited and untamed requires the elision, or perhaps the selective memory, of history. ²² As we saw above, this was witnessed in the nineteenth century, when the frontier mentality became lodged in the minds of the population in a deformed nostalgia for the independence and courage of the pioneer life. It can also be seen in the privatization of wilderness areas by the wealthy upper classes, whose idea of preservation was to deny access to lower-class citizens. And not least, the uninhabited quality of a soulful nature setting is dramatized in the forced removal of native peoples from the land on which they had lived, hunted and raised families for hundreds of years. As Cronon argues:

The flight from history that is
very nearly the core of

wilderness represents the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the tabula rasa that supposedly existed before we began to leave our marks on the world. 23

If we contemplate the “tabula rasa” that is the landscape of SUV ads, the fallacy is immediately obvious. Erecting boundaries around nature and offering SUVs as the mode of access to it assumes that we view the boundaries themselves as natural and necessary. This has allowed our current relationship with the land, paradoxically, to be one of utter disconnection from it. As Cronon points out, it is only possible to entertain the idea of a pristine wilderness if we suppress the idea that that is where our food and resources come from. 24

Ultimately, “the trouble with wilderness” is the malleability of the term. As long as it continues to be conceived as a sanctuary untouched by human hands, reinforced, among other ways, through the imagery of consumptive leisure, it will continue to erode. Ironically, though environmentalists and SUV owners would claim little common ground, they are guilty of the same fallacy. Both view wilderness as a site of escape, renewal and discovery: an uncommon realm that ought to be protected. But the idea of protecting something separate from ourselves sets up an opposition between humans and their environment that is ultimately destructive. As Dowie observes, “After more than a hundred years of intense activism, human life in harmony with nature and a healthy environment still exist only in

our imagination.” 25 SUVs are merely the latest incarnation of our environmental apathy. Its advertisements alleviate the conscience of the American mind while our consumption habits continue to weaken our environment’s increasingly fragile constitution. For the past eighty-odd years we have been seeking to escape our problems through our means of access to a place where people are not. We have evidently forgotten that the SUV’s best feature was its storage capacity, which includes more than enough room to tote our problems, and ourselves, wherever the SUV can travel.

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1. Johnny Diaz, "Ticket Master: Local Artist John Tagiuri Drives a National Anti-SUV Campaign," *Boston Globe*, 15 September 2003, B7. See also Angela Montefinise, "You're 'Flier'-ed! SUVs Hit with Eco-Litter-ature," *New York Post*, 21 November 2004. ↑

2. See Danny Hakim, "A Love Affair with S.U.V.'s Begins to Cool," *New York Times*, 21 May 2005; and Jack Doman, "Not the Answer," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, editorial, 20 March 2005. ↑

3. "Axles of evil": See "Environmentalists Are Going to War Against the SUV," by Gary Younge, *TheGuardian*, 22 April 2003, 2.2. "Ecocidal obscenity": "Hurricane Kushner Hits the Heartland," by Alex Abramovich, *New York Times*, 30 November 2003, 2.5. "Yank tanks": personal notes. ↑

4. Space restricts a more detailed analysis of the impact of these articles on popular opinion. But an opinion piece in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* gets to the heart of the issue. See Harry Kroto, "To the Question, What Did You Do in the Truly Great War – That of the Survival of the Human Race – Would Your Answer Be, 'I Bought an SUV?'" by Harry Kroto, *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 15 August 2003, 13. ↑

5. Truong Phuoc Khanh, "California Drivers Have Thirst for SUVs, Which Have Thirst For Gasoline," *Knight Ridder Tribune Business News*, 2 June 2003. ↑

6. Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 47. ↑

7. Nash, 24. ↑

8. Nash, 145. ↑

9. Nash, 145. ↑

10. Quoted in Nash, 146. ↑

11. Nash, 143. ↑

12. Eric Dregni and Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Ads That Put America on Wheels* (Osceola: Motorbooks International, 1996), 18. The quote, “that any man can afford to pay,” is from a 1908 advertisement for Ford Model Ts which is featured on this page. ↑

13. Nash, 185. ↑

14. Dregni and Miller, 91. The network of roads was completed during the Eisenhower administration. ↑

15. Dregni and Miller, 11. ↑

16. Dregni and Miller, 11. It should be noted, however, that Henry Ford’s famous Model Ts were the exception that proved the rule: Ford shunned advertising until 1927, calling it “an economic waste.” See Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 7. ↑

17. Quoted in John Storey, *Cultural Consumption and Everyday Life* (London: Arnold Publishers, 1999), 13. ↑

18. This ad was found in Jackson Lears, *Fables of Abundance: A Cultural History of Advertising in America* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 214. ↑

19. “The Wolverines Are Coming!” Display Advertisement, *Washington Post*, 4 May 1927, 4. ↑


20. Dregni and Miller, 87. ↑

21. Dregni and Miller, 91. ↑

22. William Cronon, “The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1995), 80. ↑

23. Cronon, 80. ↑

24. Cronon, 81. 

25. Mark Dowie, *Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 10. 

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