

## Rewilding North America

*A Vision for Conservation in the 21st Century*

DAVE FOREMAN

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Three out of four ain't bad. In the world of nonfiction publishing, there are books that entertain and books that educate, books that leave you in despair and books that fill you with hope. Dave Foreman's latest, *Rewilding North America: A Vision for Conservation in the 21st Century*, covers at least three of those four landscapes. Likewise, in his introduction, Foreman says that with this book,

*I hope to reach at least four audiences: citizen conservationists, conservation biologists, students, and the interested, literate public.*

The first three audiences are fairly ensured, insofar as the author is an icon of contemporary wilderness conservation. It's the final group, laypeople like you and me, that the author must hold hopefully in mind.

In previous articles and reviews written across the past two decades—starting in 1984 with *Mother Earth News*—I've profiled Dave Foreman and the good work and relentless dedication that have brought him to be honored as “the most visionary conservationist working today.” This time around, with limited space, let's just say that the New Mexico native—with whom, I should mention, I a comrade in cause—has been a leading player in the North American conservation drama for a long time and has, as they say, come a long way. Frankly, much of what Foreman has to say in *Rewilding* is not good news—which fact, together with the pathological prevalence of environmental ambivalence and willful ignorance among Americans today, explains why we see so few “green” books on best-seller lists. Nonetheless, Foreman's knowledge, passion, and prose have never been more clear and compelling. Consider the following, from the author's introduction:

*From my earliest days, I have been drawn to the heart of wilderness, to wild lands and wild rivers and wild things, to the places and beasts outside the rule of humankind. Long before I learned the ancient English meaning of wilderness—“self-willed land”—I looked up at the Sandia Mountains, rising above the city of Albuquerque, and saw a world where we were not masters of all. Long before I had heard of the Beowulf-time word, wildeor—“self-willed beast”—I watched the hornytods and bluetails scurry through the grama grass and rabbitbrush of the high desert and knew that they ran their errands on their own time in their own way, not on human-time or in human-way. ... Aldo Leopold called the essays in A Sand County Almanac “the delights and dilemmas of one who cannot ... ‘live without wild things.’” Rewilding North America is no Sand County Almanac, but it is the horror and the hope of another who cannot live without wild things.*

To “the horror and the hope,” Foreman might have added “the history,” for *Rewilding North America* unfolds in three sections, or better put, stages. The horror comes in part 1, “Bad News,” a sobering overview of species extinctions, pol-

lution, climate change, other critical ecological wounds, and humankind's role in it all.

Part 2, “Good News,” tracks the history of conservation biology, a term—being at the heart of both the book and its author's vision—that requires explanation. As the father of conservation biology, Michael Soulé, summarized it for me: “Conservation biology unites an array of scientific disciplines in an effort to solve the biodiversity problem, the problem of the destruction of nature. What are its causes? What are its cures? Here we need input from wildlife biology, ecology, genetics, sociology, ethics and economics. Our mission is to understand and, if possible, to stop the destruction of nature. This requires not only knowing wild nature, but knowing human nature as well. The challenge of conservation biology is to identify the threats against nature as the first step toward identifying sound, long-term solutions.”

Restated, *conservation biology* is the interdisciplinary scientific study of how to save the natural world, and thus ourselves, from ourselves. A sister term, *rewilding*, refers to the grounded implementation of the knowledge gained through conservation biology, to be achieved in largest part by establishing a network of “continental mega-linkages” comprising (in necessarily oversimplified terms) core wilderness areas surrounded by roadless buffer zones and connected by travel corridors to allow for both wildlife and genetic mobility and exchange.

In part 3, “Taking Action,” Foreman lays out conservation biology's scientifically crafted vision for slowing and eventually halting the destruction of nature while restoring viable wildland networks: whole, healthy, self-regulating, and sustainable ecosystems—heaven on Earth.

Maps, extensive chapter notes, and a detailed index complete the package, together comprising a layperson's bible for conservation biology.

Early on, I considered conservation biology's goal for rewilding North America as little more than a collective sky-pie fantasy—a beautiful dream, dreamt by some of America's most brilliant scientists and conservationists, but a dream nonetheless, given the bleak political and cultural contexts of our times. Yet across the years, Foreman, Soulé, and a growing army of allies have proven both persistent and convincing. I now feel that the rewilding vision provides the biologically soundest, most socially equitable and workably pragmatic hope for the future of natural wildness and the survival with dignity of all life. The crucial question is: Will Foreman's conservation biology think tank, The Rewilding Institute ([www.rewilding.org](http://www.rewilding.org)), in conjunction with its activist ally, The Wildlands Project, succeed in intriguing, educating, and activating a sufficient percentage of the “interested, literate public”—you and me—to save the sinking day?

*Rewilding North America* is a notably useful and hope-filled bridge across our contemporary chasm of despair, leading to survival, sanity, and salvation. ■

REVIEWER: David Petersen's new memoir, *On the Wild Edge: In Search of a Natural Life*, has been hailed as “the feral confessions of a Thoreauvian neo-troglydote.”