

# Not Going Green: The Effect of U.S. Public Discourse on Millennials

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*Save the earth!* is a familiar slogan, as is *going green*. However, countless passionate debates about global warming, environmental preservation, and natural resource conservation have left the topic of saving the earth all but entirely obfuscated. While the intensity of these arguments seems to indicate serious concern, further studies suggest that a critical portion of the United States population is far from concerned. Aside from some half-hearted changes in purchasing habits in the interest of going green, Millennials (18–34 years of age) of the United States are markedly less interested in saving the planet than the U.S. population was in generations past (Twenge 1056). The startling 13% decline between the Baby Boomers and the Millennials is revealed through a stunning longitudinal study lasting from 1966–2009 (Twenge 1056). While the lessened interest parallels loss of interest in “politics, government and civil mindedness,” it is the lack of concern for the environment that alarmed the researchers. The attitude remains a mystery to surveyors, marketers, and analysts alike (Twenge 1056).

The importance of the Millennial attitude towards the environment cannot be overstated. A look at four hundred years of United States history demonstrates the country’s colonial and post-colonial denizens’ shifting attitudes towards nature, wilderness, and the environment. For example, the early Puritans viewed destruction of the environment and subsequent creation of habitable land as “a triumph of God himself” (Nash 37). Later, around 1801, an appreciation for the wilderness arose from the Hudson River School of Art, which brought the average American into contact with wilderness through the medium of pictures (“The Hudson River School”), but this appreciation was challenged by the rise of capitalism and urbanization. Still later, as the U.S. population grew larger and its government more complex, arguments about conservation and “the importance of wilderness to the American mind” became paramount, this time drawing the interest of burgeoning corporations, which sought to influence public attitudes with profits in mind (Nash 133). Throughout all stages in the United States’ development, the importance, usage, and validity of wilderness was thoroughly questioned, debated, and examined. Read this way, the Millennial downturn in interest can be seen as another chapter in evolving attitudes towards nature in the U.S. Unfortunately, the present generation’s lack of interest in the environment

is of paramount concern, as the Millennials have affected and will affect the global environment much more than their predecessors.

Currently, private citizens of the United States consume the largest proportion of the world's natural resources. The finding suggests that American consumers should be the most concerned about the environment, as they are the ones most directly impacting its welfare. As noted by Dave Tilford of the Sierra Club, "With less than 5 percent of world population, the U.S. uses one-third of the world's paper, a quarter of the world's oil, 23 percent of the coal, 27 percent of the aluminum, and 19 percent of the copper" (Scheer & Moss). National Geographic notes also that "Americans are the least likely to use public transportation...least likely to purchase locally grown food and...least likely to use their own non-disposable bags while shopping" ("Greendex"). These statistics are leaving aside the fact that production of garbage and lack of recycling are beginning to take tolls on the environment through deforestation, as is the rampant consumption of wood for paper (American Forest & Paper Association). All of these statistics and more fuel intense debates between conservationists and other commentators, like news media.

With all the theatrics, why, then, does the average U.S. Millennial express less concern about the environment than his or her predecessors? It is tempting to ascribe this apathy to a fast-paced, technology-ridden society, in which the average Millennial is lazy, self-absorbed, and confined to the house. One notes these critiques in the popular artwork of London-based Ajit Johnson.<sup>1</sup> His project "#ThisGeneration" makes several comments on modern youth; his minimalist drawings show teenagers seeking WiFi before water and bemoan how young adults may "break up" via text. Though the impact of technology on society is unmistakable, such sweeping critiques are difficult to stomach; they add another unproductive layer to discourse on the environment. Few people are interested in discovering what, precisely, lies at the heart of Millennial disinterest.

As with any generalized attitude, the lack of concern is likely caused by a number of underlying factors. While changes to the discourse in the United States do not provide a complete explanation for the weakening interest, the apathy may be attributed in part to the current state of Millennial cultural surroundings. Put another way, the current discourse is not conducive to comprehension of or concern for the environment. Examination of the form and substance of popular U.S. discourse and accounts from people who have reconnected with nature may explain why, although "...we are three minutes away from doomsday" ("It Is Three"<sup>2</sup>), Millennials show little concern.

### Discourse in the United States

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current *discourse*. *Discourse* has various connotations and definitions. For this examination, discourse refers to the way ideas are exchanged, via text, speech, picture, video, or any other media. Discourse refers to both the form and the content of any idea or information

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson is based in London, but the globalized nature of U.S. discourse makes his critiques relevant.

<sup>2</sup> The *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, the source of this claim, attempts to predict global disaster. Aside from nuclear proliferation, the journal also examines environmental factors. The *Bulletin's* most recent change to the Doomsday Clock was the result of rising sea levels, a circumstance commonly associated with global warming.

expressed. In sum, it is the way the Millennials of the United States communicate with one another. This discourse is currently not suited to aiding the Millennial interest in, comprehension of, or concern for environmental challenges. Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman, and Timothy Morton provide support for this theory from three different perspectives. McLuhan states that the prevalent format of ideas (in the present case, social media) makes environmental concerns less appealing. Neil Postman indicates that the shift of discourse towards entertainment makes acquisition of meaningful information difficult. Finally, Timothy Morton argues that environmental issues are too vast for meaningful human comprehension.

From approximately 1950 to approximately 1986, discourse in the United States was dominated by television and movies (Lotz 44). Movies communicated lavish and exotic lifestyles, but television was a more consistent medium, present in everyday life. Therefore, television's inherent messages more closely reflected the importance of everyday ideas, like community and cultural norms. Television was particularly adept at expressing these concepts because the average television episode was long enough to convey meaningful messages via the words and actions of actors or news analysts. Because television dominated discourse and was shared by many others, it was a communal experience in itself (Lotz 42).

Since about 1986, discourse has fractured. With the advent of the Internet paralleling the rise of global trade, media are now optimized to send a wide variety of different messages. The ease with which the average Millennial can access information on any topic and find an accompanying virtual community, as on Reddit.com, forces content makers to conform to their consumers' wants and desires—not the other way around. The fracturing of media does have benefits. The general population may be better informed on matters they are interested in (though peddlers of false information do exist). Still, the fracture may be bad for environmental concerns, as McLuhan, Postman, and Morton point out.

Marshall McLuhan published his seminal work, *Understanding Media*, in 1962. While he died in 1980, not living to see widespread private access to the Internet, his main point may yet be relevant: “The medium is the message.” His theories imply that different forms of communication—text, video, and picture—are conducive to different messages. Given the period in which he wrote, he was especially concerned with the telephone, television, and movie, all of which provided different advantages and disadvantages. His observations concluded that the same message could be filtered such by different media that it would take on different characteristics, potentially changing the intended meaning of the message to something different altogether (McLuhan 64).

In the chapter “Media Hot and Cool,” McLuhan advances two categories of media, which are the titular hot and cool: “Any hot medium....extends a single sense in *high definition*....the state of being well filled with data” (36-37). It is important to keep McLuhan's definition of *high definition* separate from more technical terms used today. High-definition, hot media, McLuhan argued, are those that do not invite active engagement or participation. Cool media are the opposite—those that “relied on viewers to fill in the blanks” (McLuhan 36-37). So the telephone, which originally relied on a user to fill in many gaps regarding the person's facial expressions, “what they were wearing and so on,” was a cool medium (McLuhan 36-37). A movie, which presented itself fully without any interference from the viewer, was instead a hot medium, as were photographs and paintings.

The integration of hashtags into advertisements, sports programs, and news channels, as well as the invention of social media, has blurred the lines of hot and cool media. McLuhan may have argued that something as simple as the comment section of a YouTube video can change the meaning of the video radically by introducing additional information in a different format. Regardless of a medium's status as hot or cool, data supports that Millennials prefer cool media to hot ("Advertising and Audiences"). Interaction is now crucial to the success of a television show, a movie, a political campaign, or a marketing campaign. An explosion of blogging websites and intense efforts on behalf of corporations to interact with their consumer base underpin that fact. This trend, too, explains why an endeavor like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*—a hot, concentrated effort in the form of a book—may very well be met with Millennial silence.

Given the complexity of environmental damage, the information would most likely have to be presented in hot, information-rich formats. Lists, textbooks, graphs, and charts would all have to be utilized; in fact, these formats are often the form information on the environment takes ("Deforestation"). Interactive undertakings may be possible for a time, but would rapidly become too complex or expensive to be feasible. Thus, both the Millennial preference for cool media, as well as the resistance of environmental concerns to that format, play parts in Millennial disinterest.

In order to understand why the medium of presentation may affect Millennial perception of the issue altogether, one may also turn to Neil Postman, an acolyte of McLuhan, and his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. Postman's work contains sentiments similar to "#ThisGeneration," though published in 1985. Postman notes the inherent absurdity of each generation fearing the next generation, but he remarks upon his current generation's (and future generations') ability to synthesize and integrate large amounts of data (ch. 4). He is concerned with how rapidly a television changes pictures—on average, every second. In the infancy of television, this was an unprecedented pace of information delivery. He then proposes that young people are most readily accepting of information when it is presented in an entertaining format, but that the structure of entertainment is not conducive to learning, for the entertainment must be without exposition in order to effectively catch the attention; this, in turn, reduces the viewer's overall tolerance for deeply nuanced knowledge (ch. 8). Unfortunately, it is this same nuanced knowledge that would allow Millennials to make sophisticated inferences about the environment, thus understanding the damage being done. Entertainment messages would necessarily reduce the complexity and inherent importance of environmental concerns. However, if current trends continue, the average Millennial may not be interested even in educational, entertaining media.

One can only imagine how Postman would receive the existence and popularity of Vines, nine-second long videos that play ad infinitum, or SnapChat, a social media platform on which participants send one another pictures that "self-destruct" after a few seconds. SnapChat recently made its inventor, Evan Spiegel, the youngest billionaire in the world at 24 years old. Facebook allows for longer posts, but Twitter is constrained by brevity: each Twitter missive is no greater than 140 characters. It is worth noting, too, that Facebook is

falling out of favor with younger crowds,<sup>3</sup> being replaced by Instagram, which relies almost entirely on visuals (“Global Social Media”).

While this information is provocative, it may find one edging back into the “#ThisGeneration” point of view. Leaving aside moral judgment, one fact is apparent—the types of media that surround the average Millennial are not conducive to explaining the problems with the environment. Some statistical analysis indicates that the attention span necessary for comprehending these facts is rapidly dwindling. The Statistic Brain Research Institute states that “Millennials have an attention span of eight seconds, one less than a goldfish” (“Attention Span Statistics”). Even if one released tweets, Vines, or SnapChats about the environment, it would be difficult to garner any attention; Millennials’ lack of concern for the environment has arguably been replaced by self-interest and self-fulfillment, which would take precedence over the information (Twenge 1050).

Even if the right media were available, accessible, and desirable, and a young audience held captive, could one expect comprehension and concern? Timothy Morton says no. *Hyperobject*, a term coined by Timothy Morton in his book *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*, refers to any object so large, nonlocal, and “viscous” that it defies human comprehension, reason, and interaction. He provides a rather Dadaist assemblage of potential hyperobjects, including the biosphere, the Florida Everglades, the Lago Agrio oil field, a black hole, and the solar system (4). These are all phenomena that, while occasionally glimpsed in localized presentations or made knowable by computed data, are still, according to Morton, vaster and more elusive than any human can understand.

While the book proves frustrating, occasionally sophomoric in tone, and unmanageable, a visual presentation of Morton’s ideas by Danish-Icelandic artist Olafur Eliasson is less so. From October 26-29, 2014, in response to the 5<sup>th</sup> Assessment on Global Climate Change by the United Nations’ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Eliasson installed “twelve large blocks of ice...from the Greenland ice sheet” in Copenhagen’s City Hall Square (“Olafur Eliasson”). Photographs from the event include people cuddling with the ice blocks. Watching the ice’s “gradual demise,” according to quotes selected by the artist, serves as a wakeup call, an undeniable fact that climate change is real, as well as a demonstration that the human race must encounter smaller, local portions of a hyperobject for humans to experience it at all; even then, comprehension falters. As Morton writes,

Some days global warming fails to heat me up. It is strangely cool and violently stormy. My intimate sensation of prickling heat at the back of my neck is only a distorted print of the hot hand of global warming...it surrounds me and penetrates me, like the [F]orce in Star Wars. The more I know about global warming, the more I realise how pervasive it is....The more I struggle to understand hyperobjects, the more I discover that I am stuck to them. They are all over me. They are me. (24)

As he notes, he still does not comprehend global warming sufficiently.

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<sup>3</sup> The study this information is based on comes from London, but has global implications, as does “#ThisGeneration.”

Taken together, Morton's, Postman's and McLuhan's arguments form a depressing triad of explanations for why the average Millennial does not care as much about the environment as his or her predecessors. Yet, while Tim Morton may be correct that hyperobjects extend past human logical understanding, Eliasson's art installation demonstrates that small pieces of such objects may demand some sort of attention. The art project, in turn, supports McLuhan's notion of cool media (all puns aside). By interacting with melting parts of the ice sheet, viewers can, at the very least, internalize some part of the effect climate change may be having on the rest of the world. Of course, this demonstration did not take place in the U.S. and was not encountered by U.S. Millennials; however, based on Postman's ideas, one could imagine a similar art installation with a corresponding hashtag inspiring some sort of reaction. This minor success implies that direct experience with the environment is necessary to transform one's attitude towards it.

Eliasson is not alone. Encounters with the localized representations of ecological problems could help. Some attempts have already been made. Gregg Segal's photo series "7 Days of Garbage" is another example. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency states that the average person in the U.S. produces "about 4 pounds of trash a day. . .[doubling] the amount from 1960...50% more than Western Europeans" (Environmental Protection Agency). Segal photographs Californians lying in a week's worth of their own garbage to demonstrate how much waste one person can produce (Teicher). Spanish street artist Isaac Cordal has erected a set of small statues of politicians in a puddle; water rises to the men's noses. Social media users renamed the statue "Politicians Debating Global Warming" (Dougherty) Christopher Swain, a local environmental activist in Brooklyn, swam the Gowanus Channel in Brooklyn on April 24, 2015 (Biello 2015). The water at this Superfund site is so polluted by gasoline, raw sewage, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), coal tar, and detergent that it is considered one of the dirtiest waterways in the world. Swain reportedly gargled with hydrogen peroxide following the swim (Biello 2015). These efforts and hundreds of others appear every few days, only to be rapidly swallowed up by other messages. In contemporary media, the messages are sometimes competing for attention, sometimes deliberately formulated to obscure the meaning, and often completely lacking in context—all qualities that repel serious engagement by the viewer.

Yet, perhaps these localized examples are not direct enough encounters with the Millennial population to foster comprehension and concern. Perhaps one would have to immerse oneself in an entirely different culture to understand the enormity of damage to the environment, or the large gap between the environment and U.S. Millennial concerns. *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, *Refuge*, and *Ancient Wisdom* provide three examples of people moving outside U.S. public discourse and directly encountering nature. The encounter shapes their writing, their ideas, and possibly their subsequent lifestyle. Perhaps direct experience with nature will change Millennial minds, since nature was so influential on the works and lives of the authors Annie Dillard, Terry Tempest Williams, and Robert Wolff.

### Outside Contemporary Discourse

Eliasson, and by extension, Morton, are correct in that a person must intimately encounter an unfamiliar discourse or phenomenon in order to experience it even minimally. In such an encounter, Morton's rabid insistence on the limits of human understanding is in

some ways irrelevant. If an encounter with the environment is enough to change one's behavior, total comprehension of a subject like global warming or environmental destruction may not be necessary. Perhaps Eliasson's chunks of ice were not a direct enough experience to communicate the importance of the environment; Annie Dillard has directly encountered the environment, so her ideas and writing in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* are shaped by it.

Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* is a perennial classic, much like *Silent Spring*. The book relates her encounters with nature. Though she has withdrawn from modern U.S. discourse (at a time when television was still prevalent, 1970), she is still steeped in older discourse of a hot kind, in the form of books on philosophy and religion. However, her book eschews the often rigid structures of those works and is structured instead around the cycle of a year. Each chapter is flavored by the changes in the seasons. This sort of cyclical narrative echoes the changes in nature, in which Dillard seems particularly interested (147). That her book is written in this way demonstrates the effect nature had on shaping her ideas.

Like other people immersed in the environment, Dillard writes of its components and occurrences. She does not elevate the animals she sees to mythical emblems of nature. She focuses very closely on physical existence, paying special attention to the details; her fascination with details is apparent in her discussion of microscopic creatures, wherein she states, "Two monostyla drive into view from opposite directions....as their drop heats from the light on the mirror, the rotifers skitter more and more frantically...and at last can muster only a halting twitch" (122). That she is viewing a microscopic set of creatures echoes her care for detail and enhances it. Similar points of view can be noted in her discussion of pond insects (190-191) and at many other points in the book.

Compared to the messages and form of contemporary U.S. discourse, Dillard's points of view seem whimsical at best, anachronistic at worst. The present-day form of U.S. discourse is simultaneously too complex and too focused to communicate ideas like Dillard's. While Dillard interacts with these creatures, the Millennial cannot act upon Dillard acting on these creatures in any way that presents the Millennial with emotion-invoking meaning. Though social media was, of course, not extant in 1970, Dillard's escape from a world full of newspapers and televisions—which, Postman believes, were already wreaking havoc on attention spans—suggests that in order to have a meaningful interest in nature, one must isolate oneself from the modern world.

Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge* further exemplifies these ideas but suggests that complete withdrawal is not necessary. Her withdrawal from society, which occurred in 1983, was not as profound as Annie Dillard's. Her world was already tempered by her cultural surroundings, which were a bit different than the milieu of the average U.S. citizen who consumed much television. Her Mormonism shaped her life. As a result, she exhibits the longer attention span necessary to complete her scientific duties and write her book. Her book does not echo the cycle of the year, like Dillard's, but instead extends outward in a series of interrelated anecdotes, reminiscent of the flooding of the Preserve she writes about; her chapter titles are comprised of the birds she sights and of the current level of the Great Salt Lake. Nature, then, is still influential, though her experience was not the same as Dillard's. Her travels to the Great Salt Lake were temporary respites from the emotional pain of her mother's diagnosis with cancer.

What is most striking about Williams's direct encounter with the wilderness is how drastically it changes her. She learns of environmental destruction and of nuclear testing. As

a result of this and of her own interrelated problems, her normally obedient nature is transformed to that of an activist:

I crossed the line at the Nevada Test Site and was arrested with nine other Utahns [*sic*] for trespassing on military lands. They are still conducting nuclear tests in the desert. Ours was an act of civil disobedience. But as I walked toward the town of Mercury, it was more than a gesture of peace. It was a gesture on behalf of the Clan of One-Breasted Women. (289 – 290)

Williams's actions are nonviolent. Notably, though, her ideas were changed and her expression of them was transformed—from living quietly to writing and action—by direct experiences with damage done to nature. The tragic deaths of her mother and her grandmother, as well as the cancer within herself, provided an impetus. She sees vividly that her family's well-being and her own are dependent, in some ways, on the health of the environment.

Imposing these negative circumstances directly onto an apathetic public is neither feasible nor desirable. However, Williams is deeply affected by her encounters with nature even though her isolation is not as complete as Dillard's; this suggests that encounters with the wilderness may be attainable for the average Millennial and sufficient to change one's attitude. A different storyteller provides evidence that an even less encompassing experience with the environment can still change a person. Robert Wolff is Dutch, but he spent a large portion of his life in the United States (4). As a result, and from his own personal accounts, he is clearly familiar with U.S. discourse. Furthermore, his foray into nature was not a result of his desire to withdraw. He traveled to Malaysia to pursue his career, but was transformed by the experience nonetheless.

### **Wolff and the Sng'oi<sup>4</sup>**

It is possible also to examine the sharp disconnect between Millennial culture and the environment by juxtaposing the current U.S. discourse with another culture's—that of the Sng'oi. While obvious, valuable differences in mindset exist between modern U.S. discourse regarding nature and the corresponding discourse other cultures, countries, and tribes, the Sng'oi take their discourse one step farther by lacking a specific, fixed set of myths about the environment. Occasionally the forces of nature are personified, but this occurs in highly selective, unusual circumstances, such as the Lord of the Great Ocean (as discussed later). For the most part, trees, animals, and natural forces exist as they are. Life is lived day to day in a discourse that seems antithetical to the modern Millennial's. It is this lack of boundaries that renders the Sng'oi most interesting. The account of the People (as they call

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*Ancient Way of Knowing.*

Three defining characteristics of the Sng'oi culture indicate the importance of nature to their discourse: their nature-centric lifestyle, their daily rituals, and their beliefs regarding

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<sup>4</sup> No comment is made on the status of the Sng'oi or on their cultural concerns today. Instead, the focus is on how nature shaped Sng'oi discourse and, in turn, how that affected Wolff.



their environment. Situated on a lush part of the Malaysia peninsula, the Sng'oi create temporary settlements and move with no fixed pattern (Wolff 52). They live deep in a tropical jungle and thus find their needs very easy to meet. So, Sng'oi live unhurried lives in which they hunt and forage very little, relying instead on their internal appetites to tell them whether or not to find food. Wolff remarks on the discomfort this aimlessness initially causes him (42).

The environment shapes the Sng'oi idea of time, which then shapes their discourse. The climate is relatively predictable; they do not have stories about raging storm gods or fast-changing seasons. They do not idolize people who hurry about, nor do they disparage them. They see fit to live comfortably in reaction to their steady environment. Contrastingly, Annie Dillard lives in an environment with changing seasons; her book is shaped accordingly, suggesting that each direct encounter with nature is different but leaves the person with the idea that the environment is important. Additionally, for the Sng'oi, the idea that time is not important can be noted in how they communicate with one another. The Sng'oi dialect has no clearly defined verb tenses, nor a possessive pronoun (Wolff 121).

Obvious differences exist between the Sng'oi lifestyle and that of the modern Millennial. Millennials “multitask more than ever before” (Lane 2014). The value and regularity of time in the U.S. is apparent in the strictness of scheduling. The cycles of the moon, seasons, and days have all been calculated to the second; that uniform time is immediately accessible via cell phone and laptop. Social media, too, demonstrate this obsession, through time stamps on posts. The Millennial emphasis on time-driven productivity is foreign to the Sng'oi culture; the Sng'oi have no reason to work harder, to acquire anything more than the very basics. Still, the Sng'oi lack of production is not to say that their lives are shallow, either; rather, they are filled with group companionship, laughter, and jokes (Wolff 141).

The daily Sng'oi rituals indicate the environment's importance. “Every morning,” writes Wolff, “the tribe would join one another over the breakfast fire to describe their dreams” (147). Then, the tribe joins together in asking one another about their dreams, resulting in a coherent narrative. The method of communication involves a series of questions and answers—*What did the flower look like? How big was the bird?* The tribe then reach a consensus on what the dream means and allow it to “shape the rest of their day” (Wolff 88). The physical reality of nature, as well as its connotations, provide the backdrop for Sng'oi interaction; many of their conversations are about interesting flowers or trees nearby. As nature permeates their society, they find it important enough to propagate ideas about it to one another.

While the Sng'oi lack specific narrative myths, at least as expressed to Wolff, their dreams occasionally hold symbolic meaning. The Sng'oi also hold dear the concept of a spirit or totem animal. Wolff is unsure whether each Sng'oi has a spirit animal, but knows that the identity of one's totem animal is quite secret, usually not revealed to anyone. Even the ways in which the spirit animal affects one's life are not bounded by any dominating narrative; according to Wolff's closest Sng'oi companion, Ahmeed, a spirit animal is an “animal that helps” (168). The environment, of course, plays a role here too, by providing spirit animals to begin with.

Lastly, the Sng'oi beliefs about the environment display their unique connection to nature. Unlike other tribal schools of thought, which sometimes held parts of nature to be

“other,” or dangerous, the Sng’oi have an all-inclusive conception of nature. Within this belief is the particular notion that some people belong to specific trees (116–128). These beliefs are difficult to express outside of the Sng’oi native Malay; English, according to Wolff, does not have words equivalent to these beliefs. While “belong to” seems to imply co-stewardship, the habits of the Sng’oi do not make that apparent. Boundaries of ownership do not occur. Nonetheless, as a result of belonging to trees and vice versa, the Sng’oi hold deep affection for their surroundings and always take care not to take too much from the environment (86).

In some ways, the physical presence of nature is all it takes to shape discourse. One prime example concerns Ahmeed, a companion of the author, having his first encounter with the ocean. The Sng’oi, as stated, are very isolated. When Robert Wolff travels to a port for more goods, Ahmeed accompanies him. Ahmeed is struck by the vastness of the ocean; he at first cannot comprehend something “out of his circle” (128). The primary importance of this incident relates to how Ahmeed relays his information to the rest of his tribe. The revelation occurs in a small, smoky hut full of many members of the tribe; it takes the form of oral storytelling:

He [Ahmeed] began: He had gone with me to the Great Ocean. It took a long time to get there.... “There was great fear in his heart.” (There is no possessive pronoun in Malay....) “So much water...Listen! In front of you there is water as far as you can see.” And he repeated: “As far as you can see....much fear in this heart....much fear because all this water eats the land....That night, when I go to the Real World I meet the Lord of the Great Ocean....[He] told him not to be afraid, that the Great Ocean told him not to be afraid, that the Great Ocean would not eat the land; the land was floating on the ocean.” A sigh of relief went through the people....Yes, that was it, the land was floating on the ocean, yes, that could be.... (135-136)

Ahmeed then goes on to describe the ocean’s salinity, internal mountain ranges, and all types of animals (135-136).

The subject of the discourse at this time is the environment—the ocean and the way the ocean is related to the tribe—and demonstrates its essential importance to the Sng’oi. The repetition of “do not be afraid” underpins this notion; to the Sng’oi, even the distant ocean is part of their environment and can affect them personally. Thus, they are concerned. The detailed description of what is in the ocean echoes the earlier ritualistic practices; the ocean description and the dream-questions both indicate a great deal of curiosity about the environment. Because the Sng’oi discourse assumes that the environment is part of their lives (or, on occasion, of themselves), there is no need to define *wilderness* and *environment* for them. Their relationship to the natural world is deeply ingrained.

Robert Wolff left the experience profoundly changed. In the last pages of the book, he discusses how this new “knowing” has shaped his perspective. It is easy to dismiss the rather amorphous implications of this statement; Wolff reinforces the “knowing,” however, with changes to his life. He makes time to value and appreciate the environment. His old lifestyle is no longer possible, as it causes him too much distress. His time in nature was

neither isolated nor for a healing purpose. Still, his encounter was enough to change his attitude.

## Conclusion

The average U.S. Millennial is less interested in the environment than his or her predecessors. This attitude could be dismissed as a simple shift in viewpoint, as changes in viewpoint have occurred over the course of generations. However, the Millennial perspective is more important than the attitudes of their predecessors, because U.S. Millennials are consuming the largest proportion of the environment's resources.

The shape of U.S. discourse is not conducive to learning about the complex factors affecting the environment. McLuhan, Postman, and Morton agree that preferences in accessing information affect reception of a message. McLuhan's emphasis on the differences between hot and cool media highlight Millennial preferences for cool, or interactive, media, which may be an infeasible way to disseminate information about environmental issues. Postman implies that entertaining, cool media oversimplify information, which in turn implies that contemporary media would be useless to convey the complexity of the environment and factors that affect it. Morton says no one can understand the environment meaningfully.

Regardless, Dillard's, Williams's, and Wolff's direct and indirect experiences with the environment manage to shape their ideas, despite their different purposes in going away from modern discourse and the differing degrees to which they experience nature in isolation from other discourses. The form and content of Dillard's book demonstrate that her aloneness in nature did serve a meditative purpose. Williams's discussions of nature and turn toward activism show how the environment affected her everyday life. Wolff's even less direct encounter with nature—surrounded by people, on a job assignment—was still enough to change him. This all suggests that, to foster understanding, Millennials must reach past contemporary discourse and experience the environment, however directly they can, in order to change their attitudes and redirect their attention to the present environmental crises.

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