

# **It's Only Natural**

Essays on the "Idea of Nature"



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## Introduction

This is a short work about the “idea of nature” considered from the transient perspective of the year 2019—which warmly welcomed another 80+ million humans to the planet. If you think that it might be impossible to do an adequate treatment of the “idea of nature” in a short work, you are probably right. This is not an attempt to be adequate. It is an attempt to approach reality at a sufficient angle to catch it somewhat off guard.

Maybe you've never thought much about the “idea of nature”. Or maybe you think that idea is so confusing that it is not worth wasting time on. Or something. In fact, no matter what you think about it, even if you are a professional thinker, or even if you don't give a flying fig, the “idea of nature” continually shapes our lives. It does this slowly enough that we scarcely notice how it happens. We are not very good at understanding slow changes around us. What we might call “a forest” will actually seem to be quite a dynamic place when studied over decades or longer. Often, our names for “things” suggest a lack of any change, and may subtly condition us to ignore significant effects over time spans we might otherwise appreciate. And so, to ignore the wonder of natural processes.

Our use of language (considered broadly: composition, words, inflection, gestures, pauses, etc.) often leaves us in conceptual tangles that we don't really notice. It would be misleading to refer to an abuse of language, partly because a major feature of language is to enable abuse, and partly because language itself is too fluid to actually be abused. Far from being “trapped” by language, to a significant extent we *are* language, which has co-evolved with us to enable what we do. In any critical examination of the use of language we are, of course, limited to the use of language. So we're in good shape there.

There is very little, if anything, in what follows that is “original”, and nothing that should be considered comprehensive. In part, it is a mix of the blindingly obvious and the inexcusably arcane. Much greater detail is available elsewhere; you could look it up. As just one idiosyncratic overview—let’s say an invitation—agreement or disagreement with this is neither compulsory, nor relevant. You can make of that what you will. But the next time the word “nature” crosses your path, you might want to give it a closer examination.

Although this is a book of individual essays, I think they flow somewhat like a stream, and suggest that they are best read sequentially. And just a warning about the multitude of words such as “nature” which appear in scare quotes: yes, there are a lot of scare quotes used to indicate ambiguity, misdirection, and misconception in our everyday language. While this may seem somewhat awkward, it is also necessary.

I am solely responsible for all errors and mistakes\* included in the following pages.

\*For those who lack the time or interest to read this, but still want to criticise it, a handy list of “errors and mistakes” is included at the end for convenience.

I wish to thank our daughter, Maya, for thoughtful and skillful editorial contributions that resulted in significant improvements to these essays. And in this effort, and in so many other ways, I have benefited immensely from the support and companionship of my wife, Eva.

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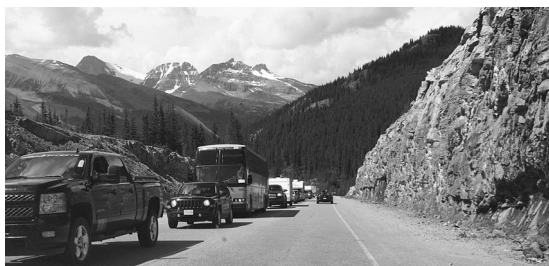
## Bringing the Steel to Lake Louise

The uphill rivers of steel and plastic converge on icy blue Lake Louise. The flow of rolling spring and summer freshets surge to new heights every year, then slow near the well-contained shore, disgorging selfie-seeking bipeds at the end of the asphalt.

Lake Louise doesn't care, so why should we? If fully-equipped fifth wheels, "Rolling Thunders" or "Brave Freedoms" with thirty-foot pop-outs, and tour buses in their thousands bring masses of wilderness-lovers to gawk at receding glaciers, what difference does it make? Everyone's having fun, aren't they? And all the money being spent is being made by others, so everything is in perfect balance. Balance in nature, you might say.

Up above one of the hanging glaciers beyond the lake, is that a little bit of wilderness, where no person has ever been? It can be seen, vaguely, with the aid of a long lens. There may be small, perhaps tiny, bits of wilderness even closer, where no person has ever looked. This is debatable, because no standards have been set for the minimum size of a wilderness. But no amount of real wilderness is necessary, or even desirable, for a good selfie.

No accurate statistics are available on the yearly tonnage of steel and disgorged bipeds "visiting" the lake, nor the length of the average "visit". We don't even know the length, in time or distance, of the average journey along the uphill river. Simple observation shows that people like to use a powerful foot to drive fast—perhaps so that they can more quickly get to the end. They seem to like to look around quickly and move on. Maybe because there is so much to finish seeing.





Lake Louise is not in the business of educating visitors, or enhancing the “guest experience”, but for those with a minute or two to spare, there is a scattering of interpretive panels offering history and ecology bites here and there. These panels show that it is a playground, but a semi-serious, world-famous playground. While most visitors don't actually play much—unless they are playing things on their smartphones—they are briefly partly immersed in a spectator sport. Most do take photos and selfies, but that's a kind of journalism. And the tonnage in the uphill river doesn't lie. Just looking around, anyone can see that they wouldn't want to miss being seen seeing there.

### **“Been There Done That...”**

It seems like almost no one *has* missed Lake Louise. If you ask, just about everyone says they have been there at the end of the asphalt, glancing at the water and the rocks and the ice. Isn't it beautiful? Everyone agrees that it is beautiful. Of course, sometimes it's cloudy or rainy, and then it is different. It's a disappointment. But these things happen outdoors in nature, and with luck the weather at some other attraction will be better. Maybe even perfect.

Lake Louise will never admit it, but once has become quite enough for most visitors, who try valiantly to reduce all that water and rock and ice to a consumer item. A simple sight bite. They “have been there”, and may have some kind of a selfie to prove it. Not that you would ever bother to doubt them. The relative few “experienced guests”, with a half-dozen or more visits, have had to discover some other kind of interaction with the area that attempts to ignore and avoid the vast majority. Those guests can hike up the trails and view the lake from above, or visit in the dead of night.

Overheard at Lake Louise: *“I don't know what it is about wilderness, but it really seems to attract people. Maybe it's because you can forget all your usual worries...”*

Lake Louise isn't worried about receding glaciers, so why should we be? Isn't it beautiful? And there's so much to look at, even if you've seen it before. There's a nice big hotel, with a number of dining rooms where you can join all the others having a big buffet

breakfast before looking at the lake, if you'd like. Big trucks haul all the food and other supplies up to the hotel more efficiently than the old horse-drawn carts hauled supplies up from the train station a century or more ago. It must also be the case that a river of tour buses is more efficient for hauling people than the train was. Lake Louise doesn't need to worry about efficiency when millions of selfies get generated automatically. Quick snap, post to the internet, move along.

So far, so good.



But... There's always a “but” or two, or more, alas. For example, let's look at that “efficiency”. Obviously, Lake Louise does not need any visitors at all, and managed to drain along perfectly well for millennia without the presence of a single “guest”. Call that a severe lack of steel and plastic if you will, but there was something fundamentally natural about it. True, it wasn't any use to anyone, if only because there mostly wasn't anyone. And so there was no steel, no wheels to move the steel, no fuel to make and move the steel or the asphalt for it to roll on, nor even the industrial agricultural food required to fuel all the eventual wilderness-lovers. All those elements have co-evolved with efficiency in pursuit of one or

another intended goal, or purpose. You can't have efficiency without a purpose, or two or three.

### **Still More and More of Less and Less**

Lake Louise doesn't have a purpose, but that's okay because all the visitors and their efficient providers have plenty to spare. That does make the situation a bit tricky. A lot of those purposes collide with other purposes. Along the lake shore, you may hear something like, "Wow, it's really crowded here! I can't even take a selfie!" This may be a symptom of too much efficiency, and too many purposes. And we're only talking quantity here, not quality.



Thinking of quantity, how many Lake Louises would it take to decrease the attraction? If there were ten, twenty, fifty Lake Louises, would wilderness-lovers flock to them all? Or would all those magnificent lakes seem not so special, or common even? Probably, they couldn't all be identical, but their differences might seem unimpressive, or even go unnoticed. How could visitors explain which Lake Louise they had chosen to glance at?

The real Lake Louise is on the Internet now with all the rest of us. Parks Canada recommends that we "Download. Drive. Discover." with a special app for our smartest phones. It might be possible to discover quite a lot moving at 90 kilometres an hour, but you do have to slow right down at the end of the asphalt. There you will discover that there are a hell of a lot of other visitors who have also done their driving and are already trying to do their own discovering. Each and every discovery will be well documented. It's a quantity thing again.

The vast quantity of visitors actively and passively discovering Lake Louise has in fact been officially recognised as a cause of the degradation of the "guest experience" itself. In order to mitigate this predictable negative development, the flow of steel and plastic on

the uphill river has been dammed and diverted. Now, in 2019, when all available parking space is fully jam-packed with pop-outs and tour buses each summer morning, the asphalt is closed off and a slow shuttle bus system is rolled out. This “inefficient” system marginally decreases the flow of guests to the lake shore, but it is “free”—for the time being.

This may all seem confusing to some. How can too many guests degrade the essence of being a guest—as long as there is enough space to take a selfie? And if it is true, surely there must be a simple fix. From this perspective, it might be better to evenly allocate space along the shore line. There could be a time-limited permit system, with the most accessible and desirable locations, especially during peak times, having a higher fee schedule. Permits could be booked up to a year in advance. Foreshore fees might even cover the cost of the shuttle bus system. Win-Win.

### **Yet Another Limited Hangout**

Now for what they sometimes call “full disclosure”: Lake Louise is obviously not wilderness, and has not been for a long, long time. The ways in which this is true are more complex than they might at first seem. Lake Louise has now been turned into a metaphor: symbolically, a relatively small and picturesque water feature in a much larger, shared back yard, where people gather to recreate sitting around smoky campfires among the natural trees—supported by all the comforts that tons of steel and plastic can bring.

This is a far more scenic back yard than many, and a very busy one, with fast and functional asphalt access. Fast access is good, because soon enough all that steel and plastic will quickly stream away to other scenic attractions, to be replaced in turn with even more steel and plastic. True recycling in nature.



This large, shared back yard is fully fenced to prevent wildlife (creatures that used to live in wilderness) from becoming road kill on the asphalt river, and messing up tons of steel and plastic. The fences help guide wildlife to highway overpasses and underpasses that provide some freedom of movement and greatly reduce animal mortality due to collisions. These are only humane and sensible measures given the impossibility of relocating the highway. This back yard is a model of co-existence and compromise, as well as being widely seen as a world-class level of “beautiful”.

There is apparently no old joke that says: “all purposes are equal, but some purposes are more equal than others”. All that steel and plastic doesn't just flood the uphill river by some instantaneous magic. It takes millions and millions of purposes to get it designed, fabricated, finished, advertised, sold, fuelled-up, and rolling on its way. Without Lake Louise, it would have nowhere to go. Whatever purposes any wildlife might have are understandably less equal, despite the fact that some visitors will really want to take selfies with bears.

All the colliding purposes have produced the co-existence and compromise in the beautiful back yard that has evolved into the internationally-renowned steel and plastic magnet that it is. Even the most hurried selfie-seeker spending a scant five minutes on the shore of Lake Louise must co-exist and compromise. The yearly increasing tonnage parked at the end of the asphalt is evidence that

the compromise is more than acceptable for most: the total investment is immense and undeniable.

### **Work Hard, Get Ahead**

Day after day after day, 24/7, Lake Louise works hard, more-or-less satisfying all the guests. Those whose purpose is to avoid crowds can visit in the icy dead of winter and play in the snow, but the lake could be frozen over. Those wanting to avoid crowds *and* cold can visit in summer at night, but the lake won't look blue then. Anyway, this crowd-avoidance obsession is just one small purpose among many, and the majority clearly get satisfied. If you stand there in the middle of a summer day, you can see that Lake Louise just works and works.



So those who seek wilderness can go elsewhere. It won't be easy; first because there is so much confusion about what “wilderness” really is, and then also because going there might just be what makes it disappear. A possible case of Schrödinger's Wilderness. One of the great, reassuring, strengths of Lake Louise is that on its shore there is no ambiguity regarding wilderness. All the steel and plastic has comfortably settled that.

At some point in the future, people may look back fondly on this time when scenic places are just overcrowded and trampled. These may become the “good old days” as those eventually in charge decide how to control ever larger numbers of “guest experiences”

while trying to parcel out the “specialness” of places. Guests can't take away chunks of places, so they take away certain qualities. It is unclear whether or not these are renewable resources. It is probably not possible to know what really makes any particular place “special”, because that will vary from person to person and from time to time, but sharing whatever the attraction is “democratically” will be tricky.



One obvious way to divide up the “specialness” would be to listen to Common Sense: demand exceeds supply, so just charge a lot more. Everybody knows that when things are rare, or scarce, they're worth more because a lot of people want them. A lot of this “specialness” at Lake Louise has just been given away for free, so it's no wonder people are lined up to get some. If it were to cost a lot more, not only would fewer visitors pay what it's really worth, but it wouldn't run out so fast either. That's one argument. Although some people will protest that high fees would discriminate against the poor, others with even more Common Sense will point out that the poor are used to discrimination pretty well everywhere.

And beyond even that, there are those who, with yet a little bit more Common Sense, have quickly figured out that the government is always inefficient, so it shouldn't be in charge of scenic sites at all. The government has no experience marketing anything except itself, they say. The government doesn't have the expertise to properly study the nature of “specialness”. The government doesn't know how to make a real profit. So the private sector should be given the chance to make the most of all the special places. The private sector has lots of experience selling special stuff. Only the private sector could “develop” special places into what they really

could be. (BTW it is truly amazing how many different complex situations Common Sense can easily sort out so quickly.)

For many years, the private sector has run profitable enterprises at and near Lake Louise, but it has no control of the mountains and the lake itself. If it had total control, the private sector could leverage the large numbers of guests visiting the lake shore, and spread out their impact in the process. There could be a large, floating grandstand to move guests off the shore itself. Higher reaches of the grandstand could command higher spectator fees. One way to spread out crowds over a twenty-four hour period would be to have night time fireworks over the lake, also viewed from the grandstand by paying guests who would prefer that spectacle to a daytime view. Water slides, selfie-platforms, helicopter sight-seeing, gondola rides, a circus maybe including bears, swimming with dolphins...possibilities would not even be limited by the most feverish imagination.

### **What If Everything Was Unique?**

But realistically speaking, the private sector will not be given total control of mountains, and lakes like Lake Louise, that are in parks. Instead, under-funded government agencies, with limited tools, will face the challenge of balancing the quality of something called “the guest experience” against an increasing overabundance of guests. And there must be one hell of a lot of guests roaming around, because Lake Louise is only one special place among many, many others facing the same problems. If you look into it, you may be shocked to learn how many there are at the end of other uphill rivers.





It is certainly possible to restrict access to sites, to keep the numbers of guests below some threshold, but that will involve “compromises”. Even if most guests more-or-less willingly accept the restricted access, it will never be possible to know how many people will object to the compromises and decide not to bother with a visit. This will be considered irrelevant if the total net numbers are still deemed to be high enough. It will also be impossible to know how many of those who do visit find the experience unpleasant and just don't say anything. This will also be considered irrelevant if the total number of visitors still seems high enough. No sense worrying about things you really don't want to know.

One thing you may not want to know is that it is impossible to know what even a relatively equitable “guest experience” would be. Everyone has different standards, and many guests seem to have remarkably...“relaxed”...standards. They don't appear to really notice crowding, or noise, or downtrodden vegetation, or stressed wildlife, or litter, as long as a good selfie is possible. Imposing a higher quality “guest experience” on this obvious majority would not be very “democratic” and would require a complex appeal to some “higher good”, and perhaps even “for their own good”. Additionally, reducing the dysfunction and the traffic jams will very likely facilitate an escalation of the problem. It might be similar to widening a highway and then finding even worse and more widespread traffic congestion before long.



Watching how some people drive in congested traffic on major highways can offer some insights. When the traffic gets dense, there are always drivers who are distracted and suddenly need to apply the brakes to avoid the vehicle in front, thereby causing vehicles behind to brake suddenly, and even stop completely. This starts a chain reaction that propagates far down the line. A certain number

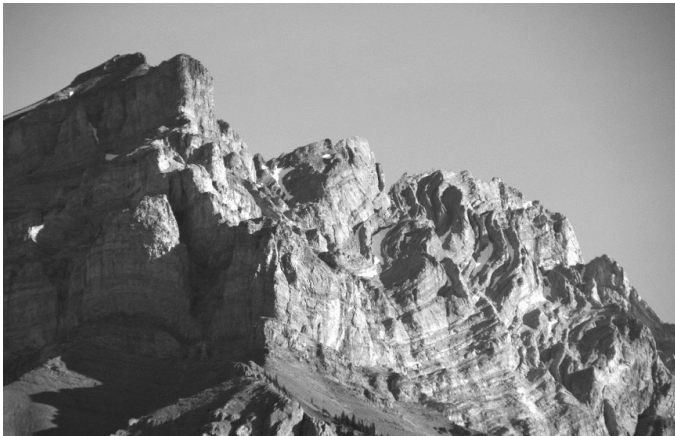
of drivers will constantly switch lanes, back and forth, trying to get a few spots ahead, while actually causing all traffic around to apply the brakes and slow down in response. Of course, if some drivers are doing it, others up ahead are doing it too. A few aggressive drivers will even use off and on ramps or lane closures to try and merge as far forward as possible, gaining a few places while slowing all traffic enough to more than destroy the gain. These sorts of actions actually create congestion before vehicle density alone would if all drivers behaved responsibly. Day after day, this social experiment gets repeated in countless locations. The results are in. No effective regulation exists for self-centred behaviour that leads to such collective inevitability—instead, this kind of behaviour is generally privileged. It is an expression of human ingenuity. And Common Sense has determined that regulation is always bad and impractical...and remarkably, it has done this without ever having to determine what all the different forms of regulation *are*.

So—should it just be that anything goes? It's a little late to be asking this question, which is really a number of questions masquerading as one. Advances in technology have resulted, over time, in the means and motives for increased visits to “special” places. Tourism promotions, digital media, smart phones, the Internet, RVs, improved roads, and more powerful vehicles have all contributed to the current situation. An overwhelming desire to “share” scenic selfies and repeat others' experiences has led to the annual seasonal flooding of the uphill rivers of steel and plastic. If some form of regulatory response is clearly indicated, it would need to be something beyond sandbagging.

Sandbagging doesn't work very well in Venice, which is a long way from Lake Louise but shares the problem of overcrowding. Venice doesn't have mountains and receding hanging glaciers, nor is the water in the lagoon icy blue, but Venice is a notoriously crowded selfie destination. In many ways Venice and Lake Louise seem quite dissimilar, but both are internationally famous “special places”. Visitors want to see them, and be seen to be seeing them. This last part is significant.

“Seeing” is easy—almost as easy as shopping. Just about anyone with at least one eye can do it. It's a common sight. There are no

standards, and practically no measurements of proficiency. In this sense, “sightseeing” really means site-“looking”. This is not to deny that it may take considerable effort to get to a site, and that people often do more than just look when they get there. But the “just looking” part of it is curious. Once the looking is done, however thoroughly, all that will remain are fading memories, however vague and transient. Okay, maybe a bunch of selfies too. For a relatively short initial scenic experience, and the possibility of vague recollections, *and* the lure of “sharing” with their followers, visitors are willing to expend serious effort to transport themselves long distances to all those well-known “special places”. Somehow it wouldn’t really work if they were *unknown* “special places”. While this may be just as well, it gives some insight into the motivation of many site-lookers and their many selfies. Perhaps eventually when it has been done enough, and is no longer in fashion, something else will be popular to consume instead.



It is true that the photos can help “remind” people of what they saw, if they don’t become misplaced or forgotten. But a photo of something that was looked at briefly is also a curious thing. Even if a well-photographed scene has not been overly altered by distortions of the camera lens, or filters, it still cannot possibly capture the extent of the original four-dimensional viewing experience. The photo will just be an image, but we’re okay with

images. Photos, images, are often seen as acceptable substitutes for real places. It wouldn't be possible to “share” all the selfies and “special places” without them. Entire glossy books of scenic images, and “stunning” travel videos help confuse viewers about reality. The image itself is “real”, the subject is “real”, and the relationship between the two is...curiously complex.

We can go way out on a limb and assert that there is no gene for sightseeing, or selfie-taking, and that people must learn to want to take selfies and “share” them. They also learn what is desirable to look at. It is still remarkable that this results in the elaborate uphill river of steel and plastic that so many are comfortable with. Nor is it the *end* result, because of course this flooding river erodes wildlife habitat and forest ecosystems even as it degrades the “visitor experience”—at least according to some observers and decision-makers. Far beyond that, the results of all the manufacturing processes needed to produce the flow of steel and plastic to places like Lake Louise will not get included in any selfies. When you look at an image of Lake Louise, you are not only *not* seeing Lake Louise, you are not seeing all that was produced in order to produce the image. You're not seeing all those purposes.

Thoughtful people have observed that taking photographs can limit or transform a person's experience profoundly. Selecting a viewpoint that will “make a good photo” will also restrict or misrepresent the aspects of a real experience that don't fit the picture framing. As a reminder, or an advertisement of a “special place”, a photograph is far from simply “representative”. Static snaps of preconceived elements in a continuous, unfolding process can be useful, but are not to be confused with reality. Photography, like all technologies, is far from “impartial”, and any claim that it is should be treated with skepticism—but only if we care to know more about how we are being screwed over. And we have the photos to prove it.

So what, give up on photos even? What's the point of going places if you have nothing to remember them by? Um...perhaps this is why nobody went anywhere before they invented cameras? Anyway, we have lots of cameras now, and plenty of steel and plastic to get to places with, so relax. No need to mini-panic and invoke the horror

of the potential loss of all that we take for granted, although that works in many arguments. If the implied question here is what “benefit” do we derive from thinking about all this—a most common question—the answer(s) may gradually emerge in what follows.

Let's leave the congregation at Lake Louise in peace for a bit, and go on a little nature walk...

