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Contains Natural and Artificial Wilderness

From health risks associated with diet beverages to regulations on genetically modified foods, artificial goods have certainly got their fair share of bad press. Find a bottle of vanilla extract. It is one of two types: the vastly more expensive natural vanilla extract and the much cheaper imitation vanilla flavor. There is obviously some legal distinction, but there is also a quite prevalent stigma around the word "artificial." Even though the vanilla flavor can be synthesized atom for atom to be identical to the natural extract, the stain on imitation vanilla's reputation is persistent.

There is a sort of superiority to the word, "natural"—an othering of some kind— as if somehow the chemically identical artificial variant is in some way worse. Regardless of whether or not the more expensive variant of flavor is noticeably better in anyway, the natural alternative is almost universally put on a high pedestal even when unwarranted.

Beyond common excuses including health effects of certain artificial flavors and a "lack of trace natural flavors" in the case of vanilla extract, there is reason to believe that this romanticism of the natural world is a luxury enjoyed by the developed world. For instance, in a 2018 essay by former director of the Danish Environmental Assessment Institute, Bjørn Lomborg, he notes that, "as societies become richer, individuals can afford to stop worrying about food and sanitation, and to start worrying about the environment" (Lomborg, 2018). Since caring about the environment takes valuable resources, it only makes sense that wealthier nations have access to a more pristine world.

The idea of a "pristine nature" is romanticized and only superficial. Romanticism was most popular in the first half of the 19th Century as a means of rejecting industrialism in favor of the "more natural" Middle Ages. However, the nature described in the Middle Ages is not pristine by any means. For example, in her 2016 TED talk, *Nature is everywhere – we just need to learn to see it*, Emma Marris remarks, "Humans have just been involved in nature in a very influential way for a very long time" (Marris, 2016). Sure there was less air and water pollution, but Europe has been deforested for nearly a Millenium not to mention the genetic modification of domesticated plants that has been taking place since the rise of farming. Suffice it to say: humans have always been manipulating their environment in some form or another.

The admittedly odd practice of the romanticization of nature is a focal point of journalist Emma Marris's Rambunctious Garden. She parallels Lomborg's argument stating, "It wasn't until societies attained a little safety, prosperity, and leisure, that nature in its wildest form began to seem rather romantic" (Marris, 2011). The example she cites is the US National Park service, noting that until domestic security was achieved—a lack of a threat of a British invasion, the end of the Civil War, and the conclusion of the Mexican American wars—that the first National Parks were established. Uncoincidentally, the US had also become quite financially stable at this time known now as the Gilded Age.

Even still, National Parks are managed by humans. They are not natural ecosystems, they are maintained ecosystems, and sometimes the maintenance shows. For example, throughout the 20th Century the population of wolves in National Parks was heavily regulated. This was done in good faith in an attempt to allow prey species to thrive. However, little did the humans know, they were playing with fire. By removing the wolves, the natural balance of the ecosystem had been disturbed. Elk populations dwindled as they starved to death in droves. A 2020 National Geographic article points out how reintroducing gray wolves to the park is "helping to create

more resilient elk herds" (Peterson). Ecosystems are extraordinarily complex systems that are nearly impossible to understand in full. For this reason alone, managing them is a daunting and dangerous task that can backfire in unexpected ways.

To compare managed efforts of conservation with nature in its wildest form, Marris argues that an overgrown suburban lot can be in many ways more wild than even National Parks (Marris, 2016). In some sense she is absolutely right. An abandoned lot is, by its very definition, void of human intervention; it is left for nature to run free. The micro-ecosystem that is the vacant lot self-balances rather quickly allowing for a wide array of species to work together. On the other hand, in the case of National Parks, "it takes a lot of work to make these places look untouched" (Marris, 2016). It does take a lot of work and a lot of money to keep beautiful ecosystems beautiful, but when the management is pointed out, it does make them seem less "natural".

Marris remarks on the reintroducing of gray wolves in the West in her 2021 TED talk, *Are wild animals really "wild"?* She makes a further point that even though they have been reintroduced, their free will has been extremely limited. They are GPS tagged, monitored, and hazed if they encroach on livestock. Even though they are living in the wilderness of a National Park, the lack of freedom makes suburban critters seem comparably wild (Marris, 2021).

Maybe she is right. Maybe managed ecosystems are less wild, but perhaps this new, quasi-synthetic wilderness is not all bad. As Marris notes in her 2015 article for Orion Magazine, "a paradox has emerged: now and in the future, only natural areas with lots of human help will continue to look and function the way they did hundreds of years ago; land that is truly allowed to "go wild" will change in unpredictable ways" (Marris, 2015). Simply put, what people think of as truly pristine wilderness cannot exist. Life is messy and, well, wild. Life exists to interact with its surroundings, so it naturally works towards a balance of chaos and order. The beautifully

structured chaos that exists only in small pockets around the world gives the illusion of a pure wilderness in the absence of human intervention.

Humans are animals too, and decoupling them from the natural world is a dangerous road to follow. Romanticizing the natural while defacing human accomplishment does not generate any progress towards a cleaner future. Even more dangerous, however, is deeming humans a "god species". Humans must rejoin the natural world, or at the very least not make moral judgements simply based on whether something is natural or artificial. In many cases the natural solution is better, that is absolutely true. However, in other cases, an artificial process can benefit all involved, including the natural world. So next time you find yourself shopping for vanilla extract, remember, nobody will notice if you use the synthetic flavor.