



On Trails: An Exploration

Robert Moor

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Winner of the National Outdoor Book Award and the Pacific Northwest Book Award

“The best outdoors book of the year.” —Sierra Club

A New York Times Bestseller

A Best Book of the Year—as chosen by *The Boston Globe*, *The Seattle Times*, Amazon, *National Post*, *New York*, *The Telegraph*, *Booklist*, *The Guardian Bookshop*

From a debut talent who's been compared to Annie Dillard, Edward Abbey, David Quammen, and Jared Diamond, *On Trails* is a wondrous exploration of how trails help us understand the world—from invisible ant trails to hiking paths that span continents, from interstate highways to the Internet.

In 2009, while thru-hiking the Appalachian Trail, Robert Moor began to wonder about the paths that lie beneath our feet: *How do they form? Why do some improve over time while others fade? What makes us follow or strike off on our own?* Over the course of the next seven years, Moor traveled the globe, exploring trails of all kinds, from the minuscule to the massive. He learned the tricks of master trail-builders, hunted down long-lost Cherokee trails, and traced the origins of our road networks and the Internet. In each chapter, Moor interweaves his adventures with findings from science, history, philosophy, and nature writing—combining the nomadic joys of Peter Matthiessen with the eclectic wisdom of Lewis Hyde's *The Gift*.

Throughout, Moor reveals how this single topic—the oft-overlooked trail—sheds new light on a wealth of age-old questions: How does order emerge out of chaos? How did animals first crawl forth from the seas and spread across continents? How has humanity's relationship with nature and technology shaped world around us? And, ultimately, how does each of us pick a path through life?

Moor has the essayist's gift for making new connections, the adventurer's love for paths untaken, and the philosopher's knack for asking big questions. With a breathtaking arc that spans from the dawn of animal life to the digital era, *On Trails* is a book that makes us see our world, our history, our species, and our ways of life anew.

On Trails: An Exploration Details

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From Reader Review On Trails: An Exploration for online ebook

Becky says

A good book that admittedly I was stopped from appreciating to its fullest by the second worst narrator I've ever listened to. Let's get that out of the way then- the audiobook was poorly edited, the sound was not normalized, many sentences were repeated, and the narrator did "accents" which were almost ALWAYS inappropriate to the speaker and were often too nasally and/or quiet. The narrator treated the audiobook like an acting reel, and that probably also explains why I'd never heard of him before.

So if you take anything away from this review let it be to read the actual book!

As for the actual information, I started and stopped this book so many times because of the narrator, that its hard for me to critique. I felt it started a bit slow, and I was definitely hoping for a little bit more about trails, but in the end, I thought the information presented was really lovely. My favorite section came at the end when he discussed the formation of information pathways (ie encyclopedias and online) and it was really fascinating and I wished it could've a bit longer. All in all definitely worthy of the praise that it has received.

jeremy says

the path of humanity is ever branching. all roads need not lead to times square.

a meditative, yet active inquiry into the nature of trails (human, animal, and technological), robert moor's *on trails: an exploration* seamlessly blends science, history, philosophy, and a poet's unerringly observational eye to create a varied and constantly engaging work that spans several genres. like a long meandering hike where one is gifted with myriad overlooks, disparate perspectives, and plenty of thought-provoking beauty to espy, moor's book is a worthy companion to both armchair adventurer and devoted outdoorsman alike. delving into both the personal and the profound, *on trails* is like a wise guide experienced enough to point out all of the interesting sights along the way, but humble enough to let his trailmate discern the meaning for themselves.

why do we hike? i have asked many hikers this same question, and i have never received a fully satisfying answer. it seems there are many overlapping reasons: to strengthen our bodies, to bond with friends, to submerge ourselves in the wild, to feel more alive, to conquer, to suffer, to repent, to reflect, to rejoice. more than anything, though, i believe what we hikers are seeking is simplicity—an escape from civilization's garden of forking paths.

Kels says

I have a feeling I'm going to love this book.

Note to self: read this on next hiking trip.

James Murphy says

My incentive in reading Moor's *On Trails* is my own enjoyment of hiking. The book delivers so much more than an examination of walking in the woods, though. Moor is a hiker himself, what he calls a thru-hiker, one who hikes long distances over established trails of great length. He describes some of his own experiences in spending 5 months hiking the entire Appalachian Trail from its beginning in Georgia to the ending on Maine's Mount Katahdin. Moor writes interestingly on why people hike and what they get from it. Most of the 2d half is taken up with an "exploration"--his word from the title, more appropriate than meditation--of hiking itself and the love of some people for extended hikes like the Appalachian Trail, the Pacific Crest Trail, or the Great Divide Trail. He understands those who love--sometimes need--to get out of their everyday lives and onto a trail which leads them into whatever nature, vision of wilderness, discipline, or solitude they seek. For me, the book became stronger and stronger as I read. Moor writes quite well and intelligently, so he moves eloquently through such topics as humanity's historical relation to wilderness and the impact of our newer technologies on hiking culture. By the end of the book what he's learned from a couple of his heroes, Thoreau and the Chinese poet/hermit Han-Shan, has caused him to become philosophical. The hiking trail, he writes, is merely one of the paths our lives take. He considers walking a trail to be an "untethered state." He agrees with Thoreau that walking the woods is the ultimate freedom. In describing how the hiker pares down what he carries from his life in the greater society, he writes, "In walking, we acquire more of less."

As I say, the book delivers a lot. Moor discusses not only trails like the Appalachian Trail and its history but the forerunners of every modern trail, animal trails--even fossilized ones--and Indian trails. Because trails are always the lines of least resistance used by moving animals and later followed by Indians, most of our modern highway system has paved them over in using the same routes. He spends time in explaining how the internet is also a trail. I was aware of the extension of the Appalachian Trail into Canada but didn't know that it'd recently been extended to even vault the Atlantic by engineering trails through the same Appalachian geology existing in Iceland, Spain, and Morocco. Moor's account of his part in mapping the new end of the trail in Morocco is fascinating. There's much more to this interesting book: the time he spent among Navajo shepherds studying how sheep create trails, the complexity of insect trails. There's something to be found here by everyone, especially by those who like to follow trails in the woods.

Diane says

This book is endlessly fascinating, but don't expect it to follow a straight line. Instead, it pursues its own meandering road.

When Robert Moor hiked the Appalachian Trail back in 2009, he became interested in the history of the trail itself, and in all other kinds of trails humans follow. He wondered why we like trails, why we build so many of them, and why some paths survive and others don't. After a lot of research and a fair amount of hiking, he arrived at this book, which isn't really a hiking memoir (as I mistakenly thought it was) but more of a rambling, Malcolm-Gladwell-esque* work of nonfiction that includes discussions on nature, science, technology, history and even philosophy.

I began to search for the deeper meaning of trails. I spent years looking for answers, which led me to yet bigger questions: Why did animal life begin to move in the first place? How does any creature start to make sense of the world? Why do some individuals lead and others follow? How did we humans come to mold our planet into its current shape? Piece by piece, I began to cobble together a panoramic view of how pathways act as an essential guiding force on this planet: on every scale of life, from microscopic cells to herds of elephants, creatures can be found relying on trails to reduce an overwhelming array of options to a single expeditious route. Without trails, we would be lost.

After mulling over this book for several days, I've decided it's impossible to describe, and Gladwellian is as close as I can get. Truly this is an interesting book, and I enjoyed it, even though it wasn't what I expected. Recommended for readers who like a book with a potpourri of subjects.

**Note: To be clear, Gladwell-esque is meant to be a compliment. If you are unfamiliar with his work, Malcolm Gladwell writes for The New Yorker magazine and he also has several bestselling books, which usually combine a variety of topics under one general theme, such as underdogs or trends. I've enjoyed most of his books and would recommend them.*

Interesting Quotes

"I learned that the soul of a trail — its *trail-ness* — is not bound up in dirt and rocks; it is immaterial, evanescent, as fluid as air. The essence lies in its function: how it continuously evolves to serve the needs of its users. We tend to glorify trailblazers — those hardy souls who strike out across uncharted territory, both figurative and physical — but followers play an equally important role in creating a trail. They shave off unnecessary bends and brush away obstructions, improving the trail with each trip. It is thanks to the actions of these walkers that the trail becomes, in the words of Wendell Berry, 'the perfect adaptation, through experience and familiarity, of movement to place.' In bewildering times — when all the old ways seem to be dissolving into mire — it serves us well to turn our eyes earthward and study the oft-overlooked wisdom beneath our feet."

"There is a simple reason why we find the image of circling ants or caterpillars so troubling. The first instinct of humans who are lost in the wilderness is to cling to any trail they find and never leave it. Indeed, authorities on wilderness survival commonly recommend this tactic: 'When you find a trail stay on it,' declares a backpacking guide published by the U.S. Forest Service, in a section titled 'If You Get Lost.' A trail, the naturalist Ernest Ingersoll once wrote, is a 'happy promise to the anxious heart that you are going *somewhere*, and are not aimlessly wandering in a circle.' A circular trial, then, is a cruel trick, a breach of logic, almost a kind of black magic."

"Old age brings with it another kind of liberation: freedom from the doubt, anger, and restlessness of youth. The old can look back and see their decisions as a single concatenation, sheared of all the ghostly, untaken routes. Heidegger, a forest-dwelling philosopher enchanted with the earthy wisdom of the *Feldweg* (field path) and the *Holzweg* (wood path), discussed his life in this manner. Three years before his death, he wrote to his friend Hannah Arendt: 'Looking back over the whole path, it becomes possible to see that the walk through the field of paths is guided by an invisible hand, and that essentially one adds little to it.' But he was able to make that judgment only with the benefit of hindsight. Fate is an optical illusion. From the vantage of a thirty-year-old like me, life's path still bristles with spur trails and possible dead ends. And so we return, once again, to the essential question: How do we select a path through life? Which turns should we take? To

what end?"

"We are born to wander through a chaos field. And yet we do not become hopelessly lost, because each walker who comes before us leaves behind a trace for us to follow. The full span of trail-making on earth, in its broadest sense — all the walks, all the stories, all the experiments, all the networks — can be seen as part of a great communal yearning to find better, longer-lasting, more supple ways of sharing wisdom and preserving it for the future."

Paul says

Moor is a long distance walker, he took five months completing the Appalachian Trail, but rather than just the exhilaration in completing this 2190 mile journey he realised that he now had questions about just why we create trails. In exploring this phenomena he is shown some of the oldest fossil trails, he learns how and why animals do the same thing, from ants that use pheromones to guide others from the nest to sources of food. He has a go a shepherding to see how sheep make trails, and manages to mislay a complete flock in his first attempt. He joins Native Americans to see the trails in their culture and perches in a tree with Larry Benoit to gain an insight into the mind of a hunter following deer trails in a forest.

He finds out how a new trail is created when he joins a renowned trail builder in Tennessee making pathways with a quad-bike. He is asked to join the International Appalachian Trail, what will be the world's longest footpath, spanning from Alabama to Morocco, and spends some time walking some of what could be the Moroccan section. In the final part of the book, he catches up with the Nimblewill Nomad, M.J. Eberhart. He is somewhat of a legend, as he has walked the Appalachian Trail, the Pacific Crest Trail and the Continental Divide Trail; around 34,000 miles in total. He could be described as eccentric too, having had all his toenails removed and passed on most of his possessions bar a truck and a couple of boxes of sentimental stuff. Moor joins him for a few days and walks with him from Winnie along the roads of Texas.

Walking creates trails. Trails, in turn, shape landscapes

Moor has tremendous potential as an author but I am not entirely sure if this is a travel book, a walking book, a book on the natural world or book on the deeper philosophy on the process of placing one foot in front of another. That said, it is an eloquent set of essays and stories about the pleasures of walking along the great trails of the world. Liked the piece about technology too, it makes a change to have someone say that it can have its place, rather than being one of those who considers the mix of technology and nature to be abhorrent. It is quite American-centric, though he does venture overseas at times, but its wide-ranging scope means that it is not quite as focused as it could be hence I have only given it three stars. However, I really liked this, as he has been bold enough to take a step off the well-trodden path for the wider view. For those with an interest in walking, this should be on your to-read list.

Asl? Can says

Yazmak istedim gibi bir yorum yazabileceğime inanmadım mı? için, ımdilik, yazmak istemedim gibi bir yorum yazıyorum.

Bence kesinlikle ilham verici ve yerli yersiz insanın aklına gelip düşündürecek bir keşfetme süreci oldu.

Çevremdeki herkesin eline kitab? tutu?turup, "Bak! Bak ne diyor!" diyip durdum.

Do?a-yaban-insan-vah?i-ecivil-hayvan-iz-yol-yürümek-kar?ncalar ve filler ve biz ve birkaç salyangoz ve bir sürü soru i?areti. Belki size de ilham verir. Belki kitapla deli gibi kavga edersiniz, ama bence bir ?eyleri harekete geçirme gücü oldu?u kesin.

Rebecca Foster says

This wide-ranging study examines many aspects and types of trail-making. Along the way Moor thru-hikes the Appalachian Trail, herds sheep in Arizona, observes elephants, follows ancient Native American paths on deer hunting vigils, and travels to Morocco to scope out new sections for the International Appalachian Trail. At times I had trouble seeing the connections between all the disparate elements (everything from ant behavior to Cherokee language and the Internet); Moor tries for an overarching message about how we shape the earth and whether we're following others or making our own way, but from chapter to chapter that scope is rather lost. Nonetheless, he writes very well and incorporates his research carefully.

Lauren says

"Complete freedom is not what a trail offers. Quite the opposite; a trail is a tactful reduction of options."

Moor states in the very first chapter that this book is not a ladder and does not lead up to any sort of conclusion, but like the trail, it winds and meanders. By and large, the wandering on this book trail was great fun: Moor recounting his through-hike on the Appalachian Trail (although this is more of a stage setter, it is definitely not the theme of the book like A Walk in the Woods: Rediscovering America on the Appalachian Trail), shepherding Navajo churro sheep in the southwest, following animal tracks and trails in Alabama, Cherokee footpaths in North Carolina, and fossilized "trails" left by long extinct sea animals in Newfoundland... he did a lot of walking in this book! A few of the story sections seemed (keeping with trail hiking parlance) "in the weeds" and "off-track" for me, but Moor circles back to the theme eventually and brings you back to the trail safe and sound.

4.5 stars. I really appreciated his subject matter and his overall style.

Some more quotes that I liked and transcribed from the audio:

Re: Cherokee language and its tie to the land:

"Belt's upbringing made him acutely aware of the ties between geography and language... the landscape is encoded into the language. Cherokee syntax and diction are mountainous. The language has several fine-grained descriptions for different kinds of hills. Suffixes can be appended to nouns to indicate whether it is uphill or downhill from the speaker."

"Cultural institutions that European cultures have long relied on to perpetuate knowledge, mainly an enormous and intricately organized corpora of texts can not properly acknowledge a form of knowledge that is orally transmitted and terrestrially encoded."

"Walking creates trails. Trails, in turn, shape landscapes, and over time, landscapes serve as archives of communal knowledge and symbolic meaning."

Re: Benton MacKaye, the innovator behind the Appalachian Trail

"He railed against the lolly-poppidness of the jazz-loving, picnic-eating city dwellers, and he contrasted these human jellyfish with the strong, tough, wilderness-savvy proletariat his trail would attract. 'And now I come straight to the point of the philosophy of thru-trails!' MacKaye concluded, 'It is to organize a Barbarian invasion! It is a counter-movement to the metropolitan invasion.'"

Dylan Blanchard says

Shiiii.

I picked up this book because I figured it was about hiking, and I was in a dope bookstore that I wanted to support. Best of both worlds.

I got waaaay more from this book than I was expecting. It was an incredible exploration straight from day 0 of trails (ediacaran trails), to ants, to animal's migratory paths, to first nation's paths to wow. wow.

This was a delicious read.

Forrest says

Man is built to walk. Actually, man is built to jog, slowly, speaking from a physiological point of view. However you ambulate, our bones and muscles are constructed to move and keep moving. Sedentary life is no life at all (he says while sitting in a chair, typing up this review). I love to walk. If you have been reading my reviews or blog for long enough, you'll know that. This is part of the reason I was so worried when I blew my back out in late 2014 and was so relieved when my surgery in 2015 was largely successful. The thought of not being able to walk, for me, makes me almost stop breathing.

But Moor is not so concerned with the act of walking itself. He is concerned with what it is we walk on, paths and trails, and how they are formed and, sometimes, conceived and maintained. He starts with the first trails, "traces," really, to be technically correct (trails are, by definition, a place where more than one organism has trodden the same path or where one has traveled repeatedly), made by strange part-plant, part-animal organisms during the Ediacaran period, a time that I did not even know existed when I began the book. These bizarre, almost alien life forms (surely they would seem alien in the current geological age - the descriptions given to these creatures made me think that H.P. Lovecraft might have been revealing more in

his fiction than we could have known before the discovery of these weird critters) left traces in mud that petrified some 500 million years ago. Their efforts were spastic, halting, and meandering, but they're the oldest traces we can find of self-propelled mobility.

From this beginning, you might think that this book then goes through subsequent eras of trail-building and use, finally reaching to the modern age.

You'd be wrong.

This book meanders. And it meanders wildly. Personally, I liked that aspect of it, but if you're looking for a concise history of trails from Point A to Point B, this is not that book. If you're looking for a more leisurely wandering through not only the history of trails, but across disciplines such as history, environmental science, technology, and anthropology, then Moor's *On Trails* is for you. Like any trail, it's not perfect, and the author acknowledges that (giving his personal E-mail address near the end in order to receive readers' feedback, which I think is awesome). Nor is it completely comprehensive. But like any good trail that you might walk, there is really too much to gather in over the course of one journey. I'll be revisiting this one from time to time and am curious to see how future revisions differ from this initial printing.

That stated, there were a few highlights that I found intriguing, sometimes compelling. Please excuse my meandering as I point them out, in no particular order:

Believe it or not, Moor is unafraid to dive into the depths of the philosophy of science. Though this is more of a side-trail of the work, rather than a full-on excursion, he points out some interesting thoughts, particularly those coming from a scientist acquaintance of his. Moor had asked him about the intentional falsification of data by some scientists, some of whom extend bold conjectures in order to claim scientific territory. Apparently it is not out of the ordinary for scientists to extrapolate, from their limited data, views that "reach" for the truth. Moor, in speaking with his friend, called this practice into question. The response is intriguing:

Karl Popper would have said that astrophysics and paleontology are not real science because you can't go out and sample it . . . I think absolutely the opposite. I think this is actually where science is. It's trying to guess what lies over the hill and map terra incognita. When people come in and colonize, that's just technology.

For behaviorists, chapter 2 is a must-read about individual agency vis-a-vis the group hive mind, feedback loops, and amplification mechanisms in the formation of trails. It is a great analysis of group and individual behavior!

Kudos must be given to Moor for not only collating so much theoretical information, but for living his research. For a short time, he worked as a shepherd with a Navajo couple (who spoke no English) for a number of weeks, learning about herding and trails (or, more properly, trying to keep his flock on the trails, mostly unsuccessfully). This section was cringe-inducing in its awkward hilarity. I felt sorry for Moor, who admits he didn't have a clue what he was doing. Luckily for him, none of his flock became casualties as a direct result of his ignorance - a miracle, given the mis-steps he made!

One thing that comes up again and again in this book is the fact that members of western society have a number of misconceptions about cultures and history. I was disabused of a few notions: the idea that America was truly "wild" when Europeans invaded (Native Americans actually carefully-groomed and managed their lands, particularly hunting lands within the forests of the Eastern seaboard, using strategic

burning in particular to clear areas of underbrush and mosquitoes), the mistaken idea that Native American trails would, of course, take the path of least resistance (they did not - "A trail might go to great lengths to avoid enemy territory or detour to visit kinfolk; it might gravitate to sacred sites, or bend around haunted ones"), and the "fact" that modern hunting and fishing regulations were primarily an organic outgrowth of conservation efforts (actually, most of them come from medieval English laws meant to protect the local noble's hunting grounds from pesky peasants).

Even the very idea that "Wilderness" is something that pre-exists at all is a judgement error, or at least an error in perspective, according to Moor:

It may sound strange (even sacrilegious) to some, but in a very real way, wilderness is a human creation. We create it in the same sense that we create trails; we do not crate the soil or the plants, the geology or the topology (although we can, and do, shift these things). Instead, we delineate the place, by defining its boundaries, its meaning, and its use.

The author actually does an excellent job of presenting and validating this argument through numerous examples, many associated with the attempted expansion of the Appalachian Trail to the International Appalachian Trail (extending across Greenland to Scotland to Spain and even to Morocco). Far from being a "natural" phenomenon, trails are technology that define and delineate wilderness, rather than cutting "through" it.

Moor gets even further off the path of expected subject matter for this book when he delves into the ways that technology shapes the land around us and forces us to walk on trails that are dictated by the advance of technology. He does not pass a value judgement on this progression, necessarily:

In large part, the continued interest in hiking seems to stem from a desire to cut through the techscape to get to some natural substratum: to borrow MacKaye's phrase, to see the "primeval influence" beneath the "machine influence." But ironically, the act of hiking is also dependent on technology. Many of the earliest hikers relied on trains and automobiles to reach the mountains. Today, some forms of technology (like cell phones or ATVs) are considered obnoxious, while others (like water purifiers, camp stoves, and GPS locators) are excused. In either case, technology inexorably trickles into the wild, allowing hikers to reach new lands, travel in new ways, think in new terms, and optimize to new values.

This melding of technology and the wild is, well, natural. There is no natural barrier between "civilization" and "wilderness". This exclusivity is created in our own minds. Yes, there are some areas left more "natural" than others, but much of the separation is a mental construct. Moor relates the following about Eberhart, a legendary hiker that he spent some time walking with along highways and through "wilderness" areas:

The problem, [Eberhart] said, was that hikers tended to divide their lives into compartments: wilderness over here, civilization over there. "The walls that exist between each of these compartments are not there naturally," he said. "We create them. The guy that has to stand there and look at Mount Olympus to find peace and quiet and solitude and meaning - life has escaped him totally! Because it's down there in Seattle, too, on a damn downtown street. I've tried to break those walls down and de-compartmentalize my life so that I can find just as much peace and joy in that damned homebound rush-hour traffic that we were walking through yesterday."

The irony of me, a walker, sitting here at a computer typing up a review about a physical book I read (I do so prefer physical books as artifacts to e-books, though I've read both) because of my love for being out in "nature" is not lost on me. The irony of you, reading this entry about a book on walking, from the comfort of

your home or library or Starbucks or wherever you are (I'm guessing you are not outside walking at the moment, but I could be wrong) shouldn't be lost on you, either!

Arielle Walker says

The Overdrive audio for this returned to the library as I was on the final chapter - I'm reserving final judgement until I get to hear those last words!

Ettore1207 says

Non si parla soltanto di piccoli e grandi viaggi a piedi, di tracce e di sentieri. In questo libro c'è davvero molto di più, anche a un livello spirituale.

Viaggiamo per il mondo lungo sentieri disegnati molto tempo prima che nascessimo. Fin dal nostro primo vagito, troviamo una vasta gamma di strutture – «percorsi spirituali», «carriere professionali», «percorsi filosofici», «percorsi artistici», «vie al benessere», «sentieri della virtù»: che la famiglia, la società e la specie hanno predisposto per noi. In tutti questi casi, i termini «percorso», «sentiero», «via» non sono utilizzati a caso. Proprio come i sentieri concreti, questi percorsi astratti guidano e al tempo stesso vincolano le nostre azioni, ci conducono lungo una sequenza di passi, avanzando verso gli obiettivi che ci siamo prefissati. Senza questi percorsi, ognuno di noi sarebbe costretto ad aprirsi una strada nella wilderness della vita, lottando per la sopravvivenza, ripetendo i medesimi errori e reinventando le stesse soluzioni.

Questo libro, con il suo andamento apertamente obliquo e tortuoso, è una ricerca della saggezza dei sentieri. Si tratta della saggezza necessaria per raggiungere gli obiettivi che ognuno di noi si pone, facendoci strada in un territorio sconosciuto, che si tratti di un fondale marino sabbioso, di un nuovo campo della conoscenza, o della vita umana in tutta la sua ricchezza. È una saggezza profondamente umana, profondamente animale, con un'enorme rilevanza sul nostro futuro personale e collettivo.

Magdelanye says

Like the very best of trails, this book meanders through a layered landscape connecting the personal within a historical and cultural context, with lots detours for philosophical observations, both the authors and the dozens of people he tracks down to visit.

Even nicer, he invites reader participation. RM is no fly-by-night journalist. He does not so much interview his experts, he tags along, often assuming a small but crucial role in the process of grounding himself solidly in experience.

Gretchen Lida says

Ranks with the likes of Annie Dillard and Edward Abbey, an important book for the modern nature reader:

Read my review in Chicago Review of Books.

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