

“The Tramps of Our Flora” – Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker (1817 – 1911)

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Abstract: Labelling a plant as “weed” may seem like a simple process, but in actuality defining exactly what a weed is can be difficult. Is it possible to create a Canadian definition of “weeds?” Declaring a plant to be a weed imposes a belief or label on it, and these beliefs and labels are provided to us by our different definitions of nature. The definition of “weeds” is a product of a social construction of nature. The idea of weeds is also an anthropocentric one, as humans decide which plants should belong in nature. In Canada and the Americas weeds also have a deep historical context in their definition. European colonizers of the Americas brought with them new plant species, as well as new ideas and definitions of nature. These new meanings separated humankind from nature, and differed from Aboriginal perspectives that saw humans as living in harmony with nature. Overall, a strictly Canadian definition of weeds was not found. Defining weeds is a process left to the individual instead of the nation. Defining what a weed is depends on each individuals’ own definitions and constructions of nature, and what is perceived to belong in it.

The yellow dandelion marring one’s green expanse of manicured lawn, the tall thistle crowding out the crops and reducing yield, the creeper and the climber that suffocate a tree; humans have identified species after species of grass, flower and shrub as unwanted and unwelcome pests in their fields, yards and gardens. A common gardener’s adage states that a weed is simply any plant that is not where one wants it. This gardening saying is far from the only idea of what may or may not be considered a weed. Scientifically, ‘weeds’, do not exist as having a genus, species or phylum. Another method describes weeds as aggressive or opportunistic plants that are able to out-compete other species of plants on open or disturbed soil (Crosby, 1995. p. 149). These statements appear overtly anthropocentric, even using human characteristics such as opportunism and aggression. This is precisely because the simple task of labelling a plant as a weed is in and of itself a very anthropocentric activity. Landscapers, farmers, environmentalists and conservationists all impose their own views of what nature is, what belongs in it, and how it should be treated as soon as they remove and inspect a clump of roots, stems and leaves and cry out, “weed!” Everyone views nature differently, through a unique set of lenses. Whether we view it as pleasurable aesthetics, as a vast and empty wasteland or as a profitable economic opportunity, we construct our own definitions and views of nature. Deciding which plants belong in our own version of nature is a large and integral part of this definition.

The objective of this essay is to examine a Canadian definition of weeds as a manifestation of our social construction of nature. I shall argue that the entire concept and definition of plants as weeds is a product of our social construct of nature. In other words, nature is socially constructed in Canada, and this social construct is essential to our definition of weeds. So essential in fact, that without a social construction of nature, the idea of weeds would not even exist.

Both weeds and social construction of nature have contested definitions, but they can be defined in such a way that the definitions and explanations of both are mutually reinforcing. It is our social construct of nature that tells us which plants are weeds, and which are not. For this reason, the same plant may be a weed,

or an incredibly useful resource for human exploitation, depending only the plant’s location or the views and ideas of a person looking at it. The concept of plants as weeds shows nature to be socially constructed. A person may appreciate the beauty of a meadow or an old field, but if one (or a variety) of the species of clovers, grasses or wildflowers from that same meadow appeared in that person’s carefully trimmed lawn, they might pull, spray, dig and mow until its existence is obliterated. In a complete paradox, the gardener may even use so-called organic, natural and environmentally-friendly lawn care products to do the job.

Nature cannot speak for itself, and so humankind has appointed itself as an appropriate, if rather biased, spokesperson. If this was not the case, then one would suggest that there would be a very finite and simple definition for weeds. Perhaps then, the only true ‘weed’ anywhere would be a plant that is not indigenous to an area; a botanical invader introduced by humans. However this argument not only dichotomizes humankind and nature, but also raises several pertinent questions. When was the plant introduced to the area? Is there an allotted time for transition from weed to non-weed? What about plants that are beneficial to humans? This is certainly an anthropocentric argument, but one cannot even begin to grasp the drastic economic and social ramifications of declaring all non-indigenous food crops in the Americas (such as wheat) as weeds. Such ramifications would certainly extend well beyond the realm of food crops. The Eurasian species Kentucky bluegrass, which is neither blue, nor from Kentucky, would therefore be classified as a weed (Crosby, 1986. p. 151). Through meticulous mowing, large applications of fertilizers and heavy irrigation of turf and lawns, this species has indeed flourished in the New World. While such a definition of weeds as non-native species could not be enforced, its claims are not altogether dismissible. Even when considering only what have been defined as farmland weeds in Canada, statistics show that sixty percent of these originated from Europe (Crosby, 1995. p. 164).

As Canadians, the history of our definition of weeds lies embedded in the history and the colonization of the Americas by Europeans, who brought with them European flora and fauna. Old World plants moved in with friars, farmers, conquistadors and

livestock, and were used for medicines, crops, and simply to make the landscape feel more like home. Economic activities such as logging and cattle grazing cleared land and overturned soil to make way for such introduced plants to thrive and spread. Darwin noted such drastic changes in his visit to Buenos Aires in 1832. In *Voyage of the Beagle*, he writes of the introduction of plant and animal species in Argentina, and how horses, cattle and sheep had so thoroughly grazed the plains, that they had been completely replaced by introduced European fennel and cardoon (Darwin, 1909. p. 125).

Not only were European animals and plant life carried over the sea, Europeans also brought with them a drastically different method of thinking and interpreting landscape. In other words, contact between Europeans and Aborigines was not the meeting of civilization with wilderness, but rather a meeting between two human lifestyles and two seemingly opposite ways of belonging to an ecology (Cook, 1995. p.65). The idea of separating society from nature is a European one, imported to North America where indigenous languages such as Crow and Cheyenne do not have any term that would translate even vaguely into what the English language labels 'nature' (Scarce, 2000. p. 3).

Scarce (2000. p. 3) suggests that "nature...exists only when societies conceptually distinguish themselves from their surroundings." While the Amerindians lived in harmony with what we label nature, Europeans dichotomized nature and human society. The North American wilderness was seen as a satanic landscape, and christianizing it meant transforming it into a new European garden (Cook, 1995. p.69). The idea of weeds was brought with the Europeans, along with the introduced European plant species. Using the former analogy of American wilderness as satanic landscape, one could argue that it was European civilization that brought weeds into the wilderness. This includes both the human concept of a plant as a weed, as well as individual species of plant that many Canadians today declare to be weeds. As Cook (1995. p. 70) wrote, "What ... Europeans brought to bear on the Acadian landscape was the heavy freight of the European agricultural tradition with its long established distinction between garden and wilderness." By introducing new species, clearing land for extended crops and gardens and removing unwanted and competing flora, the Europeans severely altered the New World landscapes in an attempt to 'christianize' what Biard described as "horrible wilderness" (as quoted in Cook, 1995. p. 69).

So far we have established that the Europeans introduced new species of plants, new methods of viewing and interpreting landscape, and a new language with a different set of terms for describing nature. All of this created a historical framework for the current academic debate over definitions of, and uses of the social construction of nature. This debate is largely theoretical, has attracted criticisms from both the right and left ends of the political spectrum, and has created an immense body of literature. Below, I will briefly outline various arguments for and against the social construction of nature.

The difficulty in defining weeds as a social construct of nature is compounded since the idea of a social construction of nature is a contested one. This in turn is further complicated as the definition of 'nature' and the ideas of constructivism are both topics of rigorous academic debate. There are two main perspectives when dealing with the social construction of nature: the construction of physical and material nature, and the construction of concepts and ideas of nature (Demeritt, 2002). While a landscape architect may be interested in the former, this essay shall focus on the latter and

deal with the creation of ideas, notions, views, and definitions of nature. The concept of a social construction of nature is a simple one: each person's views of what would constitute 'nature' are shaped by their surrounding environments, their education, their upbringing and their values. In this way, what we call 'nature' is not found or discovered, but rather constructed within our minds; the term 'nature' is the lens through which we encounter the nonhuman world (Wapner, 2002. p. 169). Nature as a concept, as opposed to a physical entity, has existed for about four thousand years (Scarce, 2000. p.2). Nature comes from the Greek *physis*, meaning 'everything', and the Latin *natura* which is the root of the English 'nature' (Scarce, 2000.p. 2).

Critiques of social construction of nature are largely aimed at postmodernism in constructivism. Especially when dealing with environmental movements and protecting nature, it is argued that if one cannot define what nature is, then one cannot determine how can it be protected (Wapner, 2003. p.71). A rebuttal to this argument holds that while concepts of nature can be socially constructed, nature itself is largely a physical entity (Wapner, 2003. p. 71). This response confuses nature with wilderness. This is not to state that they are two separate identities, but rather that both terms come with a different set of connotations and both terms are (arguably) socially constructed. For simplicity's sake, this essay will deal only with nature, and with human concepts and ideas of what nature is. Or in dealing with weeds, what we think belongs in nature. Eileen Crist (2004) was less polite in her critique of constructivism, lambasting it as "...zestless agnosticism and noncommittal meta-discourse", and writing that it depicts nature as "...mute, intrinsically meaningless, ontologically indeterminate, epistemologically unavailable" (p.16). However, Crist's remarks were as inaccurate as they were verbose. As stated above, the social construction of nature is a simple concept that does not require a complicated vocabulary to be explained or critiqued.

Such criticisms fail to recognize that although social construction is frequently labelled by and associated with postmodernism, it is really a much older idea that stems from Plato's dichotomy between appearance and reality (Demeritt, 2002. p.776), and social construction as applied to nature was introduced to the New World with European contact. Raymond Williams wrote that "the idea of nature contains, though often unnoticed, an extraordinary amount of human history" (as quoted in Harvey, 1996, quoted in Wapner, 2002. 169). This amount of human history, embedded in the ideas of nature, has imbued nature with historical and social connotations and meaning. These historical and societal images, views, and connotations, have become as inseparable from nature as the identification of certain plants as weeds is inseparable from the social construction of nature. One can even use the term 'weed' simply as a synonym for 'plant'. As Henry David Thoreau (1854. p. 240) so eloquently (and ecocentrically) wrote, "Shall I not rejoice also at the abundance of the weeds whose seeds are the granary of the birds?" In an effort to combat the blatant bias and anthropocentrism of calling plants 'weeds', Thoreau declared any plant to be a weed, regardless of whether or not a person desires to look at it or exploit it as a resource. He did not, however, declare this to be any complete or concrete way of defining what a weed is. Rather, he admits that there is no definition available other than what you, yourself, are willing to declare. On the preparation and planting of his bean field near Walden Pond he wrote:

"Removing the weeds, putting fresh soil about the bean stems, and encouraging this weed which I had sown, making the yellow

soil express its summer thought in bean leaves and blossoms rather than in wormwood and piper and millet grass, making the earth say beans instead of grass..." (p. 232).

Although the intent of the essay was to create a Canadian definition of weeds as a manifestation of a Canadian social construction of nature, the above has done little to confine any definitions or arguments to a strictly Canadian context. The history of the colonization of the New World by Europeans, and the incredible amount of introduced biodiversity that this entailed does help to geographically limit these arguments to the Americas, and perhaps Australia, or what Crosby (1986) refers to as 'Neo-Europes'. Perhaps more research could be done to further limit these definitions and ideas to the nation of Canada. The difficulty lies in that species of flora pay no mind to political boundaries, especially naturalized flora that remains untouched by government regulations, no matter how strict, on importing and exporting plants and seeds. While Canadian and American views and legislation on wilderness preservation may differ quite substantially (Worster, 2002), defining weeds is largely up to the individual, and not the nation-state. Farmers in the lower Mississippi fight a hard battle against what they call 'devil grass', while the same species is used in the same region for erosion control and levee stabilization (Crosby, 1986. p. 150).

In conclusion, the definition of weeds, the idea of weeds, and the entire concept of an undesirable species of plant which we have labelled as a 'weed', is entirely a product of our social construction of nature. In turn, the fact that there are plants which some designate as weed, while others are deliberately used and grown shows that the concept of nature is a social construct. Dandelions are killed and sprayed in lawns, and also are harvested for their leaves and sold as food in local grocery stores. In one aisle a garden centre or a nursery will sell clover seed as a drought tolerant lawn alternative, and the next aisle displays a pesticide to rid one's lawn of all species not Kentucky bluegrass, including clover. These differing definitions of what is a weed and what is not depend solely upon the construct of nature, given to us individually by the society we dwell in. In this case, it is a North American society which tells us to fight what Thoreau has called "a long war, not with cranes, but with weeds, those Trojans who had sun and rain and dews on their side" (p. 235, 236).

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