**Geography Admissions Test Sample Question B – PART ONE**

Part One is designed to test your critical reading and thinking skills. In responding to the material provided you will be asked to identify and evaluate the key arguments being presented. You may also be asked to compare different arguments. You will not be assessed on your general knowledge or on knowledge of material beyond what is presented in the text. If you include information from beyond the material provided this will be discounted and marks will not be awarded for wider reading.

**Sample Question**

Read the extract below and answer the following question:

* *What does the author of the extract think of wilderness?*

You are not being assessed on your general knowledge or on knowledge of material beyond what is presented in the text. If you include information beyond the material provided this will be discounted.

**Extract from THE TROUBLE WITH WILDERNESS**

**By William Cronon, published in Uncommon Ground, edited by William Cronon (Norton and Company, New York, 1995)**

The idea of wilderness has for decades been a fundamental tenet - indeed, a passion of the environmental movement, especially in the United States. For many Americans wilderness stands as the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, has not fully infected the earth. It is an island in the polluted sea of urban-industrial modernity, the one place we can turn for escape from our own too-muchness. Seen in this way, wilderness presents itself as the best antidote to our human selves, a refuge we must somehow recover if we hope to save the planet. As Henry David Thoreau once famously declared, “In Wildness is the preservation of the World.”

But is it? The more one knows of its peculiar history, the more one realizes that wilderness is not quite what it seems. Far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, it is quite profoundly a human creation - indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history. It is not a pristine sanctuary where the last remnant of an untouched, endangered, but still transcendent nature can for at least a little while longer be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization. Instead, it is a product of that civilization, and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made. Wilderness hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural. As we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires. For this reason, we mistake ourselves when we suppose that wilderness can be the solution to our culture’s problematic relationships with the nonhuman world, for wilderness is itself no small part of the problem.

To assert the unnaturalness of so natural a place will no doubt seem absurd or even perverse to many readers, so let me hasten to add that the nonhuman world we encounter in wilderness is far from being merely our own invention. I celebrate with others who love wilderness the beauty and power of the things it contains. Each of us who has spent time there can conjure images and sensations that seem all the more hauntingly real for having engraved themselves so indelibly on our memories. Such memories may be uniquely our own, but they are also familiar enough to be instantly recognizable to others. Remember this? The torrents of mist shoot out from the base of a great waterfall in the depths of a Sierra canyon, the tiny droplets cooling your face as you listen to the roar of the water and gaze up toward the sky through a rainbow that hovers just out of reach. Remember this too: looking out across a desert canyon in the evening air, the only sound a lone raven calling in the distance, the rock walls dropping away into a chasm so deep that its bottom all but vanishes as you squint into the amber light of the setting sun. And this: the moment beside the trail as you sit on a sandstone ledge, your boots damp with the morning dew while you take in the rich smell of the pines, and the small red fox - or maybe for you it was a raccoon or a coyote or a deer - that suddenly ambles across your path, stopping for a long moment to gaze in your direction with cautious indifference before continuing on its way. Remember the feelings of such moments, and you will know as well as I do that you were in the presence of something irreducibly nonhuman, something profoundly other than yourself. Wilderness is made of that too.

And yet: what brought each of us to the places where such memories became possible is entirely a cultural invention. Go back 250 years in American and European history, and you do not find nearly so many people wandering around remote corners of the planet looking for what today we would call “the wilderness experience.” As late as the eighteenth century, the most common usage of the word “wilderness” in the English language referred to landscapes that generally carried adjectives far different from the ones they attract today. To be a wilderness then was to be “deserted,” “savage,” “desolate,” “barren” - in short, a “waste,” the word’s nearest synonym. Its connotations were anything but positive, and the emotion one was most likely to feel in its presence was “bewilderment” - or terror.

Many of the word’s strongest associations then were biblical, for it is used over and over again in the King James Version to refer to places on the margins of civilization where it is all too easy to lose oneself in moral confusion and despair. The wilderness was where Moses had wandered with his people for forty years, and where they had nearly abandoned their God to worship a golden idol.’ “For Pharaoh will say of the Children of Israel,” we read in Exodus, “They are entangled in the land, the wilderness hath shut them in.” The wilderness was where Christ had struggled with the devil and endured his temptations: “And immediately the Spirit driveth him into the wilderness. And he was there in the wilderness for forty days tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him. “The “delicious Paradise” of John Milton’s Eden was surrounded by “a steep wilderness, whose hairy sides/Access denied” to all who sought entry. When Adam and Eve were driven from that garden, the world they entered was a wilderness that only their labor and pain could redeem. Wilderness, in short, was a place to which one came only against one’s will, and always in fear and trembling. Whatever value it might have arose solely from the possibility that it might be “reclaimed” and turned toward human ends - planted as a garden, say, or a city upon a hill.’ In its raw state, it had little or nothing to offer civilized men and women.

But by the end of the nineteenth century, all this had changed. The wastelands that had once seemed worthless had for some people come to seem almost beyond price. That Thoreau in 1862 could declare wildness to be the preservation of the world suggests the sea change that was going on.

Answers to this question could include the following points:

* The author’s understanding of wilderness is based upon his discussion of its significance in the United States. For most people, he suggests, wilderness is defined as something that stands apart from human influence. It is considered to be a place that has not been transformed by human activity, and persists today as a valuable reminder of how humans might overcome the environmental problems they have caused. The author cites Henry David Thoreau. However, it is worth noting that Thoreau does not refer to wilderness in the selected quote. He uses instead the word ‘wildness’. The author does not explore any possible differences between these terms in the extract.
* The author then questions this understanding of wilderness. Rather than something separate from human life and society, it is actually a ‘creation’ or ‘product’ of human culture. It is unnatural but we find it difficult to realise this because wilderness is so appealing. As a result, the author argues that wilderness cannot provide us with a model for solutions to environmental problems.
* The author is not saying that nature is a figment of our imagination. Nor is he suggesting that things like waterfalls or rainbows or mountains do not exist. Indeed, he seems to want to impress upon us the fact that there is something ‘irreducibly nonhuman’ in wilderness. This seems to be something real and natural and it can be appreciated and experienced in a range of environments.
* The author suggests that the reason we value these experiences is because of the influence of cultural ideas about wilderness. To support this point he notes that 250 years ago wilderness had associations that were not nearly so positive. It was associated with desolation, savagery, and fear.
* The author provides further support for this claim by referring to how wilderness is depicted in the Christian Bible. Wilderness in the Bible is a wild, uncivilized place, full of temptation. Its associations and value are the opposite of the Garden of Eden.
* The author finishes by noting that by the late 19th century this had changed to the extent the wilderness had become priceless. However, in this extract at least, the author does not provide an explanation for how or why this change occurred. It might be inferred, however, that the author would also explain this change on the basis that new ideas about wilderness emerged during the 19th century.
* In conclusion, based on the evidence of the text, it can be argued that the author thinks it is important for us to realise that there is nothing inevitable or ‘natural’ about the value we attribute to wilderness. The way we understand and experience wilderness depends upon prevailing cultural ideas. These ideas can and have changed dramatically and may change again. It seems that for this author, wilderness should not be held up by the environmental movement as an ideal model of how we should protect the natural or ‘non-human’ world.

Examples of detail for which candidates would **not** be given extra credit in answers to this question would include the following:

* Background information about Henry David Thoreau beyond the references to his ideas made in the extract.
* Knowledge of the Bible beyond the information presented in the extract.
* A candidate’s own experience of visiting an American wilderness area or, indeed, any other wilderness.
* Discussion of any other wilderness areas.