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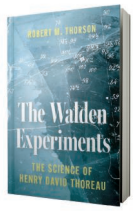
HISTORY OF SCIENCE

Walden and the wild roots of conservation science

The famous work of transcendentalism holds lessons for modern ecologists, maintains a Thoreau scholar **Renée Bergland**



The Walden Experiments: The Science of Henry David Thoreau
Robert Thorson
Princeton University Press, 2026. 328 pp.

Henry David Thoreau resisted social conventions. In his lifetime, he was as famous for his refusal to conform as he was for his published works. After he died in 1862, Ralph Waldo Emerson listed everything his friend had refused to do: Thoreau had "no profession; he never married; he lived alone; he never went to church; he never voted; he refused to pay a tax to the State" (*1*). Emerson was disappointed that Thoreau had devoted his time to woodcraft and wordcraft instead of paying work. He complained that his friend preferred being "the captain of a huckleberry party" to any other, more serious occupation.

Today, Thoreau's steadfast dedication to wild places looks more like discipline than laziness. He was a remarkably prolific writer. As it turned out, his published speeches, essays, poems, and books were just the tip of the iceberg; his unpublished journal and detailed logs of observations of the natural world have proved as valuable as his publications.

Thoreau's work is a little hard to categorize. Philosophers claim him as a philosopher. Political activists see his writings as cornerstones of social and environmental justice movements. Writers admire the beauty of his language. Scientists—particularly ecologists—use his careful measurements of 19th-century natural phenomena to document 21st-century changes to our ecosystems.

The Walden Experiments: The Science of Henry David Thoreau is also hard to categorize. Author Robert Thorson is a geologist by training, a professor of earth sciences, and a widely respected Thoreau scholar who has worked collaboratively with theologians, historians, philosophers, and literary scholars over the years. *The Walden Experiments* is his fourth book on Thoreau. The first of them, *Walden's Shore: Henry David Thoreau and Nineteenth-Century Science*, is a multifaceted work of literary criticism, biography, and intellectual history that argues that Thoreau was a skilled practitioner of 19th-century inductive science. *The Walden Experiments* leaps from that early work toward a new set of questions more centered on the 21st century. Here, Thorson invites readers to consult *Walden* as a "mid-nineteenth-century oracle" that speaks to the current global sustainability crisis.

Thoreau could certainly be oracular. His proclamation "In wildness is the preservation of the world" continues to inspire readers while resisting easy interpretation. Thoreau defined the wild as "whatever has not come under the sway of man." Perhaps his refusal to be part of social institutions—not only state, church, family, and profession but also intellectual discipline—was an attempt to preserve as much of his own wildness as he could. It might also explain his lean toward the sciences. In the mid-19th century, there was no field of study quite as wild as the dynamic and shifting world of natural and physical science.

It is common knowledge that Thoreau's interest in wildness prompted his choice to build a small house near Walden Pond, just outside of Concord, Massachusetts; live in it for 2 years; and write a book about his experience. Thorson goes deeper into the story, explaining that *Walden* took 9 years to write.

Thoreau was not satisfied with the first draft. He put it aside for about 2 years, then returned to it when he discovered Charles Darwin's journal of his own observations of the natural world, *The Voyage of the Beagle*. Inspired by Darwin's detailed observation, his inductive approach, and his beautiful prose, Thoreau "transformed an otherwise inauspicious lake into a powerful and globally famous symbol for humanity's rightful place in nature and our responsibility to it."



Thoreau's environmental ethics were informed by Charles Darwin's incisive and inductive observations about the natural world.

Thorson argues that Thoreau did not impose his philosophy on the land. On the contrary, he developed his environmental ethics inductively, from the ground up, starting with geology and then gradually expanding his vision. According to Thorson, "Thoreau—the young man keenly interested in glaciology, climate change and optics—is what we would today call a scientist." He explains that "all but one of *Walden*'s eighteen chapters engage with outdoor field observations and interpretations involving physics, chemistry, astronomy, geology, hydrology, botany, zoology, ecology, meteorology, climatology, and limnology (the study of lakes)."

Thorson's book is also divided into 18 chapters, each of which is a wide-ranging freestanding essay that jumps off from a *Walden* chapter to recontextualize Thoreau's scientific thought for 21st-century readers.

If *Walden* is a wild ride, *The Walden Experiments* is a little wilder. It invites readers to shake off their disciplinary shackles, jump out of their silos, and try to reconnect with the wild roots of the sciences, in hope that embracing wildness will give us the intellectual courage we need for the preservation of the world. □

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. R. W. Emerson, "Thoreau," *The Atlantic*, August 1862; https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1862/08/thoreau/306418/.

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