Yale professor of psychology Paul Bloom published an essay this week in the New York Times Magazine arguing that the pleasure that “real natural habitats” provide to humans is a significant argument for “preservation” of these habitats. The essay was deeply unsatisfying to me, as it avoided all the hard questions that anyone grappling with the question of what we should preserve, and why, and how, ought to grapple with.

As a teacher of natural resources law and policy, I’ve thought a lot about the value we place on the places, things, and beings we consider to be “nature” and why we value it. It turns out that it’s impossible to think seriously about natural resources and public lands policy without asking what we value about particular places and why. As a society, our decisions about what to preserve, and how to manage it, reflect these values, whether we realize it or not.

Professor Bloom neglects to mention this complexity. His argument, more or less, is simply that the pleasure nature gives us is a reason to preserve it. He cites research that shows that people respond more favorably to real animals (the cuddly kind, at least) than to robotic simulated animals (presumably also cuddly), and other research demonstrating that looking at a television image of a “natural scene” was no better at easing human hearts’ recovery from stress than “staring at a blank wall.”

The problem is that I don’t think this research, or the conclusion that “natural” things, beings, and places give us pleasure, reveals anything about what it is that we need to preserve, or how to figure that out. Nature is relative in our modern world. It is not a fixed or definable state that we can coherently think of as the absence of human intervention, or as anything else. Rather, we have affected and remade, and continue to affect and remake, everything we perceive as “natural” in profound ways.

Legislators and our public land management agencies face daily choices about whether to allow public access to an area, making it less “natural” in some people’s estimation, or place it off-limits; whether to put out fires or let them burn; whether to burn preemptively or not; whether to allow hunting , mountain biking, off-road vehicle use, snowmobiling, or other activities that may lessen the enjoyment of those engaged in less intensive uses of land; whether to build roads and where; whether to allow some, all, or no trees to be cut in a given area; and whether to apply pesticides to eradicate invasive species in order to give native species an opportunity to thrive. More obviously managed places such as gardens,

parks, zoos, and even golf courses are “nature” to some of us, and poor substitutes or worse to others of us. And sometimes “nature” may threaten or kill us, when it takes the form of a mountain lion on a hiking trail, or a cresting river.

Surely the pleasure that people obtain from visiting “natural” places, or knowing that others can visit them, or knowing that ecosystems are thriving there, or even merely knowing that a place exists that has been preserved in some way, is one of the reasons we manage certain public lands, endangered species, rivers, coastlines, and other natural resources the way we do. (Indeed, economists and policymakers have known this for some time; this insight underpins even cold cost-benefit analysis, through the application of contingent valuation, which seeks to place a monetary value on the subjective value people obtain from conserving or preserving resources.) But the mere insight that whatever we think of as “nature” has the potential to make us happier doesn’t help us to figure out what to preserve or how to preserve it.

University of Wisconsin history professor Bill Cronon, who was a teacher and advisor to me when I was an undergraduate, has already covered this territory years ago in a much deeper and more satisfying way. In his essay In Search of Nature from his 1995 collection Uncommon Ground (available in full at the link above, through Google books based some idea of “fair use” that I don’t fully understand), he argues convincingly that “nature” cannot be separated from our cultural construction of the natural world. He breaks down human ideas of nature into eight basic categories: nature as naïve reality with no cultural context; nature as moral imperative; nature as Eden; nature as artifice (self-conscious cultural construction); nature as virtual reality; nature as commodity; nature as a supernatural force for good or evil (devil, angel, or avenger); and nature as contested terrain. (See Cronon’s excellent essay for a superbly-written explanation of each of these in the context of southern California, if you are intrigued.)

Of course, Professor Bloom is on to something here, albeit something many others have already recognized. There is something, as Cronon discusses, about “natural” experiences that we all crave. Clearly, there is a universe of experiences we perceive as natural that adds to our happiness, and that’s a significant reason why we’ve preserved as much as we have. But the hard part is figuring out what the “nature” we believe is worth preserving is, what it means to preserve it, and what tools are necessary to accomplish those goals.