

Chapter 5

A Voice for the Wilderness: Hugh Nibley, Naturalist

Hugh Nibley has lived the life of the mind. He has an internal drive and curiosity that will not let him rest. But his curiosity has not been reserved solely for library research. The same drive and determination that have pushed him to learn another language, read another book, or write another article have also pushed him to explore another canyon, climb another mountain, or hike another woodland trail. He has submerged himself in nature as deeply as he has in books. All his life, he has had a deep and abiding love for nature. In nature, he has consistently sought adventure, beauty, and spiritual rejuvenation.

His private writings are preoccupied with nature. “You will think that I harp on the Nature theme with strange persistence,” he wrote in one letter, “but it is only because I want to get what I can of the good things of our planet while the getting is possible—*absit omen*.”² Hugh’s celebrations of nature demonstrate a sensitivity so instinctively poetic that I believe he could have been an environmental writer on a par with Edward Abbey, Aldo Leopold, Annie Dillard, or John Muir.

Hugh’s preoccupation with wilderness has, in turn, led him to publicly advocate for environmental concerns long before they became popular issues. Not only has he spoken out for clean air and wilderness preservation, but he has also provided for Mormons a strong theology for environmental stewardship. Yet Hugh’s words have, for the most part, been largely ignored by the Mormon community.

²Hugh Nibley, Letter to Paul Springer, July [no year]. Springer wrote “48” on the first page, but the content strongly suggests 1949 instead. The Latin tag is the pious hope: “May there be no evil omen” or “may no harm result.” I read an earlier version of this chapter, titled “A Voice in the Wilderness: Hugh Nibley, Naturalist,” at the Sunstone Symposium on 15 March 1998, Los Angeles.