Donald Worster, Ph.D.
Wyman Visiting Professorship in History, 2014-15
University of Wisconsin–River Falls

**Topic Summary**

"Wilderness: The Higher Altruism in American Environmental Values"

We will be gathering just a little over half a century after the Wilderness Act was passed (1964), and my talk will offer some reflections on the significance of that act and of nature conservation in general in the US and abroad. What was once a consensus in American culture recently seems, like much else, to have been shattered by increasing ideological and moral differences. I want to examine that early consensus, explain how and why it broke down, and suggest that this commitment to saving wildness in the landscape is not likely to disappear. On the contrary, it grows out of a much older trend away from pure utilitarianism toward nature and toward an evolving spirit of altruism. But my talk will suggest that an older pragmatism toward moral values needs to be renewed in order to overcome our present impasse.