With his latest book, Michael P. Nelson aims to bring new depth and civility to an old and often stormy debate.

The associate professor of environmental ethics and philosophy at Michigan State co-edited The Wilderness Debate Rages On, which the University of Georgia Press will publish in October.

It’s been 10 years since Nelson, with co-editor J. Baird Callicott of the University of North Texas, released The Great New Wilderness Debate, a wide-ranging collection of essays on the meaning of wilderness and the conflicts that can arise when people disagree on that meaning.

It included essays in support of preservation and some in favor of “wise use” of wilderness, with contributions from scientists, contemporary environmental thinkers, and icons like Henry David Thoreau, John Muir and Aldo Leopold.

Nelson said that, unlike the previous book, The Wilderness Debate Rages On contains “more narrative” pieces from Marilynne Robinson, Wendell Berry and others, and even includes fiction, in addition to more standard academic essays.

It also includes several essays by early 20th century ecologists, whose writings on wilderness as a venue for scientific study are virtually unknown.

“People might know the names of the scientists, but they don’t know they wrote about wilderness,” Nelson said. “Nobody listened to them.”

That’s unfortunate, he added, because “generally speaking, wilderness would have a more solid foundation for protection that way.”

Nelson said reaction to The Great New Wilderness Debate was at times hostile – some environmentalists accused him of “giving ammunition to the enemy” – and that the debate itself has become “sort of dogmatic,” with both sides resorting to name-calling and even, as Nelson and Callicott illustrate in the introduction to The Wilderness Debate Rages On, the occasional death threat.
“The debate over the concept of wilderness has an almost religious tone to it in many ways,” he said, “so positions have become pretty entrenched.”

Such animosity has made the wilderness debate, as well as discussion of other environmental topics, “tragically shallow,” according to Nelson, who added that a black-and-white argument between supporters of preservation and of wise use is “outmoded, inaccurate, and a wee bit dangerous.”

“We fail to understand intellectual history, critical thinking,” he said. “We fail to ask the really important questions, and, I would say, as a result we fail to even understand or try to understand what our problems are in the first place.”

Nelson said The Wilderness Debate Rages On is highly accessible, and that he hopes it can spark informed, critical thinking that will yield more fruitful, civilized discussion.

“I have a wild faith in the ability of rational discourse to at least eventually lend civility to nearly any discourse,” he said, “including this one.”

- By Andy McGlashen