

The Wilderness Library

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Guest Editorial

The “Backcountry Concept”: A Positive Viewpoint

The backcountry concept should be considered within a broad framework—the outdoor recreation opportunity spectrum. The spectrum idea emphasizes the need for a range of recreational opportunities and lands managed to provide these opportunities. The spectrum stretches from highly developed, intensively used campgrounds to undeveloped, lightly used wilderness. The two ends of the spectrum have received a great deal of attention over the years, but a whole series of intermediate opportunities deserve more attention than they often have received.

The spectrum concept rests on the simple fact that people have different preferences, abilities and needs, all of which vary at different times. A person may want to fly-fish a wild stream sometimes and take the kids worm fishing in a man-made lake another time. *One activity is not better or worse*

than the other-only different. Either can be a low- or high-quality experience.

Wilderness is the anchor point of one end of the spectrum. Wilderness is an important, essential part of a full range of recreational opportunities, but it is not automatically “the best.”

The Wilderness Act of 1964 is subject to different interpretations, but to many of us, it says the main objective of wilderness is to preserve sizeable areas where natural ecological processes can work with as little human interference as possible. Maintenance of natural processes, whatever they bring, is the objective, not maximizing numbers of elk or cutthroat trout, nor preserving any particular environmental conditions.

While protecting the natural processes, wilderness is also intended to provide people a chance to enjoy it as *wilderness*, to the extent possible. The Wilderness Act lists “outstanding

opportunities for solitude” and “primitive and unconfined recreation” in the definition of wilderness. However, some wilderness areas are closed to all recreational use (several wildlife refuge wildernesses), emphasizing that recreation is not the dominant reason for designating wilderness. Many areas limit the number of visitors to protect natural conditions and to provide some chance for solitude.

If this is what wilderness is, or should be, some people think that, in addition to wilderness, roadless lands managed primarily for recreation are also needed. (In fact, Bob Marshall took this position over 45 years ago when he proposed two types of wilderness, one stressing primitive recreation and the other emphasizing primeval natural conditions.) In these recreation areas, instead of trying to let nature always have its own way, managers could

deliberately create and enhance recreation opportunities. Depending on the area, for example, this might mean increasing elk numbers by improving habitat through periodic burning; fencing and improving pastures for visitors' horses; building small lakes behind natural looking earthen dams and stocking them regularly with fish; opening vistas from key points on trails, and, if desired, providing more campsite facilities, such as hand pumps, fire grates or toilets.

Backcountry is largely a concept, not an existing system. But a few places, such as the Jewel Basin Hiking Area east of Bigfork in northwestern Montana, fit this category. Such areas are usually referred to as "backcountry," but that is not an official title, as is "wilderness."

Several different categories of



graphics: Russ Hoosline

backcountry could be designated depending on the capabilities of the land, the needs and desires of people and alternative areas available. Some back country might permit trail bikes or snowmobiles. (Mechanized recreation is not permitted in wilderness.) Again depending on the situation, backcountry might permit nonrecreational uses, such as grazing, mining or water developments, under less restrictive policies than wilderness. (None of these uses is absolutely prohibited in wilderness.)

Backcountry could provide high-quality recreational experiences similar

to some enjoyed in wilderness, as well as some experiences of a slightly different type. Our research shows a substantial proportion of the present visitors to wilderness would probably enjoy backcountry more. Through more intensive management, more recreational use per acre could be provided in backcountry than in wilderness. Facilities and practices that are inappropriate in wilderness-such as planting resilient but non-native grasses-could help avoid the need to limit numbers of visitors, as might be necessary in wilderness.

Finally, backcountry could help protect wilderness by providing an attractive alternative that could draw some use away from wilderness, particularly types of use that might put an extra strain on wilderness, such as very large groups, semipermanent hunting camps or people primarily interested in catching fish.

The advantages of managing some land as backcountry and some as wilderness seem substantial to me, but several issues and problems must be considered.

First is the purity versus flexibility issue. It is hard to imagine "purity" being a dirty word, but for some wilderness advocates, it is. The issue here is not how altered a piece of land can be and still be "pure" enough to be designated wilderness, but how "pure"

or strict management should be for land already in the wilderness system. "The Wilderness Act permits more flexibility than managers recognize," some say. Maybe so. But we can't have our cake and eat it too. If we water down our wildernesses to make them more inviting recreational areas, easier and more convenient to visit and easier for commodity interests to use, natural ecological processes will be substantially altered. The chance to experience a wilderness as wilderness and to find outstanding solitude will slip away. The anchor point on the opportunity spectrum will be lost and nothing will

replace it. We will have a backcountry system called "wilderness," but little or no true wilderness. Many people who, as our research shows, prefer less developed, lightly used wilderness will have no place to go.

Permanence is another issue. Wilderness is established by Congress; backcountry is not. Backcountry *could* be legislatively established, if that is the public's desire. The Wilderness Act could even be amended to provide for zoning some areas as "pure" wilderness and some as what I am calling backcountry. But legislation is no guarantee of permanence. What Congress classifies it can declassify, and might quickly do so-for example, if major oil reserves were discovered in a wilderness. Even without legislative designation, in this era of the National Environmental Policy Act, an agency cannot change an established management direction quickly. Impact statements are required; they take time and give everyone a chance to influence decisions.

Should only lands not qualified for wilderness be considered for backcountry? Is it a case of backcountry versus wilderness? Land qualified for wilderness must be considered for all types of alternative uses. Surely, backcountry is the least drastic change possible, compared to road development and logging. Why should the choices be unnecessarily polarized? Some land that qualifies as wilderness might better be managed as backcountry in order to meet the needs and desires of people. No one would ever say, "Land suitable for tennis courts should never be used for softball fields."

A final problem is the lack of a clear definition of backcountry. This is true now. All of us-the public, land managers and researchers-should work together to define management approaches to meet our needs, to meet the land's capability and to fit into other programs. Whether this involves a case-by-case approach or a more comprehensive backcountry system is one of the issues to be worked out. If we want a range of opportunities available in roadless lands, the alternatives must be faced and choices made. What kind of wilderness do we want, and what kind of backcountry? -**Bob Lucas, project leader, Wilderness Management Research, Forest Service**

**For another perspective, see "The 'Backcountry Concept': A Wilderness Viewpoint" in (he Sept./Oct. 1979 issue of Montana Outdoors. This earlier guest editorial was prepared by Bill Cunningham, regional representative of the Wilderness Society. -Ed.*