In: Wilderness Recreation in New Zealand, Leslie F. Molloy, ed. Wellington, New Zealand: Federated Mountain Clubs of New Zealand.

Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute: Publication # 121
CITATION: Stankey, George H. 1983. Wilderness in New Zealand: an outside perspective. In: Molloy, Leslie F., ed. Wilderness recreation in New Zealand: proceedings of the FMC 50th jubilee conference on wilderness; 1981 August 22-24; Nelson Lakes National Park, New Zealand. Wellington, New Zealand: Federated Mountain Clubs of N.Z. (Inc.): 76-78.

WILDERNESS IN NEW ZEALAND: AN OUTSIDE PERSPECTIVE

BY
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The move in New Zealand to set aside areas as wilderness is an important effort, not only to the nation but on the international scene as well. It parallels activity in Australia, Canada, and the United States to reserve areas of special environmental and recreational value. As in New Zealand, wilderness preservation efforts in these countries have involved an amalgam of government agencies, private citizens, and various organisational interest groups in the creation of programmes that gave form and function to the wilderness concept. Frequently the most important catalytic agent has been the presence and initiative shown by a few key individuals – people whose deep personal concerns and commitment to protect wilderness drives and sustains the effort. For it must be clearly understood that wilderness preservation remains an activity that is still substantially in conflict with the mainstream of political and public interests. Some of this might be a direct result of the wilderness movement's rhetoric, with its calls for "preservation", "set-asides", "protection against all forms of human encroachment", etc. Nevertheless, a public programme that rests principally on the belief that preserving – not directly consuming – has value, runs counter to the predominantly utilitarian values that characterise the world today.

So in a real sense, the wilderness preservation movement constitutes a "counter-culture" activity; a particular oddity, given the substantial level of governmental involvement in it. And as an activity with a counter-cultural flavour, or at least one not well imbedded in the mainstream of the culture, it is especially important that the preparation and implementation of such an effort proceed in as well thought out a fashion as possible, always looking for opportunities to mitigate difficulties that might otherwise represent a significant setback or, worse yet, a fatal blow.

With that in mind, I will, in the following paragraphs, touch briefly on three issues that, in my experience, are significant matters that require attention by wilderness advocates, be they private citizens or government bureaucrats. I can offer no pat answers – I doubt any are anticipated – but I can outline what I see to be the critical matters requiring debate and for which some consensus will be eventually necessary before an effective programme of wilderness protection can be achieved.

First, it is absolutely imperative that the purpose(s) underlying the decision to reserve areas as wilderness is fully resolved. That is, are such areas set up primarily as places where natural ecological processes take precedence, where the maintenance of genetic diversity is important, and where protection of representative samples of the natural landscape is given high priority? Or, are such areas principally established to provide venues for traditional, nonmechanised forms of outdoor recreation such as tramping and ski-touring? Or, is it some of both? It needs to be clearly understood that the term "wilderness" possesses no inherent definition; wilderness is a social institution to which we give meaning, just as we have done with concepts like "national parks".

The issues as to what wilderness is to be – what functions it will perform – becomes critical as soon as we begin to wrestle with any of the substantive issues that inevitably confront such an effort. For example, how large should such areas be, what criteria should we utilise in establishing boundaries, what activities are appropriate, or what management actions are needed (an issue I'll turn to shortly) are all questions for which a variety of alternative answers might be formulated, depending upon how one defines wilderness.

It is likely, of course, that wilderness will end up serving multiple goals; i.e., it will have both ecological preservation and primitive recreation functions. In the United States, the legislation establishing our National Wilderness Preservation System recognises both functions as important; however, it also gives clear priority to the objective of establishing a system of areas where natural ecological processes can operate outside normal human interference. One practical implication of this priority is that in cases where conflicts arise between recreation and preservation, preservation goals take precedence.

Establishing objectives for a wilderness protection programme is not easy. While it is useful exercise to examine the programmes and institutions that have evolved elsewhere, in the final analysis it is necessary that an indigenous philosophy be conceived and implemented. Because wilderness is a cultural expression, it is extremely important that one be cautious in adopting specific procedures and mechanisms that have worked well elsewhere. For example.

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while in the United States wilderness is protected by congressionally endorsed statute, it does not necessarily follow that legally binding protection is the most appropriate procedure elsewhere.

A clear conception of the role and function of wilderness is also important as it provides a basis for understanding, and defending, the place of wilderness in the broader spectrum of land uses. Wilderness is a distinctive land use – in terms of the activities appropriate to it, in terms of the relative numbers of persons served, and in terms of the kinds of values and services it yields. Without a clear understanding of the context within which wilderness exists, defending these distinctive qualities can be difficult.

A second major factor that is crucial to the successful implementation of a wilderness programme relates to development of a framework within which public participation is actively sought and utilisied. This factor stems from a basic precept that sees an enlightened citizenry possessing a significant role in prescribing the goals and objectives for public resources. Without such broad participation, the process of establishing goals and objectives can become a captive of the views and perspectives of resource managers whose conceptions of wilderness often differ markedly from that of others. Where wide discrepancies exist between public views toward the management of resources and those charged with their stewardship, conflict is inevitable.

A participatory role in the designation and management of wilderness for the citizenry is also critical in engendering the sustained spread of public support for such areas. Without broad public support of the wilderness concept, it is unlikely that such areas can be long protected, irrespective of the strength and commitment of their most ardent supporters. This is especially true in one-person, one-vote democracies.

I would hope that it is clear that what I am advocating here is a role for public participation that goes beyond the occasional call for comment on some management plan. Such highly procedural conceptions of public participation fail to grasp adequately the full value and significance of citizen involvement in a complex area such as wilderness protection. The most difficult matters that confront managers of wilderness today are not related to technical, biological, ecological, or physical questions; rather, they derive from conflicts over prescriptive matters, debates over equity issues, and the complex issue of attempting to resolve mutually incompatible value judgements. Simply put, the major questions with which the wilderness manager must grapple are not technical/scientific ones, but value-laden matters. The technical training of the manager and the array of administrative and procedural edicts at his or her disposal have only limited utility in resolving such questions. And while it is abundantly clear that the public (an amorphous term which I will not attempt to define further) has no particular claim to what is right, true, or good, decisions regarding the use of public resources that lack public input, derived from sincere, conscientious, and honest efforts, hold little chance of long-term success.

Finally, I would want to point out, in the strongest of terms, that successful wilderness protection ultimately rests upon the implementation of a management programme that insures that those values which designation originally sought to protect are, in fact, protected. As a former president of the Sierra Club in the United States once noted, without adequate management, areas set aside as wilderness might become little more than empty shells.

I raise the issue of management because, unfortunately, I all too often find that the process of seeing areas set aside, complete with boundaries neatly outlined on maps and signs on the ground, gives rise to a sense that the task is complete. But in reality, of course, the task has only begun. Designation of an area as wilderness does little to regulate the flow of pesticides from adjacent lands. It does nothing to rectify existing problems that derive from uses inconsistent with the concept of wilderness. And the designation of an area as wilderness does nothing, in itself, to control or regulate the impacts associated with the continuing recreational use of the area. Despite the current national and worldwide economic malaise in which we find ourselves, the popularity of wilderness as a recreational venue remains high. While such popularity suggests continued public support for wilderness, it also suggests that the problem of recreational impact will continue.

I am aware of the arguments that point to the seeming contradiction contained within the notion of "wilderness management". Yet, in light of the problems noted above, it seems necessary to conclude that a wilderness programme without management is a wilderness programme with a short future. The real issue, as I and many others see it, is not whether wilderness ought to be managed, but one of *how* it should be managed.

I do not propose to dwell on this issue further, other than to make a couple of points. First, to respond to the matter of how wilderness ought to be managed brings us full circle to my opening remarks on the issue of setting goals and objectives. Without such direction-setting prescriptions, resolving the issue of an appropriate wilderness management programme is virtually impossible. In the absence of clear objectives, specific management actions become patchwork in nature, covering up symptoms rather than correcting causes, and often implemented with only the poorest understanding of their accumulative effects.

Second, the question of what constitutes an appropriate management direction also provides linkage with the second matter I discussed – a framework for substantive public participation. Effective management requires public support and

understanding; without them, the best, most conscientious efforts by managers are likely to be perceived as authoritarian and capricious. Management, on the other hand, with public consensus, is much more likely to succeed.

As New Zealand moves to set aside a system of wilderness reserves, we will see another important step taken in the establishment of an international protected areas system. The mechanisms and institutions utilised to set up such a system will reflect the cultural and social realities of the country; however, the values that the system will yield will be universal in their contribution to the world's appreciation and understanding of the environment.

"Wilderness areas should be part of a range of natural recreational areas . . . "

Approaching the summit of Hauhangatahi from the north, Hauhangatahi wilderness area, Tongariro National Park.
Photo: Hugh Barr