

Human Relationships with Wilderness

The Fundamental Definition of Wilderness Character

BY ALAN E. WATSON

The science that has guided wilderness management thus far is not really very old. It couldn't be. Wilderness legislation has guided U.S. federal agency managers since 1964. My own introduction to wilderness

research was when I stumbled onto a series of debate articles by some of the few people engaged in early wilderness research during my freshman year of college in the mid-1970s (Hendee and Lucas 1973). What caught my attention was not the clarity or strength of the science supporting the debated topic, but just the contrary. I could easily identify with both sides of a debate for and against requirements for

permits for recreational visits to wilderness. The lack of a clear, easy-to-defend solution to the dilemma these scientists described evaded both positions, yet the arguments both for and against were highly emotional ones. The "character" of wilderness, it was clear to my young mind, was something very different to different people (see Figure 1).

The basic element that excited me about this debate was the weighing of structure, articulation of protection benefits, and control associated with permits against spontaneity, freedom, and uncertainty. Whereas both sides

of the argument clearly placed great importance on wilderness character, there was disagreement on how it should be protected. At the time, I assumed that 30 years or so into the future, this debate would be settled. It isn't. Today we still are in great disagreement—not over the value of wilderness character, but on how to protect it in wilderness. Rather than be disappointed about that, maybe we should celebrate it.

In the year 2001, I was confronted by another dilemma equally basic to the question of how to protect wilderness character. At an international symposium in Alaska, very early in the program a university student expressed sincere interest in attending mostly to resolve his confusion over exactly what is wilderness. Although in my introductory comments I had contrasted the definition of wilderness contained in the U.S. Wilderness Act of 1964 with that contained in World Conservation Union (IUCN) descriptions of wilderness places and objectives (see Martin and Watson 2002), this student was clearly confused by the range of attributes and values commonly associated with wilderness. And true to this student's observations, much of the literature on wilderness, and even terminology within the U.S. Wilderness Act, commonly attempts to define wilderness through a single universal set of purposes, each of which could also be received in many locations besides wilderness, and which may not be received in every area protected as wilderness.

It was not until a couple of months later during that same summer, while traveling through the Alaska night from above the Arctic Circle to Anchorage, that the dilemma solved itself for me. Although I had felt insecure, undeserving,



Article author Alan E. Watson, photo by B. Roukema.

uncertain somehow about how to answer this student and many others who had repeatedly voiced the same question, it became clear to me during that night drive that what attracted many of us to wilderness in the first place was the fact that it couldn't be defined. Wilderness is difficult to define, yet it has nearly universal and immediate appeal. That is the reason debates like the one described earlier can be such a dilemma, and why many people remain confused about what wilderness means. It is difficult to describe in a universal way exactly for whom we are protecting wilderness, what is being protected in wilderness, why it is being protected, and from what it is being protected. Wilderness, therefore, means different things to different people. When we try too hard to define it precisely, we are at risk of losing meaning for some people. Much as Leopold found in his essay on the "River of the Mother of God," when we find what we are looking for, we may have lost something (Flader and Callicott 1992).

Through the past 10 years of my work to help the *International Journal of Wilderness* succeed, knowledge development as a federal scientist since 1988, and a career of deep involvement with university programs, the strength of my confidence in the conclusion that one of the primary values of wilderness to society is its difficulty to be defined has only increased. I am suggesting that we acknowledge and celebrate that wilderness character implies different things to different people, and approach the challenge of defining wilderness character through describing, understanding, and even monitoring the relationship people have with wilderness. This type of research may offer more insight into the fundamental definition of wilderness character than have efforts aimed at monitoring aspects of the wilderness itself.

Is Wilderness Character in Black and White or Living Color?

Measuring observable characteristics of the wilderness itself and thinking of it as wilderness character is like a black and white photo. There is no understanding, no depth of meaning, and little insight into the values of that wilderness. Focusing on human relationships with wilderness, however, gives color to the image. Although relationships with wilderness vary, they are definable. Defining these relationships provides direction to protecting or restoring them, and through focus on relationships people have with wilderness, the impossible task of defining wilderness in black and white terms is avoided. Wilderness character becomes a concept that is used to describe the relationship one particular person or social group has with wilderness, or the multitude of these relationships.

Who Is It Protected For?

Some of us have gravitated toward referring to the different people or groups of people with a stake in wilderness as stakeholders. They are not simply customers, they are not necessarily users or visitors. There are many different types of people with very different relationships to wilderness. They can include recreation users, but also include those interested in wilderness for its scientific values, those depending upon wilderness resources for subsistence, those for whom wilderness is part of their lifestyles and not a diversion, and those distant urban residents who depend upon wilderness watersheds for crucial water supplies.

There is no single, easy-to-define stakeholder group to go to for a definition of wilderness because there are many different types of relationships with wilderness, and most people will

define wilderness character from their own orientation toward it. The Wilderness Act in the United States provides a definition from one particular orientation, that of the people who engineered the legislation to capture a definition of wilderness character that fit their relationship with wilderness. It was described as a place where humans do not remain, where they return from to their urban homes at the end of a trip. It is a place where they can go to find solitude or exhibit primitive skills, much in contrast to their daily urban lives. It is a place where they can assume they are witnessing natural processes as a dominant force, and they can assume that humans have not intervened and are not intervening directly to influence the landscape. Not everyone describes wilderness character along these same dimensions, however. Recent research by Whiting (2004) illustrates these differences. Native villagers in the western Arctic of Alaska value wilderness for spiritual, emotional, and humility reasons, and it contributes to their identity to go there and engage in hunting and gathering activities. These are not purposes described in the U.S. Wilderness Act because they were not the type of relationship the authors of the act had with wilderness.

What Is Protected?

Different groups of stakeholders also use different terminology to describe the attributes, or qualities, of a place that embodies wilderness character. In the United States, the Wilderness Act speaks of wilderness being untrammeled, whereas in South Africa, the term *uncontaminated* has been used to describe wilderness character by some parts of that society (Shroyer, Watson, and Muir 2003). Untrammeled suggests a landscape that is not tampered with, unfettered, and unmanipulated, although all factions may agree that this



Figure 1—Debates over requiring permits to visit wilderness represent different relationships with wilderness. Photo courtesy of the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute.

is only a perceptual attribute. In reality, there was long-term intervention by indigenous people to increase their chances for survival, and perpetual intervention by more modern society to manipulate game populations, influence the role of fire in the ecosystem, and create travel corridors for human travel, even if by primitive means. Uncorrupted is also a perceptual attribute, related to the purpose of a human intervention on the land or water. If the human impact is done to support privatization or commercialization of nature at the expense of spiritual or intrinsic values associated with that wild place, it becomes corrupted. Distant urban populations would probably be uninterested in both trammeling and corruption, and more likely define wilderness character of a water catchment in terms of a lack of



Figure 2—Inhabited wilderness implies a very different set of values from the ones described in the U.S. Wilderness Act. Photo courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

alien plants, natural hydrologic cycles, and lack of all sources of erosion.

Why Is It Protected?

The values, or reasons for protection, that different stakeholder groups ascribe to wilderness places can also be very different. Wilderness simply means different things to different people. A simple illustration of this is the description by many people of Alaska wildlands as some of our wildest places on the North American continent and in the U.S. National Wilderness Preservation System (Watson, Kneeshaw, and Glaspell 2004). By worldwide standards, these vast, relatively intact ecosystems are among the wildest. However, they differ from most wilderness areas in the continental United States by the fact that traditional relationships between rural people and these wilderness places were assured through the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980. Native and nonnative, rural people continue to travel through these lands to hunt, fish, gather, learn, and teach younger generations about interacting with the resources there. You are, however, more likely to find aircraft use for access, human-built dwellings, and other motorized forms of access there than in areas not established as wilderness through ANILCA. Humans are at home in this landscape, they leave much more than their footprints, and the skills they use to travel and harvest resources here are not considered by them to be primitive, but instead well developed—crucial to survival of whole communities. In many places around the world, including Alaska, inhabited wilderness implies a very different set of values than the ones described in the U.S. Wilderness Act (see Figure 2).

Recently organized efforts have included attempts to define the values

or meanings that different stakeholders ascribe to areas protected for their wilderness character. Some of the values associated with wilderness in the circumpolar north, for example, are very similar to those associated with wilderness in other latitudes, but some are very unique (Alessa and Watson 2002). They are unique to the local rural people with a long history of association with these areas, as they are unique to the distant populations of the world who receive very different benefits from their protection.

What Are We Protecting Wilderness From?

Perceptions of wilderness character differ and can partially be defined by the forces of change that are believed to influence it. Historically, wilderness management research has focused on the threat posed by one dominant force, that of recreation use (Watson and Williams 1995). An expansion of interest to other threats is fairly new, but most of this work remains focused on understanding the threat to wilderness attributes, not to the meanings people receive from interaction with wilderness places (Landres, Cole, and Watson 1994). In the circumpolar north, some unique influences on wilderness values are believed to include the lack of appreciation of multiple orientations toward wilderness resources, energy exploration and development, north-south regionalism and political conflict, fragility of ecosystems, and pressures related to tourism development, in addition to other forces (Alessa and Watson 2002).

Conclusions

Our mandated responsibility extends beyond stewardship of our transactions with wilderness—like counting the number of campsites we find in an area or the number of people we encounter during a hike there—to stewardship of

the relationship people have with this area. Collectively, we motivated our congressional representatives to create this system of wilderness on our behalf and for future generations. Only recently has it been recognized that many evaluations by the public of wilderness policy are rooted in larger contexts than just individual visits to a wilderness (Borrie and others 2002; Watson and Borrie 2003).

A new era of stewardship is facing us, not only with expectations of stewarding our public lands, but also with us becoming deeply cognizant of our role in stewarding the relationship between the public and public lands. Local communities are vocal in their assertion that we need to understand the values they receive from wilderness and other lands and demonstrate to them that we consider these values in making decisions, while also meeting the primary intent of the legislation and policy that guide us in our management decisions. Wilderness character is perceptual, with different people perceiving it very differently, and these perceptions are bound to be changing through time. Our jobs as scientists include providing adequate understanding of the range of these relationships with wilderness places and the things that influence them, in a way that enables managers to set objectives for protection, and even restoration, of human relationships with wilderness landscapes. 

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- ALAN E. WATSON is an executive editor of the *International Journal of Wilderness* and research scientist at the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute in Missoula, Montana. E-mail: awatson@fs.fed.us.

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bugs there would be people all over the place” (p. 21). This statement alludes to a theme that runs through the entire book: the Barrens are unique and “special” in their wilderness state.

Parts IV through VI offer a look at the human side of the Barrens, such as the memorable characters and places in the region and the way Hall's family has been affected. The seventh and final part examines and summarizes how the enjoyment of paddling Arctic rivers is connected with its conservation. Thirty years of canoe tripping has allowed Hall to experience the increase in tourists and how the north has adapted to growing tourism. Throughout it all, Hall and others have fought to protect the Barrens for its wildlife and intrinsic value. Hall points out protection and activism battles won in the past, perhaps in hopes that they will inspire others to act in the future. Major tracts of land have been saved, but in a changing world with changing politics, for how long?

Overall, *Discovering Eden* is an enjoyable read; a light-hearted but valuable contribution to literature on wilderness conservation. The personal accounts and humorous tales also present a strong message that even if you are only one conservationist and you persist, then perhaps your determination will be rewarded. As Hall notes, “The choices we make in the next decade or two may well determine how much biological diversity persists over the next hundred, thousand or even million years. ... Only through the foresight and sheer determination of a coalition of northerners and other Canadians will an Eden this large be preserved intact for future generations” (p. 216).

Reviewed by PATRICK MAHER, a Canadian Ph.D. candidate at Lincoln University, New Zealand, examining the experience of visitors to the Ross Sea region, Antarctica. E-mail: maherp@lincoln.ac.nz.