

PRESERVING WILDERNESS CHARACTER

- **Why is it important?**
- **What is wilderness character?**

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“Once land is designated as wilderness, how do we preserve the spirit of the land, its wildness and naturalness?”

-- Laura and Guy Waterman, *Wilderness Ethics*, 1993



This quote from the Watermans aptly describes the general goal for wilderness stewardship. The big question is, How do we do this?

The answer is by going back to the Wilderness Act and it's central mandate to preserve wilderness character.

WHY IS WILDERNESS CHARACTER IMPORTANT?

Wilderness Act of 1964

- Statement of Policy, Section 2(a):

“a National Wilderness Preservation System...shall be administered...so as to provide for the protection of these areas, *the preservation of their wilderness character*”

- Use of Wilderness Areas, Section 4(b):

“each agency administering any area designated as wilderness shall be responsible for *preserving the wilderness character of the area*”

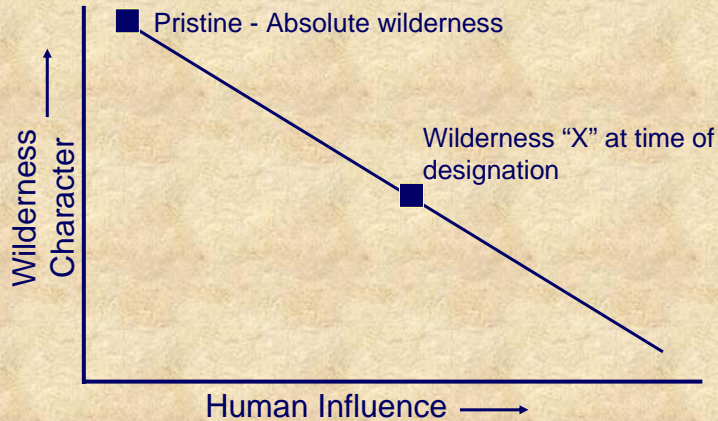
There are two central reasons why wilderness character is important. The first, shown here, is that the Wilderness Act requires the agencies that administer wilderness to preserve the wilderness character of the area. In other words, preserving wilderness character is a legal requirement.

The Statement of Policy in Section 2(a) describes the overall goals for establishing wilderness, and this Section clearly states that the administering agencies shall preserve wilderness character.

Then in Section 4(b) on the Use of Wilderness Area, we again see this clear statement. Congress clearly intended a variety of uses in wilderness (“recreational, scenic, scientific, educational, conservation, and historical use”) and in allowing these uses, the agencies must also preserve the wilderness character of the area. Legal scholars point to this Section 4(b) statement as THE primary management mandate in the Wilderness Act.

THE WILDERNESS MANAGEMENT MODEL **FS Wilderness Management Policy – FSM 2320.6**

“...protect and perpetuate wilderness character...”



The wilderness policies of all the four agencies that administer wilderness (BLM, FS, FWS, NPS) reflect the central mandate of the Wilderness Act to preserve wilderness character. For example, this graph is from FS wilderness policy, and shows how increasing human influence negatively affects wilderness character, and this policy shows that wilderness character will be at least maintained as it was at the time of Congressional designation.

WHY IS WILDERNESS CHARACTER IMPORTANT?

- Improve on-the-ground stewardship: understand consequences, and prioritize decisions and actions



The other central reason why wilderness character is important is to improve on-the-ground wilderness stewardship.

Every wilderness is beset with a host of problems, challenges, and issues that may require decisions and actions, and several examples are shown in this slide. How do these decisions and actions affect wilderness character? How should wilderness managers prioritize their time and effort among all the competing demands?

Making the need to preserve wilderness character explicit in day-to-day management will allow managers to better understand the consequences of their decisions and actions, and to prioritize their efforts to ensure the preservation of wilderness character.

WHAT IS WILDERNESS CHARACTER?

No definition in the Wilderness Act and no legislative history on the meaning of this phrase

- **Character**

“The combination of qualities or features that distinguishes one person, group, or thing from another” -- American Heritage Dictionary

“The aggregate of distinctive qualities” – Webster’s 3rd New International Dictionary

- **Wilderness character** – the combination of biophysical, experiential, and symbolic qualities that distinguishes wilderness from all other lands

There is no definition of wilderness character in the Wilderness Act, and there is no legislative history on the meaning of this phrase.

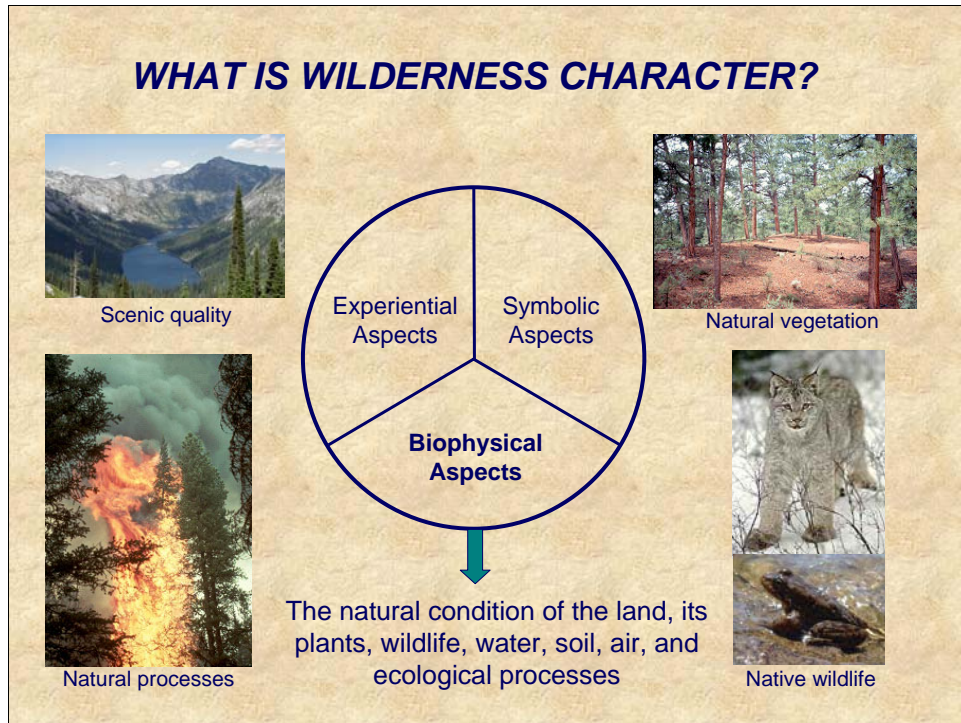
So we’re left to our own devices...

The first place to turn is the dictionary, and here are definitions from two standard dictionaries that both convey the same thing.

Our Committee’s definition of wilderness character builds on these dictionary definitions. In essence, wilderness character is very complex, filled with nuance and symbolism. In the words of some people, wilderness character is ineffable, indescribable. We agree, but our position is that wilderness stewardship is hindered without a pragmatic definition, and that such a definition is needed to help develop tangible stewardship goals.

After much discussion and outside review, for the purposes of developing monitoring direction we define wilderness character in terms of the biophysical, experiential, and symbolic qualities of wilderness. Each of these is explained below.

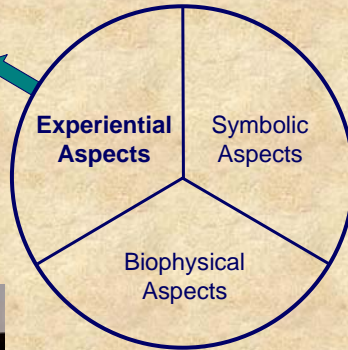
WHAT IS WILDERNESS CHARACTER?



The circle represents wilderness character, and how it is composed of three basic parts.

WHAT IS WILDERNESS CHARACTER?

The personal benefits and meanings people derive from their experiences in wilderness



Recreation and the use of primitive skills



Experience of nature, free from constraints of culture

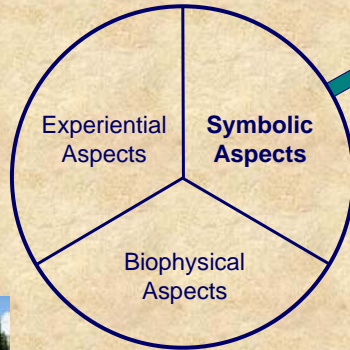
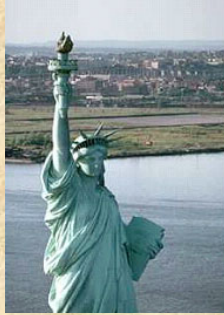


Personal challenge and self-discovery



Experience of indigenous cultures, and human stories from the land

WHAT IS WILDERNESS CHARACTER?



The meanings that individuals and society derive from the existence of wildernesses



Interconnectedness



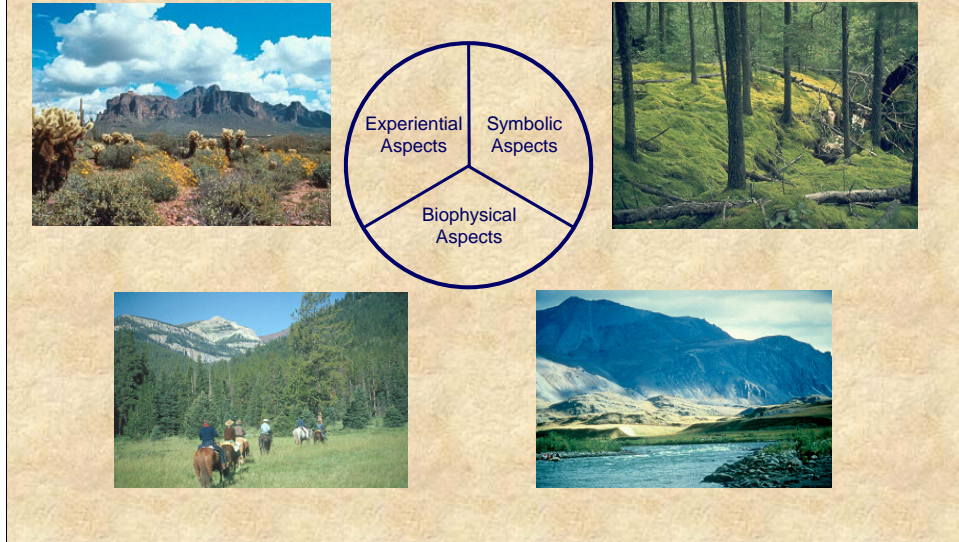
Humility and restraint



Part of something larger than the self

Just like the Statue of Liberty that is filled with symbolic meaning, so is wilderness.

THERE ARE UNIQUE ASPECTS OF WILDERNESS CHARACTER IN EACH WILDERNESS



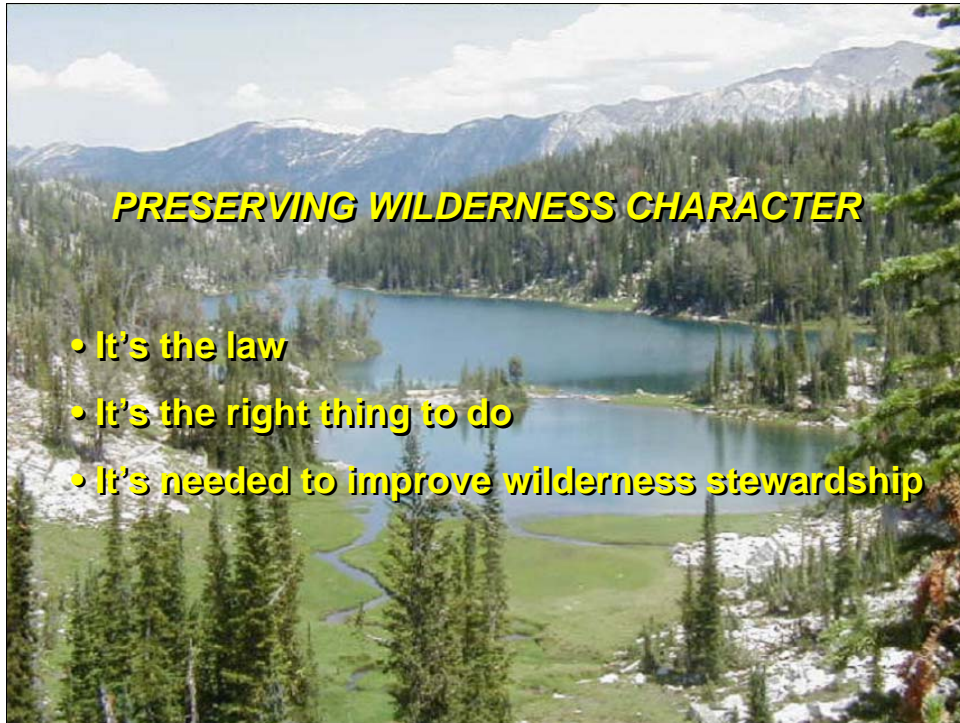
In addition to national notions of wilderness character, the diversity of ecological systems inside wilderness is huge. In addition, each wilderness has a unique combination of social/cultural context, as well as administrative direction in legislation and agency plans. Therefore, while there are core, national aspects of wilderness character that apply to all wildernesses, there are also unique, place-dependent aspects of wilderness character in each wilderness. For example, the legislative history of wilderness legislation often describes specific reasons why a particular wilderness was established, and these are unique, place-dependent aspects of wilderness character.

**WILDERNESS CHARACTER IS STRONGLY INFLUENCED
BY STEWARDSHIP DECISIONS AND ACTIONS**



In addition, stewardship decisions and actions strongly influence all three aspects of wilderness character. Note how on the right side that all three aspects of wilderness character are still present, but now the wilderness character of the area is distorted.

These photos show how stewardship decisions, in this case determining party size limits, using management-ignited fire, or building a bridge over a stream, affect wilderness character. All of these decisions were made to protect wilderness, but in wilderness EVERY decision and action may have unintended effects.



PRESERVING WILDERNESS CHARACTER

- **It's the law**
- **It's the right thing to do**
- **It's needed to improve wilderness stewardship**