

The Idea of Wilderness

- *By TinaMarie Ekker*

“Wilderness is a place of restraint, for managers as well as visitors.”
— Pinchot Institute for Conservation, Ensuring the Stewardship of the National Wilderness Preservation System, 2001

Wilderness is Relationship. All cultures across history set places apart from the routines and common behaviors of daily life. The purpose of these special places is to reorient our focus and perceptions in a setting that is conducive to reflection. We approach such places differently than we do the usual places in our daily lives, and it is the restraint in this interaction that makes them special, enabling us to experience the unique values these places provide in nurturing the human spirit. Examples include shrines, memorials, and ceremonial sites. Wilderness also is such a place.

Like all special places set apart, Wilderness is not just a geographic location, it is an idea and an ideal. The “idea” of wilderness encompasses certain values that we as a society have chosen to protect. Congress enacted the Wilderness Act in 1964, with the singular statutory purpose of securing the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness:

It is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness. For this purpose there is hereby established a National Wilderness Preservation System.
(emphasis added) (The Wilderness Act, Sec. 2(a))

The Wilderness Act intended that Wilderness would have meaning, that it would be protected for something, not simply be a place where certain activities, such as logging, do not occur. Although Wilderness may look similar to other undeveloped landscapes such as national park backcountry, it is the way that humans interact with Wilderness that makes it different from other landscapes.

In preserving Wilderness we are essentially preserving an endangered experience, and an endangered idea — the idea that self-willed landscape has value and should exist. Wilderness offers the opportunity to experience a relationship between humans and nature that is increasingly rare in our modern world, a relationship in which humans do not dominate, manipulate, or control nature but instead immerse ourselves as a member in the larger community of life.

What makes this possible is the authenticity of Wilderness. This authenticity offers us a window into a world other than the world humans have constructed and now dominate. It is the authenticity of Wilderness that gives it deep meaning, imbuing it with immense intrinsic value as part of the ancient fabric of the earth.

What keeps Wilderness 'real' and alive in our world today is the attitude with which we approach and interact with these congressionally designated landscapes. In this way, 'Wilderness' is not just physical geography, it is also a concept that must be protected and preserved if Wilderness - not just undeveloped landscape - is to continue to exist for future generations to experience and enjoy.

Defining Wilderness

With passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964, Congress gave the concept of 'Wilderness' a legal definition:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. (emphasis added) (The Wilderness Act, Section 2(c))

A defining aspect of Wilderness is that it will forever remain in contrast to modern civilization, its technologies, conventions, and contrivances. The Wilderness Act expressly prohibits motorized equipment, mechanical transport, commercial enterprise, and the placement of structures and installations precisely because allowing the routine intrusion of such things blurs the distinction between Wilderness and modern civilization, and psychologically alters our relationship with these places. The more these intrusions occur in Wilderness, the less meaning Wilderness will have, and the less we as a society will retain the special psychological, symbolic, and experiential values that true Wilderness provides.

A second defining aspect of Wilderness is that it remain untrammelled. Untrammelled does not mean "untrampled" or "undeveloped." Untrammelled means unfettered, free of intentional interference or manipulation. By selecting "untrammelled" as a core defining quality of Wilderness, Congress defined the kind of relationship that humans are to have with Wilderness. By law, we are to allow Wilderness to be self-willed, shaped by natural processes, not controlled or manipulated by human goals and desires. Being in contrast to civilization and untrammelled by human control and manipulation are key to the very meaning of Wilderness, and are what differentiates Wilderness from other undeveloped landscapes.

Wilderness Character

The overarching mandate of the Wilderness Act is to preserve the wilderness character of each area in the National Wilderness Preservation System. Wilderness character, like personal character, is comprised of more than just physical features, encompassing both tangible and intangible qualities. Preserving wilderness character is the key to keeping alive the meaning of Wilderness in America.

Some tangible components of wilderness character include the presence of native wildlife at naturally occurring population levels; lack of human structures, roads, motor vehicles

or mechanized equipment; lack of crowding; and few or no human “improvements” for visitor convenience such as highly engineered and overdeveloped trails, developed campsites, signs, or bridges.

Some intangible components of wilderness character include outstanding opportunities for reflection; freedom; risk; adventure, discovery, and mystery; places where self-reliance and safety are a personal responsibility; untrammelled, wild and self-willed land; uncommodified, and places that forever provide solitude and respite from modern civilization, its technologies, conventions, and contrivances.

Wilderness solitude is a state of mind, a mental freedom that emerges from settings where visitors experience nature essentially free of the reminders of society, its inventions, and conventions. Privacy and isolation are important components, but solitude also is enhanced by the absence of other distractions, such as large groups, mechanization, unnatural noise, signs, and other modern artifacts... it is conducive to the psychological benefits associated with wilderness and one’s free and independent response to nature. (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 2001)

Public Use

The Wilderness Act identifies allowable “public purposes” for Wilderness. These are recreational, scenic, scientific, educational, conservation, and historical use. It is important to keep in mind that these “public purposes” are not the statutory purpose of the Act. They are the appropriate purposes for which the public may use Wilderness. While these “public purposes” are allowable in Wilderness, they are not mandatory. The “public purposes” do not take precedence over the Act’s singular statutory purpose to preserve the wilderness character of each area in the NWPS.

Except as otherwise provided in this Act, each agency administering any area designated as wilderness shall be responsible for preserving the wilderness character of the area and shall so administer such area for such other purposes for which it may have been established as also to preserve its wilderness character. (emphasis added) (The Wilderness Act, § 4(b))

If any of the allowable public uses of Wilderness conflict with the preservation of an area’s wilderness character, protecting wilderness character has priority. A Wilderness can be completely closed to one or all of these “public purposes” if such use would diminish or degrade any components of wilderness character.

Conclusion

“This is the challenge of wilderness management, preserving what is unseen and unmeasurable...”

— Roger Kaye, Wilderness Scholar, 2001

The concept and idea of “Wilderness” is premised upon humans interacting with certain landscapes in a manner that is different from how we approach any other area of land.

Keeping the idea of Wilderness alive requires our participation in a special relationship with these landscapes that is very different from the utilitarian, commodity-oriented manner in which modern society generally interacts with nature. Preserving the idea of Wilderness requires humans to exercise humility and restraint, not dominance over the land and its natural processes. The opportunity to experience this kind of relationship with nature is an increasingly rare experience in our modern world. Designated Wilderness is the only landscape where this form of interaction between humans and the rest of nature is written into law.

The unique values of Wilderness will continue to be available to present and to future generations as long as we continue to treat Wilderness as special places set apart from the conveniences and routines of modern daily life. Preserving the meaning of Wilderness depends on the actions of everyone, visitors and managers alike, as well as those who may never visit but find their spirits nurtured just in knowing authentic Wilderness still exists.