

Wilderness Character

— *By Roger Kaye, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge*

. . . 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] — Section 4 (b), The Wilderness Act of 1964

Preserving “Wilderness character” is one of our criteria for judging the appropriateness of potential management actions, public uses, and technologies in Wilderness. Thus, we need to know what it is. We need a sense of how tangible and intangible attributes of a landscape converge to shape wilderness character, and how our actions may diminish or enhance this elusive but definitive quality.

At its core, wilderness character, like personal character, is much more than a physical condition. It is an unseen presence capable of refocusing our perception of nature and our relationship to it. It is that quality that lifts our connection to a landscape from the utilitarian, commodity orientation that dominates the major part of our relationship with nature to the symbolic realm serving other human needs.

This transcendent function of wilderness character is recognized in the legislative history written by the Wilderness Act’s chief author, Howard Zahniser:

We deeply need the humility to know ourselves as the dependent members of a great community of life, and this can indeed be one of the spiritual benefits of a wilderness experience. Without the gadgets, the inventions, the contrivances whereby men have seemed to establish among themselves an independence of nature, without these distractions, to know the wilderness is to know a profound humility, to recognize one’s littleness, to sense dependence and interdependence, indebtedness, and responsibility.
— *The Need for Wilderness Areas, 1956*

Wilderness serves an ancestral impulse – found throughout time and across cultures – to set some places apart as the embodiment of an ideal. The wilderness ideal is the need for places where we can know ourselves as part of something beyond our modern society and its inventions and conventions, something more timeless and universal.

Wilderness character is not preserved by our compliance with wilderness legislation and regulation alone. It emerges from the circumstances we impose upon ourselves. It emerges from the decisions we make that test our commitment to our ideals. Every management decision against an action or technology that might degrade the wilderness condition serves to uphold and strengthen the character it is seen to have. Every decision to forgo actions, technologies, or conveniences that have no seeming physical impact, but detract from our commitment to wilderness as a place set apart enhances wilderness and agency character because sacrifice for an ideal is the strongest gesture of respect.

The Wilderness Act provides guidance for such decisions. But beyond its listing of certain allowed and prohibited uses, much ambiguity remains. Like the stewards of the Saint Paul Cathedral, Arlington Cemetery, or the Viet Nam Memorial, we have few objective criteria, and no standard metric with which to quantify or evaluate actions that enhance or detract from the character of our nation's natural sacred places. This is the unique challenge of wilderness management, preserving what is unseen and unmeasurable.

Zahniser's words suggest that chief among our criteria should be the purpose of the action, the spirit in which it is carried out, and the effect it will have on our way of thinking. Will the action reinforce the primacy of our uses and benefits, our convenience and expediency? Or will it serve to affirm our role as humble, respectful guests of the landscape? As the criteria we choose shapes the character of wilderness, so it shapes our character as stewards.

Wallace Stegner called Wilderness America's "geography of hope" – the hope for an undiminished future. Nowhere is this ideal expressed more visibly than in those remnant landscapes we allow to be wild and free. Free of our tendency to dominate and thus free to inspire thinking beyond the boundary of our life and lifetime. This convergence of vision and restraint is the source and symbolism of wilderness character. It is that quality that transcends physical boundaries to touch the millions who will never come, but who find inspiration and hope just in knowing some places are – and will always be – wild and free.