

# **The Many Faces of Wilderness Character - A look at the history and useage of a concept that embodies the heart and soul of our wild places**

— *By Roger Kaye*

On January 16, 2001, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) published a Federal Register notice and solicitation for comments on its recently developed Draft Wilderness Stewardship Policy Pursuant to the Wilderness Act of 1964.

The purpose of the draft policy is to provide a broad framework and specific managerial direction for implementing the Wilderness Act within the National Wildlife Refuge System. Because of its prominence in the Wilderness Act, the phrase "wilderness character" is referenced throughout the draft policy as a criterion for administering Wilderness. This emphasis is supported by recent research by Wilderness Act scholar Douglas Scott who describes preservation of wilderness character of designated areas as the overriding mandate of the Wilderness Act. Furthermore, subsequent congressional action has reemphasized the primacy of this mandate. For example, a 1983 report by the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs stated that:

The overriding principle guiding management of all wilderness areas, regardless of which agency administers them, is the Wilderness Act (section 4(b)) mandate to preserve their wilderness character.

Recognizing this importance, the Service decided a description of wilderness character should be provided in the policy. But wilderness character, like other key descriptors of Wilderness in the Act, was not defined in the legislation.

The other three agencies that administer designated Wilderness (National Park Service, Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management) have overlooked this definitional problem in their Wilderness management policies. Their unspecified use of the term can be read to mean that the Act's resonating mandate to preserve wilderness character is synonymous with the mandate to preserve the physical condition and natural processes of Wilderness. However, the writings of Howard Zahniser, the originator, chief author, and lobbyist of the Wilderness Act, and others who influenced his drafting of it, clearly indicate that the intent of the Wilderness Act goes well beyond the protection of the tangible qualities of designated landscapes.

Although Zahniser did not offer a formal definition of wilderness character in any of his drafts of the Wilderness Act, his testimony before the final Senate hearing on the Wilderness Bill in 1963 indicates that the essence of the concept is found in the first

sentence of Subsection 2(c), "Definition of Wilderness." Zahniser testified that "The first sentence defines the character of wilderness. . . ." That sentence reads:

"A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

Zahniser further stated that:

"In this definition the first sentence is definitive of the meaning of the concept of wilderness, its essence, its essential nature—a definition that makes plain the character of lands with which the bill deals, the ideal."

The first sentence of Section 2(c) has probably caused more confusion and debate than any other line in the Act. To clarify Zahniser's intent in constructing this sentence we must recognize that it contains two related, yet distinct elements of wilderness character.

Consider first the second, most widely quoted element, "where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man." It describes the ecological and evolutionary freedom of the natural system that wilderness designation maintains. Zahniser purposely chose the word "untrammelled" because it was precisely the right word to convey the wildness of wilderness – that is, its freedom from human control, manipulation or limitation.

The first element of the Act's definition of Wilderness expresses a seminal function of Wilderness: In providing a "contrast" with those areas where humans dominate, it expands our thinking about our relationship to the natural world. Wilderness provides the physical distance from societal influences that is necessary for us to understand their effect on us. And as a place set apart, where we yield our actions and uses to nature's primacy, Wilderness provides a psychological distance from our cultural imperative to dominate and bend nature to our purposes. This is the distance necessary to sense our ancestral relatedness and continuing dependence on the natural world.

That Zahniser's intent went beyond protecting the natural and untrammelled condition of wilderness is further revealed by his statement in *Wilderness Forever* that:

"protecting areas is only part of our concern. We saw that safeguarding wilderness involves the wildness of ourselves . . ." (emphasis added)

Indeed, unlike his associates Robert Marshall, Aldo Leopold, and Olaus Murie, Zahniser was not a biologist or an ecologist by either training or inclination. The son of a minister, Zahniser's orientation toward wilderness was primarily spiritual. In his seminal article *The Need for Wilderness Areas*, inserted into the Congressional Record by sponsor

Senator Hubert Humphrey, Zahniser emphasized that the potential for wilderness to evoke a transcendent perspective was among the needs for and purposes of "a national program for wilderness preservation."

Zahniser then referenced an article Robert Marshall wrote toward the end of his life. It described "certain distinctive values" that come to a person in wilderness. Marshall was a scientist, with a Ph.D. and research experience in plant physiology. But this reflective article did not emphasize the ecological values of untrammeled wilderness. Nor did it give primacy to scenic or recreational aspects. Many values are present in wilderness, Marshall wrote:

" but they are blended with the dominant value of being part of an immensity so great that the human being who looks upon it vanishes into utter insignificance."

Zahniser acknowledged the more tangible and commonly understood recreational, scientific, and ecological values of wilderness, but emphasized that "THE MOST PROFOUND of all wilderness values in our modern world is an educational value" (emphasis his). By "educational value" Zahniser was specifically referring to the capacity of wilderness to enable one "to sense and see his own humble, dependent relationship to all of life." He believed that the "understandings" implicit in this wilderness way of perception and relation might promote:

"an awareness of our human existence as spiritual creatures nurtured and sustained by and from the great community of life that comprises the wildness of the universe, of which we ourselves are a part . . ."

Over and over, Zahniser spoke to the contrast Wilderness provides to our shared sense of separation from the natural world. To understand ourselves as integral parts of a broader system of life, Zahniser said that:

"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...to know the wilderness is to know a profound humility,...to sense dependence and interdependence, indebtedness and responsibility."

This statement underscores the fact that Zahniser's motivation for excluding motor vehicles, motorized equipment, mechanized transport, structures and installations in Wilderness was not simply to protect the physical condition or recreational aspects of Wilderness. Through our act of foregoing these conveniences, through our decision to restrain and limit ourselves, arises the paramount benefit of Wilderness.

In conclusion, the phrase "wilderness character" at once represents two landscape attributes: a physical condition and a psychological effect. On the surface, it describes the

untrammelled state of a landscape, its lifeforms, and the ecological and evolutionary processes in which they are embedded. On a deeper level, wilderness character embodies the psychological capacity of such a place to set apart to enlarge our thinking, to evoke the recognition that we are interdependent and obligate members of a larger community of life. It is these inseparable attributes of Wilderness – and the ennobling effect honoring them has upon us – that Zahniser believed we most deeply needed to provide for.