Soul of the Wilderness

Natural, Wild, Uncrowded, or Free?

BY DAVID N. COLE

Abstract: The most important and desirable attributes of wilderness are that it is natural, wild, uncrowded, and free. However, these attributes come into conflict with each other as society faces difficult decisions about wilderness management. This article discusses these attributes, ultimately suggesting that the value of wilderness might be optimized by embracing a diverse wilderness system, a system in which wilderness values are maximized or minimized in different areas.

Images of wilderness are as diverse as the value systems of those who hold wilderness dear. Yet different people find different attributes important in their ideal image of wilderness. A wilderness landscape is natural, retaining its primeval character and influence. Wilderness is wild, a contrast to the rest of the world, and is not intentionally controlled and molded to human purposes. Wilderness is uncrowded, a place where human presence and evidence is localized and subtle. Finally, wilderness is free. People seeking appropriate kinds of wilderness experiences should ideally be free to visit wilderness, with a minimum of behavioral restriction.

Each of these four desirable attributes of wilderness is codified in the language of The Wilderness Act (TWA). The word "natural" is used several times, as in wilderness is to be "managed so as to preserve its natural conditions." Natural is usually taken to mean that the influence of post-Columbian peoples should be generally absent. The notion of wild is conveyed by the word "untrammeled," frequently misinterpreted as meaning something similar to natural. Instead, untrammeled is synonymous with unfettered and unrestrained. It suggests freedom from human control rather than lack of human influence. The idea that wilderness should be uncrowded is implicit in the definition of wilderness as a place that "has outstanding opportunities for solitude." Finally, the desire for wilderness to be free is clear in statements that it should "be administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people," and is a place for an "unconfined type of recreation."

Wilderness Attributes in Conflict

There is little reason to think that the framers of TWA saw substantial conflict between wilderness as natural, wild, uncrowded, and free. However, changes in scientific understanding, societal values, and the wilderness system itself suggest that these goals have become contradictory. To keep wilderness from being crowded, some managers deny access to visitors and severely restrict behaviors. Other managers, to avoid restrictions, have allowed wilderness to become quite crowded. Should wilderness be uncrowded or should it be free? The need to make this tragic choice has been aggravated by continual increases in wilderness recreation use and by societal decisions to designate lands popular with recreationists (often near metropolitan areas) as wilderness. Recently designated wilderness, rather than being remote and conducive to the "two-week pack-trip" ideal of Aldo Leopold and Bob Marshall, is primarily used for short day-trips by proximate urbanites with little free time. In such places, the conflict between uncrowded and free is pronounced.

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We face a similar conflict between natural and wild wilderness. Several decades ago managers and policymakers assumed that natural conditions could be perpetuated by leaving nature alone. Today, this assumption is untenable. Contemporary human activities and influences (fire suppression, climate change, and much more) are altering conditions in all wilderness areas. Some wilderness managers have adopted restoration programs to compensate for this loss. Yet restoration, despite its admirable intent, is a form of control over wilderness conditions. Other managers, to avoid this

Wilderness in Alaska is relatively uncrowded and unaffected by human activities. Even here, however, choices must be made between naturalness and wildness, lack of crowding and freedom. Photo courtesy of David N. Cole.

"trammeling" of wilderness, have eschewed hands-on management, leaving wilderness wild and untamed but allowing human influence to expand and intensify.Again, choosing between natural and wild wilderness is aggravated by demands for more wilderness and for wilderness to serve more purposes. Increasingly, societal voices are asserting the need for a wilderness system that includes representative samples of all biotic communities and is managed to preserve native species and processes. Such values differ from those that led early wilderness advocates to preserve sublime landscapes. Many recently designated wilderness areas are small, fragmented, substantially altered, and surrounded by threats to their integrity. In such places, the conflict between the natural and the wild is pronounced.

Tragic Choices

Since we cannot simultaneously maximize naturalness and wildness, or uncrowdedness and freedom, we must choose between these attributes. How should we do this? One option is to emphasize one or the other. The obvious drawback to this approach is that society must forgo the other attribute. If we decide to emphasize uncrowdedness and wildness, for example, society will lose important benefits that can only be obtained from a wilderness experience as well as benefits that accrue from preservation of natural conditions and processes. This would be a reasonable decision if these latter benefits are relatively less important or can be provided elsewhere. For each attribute, let's examine benefits that might be lost and the potential for those benefits to be provided elsewhere.

Losing Naturalness

At the time TWA was passed, few recognized that naturalness would be lost if wilderness ecosystems were not intentionally manipulated. There was surprisingly little discussion of the desirability of preserving representative examples of all ecosystems in wilderness or of the importance of preserving biotic diversity. Today biotic conservation is widely considered to be among the most important values of wilderness. Designated wilderness areas are the "building blocks" of reserve networks that maintain viable populations of native species. Widespread and severe erosion of the naturalness in wilderness areas would reduce their scientific value. For some native species and processes, small nature reserves will suffice, but for animals that require large areas, there is no substitute for wilderness.

Losing Wildness

Wilderness represents "self-imposed restraint in a society that generally seeks to dominate and control all of nature" (Noss 1991). TWA can be interpreted as an attempt to declare some lands to be off-limits to human engineering. Ironically, we are now thinking about reversing our decision to be self-restrained and molding the last unengineered lands into our image of naturalness. If we do so, the wildness of wilderness will be diminished. The scientific value of wilderness will be compromised, because there will no longer be any unmanipulated land, no "controls" for assessing the success of wilderness restorations. More important, humans will lose their ability to experience life as part of a biological realm that is self-willed and self-ordered, rather than human controlled. It is hard to imagine lands beyond wilderness where such selfrestraint will be exercised.

Losing Uncrowdedness

Uncrowdedness is not entirely satisfactory as a descriptor of the wilderness condition that is conducive to solitude, contemplation, personal challenge, and communion with nature. Opportunities to experience wilderness in these ways diminish as more people visit wilderness areas. Although many wilderness trails and popular destinations are already crowded, it is unlikely that the most remote, inaccessible places will ever be crowded. It is equally unlikely that all nonwilderness land, much of which is unattractive to most recreationists, will become crowded. The problem with increased crowding, then, is that people lose the ability to experience solitude in recreationally attractive, relatively accessible locations. Since most people seek out these opportunities, this represents a significant loss.

Losing Freedom

The ability to benefit from wilderness experiences when people need and desire them is among the foremost values of wilderness. Another value is the freedom to behave spontaneously with few of the shackles of daily life. Such freedoms are lost when access to wilderness is limited and behavioral restrictions are implemented. Anyone wanting to float the Selway River through the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, for example, must apply for a permit with only a 3% chance of success (unless they go with

an outfitter). To spend a week hiking a trail in the Mount Rainier Wilderness, one must reserve a campsite each night of the trip and camp adjacent to other hikers. Again, it is unlikely that use limits and behavioral restrictions will be necessary in unattractive, inaccessible places. But loss of freedom will diminish benefits for wilderness visitors who prefer more attractive and accessible locations.

Some argue that demand for recreation experiences should be provided on lands outside wilderness (Lucas 1980). A "backcountry" land designation could provide the benefits of free access, making it possible to emphasize uncrowdedness in designated wilderness. Proposals for such complementary land designations, including one by Bob Marshall (1933), have fallen on deaf ears. Consequently, there is no system of nonwilderness lands capable of accommodating demand for wilderness-like recreation experiences. Instead, we have a wilderness system that is twice as large as the "outside maximum" of 50 million acres mentioned by Howard Zahniser, the principal architect of TWA (U.S. Congress, Senate 1961). For the most part, wildernesslike recreational benefits must be provided by designated wilderness or not be provided at all.

Compromise between Attributes

To me, each of these four attributes is vitally important. I cannot imagine the loss of any of them, nor can I imagine how they could be compensated for outside wilderness. Some colleagues suggest my all-or-nothing arguments are too rigid. There is some truth to their complaint. Indeed, none of these attributes will be entirely lost, regardless of what we do. Nor is it possible, in the pluralistic society we live in, to avoid compromise between competing value systems. In fact, the most likely outcome of the conflict between attributes will be a compromise in which each attribute is diminished, a system in which most wilderness areas are substantially altered, frequently manipulated, crowded in some places, and restricted in others.

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We are already well down this path. Consider places where controlled burning has been used to reduce fuel buildup and thin dense thickets of trees resulting from fire suppression. Management goals may refer to restoring naturalness. However, fires typically are not ignited with the frequency or timing needed to restore natural conditions. Rather, enough fire is applied to reduce the fuel loadings and the risk of wildfire. The result is wilderness that is neither very natural nor very wild.

Consider the places where managers have dealt with heavy recreation demand by limiting the use of popular trails and destinations. One result is that spontaneity and freedom of access are reduced. Often, use limits in popular places have displaced visitors to locations that had not been crowded before. Unless limits are set at low levels, crowding problems grow without significant alleviation of crowding in the most popular places. The result is wilderness that is neither very uncrowded nor very free.

Embracing Diversity

How might we preserve a diversity of wilderness values? The alternative to compromising every attribute everywhere is to compromise different attributes in different places. We could emphasize naturalness, using manipulative restoration, in some wilderness but not in others. Obvious candidates for emphasizing naturalness would be small wildernesses surrounded by developed lands, representative examples of every ecosystem type, and places that harbor critical species or ecosystems endangered or threatened by human disturbance. Large remote wilderness areas would be good candidates for emphasizing wildness. We could plan for a broad range of recreation use levels and allow heavy visitation in selected wilderness locations, while ensuring that use levels remain low on most wilderness lands. Such an approach would maintain most of the wilderness system in an uncrowded state, while being responsive to increasing demand for wilderness experiences.

Conclusion

Much has changed in the decades since TWA was passed. The population of the United States has grown in size and diversity as has the wilderness system and the demands placed on that system. Now we must decide how to respond to the conflicting

Backpackers in Alaska, which has some of the most natural, wild, uncrowded, and free wilderness in North America. Photo courtesy of David N. Cole.

demands of conservation biologists, humanists, recreationists, educators, and therapists. If we continue with traditional, site-specific, decentralized decisionmaking, the future wilderness system will be the result of countless independent decisions made over many years by hundreds of different individuals—a classic example of "the tyranny of small decisions" (Kahn 1966). The likely result is a relatively homogeneous system of wilderness that is neither highly natural, wild, uncrowded, or free.

I suggest, instead, that we take a proactive, coordinated approach to decisionmaking. Society should debate the pros and cons of different attributes and plan for a system that optimizes legitimate wilderness values. This might mean deciding on a systemwide emphasis on one or another of these opposing values. Alternatively, it might mean allocating separate lands to each opposing value and embracing diversity. IJW

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Blooming

If it weren't for the wildflowers,
I wonder if I'd begin life anew,
find the strength to stretch
like a child upon waking,
to extract the damp fingers
that cling, try to root me.

In this dazzle of petals and bees
and sweet pungent flood
I vision my reveries realized:
me floating just above everything
more heart-filled and moon-fed
each blooming.

Once I marked the passing
of my dreams.
Now my dreams mark me.
Yarrow and tiger lily
cloak my shoulders,
the meadow rises from the center of a soul
which whispers the lessons
it longs to live
with a passion
resplendent, crazy, free,
and here.
Undeniably here.

—Sharon Brisolara