

In Their Own Words: Wilderness Values of Outfitter/Guides

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Abstract—A case study of conflict between outfitter/guides and the U.S.D.A. Forest Service was conducted in the summer of 1996. This research found variations in wilderness values among outfitter/guides operating in the Sierra Nevada region. Results from the interviews conducted in this study show divergence between two types of guides. The stock-based guides (also known as packers) had a more utilitarian view of wilderness, disregarding some ecological considerations and emphasizing the wilderness experience, as the most valuable asset to wilderness. The mountaineering guides focused on the wilderness experience as well as on preserving the wilderness resource. Both packers and mountaineering guides wanted to act on their wilderness values through volunteer work for the resource management agencies. Mountaineering guides also imparted their wilderness values to their clients through education.

Through special use permits, outfitter/guides operate within wilderness and provide services to recreational users for a fee. Although the 1964 Wilderness Act allows the operation of commercial guiding and outfitting in wilderness, the actions and values of these guides and their clients can give rise to controversy about their permitted association with the wilderness. Criticisms of outfitter/guides operating in wilderness include: 1) a lack of compatibility of commercial ventures with the wilderness ideal, 2) resource damage by stock use, 3) the lack of preparedness of outfitter/guides' clients to safely use wilderness, and 4) the potential increase of wilderness users through marketing by outfitter/guides resulting in crowding of particular wilderness areas. Outfitter/guides operate on many National Forests. They have representation through organizations such as the American Mountain Guides Association and state organizations such as the Idaho Outfitter Guides Association or California Outdoors. In the National Forest studied for this research outfitter/guides wrote approximately 10% of all wilderness permits.

Many different values are derived from wilderness. Values are the evaluation of certain beliefs (that is, if you believe something to be true, whether that truth is positive or negative). In discussing wilderness values, we can address either the value derived from wilderness (benefits) or the inherent value in wilderness.

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Benefits

A great deal of research has focused on the benefits of wilderness recreation and experience. This research has provided a long list of believed benefits of wilderness. For example, Greenway (1996) discusses escape, addressing the human/nature relationship, peacefulness, and freedom. Kaplan and Kaplan (1995) discuss self confidence, simplicity, contentment and self discovery. Driver and others (1987) report that wilderness users seek to enjoy nature, reduce tension and gain physical fitness.

Inherent Value

Less prevalent is the assessment of the values placed on wilderness itself. Ecological value focuses on the provision in wilderness of an area which lacks the influence of humans. This lack of influence by humans provides a laboratory for research that can limit the factors influencing a plant or animal species or an ecological process (Henning 1987).

The lines between the two areas—benefits derived from wilderness, and inherent values in wilderness—remain unclear at some points. If wilderness is valuable to society, then society benefits from it. The line between these types of wilderness values is somewhat indistinct in the research we conducted with outfitter/guides. Because we relied on interviews, people were free to create overlapping categories. In this paper, we will analyze wilderness values as they were described to us. We present a framework for these values that aligns with the distinction between wilderness benefits and inherent values.

Methods

Key informant interviews were conducted with mountaineering guides who focus on rock climbing and mountaineering skills and packers who use pack stock to transport clients and/or gear into the wilderness operating within wilderness in the Sierra Nevada. In addition to interviews, data sources included local publications, literature from interested parties, Forest Service files and correspondence between outfitter/guides and the Forest Service.

Semi-structured interviews of nine outfitter/guides (five packers and four mountaineering guides) operating within the wilderness in the Sierra Nevada area were conducted in the summer of 1996. These interviews focused on conflict, wilderness values and wilderness education. Interviews were based on a series of questions. New information provided by the interviewees led to the development of additional questions. This allowed the interviewer to probe new

areas and develop an understanding of the issue. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 3 hours, depending on the brevity of interviewees answers. Interviews were tape recorded, transcribed and coded for key words and comments on specific components of the study.

Results

Existence of Wilderness Values Among Outfitter/Guides

Interviews with outfitter/guides made the existence of wilderness values clear. These interviewees choose to devote a great deal of their time and energy to making a career in wilderness recreation. Valuing wilderness and wilderness recreation was a part of their commitment to wilderness as a vocation. There were no outfitter/guides who did not value the existence and preservation of wilderness.

Differences existed between packers and mountaineering guides. The results reveal a split in terms of their utilitarian and biocentric views of wilderness. While all guides believed recreational use of wilderness was valuable, mountaineering guides' views were tempered by the value they place on the ecological components of wilderness.

Coding and categorizing interview data revealed a number of typologies of wilderness values. In some cases, these types of values match the existing literature on wilderness values. The categories developed from our research with outfitter/guides operating within wilderness in the Sierra/Nevada include the valuation of wilderness for 1) society, 2) the environment, 3) individual development, 4) self interest and 5) acting on wilderness values.

Society

The value of wilderness to society fell into two broad categories. First, and largest, was the value of wilderness experience. Second, outfitter/guides addressed the value of wilderness for society as a whole, including existence, spiritual good and an undeveloped place.

Value of the Wilderness

All outfitter/guides, not surprisingly, felt that wilderness recreation was positive for people, whether they came as families, individuals, friends or youth groups. Within this commonly held value of wilderness experience, differences existed between packers and mountaineering guides. They manifested themselves in the balance between ecological considerations and the social values of wilderness. For example, some mountaineering guides suggested that there was a drawback to the social value of wilderness recreation because this use also degraded the wilderness resource. One mountaineering guide expressed the dichotomy of wanting people to experience wilderness and realizing the impact of that use:

As far as bad sides go, [outfitter/guides] are taking more people into the wilderness. And consequently, we do contribute to overcrowding. We do contribute to impact. As such, the best we hope to do is to try to mitigate that...It does have an impact and it does certainly concern me and I think about it

quite often when I take people to remote areas. The same thing applies to say magazine articles on remote areas and so on. So when somebody sees those and reads them, they automatically become less remote and more known.

In balancing the social and ecological values of wilderness, packers tended to believe that the social values weighed more heavily. Packers indicated the belief that ecological concerns about recreation impacts were exaggerated. Many packers suggested that impacts of very large groups in the past as well as impacts from overgrazing pack stock, had disappeared from the wilderness in the area. They also vehemently believed that access was more important than potential impacts from stock. One packer represented this general feeling:

52% of the land base in California is government owned lands. There's 30 million people. Somebody's going to use something, whether it's for recreation, whether you want to say it's recreation or meditation, or an experience, give it any word you want. There's some form of use that should and can occur. [Wilderness] is not something that needs to be locked up with no use. There's no reason to destroy anything in there. It's a sociological problem of somebody's idea of how many people should be someplace. It has nothing to do with reality. These decisions [about use levels] don't have anything to do with reality. They can take you where two hundred Sierra Club people were encamped at five different camps in this area. Two hundred people were there in the camps all summer and for a year at a time. You can't tell if anything was ever there. I mean, you can also go now to where there's been cabins built and they've been destroyed and you can't tell that they were there either.

The belief that use should be promoted as much as possible also relates to the packers' belief that eventually every wilderness user needs a packer. They suggested that backpacking was for the young and childless and that packers provide a valuable service to wilderness users no longer able to backpack. One packer discussed the belief that wilderness use should be made more accessible both by issuing permits more easily and by permitting any means of transportation available:

Wilderness permits should be as easy to obtain as possible and the reason, one of the reasons I think this is I don't think the public should be discouraged from using the wilderness. ... If [people] want to go in, they should have the right to go into the wilderness by any method of their choosing.

Another packer discussed the spectrum of people using the wilderness and the extension of wilderness use among multiple generations:

As people get older or they have handicaps, they need the service of a horse. ... In the horse world you can take 3 or 4 generations of one family.

Both packers and mountaineering guides suggested that wilderness recreation promotes support for wilderness among the public. This support is translated into voting for candidates who support wilderness preservation and introducing children to wilderness recreation.

Non-use Values

In the broad category of non-use values of wilderness to society, outfitter/guides mentioned several items, including

a mirror for comparison to developed society, spiritual value, and existence value. One mountaineering guide shows how categories of wilderness values are intertwined by discussing ecological value, as well as the need for a place where society can see its impacts:

I guess there's a lot of reasons why wilderness is important to me... I think that humans need a place that they can go and sort of be reminded of what life is like without all the complications that we've added to the game. So that doesn't necessarily need the mountain environment but a place where you can get away from all the trappings of what a lot of people call civilization. So, I guess that's probably the strongest one. But also secondly, where there are more or less undisturbed ecosystems. And thirdly is a place that helps people see their impacts or effects. Wilderness is kind of a laboratory because it is so fragile. And, I mean, there are a lot of things that are models for a more complicated life. I mean the life around camp is a much simpler model.

Environmental Values

The interviews indicated that both mountaineering guides and packers had strong connections to the environment. They placed a value on the environment that drew them to a line of work in the wilderness. Unsurprisingly, there were similarities in environmental wilderness values between the mountaineering guides and the packers. However, the environmental values among the mountaineering guides and the packers are differentiated by the commitment to current environmental and ecological thoughts on wilderness and the level of their holistic view of the wilderness ecosystem.

Mountaineering guides conventionally differentiated themselves from packers. Some suggested that packers do a great deal of environmental damage because of their stock use. However, mountaineering guides also note that some packers behave in an environmentally sound way. One mountain guide explains his thought on similarities among guides and packers:

I think some of us have similar interest in terms of really wanting to see [wilderness] looked after - in terms of the resource or actual forest, as far as it not being degraded.

Changing Values

Packers frequently discussed feeling left behind in terms of environmental values. These packers felt that they were the 'real environmentalists.' Many spoke of how they had been a part of the history of wilderness preservation in the Sierra Nevada. Some packers think they are caught in an environmental pendulum: Environmental concerns swing back and forth, while they, and their business, have stayed grounded and consistent. This led to feelings of confusion about rules designed to protect the wilderness environment. One packer explained:

You see, [Forest Service] rules are not impossible. They are probably idealistic. This year the National Forest has said "you will not go around a tree, and you will not go around a snow drift." Well, ... I do not know who brought that up, but that is something that has been done for a thousand years. When you were on a trail if there was a tree down you went

around it and if there was a snowbank in the wilderness you went around it, if it was safer to go around it than to go over it. And you wonder, who came up with this wonderful idea.

Another packer discussed confusion about the ban on campfires in some wilderness in the Sierra Nevada region.

...and then there's uncontrolled wildfires. It's OK if there is a lightning strike that burns up side of the hill - that's good - but if you have a [camp] fire it's bad. So it's interesting who's interpreting it.

Ecological and Aesthetic Values—Neither the mountaineering guides nor the packers initiated much discussion regarding the biological aspects of the wilderness. Emphasis was placed on aesthetics, including, but not limited to, packing out trash, placement of bolts for climbing, grazing stock animals and trail degradation. Although, these impacts have biological effects, the focus was clearly on how outsiders viewed the aesthetics of outfitter/guide operations. More accessibility brings more people. This, in turn, can produce more trash, more stock use and more bolts, which become a distraction from the pristine, natural, isolated feeling that the wilderness user may seek.

While neither group of outfitter/guides concentrated on biological or ecological considerations, the mountaineering guides appeared to have a more holistic view of the environment than packers. They showed a consistent desire to take care of the natural environment in its entirety. One mountaineering guide explained how the broader issue of understanding our natural environment as a resource is the core of wilderness preservation:

It's become very apparent to me that civilization and mankind and the post-industrial melee that we are in - that often times we make decisions relative to the resources, natural resources, that don't keep pace with our knowledge school, and I think it's possible for us to charge forward possibly and compromise someplace that has a unique and credible scenic beauty and other credible wild and natural resources and compromise it... Make it too accessible for development.

When speaking about environmental wilderness values, the packers emphasized their actions to maintain the wilderness. Usually this revolved around packing out trash:

Many of the packers over the years have led the way in environmental concerns, cleaning up the mountains. This packstation was the first one to start a major system of packing out trash, out of the back country. [We] put up sacks with a sign, it really was beneficial to the hiker. ... There's a difference in what is destruction and what some people see as destruction.

This distinction between seeing the wilderness environment holistically and aesthetically is important. Packers did not appear to be current with the ecological theories that now direct wilderness management.

Individual Development _____

In addition to the value of wilderness to society as a whole, outfitter/guides felt that wilderness held values for individual development. Some of the traditional benefits of wilderness recreation (Kaplan and Kaplan 1995, Greenway 1996, Driver and others 1987) were discussed by outfitter/guides. However, they tended to focus on only a few benefits.

The value of wilderness for individual development reported by outfitter/guides can be divided into several categories: 1) self-awareness through intense experience, 2) development of youth, 3) peacefulness, and 4) escape. Mountaineering guides were more likely to discuss self-awareness through intense experience. These climbing guides probably saw a mixture of benefits from adventure or high-risk recreation with the wilderness environment. One mountaineering guide provided the following insight:

I think climbing is the quintessential wilderness activity in the sense that what it demands on the part of the participants, I think, is the very essence of what the Wilderness Act is trying to provide for people. The idea of commitment, the idea of small groups, the idea of resourcefulness, of trying yourself, in using some sort of natural environment as kind of a monitor and — I hesitate to say — measure yourself against it. But something to kind of gauge your awareness about not only the natural environment but you're physical animal self.

Youth development was a prominent theme in the interviews with packers. The packers felt that youth participation had been curtailed by the party size limitations of both the National Park Service and the Forest Service. Not only did outfitter/guides see wilderness experience as valuable to the youth themselves, many believed that if young people did not have wilderness experiences, wilderness support would decline in the future. As one packer with several decades of experience stated:

One thing that bothers me, we used to see a lot more church groups, YMCA groups, Scout groups, and different youth groups, but those were the main ones, the church, the Y, that do wilderness trips and take those kids. A lot of them would come right out of L.A. and I think it was a great experience for them. And years [later] you'd have people bring their families back to go into the mountains that their first Wilderness experiences were on those early church trips or whatever. I don't see that happening anymore. I just don't see the youth back there. ... It kind of makes me wonder about down the road, if there isn't the youth coming on that turn into proponents of Wilderness, what will happen?

In addition to the valuable benefits of youth development and self-awareness, mountaineering guides discussed peacefulness and escape from developed society as benefits of wilderness. One guide purposefully created peaceful and quiet times for his climbing clients. Another guide suggested that people needed a place they could escape from society and live simply.

Self Interest

Financial Interest

For some outfitter/guides, especially packers, wilderness preservation was valued because it had financial benefits. While packers suggested several times that their businesses were not particularly lucrative, they were making a profit. This profit depends on the wilderness and its condition. Therefore, packers, and sometimes mountaineering guides, suggested that maintaining wilderness was in their best interest because wilderness recreation was their livelihood. One packer stated:

Wilderness is what the outfitters rely on and I think that's what's hard for some of the wilderness outfitters to take — is people accusing them of ruining the wilderness, the backcountry and stuff like this when their livelihood solely depends on the wilderness. One for being able to do it, but the pristineness of it. That's what keeps people coming to your areas. So you have a real vested interest in the area that you service.

A mountaineering guide put his self-interest in the wilderness within the framework of working with the Forest Service to help maintain the quality of the area:

I think there's a general rule that the guides I work with in this area are very prepared to work with the FS to educate people and also to preserve the wilderness. It's where we make our living, so, as I said earlier, we're not going to destroy it.

Sometimes self-interest or economic interest took precedence over wilderness for outfitter/guides. This tempered their view of what was appropriate, in terms of impact from recreational users. In response to a question about whether outfitter/guides ever hurt the wilderness, one packer said:

It depends on how you define abuse, I think. Abuse could be going up there and throwing matches around and starting a fire. I mean that would be abuse, or abuse could be knowingly running back and forth with a string of mules through a wet meadow. I mean I don't think anybody intentionally abuses the wilderness. I don't think that's going on at all. I do think that in the past there have been some packers that have done a few isolated instances. I can think of a couple where there was heavy use because of a successful business enterprise and some people might term that abuse. I wouldn't term it abuse, I would say that it's probably not preferable but I would say that in a large scope of things it tends to be minimal because a lot of what would be considered or perceived as abuse, mother nature is going to take care of it in a matter of time.

Another mountaineering guide suggested that if people wanted to be guided to an area, this constituted a need for outfitter/guides.

I suppose this would kind of bum some people out but I think of the [need for outfitter/guides] as a free market kind of thing. I mean, I know that that bums a lot of people out, the idea of this economic element of the consideration of the wilderness. But I think it's a distinct element of sort of the concept of ecosystem management. ... I think if there are people that want to go some place bad enough and there is someone that's willing to take them there, that's for gain — obviously I think it sort of becomes an economic deal.

Self-interest and extreme economic self-interest are perhaps the most antithetical to wilderness values because money-making ventures seem incompatible with wilderness as a resource for all. However, much of this rhetoric was tempered by a concern for the wilderness area. Only one outfitter/guide truly seemed to perceive little impact from recreational use of wilderness.

Personal Interest

Another part of self-interest in wilderness is the relationship between the personalities of the outfitter/guides and their chosen career. Like many people working in natural resources, outfitter/guides are attached to the outdoors,

the wilderness and their specialized recreational pursuits. Both mountaineering guides and packers had many years of experience in their field. They came into the business of wilderness outfitting and guiding from an avocation of wilderness work. One mountaineering guide told us:

[My work is] very rewarding and very worthwhile. It keeps me in the environment that I really like and working with great people.

This was typical of most of the interviewees. Many had come into the business of packing or guiding at a fairly young age. The length of service as guides and packers ranged from 10 years to more than 35, dating back to before the Wilderness Act was passed.

Acting on Wilderness Values

Outfitter/guides acted on their wilderness values mainly through wilderness education and volunteering time and service to the Forest Service. Regarding the wilderness education techniques and substance, a distinct split between packers and mountaineering guides was apparent. Packers tended to report that they complied with the requirements of their permit to operate in wilderness by providing the “rules” to their clients. Mountaineering guides seemed to have internalized the value of wilderness education, especially “Leave No Trace” practices. Packers and mountaineering guides both reported doing some interpretive work for their clients: showing them the flora, fauna and natural history of the area.

The difference between the packer and the mountaineering guide in style of wilderness education is apparent in the following passages in which three different packers reveal this type of motivation for wilderness education:

It's in our best interest. Here are the basic rules. You got to do this, yeah, the fires, near the lakes, sanitation, clean up after your camp, yeah.

You can only sort of suggest the basic rules. But to be held responsible for people for days, sounds like we're sort of trying to get out of responsibility, but it's true. ... Some people listen, some people don't.

When they begin to correspond with us in regard to a pack trip we send them information in the mail that basically is a sheet of wilderness etiquette, ideas, ethics and things having to do with low impact camping. It's taken basically from the wilderness regulation sheet.

While packers concentrated on rules, mountaineering guides talked more about imparting wilderness values onto their clients. One mountaineering guide's statement shows the thought he puts into his wilderness ethic and how that is best conveyed to his clients:

What I want to do with the participants is I tell them or teach them that personally I divide impacts into 2 categories, those which humans find offensive and those which really have an effect on the resource. So for example fishermen making a trail around the lake and trampling the trees eventually kills the trees and that has an effect on the resource whereas a piece of plastic candy bar wrapper found on the trail is probably not that big a deal unless a critter comes along and eats it... It's not really a better or worse

thing. It's just that I think that some people, especially those who haven't spent a lot of time in wilderness don't really understand why we're going off on them about why leaving an apple core matters, or an apple seed or — how extreme do you want to get? — or why we have to pack out toilet paper. Then this could be in the sense that on one hand it's kind of a style/form thing. The best style is to not leave any trace so there are some impacts that really do have an effect ... Ones we obviously want to avoid. The others are just a matter of good style, good form. We'd just as soon not have people be able to tell we were there if possible.

Another mountaineering guide discussed his desire to teach people more than technical skills in the wilderness:

As a guide, I certainly see my role not just as taking people up and down mountains but also engendering some sort of respect for the land. And showing people how to use it and so on. And I think in that way guides fulfill a need.

These statements on wilderness education show the most striking contrast between packers and mountaineering guides. Mountaineering guides appeared to be better aligned with wilderness management practices and theory (Hendee and others 1990). They reflected the desire to practice low-impact wilderness recreation and to pass that along to their clients through example, lecture and materials. However, both groups provided low-impact camping materials to their clients. This may mean that, in comparison with non-guided visitors, clients of outfitter/guides are receiving more information on wilderness ethics.

In addition to acting on their wilderness values through education, outfitter/guides all discussed their desire to work with the managing agencies to maintain wilderness qualities. From tracking threatened and endangered species, to trail work, to search and rescue, outfitter/guides wanted to participate in wilderness management. One mountaineering guide illustrates this point well:

It's not even community service, it's sort of something we need to put back into the resource system. So if there's any way we can be used as a resource to improve things I'd like to see them take advantage of it. ... and now what we need for the Forest Service to say is 'alright, here's some things that you can do.'

Conclusions

It is evident from our interviews that outfitter/guides value wilderness in multiple ways. They value it for the experience it provides people, for the fact of its existence, for individual and youth development, and for its financial and vocational benefits. Their values may not exactly match those of wilderness managers or align exactly with academic wilderness philosophy, but they exist in their own form. Valuation of wilderness is sometimes seen as characteristic of the elite. This case study shows that various types of people hold wilderness values. Outfitter/guides are sometimes seen as an aberration in the Wilderness Act. But the guides in this case study showed that they did support the existence of wilderness.

However, outfitter/guides should not be treated as a homogeneous group, in terms of wilderness values. There were many gradations of values evident between the packers and mountaineering guides. Most prevalent was the theme of

packers behaving in environmentally responsible ways because it was part of the permit. In contrast, mountaineering guides seemed to internalize more of the wilderness ethics and behaved in environmentally responsible ways because they thought it was the right thing to do. Packers tended to believe that they were the “real” environmentalists or conservationists. Many were instrumental in preserving wilderness areas in the Sierra Nevada. However, the wilderness ethic or environmentally sound practices had changed around them, and they felt left behind.

One of the interviews’ most promising findings is the desire of outfitter/guides in the Sierra Nevada to work with the natural resource management agencies to maintain wilderness. Outfitter/guides discussed a desire to work on trails, decrease impact, monitor wilderness conditions and work in search and rescue operations to aid Forest Service employees. Because of their underlying wilderness values and their willingness to help maintain wilderness, these permittees could be a valuable tool in wilderness management in the future.

Common wilderness values provide common ground from which agency personnel can work with outfitter/guide permittees. There may be disagreements over management techniques or exact levels of impact, but perhaps wilderness

advocates should work from these common goals instead of focusing on disagreements. All of the outfitter/guides advocated preserving wilderness. They saw it as a unique place that held value for society. Outfitter/guides are a unique group and should not be overlooked in the struggle to protect wilderness in the United States.

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