Wilderness Rangers and Their Effects on Wilderness Character

BY PAUL MARKOWSKI

The Wilderness Act of 1964 (Public Law 88-577) was enacted by the U.S. Congress “to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness” (Section 2a). One of the main directives given to the four federal land management agencies by this wilderness law was to preserve the “wilderness character” of each designated area (Section 2a). Working as a wilderness ranger for the U.S. Forest Service during the past two seasons in the High Uintas Wilderness (Utah) allowed me to witness firsthand how the duties of a ranger affected the wilderness character of the area (see figure 1).

Untrammeled Conditions

One of the most important characteristics of wilderness is that it is uncontrolled by humans. The Wilderness Act explicitly states that a wilderness is “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man.” (Section 2c). One of the many duties of a wilderness ranger is trail maintenance because having trails within a wilderness is a type of control of the wilderness resource (see figure 2). Rangers also maintain trail conditions by installing wood bridges and water bars where they are necessary to protect the resource and removing obstructing vegetation to keep hikers on the trail. Even though all of these trail duties are necessary in order to prevent both damage and erosion to the trails, they are, to some extent, “trammeling” the wilderness.

Campsite restoration is another ranger duty that can trammel the wild area. The reason that restoration needs to be done is usually because of thoughtless and/or careless campers who leave garbage at their site, build and leave rock fire rings, and leave campsites denuded of ground vegetation that is unsightly for those who pass the site in the future. Some might argue that these areas should not be restored to natural conditions, but rather be allowed to naturally regenerate back to their original pristine condition. Natural recovery may be unrealistic without camping prohibitions on those sites and enforcement because people tend to camp in previously disturbed areas. Therefore, rangers often need to physically bring these campsites back to their original condition by picking up the trash, breaking up old fire rings, and attempting to regenerate the soil, vegetation, and site conditions.

Unconfined Recreation

Wilderness, as stated by the 1964 legislation, must also offer “a primitive and unconfined type of recreation” to
visitors (Section 2c). Wilderness was designated, in part, to allow the American public to experience and connect with their pioneer heritage. Today, many people in America live and work in an urbanized “concrete jungle,” thus, having wild areas for escape is becoming a necessity. So when a visitor goes to the wilderness, one of the greatest characteristics it offers is an unconfined area for escape from everyday routines. One problem with this idea is that when many humans engage in unconfined recreation in the same area, management and enforcement problems are sure to arise. When the 1964 Wilderness Act was written, its writers probably never imagined that so many Americans would visit these wildlands and cause the trampled conditions the legislation sought to prevent. The sheer numbers of people that visit wilderness areas is increasing annually.

In order to save the wild nature of these lands, some wilderness areas within the National Wilderness Preservation System have had to adopt restrictions on visitor activities and behavior. Some examples of use restrictions are group limits, camping area location restrictions, stock use restrictions, and campfire use restrictions. When a wilderness area has use or user restrictions, it is up to the wilderness ranger to educate and inform visitors or, if necessary, to enforce those restrictions. Sometimes conducting law enforcement activities can lead to conflict between visitors and rangers. Visitors may believe that the use restrictions are not in accordance with the Act’s “unconfined type of recreation” clause. However, restrictions are needed and enforced by the rangers to maintain natural conditions in the wilderness resource.

In order to help educate visitors, a wilderness ranger must be well versed in the Leave No Trace (LNT) principles. Rangers not only practice these LNT principles themselves, but also teach them to everyone they meet during their tours within the wilderness area. LNT principles help to educate wilderness users on how to minimize their impacts to the wilderness resource. These principles are very important in protecting both the land and its flora and fauna, and they also teach visitors to “confine” their own activities to a certain extent. LNT teaches people to camp and walk on durable surfaces, to use a camp stove instead of a campfire to cook food (see figure 3), to pack out all that you pack in, and to bury all human waste. These LNT principles are designed to protect the natural conditions of an area and teach visitors to voluntarily confine their activities and behaviors—a balancing between protecting and allowing unconfined recreation that is not understood by all visitors.

**Solitude**

One of the most attractive characteristics of a wilderness is that it offers solitude to the visitor. People go to wilderness to seek solitude for a number of reasons. Some want to get away from the big city life in order to experience silence, whereas others seek solitude for spiritual renewal and religious meditation. No matter what the reason is for a visitor to seek out this solitude, wilderness can provide it. One of the duties of any wilderness ranger is to seek out public visitors within the wilderness. Rangers are trained to teach users LNT, wilderness safety, and to inform them of any use restrictions that may be in place.
be in effect. Imagine a visitor who has specifically entered a wilderness area with only one goal in mind—to find solitude. When a ranger encounters that visitor at his or her campsite, this solitude experience may be violated and, in the mind of the visitor, his or her solitude experience may be lost. This, of course, can lead to conflicts between visitors and rangers. Some people suggest that rangers should be banned from wilderness for this reason. However, when the pros and cons of having wilderness rangers in wilderness are considered, I am confident that the pros far outweigh the cons, because the main directive given to the federal land management agencies by the Wilderness Act is the protection of the wilderness resource.

Rangers are also trained in search-and-rescue techniques. Some people argue that the roar of a rescue helicopter impacts some visitors' sense of solitude within a wild area, even when it is done to save another visitor's life in the wilderness. However, what some visitors do not understand is that when a ranger learns that there is a possible search-and-rescue mission, the “minimum tool” for search and rescue is always used. For example, if a visitor breaks his or her ankle and the ranger determines that no life-threatening situation exists, then a horse or mule will probably be brought in to take the injured user back to the trailhead rather than compromise the serenity and solitude of the wilderness with an air rescue. The minimum tool for transporting the injured visitor here is the stock animal.

The wilderness character of an area is of the utmost importance and needs to be preserved for future generations, but this must be weighed against reasonable management activities (via the minimum tool assessment) and how those management activities might impact on a visitor's wilderness experience—opportunities for primitive and unconfined recreation and solitude. After all, a ranger's job is in protecting the wilderness character.

REFERENCES

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