Symbolism, Experience, and the Value of Wilderness

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Abstract: This article explores a psychological perspective on the symbolic value of wilderness that may help in understanding the strong feelings and fascination that wilderness evokes in many people. In Jungian psychology, wilderness is interpreted as a symbol of the unconscious mind. Part of our fascination with wild nature may be that we see in it a reflection of the spontaneous, imaginative side of our own psyche. From this perspective, allowing our senses, feelings, and imaginations to be engaged by untrammeled natural processes is a way of untrammeling our own minds.

Introduction

In the recently published national framework document for monitoring conditions related to wilderness character in the United States, Landres et al. (2005) identify three societal ideals that underlie the Wilderness Act of 1964:

1. Environments in a relatively natural state free from modern human influence.
2. Opportunities for people to experience natural environments free of the constraints of modern civilization.
3. Symbolic meanings representing an attitude of humility and restraint on the part of humans toward natural lands.

The inclusion of symbolic meanings in this list acknowledges an intangible but important aspect of wilderness character. Wilderness character is not determined just by the biophysical condition of the land and the type of recreational use that people make of the land, but also involves a distinctive sense of meaning regarding the relationship of humans to the larger world of nature. Cole (2005) argues that wilderness lands in general symbolize human restraint and humility in interacting with the land—a symbolic meaning that stems from the definition of wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man” (Wilderness Act 1964). In Cole’s view, this particular symbolic value is what distinguishes wilderness from other types of lands that provide similar ecological and recreational values. At the same time, Cole acknowledges that wilderness areas also carry a variety of other symbolic meanings that vary between locales, cultural groups, and individuals.

Symbolic meanings—including but not limited to the particular one emphasized by Landres et al. (2005) and
Cole (2005)—have figured prominently in discussions of wilderness history and philosophy. Nash (1973) remarks that wilderness "is so heavily freighted with meaning of a personal, symbolic, and changing kind as to resist easy definition" (p. 1). Tuan (1974) notes that ambivalent meanings of wilderness are rooted in the contrasting religious symbolism of moral chaos versus divine virtue, whereas Oelschlaeger (1991) characterizes the idea of wilderness in the postmodern context as "a search for ... a new creation story or mythology" (p. 321). Despite the widely recognized importance of wilderness and nature symbolism in the literature, symbolic values are often overlooked or neglected in decision making compared to more tangible ecological and recreational values (Williams and Patterson 1999; Cole 2005).

A comprehensive review of the symbolism of wilderness and nature is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, my purpose is to inquire into one particular aspect of the psychological symbolism of untrammeled nature, which may help in understanding the strong feelings and fascination that wilderness evokes in many people.

As general background for this inquiry, I first give a brief overview of some of the different forms and functions that symbols can assume.

The Form and Function of Symbols

The American Heritage Dictionary defines a symbol as "something that represents something else by association, resemblance, or convention; especially, a material object used to represent something invisible" (Morris 1976, p. 1302). In the broadest sense, all human language use and conceptual thought are inherently symbolic, since they use words to represent things that are not words. In this article, however, I use the word symbol in a more limited way, to refer to (nonlinguistic) objects, places, actions, and so on that acquire significant meaning through representing something other than themselves.

The relationship between a symbol and what it symbolizes can take many forms. Some symbols are assigned by convention and bear no intrinsic resemblance or relationship to what they represent. A sword may symbolize war, because it is a weapon used in waging war. A lion may symbolize strength and courage because its appearance and behavior seem to embody these qualities.

Symbols also vary in the way they function in human thought and experience. Some symbols (e.g., the stop sign) simply denote what they symbolize without adding anything to its meaning. Other symbols help to cognitively structure the domain of experience that they symbolize. For example, in symbolizing a person’s life as a journey we use the spatial structure of travel between places as a conceptual model for our experience of living over time (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Some symbols also have important emotional and motivational functions. They not only represent and help us conceptualize what they symbolize, but evoke strong emotions and motivate us to...
action (Progoﬀ 1963). For example, a person’s feelings toward their country may come to a focus in the symbol of the country’s flag, so that an attack or insult directed at the flag is felt and reacted to as if it were an assault on the country itself.

**Emergent Symbols**

In the examples discussed so far, the meaning of the symbol and its relationship to what it symbolizes can be described and understood at a conscious level. This is not true for all symbols, however. Some symbols emerge spontaneously from the imagination, and their meaning may be unclear and diﬃcult to articulate (Jung 1964b). Symbols of this kind often carry a strong fascination and emotional charge. They represent something that has great importance but that is not fully accessible to the conscious mind. At the individual level, such symbols may appear in dreams or in works of art. At the cultural level, they ﬁgure importantly in the mythological stories and beliefs of a people (Campbell 1968). Symbols of this kind are crucial to the process by which people become aware of and relate to the deepest meanings and values that inﬂuence their lives (Progoﬀ 1963). I use the term **emergent symbol** to refer to this type of symbolism.

Throughout human history, elements of nature have functioned as emergent symbols in traditional mythologies, and for at least some modern people nature continues to be a source of fascination and emergent symbolic value (Schroeder 1992a). People sometimes ﬁnd themselves unable to capture in words the experience of fascination and meaning that wild nature evokes:

> But there are no words that can tell the hidden spirit of the wilderness, that can reveal its mystery, its melancholy, and its charm. (Roosevelt 1910, p. xi)

The evenings have been really lovely. But the whole experience here has a flavor, an essence that will not be expressed in words. I get so tired of saying “lovely”—but where are the words? (Murie 2004, p. 331)

Ineﬀable feelings such as these are fertile ground for emergent symbolism. A sense of fascination and emotional depth pervades the landscape, and features such as trees, animals, and mountains may take on a numinous, magical quality that evades ordinary language. Where rational description and explanation fail to grasp the experience, imagination takes over and symbolic images unfold through poetry, art, dreams, and reverie.

**Wilderness as a Symbol of the Unconscious**

Jungian psychology, named after Carl G. Jung, is the branch of psychology that has been most concerned with emergent symbols (Jung 1964a; Jacobi 1973). Jung was also perhaps the only major ﬁgure in the history of psychology to take a serious interest in the relationship between humans and wild nature (Sabini 2002). He interpreted particular elements of nature appearing in myths and dreams as expressions of deep structures (archetypes) within the human psyche. More broadly, Jungian psychology has often viewed the wilderness as a symbol of the unconscious mind itself, and has regarded the relationship between modern civilization and nature as an outward reﬂection of the relationship between the conscious ego and the unconscious psyche (Meier 1985; van der Post 1985; Schroeder 1992a). Poet Gary Snyder echoes this view:

> There are more things in mind, in the imagination, than “you” can keep track of—thoughts, memories, images, angers, delights, rise unbidden. The depths of mind, the unconscious, are our inner wilderness areas. … The conscious wilderness...
agenda-planning ego occupies a very tiny territory, a little cubicle somewhere near the gate, keeping track of some of what goes in and out (and sometimes making expansionistic plots), and the rest takes care of itself. (1990, p. 16)

In Jungian psychology, emergent symbolism functions as an avenue by which unconscious meaning can play a role in conscious experience. This function is not realized by giving a rational interpretation or explanation of the symbol, but by entering into an open-ended, experiential engagement with it. For Jungian psychologists, symbolic meaning is not a static interpretation attached to an object, but an unfolding process in which a person participates.

In premodern times, according to Jung, the emergent symbolism of natural phenomena helped to maintain a balanced relationship between the conscious and unconscious sides of the mind. But modern consciousness has come to overvalue rational intellect and has thereby lost its connection with the more archaic, instinctive level of the psyche:

> Man feels himself isolated in the cosmos, because he is no longer involved in nature and has lost his emotional “unconscious identity” with natural phenomena. These have slowly lost their symbolic implications. … No voices now speak to man from stones, plants, and animals, nor does he speak to them believing they can hear. His contact with nature has gone, and with it has gone the profound emotional energy that this symbolic connection supplied. (Jung 1964b, p. 83)

The deeper, older level of the human mind still exists, but now expresses itself in the form of neurotic symptoms and social upheavals (Jung 1964b). Jung considered the emergent symbolic process to be an essential antidote for the imbalance in the modern attitude that underlies these symptoms.

Engaging in the emergent symbolic process as envisioned by Jung requires a fundamental shift in attitude for a modern person (Progoff 1963). Rather than pursue a solution to a problem head-on through rational analysis, the person must refrain from deliberate effort and allow symbolic imagery to spontaneously form in dreams or imagination. He or she must be willing to allow the symbolic process to unfold in its own way, to let symbols develop and change on their own without seeking an intellectual interpretation or imposing the ego’s conscious goals on them. This attitude of Jungian psychologists toward the emergent symbolic process of the mind parallels almost exactly the attitude toward natural processes expressed in the Wilderness Act of 1964. Whereas the ideal of the Wilderness Act is to have places where nature remains untrammeled and free from the interference of modern culture, the ideal of Jung and his adherents in working with symbols is to have areas of human experience where the symbolic processes of the psyche proceed untrammeled and free from the interference of the rational ego.

Part of our fascination with wilderness may be that in it we see a reflection of the spontaneous, imaginative side of our own mind. The ideal of untrammeled wilderness outwardly mirrors our willingness to allow the creative symbol-making function within our own psyche to unfold free of interference from ego-driven goals. In allowing wilderness to be free, we are symbolically freeing our own minds and hearts.

The Unconscious Mind as Part of Nature

Jung believed that the psyche has an inherited tendency to generate symbolic images that express certain fundamental themes of human existence, which he referred to as archetypes. Because Jung viewed the archetypes as a product of evolution that preceded the development of the conscious ego, he considered them to be literally part of nature. Jung’s belief that symbolic meaning can arise from an inherited level of the psyche that is common to all humans may seem contrary to the currently popular view in the social sciences that meanings of natural environments are socially constructed and unique to particular groups and cultures. Certainly, values and meanings of wilderness do vary between communities and societies based on their history, traditions, experiences, and ways of interacting with the land (Williams 2002; Watson 2004). American Indians, for example, associate quite different symbolic meanings with places and landmarks.
in the western United States than do more recent arrivals to that region (McAvoy 2002). This fact does not necessarily contradict Jung’s notion of archetypes, however. A Jungian approach does not necessarily see all meanings as having archetypal sources; symbolism may also develop from historical, social, or individual factors. Also, when archetypal themes do arise, the specific form they take depends very much on the particulars of the culture and the life circumstances of the individual person.

Jung’s ideas have not been widely accepted within mainstream psychology. They have had greater influence within the fields of cultural and religious studies (e.g., Campbell 1968; Bulkeley 1994). Jung’s notion of the archetypes is actually somewhat similar to naturalist E. O. Wilson’s (1984) concept of “biophilia.” Wilson speculates that through evolution the human mind is genetically predisposed toward a fascination with other living organisms and natural environments (especially those that were important to our survival), and that this tendency underlies the symbolic imagery that appears in dreams and cultural traditions.

Because humans evolved in the natural world, it seems reasonable to suppose that human perception and awareness would in some way be instinctively attuned to natural phenomena. According to philosopher David Abram (1996), this was originally the case; but as Western civilization gained increasing mastery over the biophysical environment, we progressively removed our sensory awareness and fascination from nature and transferred it to a humanly created world of concepts captured in phonetic writing. Over the last several centuries of cultural development, our sense of self has withdrawn from its immersion in the larger world of nature and become confined to an interior realm within our own heads. In the process of trammeling nature in the world around us, we also trammeled our own minds:

There is no longer any flow between the self-reflexive domain of alphabetized awareness and all that exceeds, or subtends, this determinate realm. Between consciousness and the unconscious. Between civilization and the wilderness. (Abram 1996, p. 257)

Abram sees a parallel between the unconscious and the wilderness, but for him the unconscious is not a region within the interior of our psyche. It is a broader field of awareness that extends beyond our self-contained sphere of human concepts and embodies our original sensual, experiential involvement in the surrounding natural landscape.

The unconscious is seen somewhat differently from the perspectives of Jung, Wilson, and Abram, but for all three it appears to be intrinsically linked with nature. The wilderness as a symbol of the unconscious mind is thus more than just a convenient metaphor. The idea of the unconscious points toward a domain of experience in which the division between our own minds and wild nature is not entirely clear-cut. Wilderness emerges naturally as a symbol of the unconscious, because at some level our minds have never entirely lost their continuity with the natural world around us.

Symbolism and Wilderness Experience

Cole (2005) draws a distinction between symbolic values and experiential values of wilderness, pointing out how they may conflict with each other in decision making about wilderness management. This may sometimes be the case, but when considering emergent symbolism it seems more appropriate to view symbolic value and experiential value as interconnected and mutually reinforcing.

To realize the value of wilderness as an emergent symbol we must do more than just acknowledge it intellectually; we must experience and participate in the symbolic process directly—and what better place to do this than in the wilderness itself? When emergent symbolic values come into play, a recreational visit to a wilderness area is more than simply an opportunity to enjoy hiking, camping, or fishing. McAvoy and Dustin (1989) propose that a wilderness excursion may function symbolically as a modern-day instance of the archetypal hero’s journey, famously described by Joseph Campbell (1968). The journey into wilderness leads then both outward into the natural world and inward into the wild parts of one’s own psyche. In this journey, the symbolic values and the experiential values of wilderness are inseparably intertwined.

The symbolic value of wilderness discussed by Cole (2005) and Landres et al. (2005)—wilderness as a symbol of humility and restraint in the human relationship with nature—hardly qualifies as a value if it is grasped merely cerebrally. Only when this meaning is experienced in a more immediate, emotional way does it have the power to motivate a
person and transform his or her view of the world. We realize the symbolic value of wilderness perhaps most powerfully when we are actually immersed in experiencing a wild, natural environment. Conversely, our experience of wilderness may acquire greater significance and meaning when it evokes an emergent symbolic process that reconnects us with the deepest part of our own minds. When we allow natural processes that are untrammelled by human designs and intentions to engage our senses, feelings, and imaginations, we are—both symbolically and actually—untrammeling our own minds. In so doing, we can rediscover that nature is a part of who we are, and that our own freedom is sometimes best served by allowing other beings to be free of our control.  

**REFERENCES**


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