Introduction

The term spiritual benefits, as used in this paper, means first “nourishing the spirit”—that is, providing positive psychological benefits, and second having some relation to established religious or spiritual traditions. I hope the experiences I describe will seem familiar to my readers, but it is clear that not everyone has them. Why some people respond spiritually to wilderness and others do not is a vitally important question for wilderness advocates, but not one I address in this article.

Here, I identify six benefits, the wilderness experiences that engender them, and a relation to a spiritual tradition. I refer to the six spiritual benefits as “the enduring,” “the sublime,” “beauty,” “competence,” “experience of peace,” and “self-forgetting.” In each case, I look for a psychological understanding of why these experiences are perceived as beneficial.

The Enduring

At least some of the yearnings underlying our spiritual experiences of wilderness seem universal. According to the teachings of the Buddha, for example, at the heart of human existence lies duhkha. Though often translated as “suffering,” a better rendering might be “unsatisfactoriness” (Hagen 1997). Dukkha is a multifaceted concept, but a core element is the fact of change. Nothing abides. We ourselves, everyone we love, every institution and cause to which we devote our care exists for an instant in the great scheme of things. As a result, all our mundane hopes are doomed to failure, for if everything changes, nothing can be accomplished—not, anyway, as a permanent achievement.

This, to put it mildly, is not a happy thought. It should be equally obvious that the Christian idea of an eternal God conferring eternal life reveals a Western response to the same fear of impermanence. The solutions are different.

Buddhism says that change and impermanence are ineluctable, and counsels us on how to live in peace with them. Christianity says that they are illusions, and that the deepest reality is eternal and unchanging. But though the solutions are different, the stimulus, the disquiet we feel before the threat of impermanence, is the same.

The eternal God of Christianity and Western monotheism cannot be experienced directly, so when He appeared to Moses He assumed the form of a burning bush; when He came to Job He was a mighty whirlwind. Like Job and Moses, if we are to experience God we must find Him in finite, or perhaps better, in analogous form. God is neither a whirlwind nor a burning bush, but each is godlike in a way—in power and mystery perhaps. So too, wilderness is godlike in answering our craving for something that endures in the midst of change. Rocks and rivers, if not eternal, are at least very old, and if each season is new and quickly fades, still the cycle of the seasons goes on, by comparison with our short lives, forever. I live and die in a few decades, but the giant sequoias stand for millennia. Whether because the Buddhists are right and nothing is truly unchanging,
or else because the theologians are right and eternity, though real, cannot be given to the senses, we can never experience the full eternity that monotheism attributes to ultimate reality. In wild nature, though, we encounter things and processes that are, from the perspective of puny human life, ancient enough to serve as stand-ins.

Whether one sees wilderness as God’s creation or as a substitute for God, one can find comfort in identification with its enduring nature. This, which I shall call “the experience of the enduring,” is the first spiritual benefit of nature.

Robinson Jeffers’s poem “Their Beauty Has More Meaning” captures both this experience and the comfort it brought to him:

Yesterday morning enormous the moon hung low on the ocean, Round and yellow-rose in the glow of dawn; The night-herons flapping home wore dawn on their wings. Today Black is the ocean, black and sulphur the sky, And white seas leap. I honestly do not know which is more beautiful. I know that tomorrow or next year or in twenty years I shall not see these things—and it does not matter, it does not hurt; They will be here. And when the whole human race has been like me rubbed out, they will still be here: storms, moon and ocean, Dawn and the birds. (1963, p. 77)

The power of this benefit results from encountering the enduring through direct experience of wilderness, not as a mere idea. Without the idea, our experience would be—as Immanuel Kant (1929) famously said—blind. (“Thoughts without content are empty; intuitions without concepts are blind,” p. 93.) But we can have the idea anywhere and anytime. In wilderness we encounter the enduring because we come face to face with ancient things and timeless cycles, and it is this direct encounter that makes our sojourn in wilderness a moving spiritual experience.

The Sublime

Wilderness often provides images of immensity and power. The immensity of the mountains, the power of rivers, glaciers, the sea, are known directly when we travel in the wild. In their power, and their capacity to incite awe, they are almost God-like. We seem to have a natural craving to experience them. And in a strange sense we crave even the knowledge that all of them are indifferent to the human realm—stern and unrelenting like the God of the Old Testament.

These—the awesome power of wild nature and its indifference to human concerns—aesthetic theorists have called the sublime, and “experience of the sublime” is a second spiritual benefit of wilderness. Thoreau, after climbing Mt. Katahdin, described this experience vividly:

Vast, Titanic, inhuman nature has got [the beholder] at disadvantage, caught him alone, and pillers him of some of his divine faculty. She does not smile on him as in the plains. She seems to say sternly, why came ye here before your time? … Shouldst thou freeze or starve, or shudder thy life away, here is no shrine, nor altar, nor any access to my ear (1972, p. 64).

These impressions are powerful to a person in the wilderness. It can be a dangerous and scary place. Storms, the great predators, the huge forces of flood and avalanche, and even the very immensity of space, all demand respect that edges easily into fear. Beyond that, they all remind us in a visceral way of
our comparative weakness and vulnerability. As wilderness advocate Howard Zahniser said, “To know wilderness is to know a profound humility” (Nash 1973, p. 214).

But what is it in us that responds to this humbling? Why do we want to encounter forces and powers that belittle us?

The explanation, I think, is that wild nature humbles not just us as individuals, but humankind and all of its ambitions. To be insignificant in a human crowd is often painful, for it reminds us that we have not achieved the fame and fortune that others have. To be insignificant in wild nature, by contrast, can be comforting, for wilderness dwarfs not only ourselves, but fame and fortune too. As Jeffers (1963) put it in “Calm and Full the Ocean”

It is only that man, his griefs and rages, are not what they seem to man, not great and shattering, but really Too small to produce any disturbance. This is good. This is the sanity, the mercy… (1963, p. 84).

By the humbling of human aspirations and foibles, experiences of the sublime can lighten our spirits so that we enjoy the immediate and simple pleasures found in wilderness. The abundance of these joys, despite the simplicity and even danger and deprivation that wilderness travel can involve, points us toward further spiritual benefits of wilderness. There is, however, a mystery to be solved here that is similar to the mystery of how we can be comforted by encounters with the sublime. Why should the deprivation, exhaustion, challenge, and even the danger we find in wilderness bring us spiritual joy and peace, a feeling of being fully alive?

Surely many different things interact to produce the answer. What I have said above may form a background. In wilderness, we may already feel the comfort of identification with places and processes much grander and more enduring than our individual egos (the enduring), and feel too that the defeats and frustrations of our everyday lives are much less important than they seem from an office cubicle (the sublime).

Beauty

The beauty of wild nature helps to engender the spiritual peace and comfort we find there. Indeed, “experience of beauty” might be listed as a third spiritual benefit from wilderness experience. For the lover of wilderness, its beauty is not known by eye alone. We enter wilderness with all our senses and all our being: feeling the rain or breeze; smelling its pine and sage; hearing the water, the crack of lightning; seeing the world anew with each shift of light or perspective; not least, we know in our elemental core how our journey has entwined us—our comfort and our fate—with this landscape. This subject is, however, much too large to take on here, and I shall do no more than note the experience and its likely contribution to our embrace of wilderness experience despite its challenges and discomforts.

Competence

Two additional elements are involved in explaining why the trials and challenges of wilderness are often experienced as positive. The first I shall refer to as “the experience of competence” (Ewert 1983, 1985; Gass 1987; Kaplan and Kaplan 1983; McDonald 1983; Schlein, et al. 1990; Young and Crandall 1984; Zook 1986). When met successfully, challenges are likely to be perceived as empowering and as proof of our capability and worth, and these feelings contribute in turn to the calm, quiet spirit often experienced in the wild.

The trials we meet in wilderness are well suited to play this role, in part because they do not typically throw us into competition with other people. In competition against others there will be winners and losers. When, as we usually do in the wild, we struggle with our own limitations, success is much more
likely, if only because a defeat of one kind—failing to get to the mountain top, for instance—can be a triumph of another—the wisdom of knowing when to turn back. In this way wilderness experience encourages us to forget, temporarily at least, about competition, and to focus instead on competence—acquiring it, testing it, celebrating our possession and growth in it.

This sense that the wilderness is a place of testing from which we emerge strengthened and cleansed in spirit is not, of course, a modern invention. The worldwide tradition of vision quests and initiation rituals is a reminder of this. So too is the story that Jesus tested himself by a journey into the wilderness, which resonates with an even older tradition:

The Israelites’ experience during the forty-year wandering gave wilderness several meanings. It was understood, in the first place, as a sanctuary from a sinful and persecuting society. Secondly, wild country came to signify the environment in which to find and draw close to God. It also acquired meaning as a testing ground where a chosen people were purged, humbled, and made ready for the land of promise (Nash 1973, p. 16).

**Experience of Peace**

At least one more aspect of wilderness experience contributes to the peace we find there. The demands and challenges of wilderness experience focus the traveler’s attention in the same way as activities that promote “flow” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). The experience of flow is promoted by activities that involve risk and challenge near the limit, but within the participant’s ability, that provide relatively swift and unambiguous information about success or failure, that provide opportunities for improvement of performance, and that thus focus the participant’s attention, driving ordinary cares and anxieties from one’s awareness.

The challenges we encounter in wilderness frequently have these characteristics. We need to get to a camping place by sundown; we need our tents to stand up to the storm. We need to get up and over the pass before that storm breaks. These are simple and direct challenges, but they are also important in obvious ways; meeting them depends on our own skills and effort, and success or failure will be unambiguous. They have the effect of driving out our familiar, everyday anxieties, and, at least when we have met them successfully, they leave us feeling peaceful, worthy, and open to the spiritual meanings of humility and eternity described earlier. This may not be the Bible’s “peace that passeth understanding” (Phil. 4:7), but it is, I think, akin.

This benefit, “the experience of peace,” is the product of all the other elements discussed. Identification with the enduring aspects of nature, minimization of ordinary concerns before nature’s sublimity, physical removal from the sources of everyday anxieties, experience of beauty, feelings of competence, and the attention-focusing effect of the challenges encountered all contribute to the mental calm so often found in wild nature.

**Self-Forgetting**

All five previous benefits also contribute to a final benefit, that of “self-forgetting.” To identify with the...
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enduring elements of nature, we must in some measure relinquish identification of ourselves with our individual egos. The sublimity of wild nature humbles us, minimizing the importance of our individual selves, yet comforting us with its own grandeur. Nature’s beauty draws us beyond ourselves and into rapt fascination with our surroundings.

Similarly, the challenges that leave us feeling confident and peaceful do so by commanding our attention, leaving little room for direct concern with self.

This self-forgetting is extolled in nearly every spiritual tradition. Indeed, it might provide a concise summary of the goal of spiritual life. I do not suggest that the experience of self-forgetting found in the wilderness produces spiritual perfection, but it may be that it gives us at least a glimpse of the joy we are promised such perfection would bring.

Conclusion

I have discussed that in wilderness we can experience at least six spiritual benefits, which I have called “the enduring,” “the sublime,” “beauty,” “competence,” “peace,” and “self-forgetting.” I have tried to suggest connections for each of these to a spiritual or religious tradition, as well as a psychological explanation of how each leads to spiritual nourishment or benefit. My treatment has necessarily been brief, and each of these benefits deserves deeper examination. One form of examination would be social science testing of the hypotheses implicit in my claims.

REFERENCES


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