Wilderness Access Issues for Education, Personal Growth, and Therapeutic Use

a U.S. Panel Summary

BY ALAN EWERT, JOHN HENDEE, SAM DAVIDSON, RICHARD BRAME, AND CRAIG MACKEY

A proliferation of wilderness access issues surrounds the designation and management of wilderness in the United States. For example, how should wilderness lands be used? What uses should have access priorities and privileges? What is the proper role of socially beneficial uses of wilderness, such as for education, personal growth, and therapy? What adjustments in wildness should be allowed to facilitate use? These issues were addressed by a panel of experts at the national “Wilderness Science in a Time of Change” conference in Missoula, Montana, USA, May 17–23, 1999.

The following articles by these panelists summarize some key issues related to changing use of wilderness lands and access policies. By necessity, each article is short and focused, and no doubt raises more questions than it answers. A hopeful result is that each article does help better define the important parameters of wilderness access issues. The statements and their authors in order of presentation are: Compiler and commentator, Alan Ewert, Indiana University; John Hendee, University of Idaho Wilderness Research Center; Sam Davidson, The Access Fund; Richard Brame, National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS); and Craig Mackey, Outward Bound and Wilderness Inquiry.

While few would argue that activities such as hunting, fishing, camping, horse packing, and hiking have been traditional wilderness endeavors, the issue of what is the most appropriate use of wilderness lands is becoming more controversial and contentious. Some would argue that the highest and best use of wilderness lands are as places for strict preservation with only limited and mostly scientific use. Others would argue that recreation is the primary use of wilderness resources, both for the current and future generations. In the first article, John Hendee, professor and director of the University of Idaho Wilderness Research Center, takes the position that another, equally valuable use of wilderness is for education, personal growth, and therapeutic or health-care interventions. He describes these uses and their growing popularity on wilderness lands and then he identifies emerging policy issues.

— Alan Ewert
Wilderness experience programs (WEPs) are organizations that take paying clients into wilderness or comparable lands in order to develop their human potential through education, personal growth, leadership training, group dynamics, or purposive therapeutic interventions (Friese et al. 1998). Evidence suggests that WEPs represent a large and growing use of wilderness. One nationwide survey of wilderness managers found that, among those reporting WEP use in wilderness they administered, two-thirds said such use was increasing, and more than one-third expressed concern over environmental impacts of use by such groups or conflicts with other users (Gager et al. 1998). Because of the size of wilderness and prospects for continued growth, its use for education, personal growth and therapy, or behavioral health care by organized wilderness experience programs presents growing management challenges and growing opportunities for enhanced social benefits from wilderness.

Educational Use of Wilderness

Wilderness is used for both higher education and conservation education purposes, as sites for field trips, study areas for student research, and as a source of instructional examples are utilized within its boundaries. Reed et al. (1989) reported that 39% of National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) wilderness managers claimed that environmental and conservation education programs were being conducted in areas they administered in 1987. Studies in the mid-1990s document more than 200 education-oriented wilderness experience programs (excluding higher education institutions and youth organizations), ranging from several large programs serving hundreds of students (e.g., Teton Science School), to many small programs serving fewer than a hundred per year (Friese 1996; Dawson et al. 1998).

Wilderness personal growth and therapy programs, part of an emerging category of use called “outdoor behavioral health care,” use various combinations of challenge adventure and reflective activities to help participants achieve their goals. These wilderness experience programs serve all age classes, but adolescents and young adults are the most frequent participants, with enhanced self-esteem and other variations in empowerment the most consistently reported effects in studies of such use (Friese et al. 1996).

Because bona fide schools and higher education institutions may be exempt in some locations from having to secure special use permits to use wilderness, there is a lack of systematic data about the extent of this type of institutional outfitting. Not surprisingly, commercial outfitters would like to see all educational users required to have permits and be required to pay for their use of wilderness lands (Mackey 1998). Thus, as wilderness enters the 21st century, one of the most important policy issues is whether, and how, to bring educational use of wilderness into the wilderness use accounting system and further, whether and/or how to charge for use.

Wilderness Personal Growth and Therapy Programs

Wilderness personal growth and therapy programs seek to empower participants. These programs challenge a participant’s preconceived abilities through wilderness activities. These activities teach participants that their capabilities exceed what they imagined—and that they may also be self-limiting their performance in their daily lives. Recent surveys (Friese et al. 1998; Dawson et al. 1998) have identified over 230 personal growth programs ranging from several large programs serving thousands of clients annually to many small programs (100...
Solitude as a Factor in Access to Wilderness: Social Encounter Standards Should Not be the Sole Basis for Restricting Access

BY SAM DAVIDSON (E-MAIL: SAM@ACCESSFUND.ORG)

Along with use, who gets access to the resource is becoming one of the most contentious of wilderness issues. This issue revolves around the prioritization of users (i.e., who gets access to wilderness permits), what types of activities should be given preference, and should educational and nonprofit organizations have special access rights over private and/or commercial for-profit organizations. In the following section, Sam Davidson of the Access Fund argues that in the case of climbing, solitude is an incomplete attribute on which to base wilderness access decisions. He suggests that solitude should be only one of a constellation of factors on which to base access decisions.

— Alan Ewert

The Access Fund is a climbers conservation and advocacy group. Primary goals of the Access Fund include preserving existing wilderness and establishing new wilderness areas. This is particularly relevant since many of this country’s most historic, scenic, and challenging climbing opportunities are found in designated wilderness and wilderness study areas.

Solitude as a Management Issue

Since one issue of particular interest to climbers is solitude, it may be instructive to look at how the climbing community is affected by solitude-based management decisions. Solitude-based restrictions affect climbers in unique ways. Climbers may be denied access not because social encounter standards are being exceeded on the actual climb, but because they are...
being exceeded on the trails that climbers use only briefly as part of the approach to the climb.

Second, restrictions based on inflexible social encounter standards may be inconsistent with climbers' expectations for their wilderness experience. Climbers do not expect to find solitude on many of the most popular wilderness climbs; in fact, surveys indicate most climbers would prefer not to find solitude if it means that they can climb the route of their choosing.

Third, virtually all of the better-known wilderness peaks (e.g., Mt. Shasta, Mt. Whitney, Mt. Hood) have one climbing route that is far and away the most popular, usually because it is the easiest line up the mountain. If solitude standards are rigidly applied to these routes, climbers will be forced (if they want to climb at all) onto other routes with greater risk and difficulty.

Climbing is highly weather and season dependent, and climbers often travel great distances to attempt specific climbs. As a result, there is often substantial incentive to climb something, even if it is not the route of choice. Given these motivations to climb, it seems reasonable to expect that solitude-based restrictions will lead to an increase in climber accidents, injuries, and rescues—not to mention fewer opportunities for solitude on currently less-popular routes, and the dispersion of associated resource impacts into more pristine areas.

Conclusion

Solitude is not a good stand-alone basis for limiting access to wilderness-based climbing opportunities. To satisfy the mandate of managing wilderness for its full variety of values, and to ensure that management prescriptions are understood and supported by wilderness users, solitude must be integrated with more resource impact-based criteria in making decisions that may affect public access. This goal will be advanced by greater cooperation between wilderness managers, the scientific and academic communities, and wilderness use and advocacy groups. IJW

Wilderness Education
Part of the Solution

BY RICHARD BRAME (E-MAIL: RICH_BRAMENOLS.EDU)

What role will wilderness education play in the overall stewardship of wilderness and other protected lands? Although touted as a way to prevent excessive negative impacts to the wilderness resource by training the user in proper wilderness use ethics, does exposure to wilderness areas through educational, personal growth, and recreational programs, also increase the overall numbers of visitors? Rick Brame from the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) argues that wilderness education organizations are essential partners in the stewardship of wilderness areas.

— Alan Ewert

The National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) was founded in 1965 to teach technical outdoor skills, conservation techniques, and leadership to students on courses in backcountry and wilderness areas. Approximately 3000 students per year attend one of the eight schools held worldwide. In addition to a field curriculum, NOLS has extensive wilderness research, publication, and national public lands public policy involvement. NOLS' mission is to be the best source and teacher of wilderness skills and leadership that serve people and the environment.

The Role of Wilderness Education in Land Conservation

NOLS and other wilderness education organizations play a growing role in preserving the long-term health of wilderness and wildlands. The most powerful role these organizations fill is to “link” their students, who primarily come from urban settings, with the wilderness they find themselves in and hopefully help them develop a greater appreciation of that wilderness resource. In turn, this appreciation may provide for a more supportive and better-educated public for dealing with public lands management. In many cases, this greater appreciation can also
help integrate the work of land managers and researchers with the public, particularly since regulations, enforcement, and scholarly publications alone cannot reach all of the public or build the ethics that determine recreational and conservation behavior.

**Wilderness Education Is an Accountable and Professional Partner**

Because wilderness education organizations (WEOs) are often commercial and as such participate in a permit system, they are usually easily identified and regulated by the land management agencies. Their procedures, curriculum, and qualifications are often scrutinized, modified, and improved by the overseeing land management agency. This partnership between the WEOs and land management agencies can often result in better land management practices and reduced impacts to the resource.

In the specter of ever-increasing public use of public lands, intuition and research suggest that it is the behavior of the visitors, not the number, that determines real social or ecological impact. Moreover, it is often the amount and type of wilderness education that individuals receive through professional wilderness education means that determines their behavior and impacts upon the wilderness resource.

**Wilderness Education Can and Should Pay Its Own Way**

Legitimate WEOs support quality management of public lands. Managers must have the tools to preserve, protect, and provide public lands. Moreover, providing tools means political and economic support as well as actual wilderness management techniques. Fees generated by the publics and WEOs’ use of federal lands, when they are kept in the locality, are an appropriate means to support public lands management. Legitimate wilderness education organizations such as NOLS, support the use of sustainable fees for public lands access.

**Conclusion**

There is a potential for individuals and land managers to characterize WEOs as major threats to the health of public lands. However, upon closer examination of the benefits that wilderness education brings through service, ethical and conservation pedagogy, empowered and diverse citizenship, and economic contributions, it becomes apparent that wilderness education programs can be powerful and positive influencing agents for public lands. IJW
commodity that Congress created can quickly be altered or orphaned by that same institution.

As a child of the American political system, wilderness thrives only to the point that a strong, vocal, and diverse constituency speaks on its behalf. While Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas once proposed that rivers and other natural resources be allowed plaintiff status in the American courts, I have yet to see a wilderness area work the back halls of the U.S. Capitol. Today, we are selling wilderness short. Not in the Congress, but in the field. Not in politics, but in both management and science. The champions of the American wilderness system recognized that the resource held a range of values for a range of people. Today, recreation has become the wilderness value of choice. And solitude has become the recreational value of choice.

But stop and think about what wilderness means to you. Wilderness hosts many values and opportunities: recreational, educational, scientific, biological, cultural, historical, spiritual, therapeutic, and physical, to name a few. For wilderness to survive as a physical resource it must first survive as a healthy political construct. To accomplish both these goals, we must begin to recognize, manage for, and promote wilderness and all its values.

Why, when many see wilderness as overused and even abused, would we want to promote additional values or uses in wilderness? The answer is diversity. Not all wilderness supporters are wilderness users. Not all wilderness users are hardcore recreationists. The U.S. populace is changing, aging, and diversifying. The reasons for how and why we utilize or support our public lands are diversifying. The role of the outfitter has evolved from one of hunting guide to that of primary provider of a spectrum of outdoor activities for many Americans. For example, many in the Hispanic culture utilize public lands not for solitude but for traditional family and group recreation. As traditional wilderness users age, we may see traditional demands decline; others will rise. Interest in the biological or biodiversity values of wilderness is rapidly increasing. Without reason. The Act speaks to “outstanding opportunities for solitude.” Again, social science must play a role in recognizing, balancing, accommodating, and enhancing a range of wilderness experiences for a range of wilderness users and supporters. The future of wilderness, as romance and reality, depends on it.

**Overall Conclusions**

One can conclude from the previous discussions that there are many issues and controversies surrounding wilderness use and access. Many of these issues are evolving, and any solutions will require long-term processes and dialogue with the different stakeholders—managers, public citizens, scientists, special-interest groups, politicians, etc. In part, this dialogue will be problematic because it will involve different cultures and languages (Portney 1992). That is, managers may be concerned about topics of little interest to scientists, while the public and special interest groups may have an entirely different focus on various issues. But one thing seems clear and seems evident at the Congress: the easy battles for allocation have been fought and generally won. Now the difficult issues of how to use these wilderness areas begins.

— Alan Ewert

**REFERENCES**


in Arizona, which they still direct. Anasazi clients are referred to as Young Walkers, and the program consists of walking through desert environments foraging for wild foods and dealing with the therapeutic issues that arise spontaneously in the natural environment. The young walkers make their own moccasins and may also make their clothes out of natural materials.

Ezekiel, a Totonac Indian from Mexico, spoke first and emphasized the spiritual principles underlying the Anasazi program. Beginning with the concept of liberating “The One Who Stands Within,” a direct translation from the Navajo language, he wove a worldview and profile of young people very different from mainstream society. Ezekiel explained the philosophy as, “Me lift thee, and thee lift me; and we’ll ascend together. Spirit, The One Who Stands Within,” a direct translation from Anasazi clients.

The Anasazi program endeavors to see the Young Walkers full of the potential that the Great Spirit sees, not through the terrible traditions of mainstream society, traditions such as the terrible twos and the terrible teens. Children who come to Anasazi are not sick; they just made some wrong choices. Those who are lost can find their way home again. It is important to lighten up and allow and encourage all individuals to be themselves.

Larry Dean Olsen then focused on the specific principles that govern the Anasazi program. Wilderness offers opportunity for great change. Teach people to be with the land and emphasize simple walking in the wilderness. Each Young Walker is a person of worth with potential for greatness, not a bad kid to be fixed. Thus, there is no use of labels of negativity, no judgment or delving into past mistakes. Go on from today. Let the past be gone. There is no need to contrive activities or situations. Each Young Walker’s experience is real and personal and has its own natural consequences. Build relationships of trust. Touch the heart of the child and then they will want to change. The outdoor skills simply prepare the way for that. Olsen closed by stating that to solve the ills of the Earth, we must solve our problems with each other. “If your heart is right, you will be able to touch another heart.” IJW

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