Visitors
Meanings of Wilderness Experiences in the 21st Century

BY JOSEPH W. ROGGENBUCK

The way in which Americans learn about and relate to nature (especially wild nature) is changing in the 21st century. Demographic trends, such as an aging population and increased ethnic diversity, will affect the kinds of people who visit wilderness, as well as what they expect, what they bring, how they behave, and what experiences they have in wilderness. Ultimately, all these changes will alter the meaning of wilderness itself. Wilderness policymakers and managers have little control over these changes, but their actions in response to them will help redefine the National Wilderness Preservation System in the 21st century. The wilderness community needs to talk about the most appropriate responses to these forces of change.

The meaning of nature changes in all cultures, and the United States is no exception. The definition of wild nature in the United States is undergoing rapid change, especially among its youth and young professionals. The change appears to be less shaped by living on the land and science, and more by the virtual reality of television, the mall, Disney, and the web. More American homes today have TV sets than indoor plumbing (Price 1999). Television watching is the number-one use of leisure time in America (33% of our free time). And nature sells on TV; its proliferation on TV in recent decades amounts to a green revolution (Price 1999). TV magnifies and accelerates nature. It captivates us before we change channels. For example, lions on TV are shown tearing apart wildebeest after wildebeest, even though lions mostly sleep, sniff, and scratch.

Disney and megamalls have become symbols of the United States. International tourists from Australia and Japan list Disney as their number-one destination. For many families in America, a journey to Disneyland has become more important than a trip to Yellowstone. Children (and parents) encounter a nature at Disney that is carefully “imagineered” for leisure and aesthetic consumption (Archer 1996). Charismatic fauna are lured by feeding, the risk of a stumble or bite is virtually eliminated, and the role of human management is hidden.

For many, shopping is now a dominant leisure activity, and consumerism is a primary means to build, test, and augment self-identity. For many people in America, the mall is more than a place to shop, it’s a place to hang out and create identity. This is not lost on the designers and entrepreneurs of the mall, nor is it lost on the sellers of nature. For example, the Mall of America in Minneapolis receives more visitors than the Grand Canyon and Disneyland combined. It has a Nature Company store; a theme park with a Minnesota woodland motif; and a “wilderness hut” and a rainforest café with live animals, a waterfall, fog, and even a “star-filled” sky. The mall has become a teacher of nature, providing an opportunity to purchase a piece of it for home display and worship.
The New Nature
But what kind of nature does TV, the web, the mall, and Disney teach, and how will these entities shape wilderness visits and visitors in the future? I believe that the new nature is packaged and convenient (above all else, Americans want their leisure and nature to be convenient), and divorced from time and place. Free time for leisure and learning in America is available in smaller and smaller chunks. If we have no time to travel somewhere, we travel nowhere. We click through TV channels or explore the imagined nature of Disney or the megamalls.

The new nature of the masses is clean, comfortable, safe, and sanitized. It is not messy. It has no sting. Nature in the mall or at Disney doesn't bite. There are no real mosquitoes or lions. Bears don't rob us of our dinner in the night. If we start to sweat, we can rest on a convenient bench, or better yet, pop into the store behind the bench, buy some deodorant, and quench our thirst with bottled water from a "natural spring."

Nature is increasingly vivid and exciting. The human designers of the new nature control its flow. Hiking trails are short, strategically sprinkled with scenic vistas. Stores attract us with the smell and music of nature. Arousal and attention are manipulated through vertigo, interpretive signs, or mysterious, curving trails. The new nature has the proper level of stimulation and arousal; the new nature is entertaining. But if by chance science and technology get it wrong, or the experience becomes too crowded, too cold, or too boring, we just click the mouse. And this is another descriptor of our new nature: We can leave it. Nature is separate from humans.

Finally, nature and the nature experience have become increasingly commodified. A family today can spend thousands of dollars at Disney World. We purchase TV nature at home for a monthly fee. At malls, we purchase mementos of nature. At bookstores, we find nature adventure stories and scenic calendars. At superstores, "gearheads" purchase expensive outdoor paraphernalia to smooth the bumps, soothe the itches, and light the darkness of wild nature. All they ask is that these products or services be convenient, comfortable, and exciting, and that the goods enhance their identity as nature lovers.

Wilderness Use in the 21st Century
How will this redefinition of nature affect wilderness use and users in the 21st century? I'm guessing first of all that the easy access to virtual nature will only increase the demand for wilderness protection. Second, I don't believe it will cause a decline in actual wilderness visits, at least not in the foreseeable future. I'm guessing that for every potential wilderness visitor who gets lost and fulfilled in the simulation of nature, another will be provoked to try out the "real thing." The wild is still deeply ingrained in the American spirit.

But I do think future visitors will expect and ask for quite different experiences in wilderness and make very different demands on wilderness managers. To be sure, a few John Muir types will still go to the wilderness alone, with only a sleeping bag and a bag of beans in a pack. But an increasing number will want to buy a "wilderness experience package." Tour operators in "somewhere" places such as Los Angeles, Chicago, and Baltimore, or in "nowhere" places on the web, will compete to meet the new market demand. Entrepreneurs will offer wilderness experience packages, each tweaked at the edges for distinction from its competitors.

But I'm guessing the prototypical wilderness experience will likely be one that can be bought and sold at the spur of the moment. It will be long on image and identity-formation potential, so the Bob Marshalls and the Boundary Waters will remain popular. But repeat visits will likely drop drastically, as the new wilderness clientele struggles with the slow rhythms of nature and seeks ever more novel and adventurous experiences. With few returning visitors, wilderness will become less and less a place of attachment imbued with personal history.
The new nature of the masses is clean, comfortable, safe, and sanitized. It is not messy. It has no sting. Nature in the mall or at Disney doesn’t bite.

### Expectations of Future Wilderness Visitors

In part because the future wilderness visitors will pay for nature, they will likely demand greater service quality. And what will the new nature lovers demand? They probably will want convenient, fast, and efficient care. Gone will be the days when outfitters rummage through storage rooms to put together food packs, find backpacks or paddles, or blow up rafts while customers wait. The outfitter will provide menus and vacuum-packed food, conveniently packaged in individual meal bags, just like the mall, and all before the visitor arrives.

New wilderness visitors will also expect their tour operator, leisure counselor, outfitter, or guide to mediate or interpret wild nature. Potential clients will access this information on the web, discovering when the fish bite, the flowers bloom, or the lions mate. At base camps at the edge of wilderness, outfitters and rangers will suggest possible routes that avoid the scars of past fire and storms, that offer the best views, and that permit the quickest escape if boredom, danger, or disappointment strikes. Clients may even rent global positioning systems so they know where they are, and perhaps even where the bears are.

### The Role of Outfitters and Guides

In the 21st century, adventure programs, outfitters, and guides will likely lead a greater and greater percentage of wilderness visitors through the experience. This permits visitors to find their desired experience most quickly. Visitors coming from the mall, TV, and Disney will want picturesque nature; they will have little interest in ecological or evolutionary nature. So trip guides will lead them to waterfalls, grizzly bears (at a safe distance), and sunsets, and lead them away from nature’s wrath. The guides will also mediate their clients’ adventure. They will assess their clients’ interests and abilities, match challenges with their competencies, and lead them beyond boredom and anxiety.

Finally, the nature experience of wilderness in the 21st century will be clean, comfortable, and safe. In the name of Leave No Trace (LNT), outfitters will put down carpets in wilderness to catch crumbs during dinner and protect feet from biting ants. Wilderness visitors will minimize the size of campsites and remove fire rings rather than “improve” the sites through human ingenuity. The art of building a cook fire may be lost, giving way to the ecological lessons of what critters live in and under firewood, what wood burns best, and how ancestors and pioneers lived in nature. Adventure schools will teach greater and greater numbers of people to live comfortably in the woods. Nature stores will sell food containers so that bears and lions don’t rob people in the night. They might even sell bear-proof containers to sleep in so that visitors will be safe!

The power of the forces of change are all but irresistible. People want nature. It’s aesthetic. It’s healthy. It sells. The market will respond not only to meet demand, but advertise, promote, and further redefine nature. The market will increasingly demand quick, convenient, intense, scenic, and sanitized experiences in wilderness. Public land managers will tend to respond to the market by charging fees, promoting LNT, and cleaning up when nature or people leave a mess.

### Should the Market Define Nature?

But should management be guided by polling? Should we allow the market to decide the ideal or normative wild nature experience? Or should we resist the market trends and return to
the romantic ideals of solitude and primitivism advocated by Thoreau, Muir, and Olson? Should we advocate the “living in the woods” skills advocated by Leopold and Marshall? Should we slow down the wilderness experience and encourage Muir’s meditation on the slow rhythms of a flower?

A new or revised wilderness ideal may be needed to serve as a guide for the future management of wild nature experiences. The wilderness community needs to actively engage in a dialogue about its qualities. I have long valued the ideals of solitude, primitivism, and the sublime, but this view of the wild nature ideal is coming under increasing criticism (e.g., see Cronon 1995; Callicott and Nelson 1998). I agree with recent wilderness critiques that any change or revision in wilderness ideals should recognize and promote nature as evolutionary and ecological. Humans should immerse themselves deeply in nature. How future recreational visitors develop deeper ecological and evolutionary connections with nature in wilderness is a matter the profession must discuss and debate.

The Golem is a mythological creature in the Jewish faith/culture magically created from clay and water to help human beings in their work and protect them from enemies. In stories, the Golem becomes more powerful and clumsy every day, turning into “a lumbering fool who knows neither its own strength nor the extent of its clumsiness and influence” (Collins and Pinch 1998, p. 1), and ultimately threatening to destroy the very creatures it was created to protect: human beings.

Society has long feared the possible power of technology to destroy humankind or the Earth itself (e.g., nuclear weaponry). This fear is a favorite theme in science fiction. Paradoxically, humans have also embraced almost every form of technological innovation producing a classic love-hate relationship. An often forgotten paradox is that wilderness is embedded within a similarly ambiguous relationship with technology: While wilderness recreation is about living a simpler life unencumbered with the trappings of “civilization,” we increasingly require technology to enjoy wilderness. Further, the appearance of the cultural constructs of wilderness and parks are reliant upon the technological innovations.

Wilderness managers have been relatively silent on the impacts of recreation technology on (1) backcountry recreationists (2) outdoor recreation activities, (3) the wilderness setting, (4) wilderness experiences, and (5) wilderness management. Years ago, the automobile was briefly opposed in national parks in North America. But automobile proponents won the day, arguing that automobiles facilitated park use and generated demand, public support, funding, and even new parks.

These old battle lines may soon be drawn again. The rate of technological change in outdoor recreation is growing exponentially, and recreation