

Wilderness

Social Benefits

"The tendency nowadays to wander in wilderness is delightful to see. Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life." —naturalist and author, John Muir



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The Importance of Wilderness to Spiritual and Mental Health

American society owes a lot to wilderness. While Americans are often quick to distinguish personal growth, spiritual pleasure, and inspiration among the social benefits of wilderness, we are beholden to a society that is rooted culturally and historically in wilderness in the context of human endeavor.

Upon reaching New World shores to seek opportunity and freedom from tyranny and oppression, the pioneers faced a landscape of vast, uncharted wilderness. As they pushed onward, they encountered tribes of Native Americans so inextricably linked to the land and to the rhythms of nature that it defined who they were and their entire way of life. The pioneers learned quickly that they, too, needed to adapt to the rules of the untamed land, or perish. Most succeeded, and in a few centuries the continent had become exceedingly civilized and less intrinsic wilderness. But the history of living in and expansion through North American wilderness remains a vital component of the social fabric that displays the character of American citizens and culture.

Having inspired a legacy of national pride and a sense of cultural identity, America's respect for wilderness is

undeniable. Feeling a strong cultural connection to wilderness through their ancestors who once lived there, Native Americans continue to pay tribute to their wilderness heritage in social tradition and ceremony. And every American, in social gatherings under one flag to celebrate national aims and institutional achievement, can resonate with their legacy in wilderness upon hearing their national anthem — "O'er the land of the free and the home of the brave" — and in popular song lyrics such as "This land is your land, this land is my land" and "From the mountains, to the prairies, to the oceans...God bless America, my home sweet home."

With so much societal pride connected to wilderness, the American public has strong reason to believe wilderness contributes value to American society as a conduit to American heritage, history and national identity. But there's more. Studies of wilderness values have brought to light other social benefits of wilderness, including artistic, spiritual, aesthetic, well-being, self-enlightenment, family/social, character-building, and therapeutic, all of which can teach lessons of successful coexistence with each other and with nature.

"The influence of fine scenery, the presence of mountains, appeases our irritations and elevates our friendships."

— poet and essayist,
Ralph Waldo Emerson,
The Conduct of Life, 1860

As an oasis of abundant opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation experiences, wilderness is increasingly embraced by Americans as a place to reconnect with humanity, feel alive, marvel in scenic beauty, become inspired, challenge ourselves, share splendid outdoor experiences with friends, and view the larger community of life to which we belong in ways that are not motorized, mechanized, electronic, or facilitated. And as a place to seek healing — physical, psychological, emotional and social — for the therapeutic benefits in Wilderness that result from spending time there.

In today's society, rampant growth in the use of the Internet, digital social media and mobile phones and in watching television has young people staying

inside and not engaging nature, resulting in what Richard Louv, author of *The Last Child in the Woods*, calls "nature-deficit disorder," an unhealthy trend he links to childhood obesity, attention deficit disorder and depression, as well as apathy for the environment. Evidence shows that children learn better and live happier and healthier when they play in the outdoors. As do adults.

American society enjoys its freedom, and in wilderness Americans have within their reach open paths to enjoy freedom. Unlike our ancestors who built from wilderness a nation on the premise of freedom, today's Americans are free to explore wilderness and experience the unexpected outcomes of self-inspired adventure and to escape the fast-paced world of work and home.



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Shenandoah Wilderness, VA