

A GUEST EDITORIAL

SOLITUDE:

EDITORIAL BY
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Researchers continue to delve into solitude component of Wilderness

The potential restriction of amount of use proposed as a means of increasing solitude in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness has prompted considerable controversy.

Opinions vary widely concerning the desirability of these management actions. Some have interpreted the Wilderness Act as not requiring solitude, because the Act mentions that wilderness should provide for "solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation." Others feel the Act mandates "outstanding opportunities for solitude" on every acre of wilderness. Assuming that Congress intended for wilderness to provide for some level of solitude, at least in some places, this article reviews research related to wilderness solitude.

Although there have been a few attempts to study wilderness visitors' perceptions of solitude directly, most research has focused on number of encounters between groups rather than on solitude per se. The Wilderness Act refers to outstanding "opportunities" for solitude. It does not mandate that solitude be provided. Researchers have typically assumed that opportunities for solitude should generally increase as encounters with other groups decrease. Because numbers of encounters can be more directly influenced by management actions than solitude can, managing number of encounters has become the most accepted means of managing opportunities for solitude.

From this perspective, researchers

have gone on to ask wilderness visitors how many encounters with other groups they prefer to have. Answers to this question have varied between wildernesses and between locations within the same wilderness, as well as with the type of group encountered. Two of the most consistent findings are that (1) preferred encounter levels are lower at campsites than on trails and (2) preferred encounter levels are lower when meeting large groups and groups with pack stock than when meeting small groups of hikers. In most studies, a majority of visitors prefer having no other groups camped within sight or sound of their campsite. On trails, many visitors prefer encountering no other groups, but many others are perfectly happy meeting a few other groups on the trail. In a classic study, George Stankey (a researcher with the Forest Service) found that a majority of visitors to the Bob Marshall, High Uintas, and Bridger Wildernesses thought that meeting 0-2 other groups on the trail was "a pleasant experience." However, only about 30 percent thought meeting three other groups was pleasant and only 10 percent felt meeting five other groups was pleasant.

This and similar studies provide a useful perspective on visitors' preferences, the conditions that visitors would most like to experience if there were no costs associated with achieving them. But what if there are costs? If it is necessary to restrict access in order to achieve a certain set of wilderness conditions,

how would visitors balance their desires for both low encounter levels and unrestricted access? Would they prefer use limits or would they be willing to experience more encounters with other groups than desired in order to continue to enjoy free access?

Researchers have recently tried to address this issue by asking visitors about the maximum number of encounters they would be willing to accept or tolerate. Most visitors state that they will accept or tolerate several times as many encounters as they prefer. While few would question this general conclusion, some researchers (myself included) question the validity of quantitative estimates of acceptable numbers of encounters. One problem is that precise definitions of acceptability and tolerance have seldom been used. Results would be more meaningful if researchers asked visitors, for example, about the maximum number of encounters they would accept before they are willing to have their access restricted. However, even this approach assumes that visitors are capable of providing meaningful estimates of what they would accept. Until they experience a truly unacceptable number of encounters (and perhaps even after such an experience), this may not be possible.

In 1989, Alan Watson and I oversaw a study of several high-use destinations in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness (Snow Lake, Gem Lake, Rachel Lake, and Rampart Lakes). We assessed levels of physical impact and levels of encounters be-

tween groups. We also asked visitors questions about what they encountered, their reactions to what they encountered, and their management preferences. In brief, we found that impact levels in these heavily-used places were quite high but no higher than occur in many other wildernesses. Encounter levels were extremely high, particularly during the day and on weekends. On the trail to Snow Lake, for example, weekend visitors typically encountered other groups every 3.2 minutes. However, when visitors were asked if meeting other people detracted from their experience, about half replied "not at all" and only 5-10% replied that it detracted "a lot".

Finally, we asked visitors if they supported a use limit now or in the future, noting that "if a limit is enforced your own opportunity to visit this area may be reduced in the future". Only about 20 percent supported a reduction in current use, while another 20-25 percent supported a limit designed to hold use at current levels. Most visitors (40 to 50 percent) felt that use should not be limited at this time but might need to be in the future. The rest (7 to 18 percent) felt that use should not be limited under any circumstances.

So what does this all mean? The experience of many visitors is affected by the number of other groups they meet and most visitors prefer relatively few encounters with other groups, particularly at campsites. Visitors will clearly tolerate or accept higher levels of encounters than they prefer. This probably explains why in high-use destinations in the Alpine Lakes, most visitors do not support the use restrictions that would result in preferred encounter levels. We also have learned, however, that visitors vary

greatly in the extent to which number of encounters influences their experience, as well as in their preferences for and tolerance of different numbers of encounters. Consequently, a substantial number of the visitors to high-use destinations in Alpine Lakes (about 20 percent) do support use reductions.

Research seldom identifies unequivocally the right or wrong thing to do. That is certainly the case in this situation. The decision about whether or not to restrict use to improve opportunities for solitude must be based on societal values, some of which are already codified in the Wilderness Act. What research can do is describe some of the pros and cons of alternative decisions. Our research at Alpine Lakes and elsewhere suggests that dramatically reducing use would be costly because, to correct a situation that does not bother them much, many current visitors would be denied access. It also suggests that allowing use to grow everywhere, to the point where encounter levels are high throughout the wilderness, would be costly because few visitors would find their preferred experience and those seeking outstanding opportunities for solitude would have a difficult time finding it.

Compromise approaches are likely to offer more benefits and fewer costs than either extreme. One potential compromise is to divide the wilderness into zones which offer different recreational experiences. In some portions of the wilderness, encounter levels could be kept low, even if this meant limiting numbers of visitors. These places would provide outstanding opportunities for solitude in perpetuity. In other portions, access might not be limited (at least to day users) in order to increase opportunities for solitude. These places would

provide less outstanding opportunities for solitude but would provide a "primitive and unconfined type of recreation" (another Wilderness Act mandate) and could serve to meet much of the demand for wilderness access. Even in these places (perhaps Snow Lake is a good example), access might ultimately need to be restricted if there were not a sufficient number of places at the destination to accommodate all visitors, if conflict between groups escalated, or if unacceptable resource impacts occurred. This approach is consistent with the finding that visitors vary in the importance they attach to solitude and in their tolerance of encounters. It also meets the mandate of the Wilderness Act if it is interpreted to require that most but not all wilderness acres provide "outstanding" opportunities for solitude.

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David N. Cole is research biologist with the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, Missoula, Montana, which conducts research for the four federal agencies that manage wilderness. When he submitted his editorial, he had this to say about the on-going series of editorials focusing on the solitude question:

"I think the forum you are providing is a very useful one. We need more debate about these issues. Ultimately management decisions must be based on the values of society. Science can only help achieve those societal goals once they are articulated."



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