

## APPROPRIATENESS TO PAY: IS WILDERNESS A UNIQUE RECREATION EXPERIENCE?

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The debate about public recreation fees is particularly vigorous in the case of designated Wilderness. Wilderness may be unique as a public recreation resource in terms of its function within public lands for the following reasons:

- § Wilderness lands contrast with more developed settings
- § Wilderness offers outstanding opportunities for solitude
- § Wilderness provides extraordinary opportunities for primitive and unconfined experiences
- § Wilderness recreation is highly dependent on natural conditions
- § Wilderness easily suffers degradation from the desired pristine state, primeval character and influence
- § Wilderness is finite in supply
- § Wilderness provides many off-site values, often referred to as existence, opportunity and bequest values

Visitors to wilderness attach a variety of values and meanings to their experiences and to the place. Visitors can construct different relations or forms of attachment to a wilderness. Two major types of wilderness recreation values have been described: functional, utilitarian values; and emotional, symbolic or spiritual values. Users with a more functional relation may be more in favor of fees for recreation use of Wilderness: they can easily perceive direct benefits from the improvements made possible by fee revenues. However, those users with a more symbolic attachment to Wilderness may tend to be less supportive. Not only are fees likely to have greater impact on the experiences of symbolically attached users, but these users may be less able to find a suitable substitute for that opportunity. Although willing and able to pay, they may be offended by being asked to pay. Questions of efficiency and equity seem less relevant to places holding spiritual and symbolic values.

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A recent visitor to the Desolation Wilderness stated: "To enter the Wilderness is an innocent pleasure which truly is a birthright of every human being that walks this earth. To charge for its use is, in my opinion, blasphemy. Wilderness areas are of vital importance to us all but their maintenance comes under the purview of the federal tax payer, not the nickel and diming and over-planning of those who use it. That would have the effect of negating much of the pleasure connected with it."

Managers are charged with responsibility to preserve the fundamental relationship between wilderness users and the resource as landowners, stewards, and stakeholders. Fees may contribute more to the feeling of "citizen becoming the customer." One recent newspaper editorial questioned the concept of running government like a business: "When was the last time the manager of Walmart asked you to help out a bit by sweeping up the floor; and what would you have said if she did?" When developing fee programs for wilderness, we must ask whether we are changing these relationships and if these changes meet the intent of wilderness legislation.

Wilderness recreation fee programs are seen by some as a continuing trend toward privatization and / or partitioning of the public estate. Disapproval of wilderness managers dictating the financial terms of entry could be expected, particularly given the very democratic heritage of wildland recreation in this country. There will likely be those who are concerned that a dependence on fee programs will become the tail wagging the wilderness management dog. One such visitor to the Desolation Wilderness commented: "A wilderness area that you have to pay to enter especially for the day loses some of its wildness. It is no longer a free open area where people can walk at will. It becomes more of a park or an amusement park. There is a price to pay for every activity in this country. This is one of the last areas that has not become so controlled by humans."

The principle of minimal tool management in wilderness may be applied to fee implementation. If the purpose of the wilderness use fee is to raise revenue, consideration might be given to a donation program. As in church, where parishioners contribute to a donation plate rather than purchase entry tickets, a Wilderness donation program would be more sensitive to symbolic and spiritual values. In the Desolation Wilderness Fee Demonstration Study, 75% of survey respondents said they would donate if requested.

Another alternative to direct user fees would be an excise tax similar to those placed on hunting and fishing goods under the Dingle-Johnson and Pittman-Robertson acts. However, there is concern over the popularity of such a program. Some studies (such as Godin, 1994 proceedings) have found little support for excise-type taxes to raise revenue, while others, such as Crompton and Decker (1989, JPRA), have found strategies for gaining acceptance such as targeting the revenue from respective users to the corresponding resources.

There is ample evidence and sufficient alternatives to suggest caution in applying recreation fees in designated Wilderness areas. The very act of purchasing a wilderness experience may have the associated civilizing effect of turning a natural area into a consumer good for some people. Fees are likely to have a commodifying effect by narrowing the focus of the meaning of wilderness to functional, utilitarian values at the expense of the symbolic, emotional, and spiritual experience values. Thus, a wilderness recreation fee program may run counter to the integrity of the relationship between people and wilderness. Civilization is the reduction of everything to the common denominator of the dollar. Wilderness would seem to be the very opposite.

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