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CHANGING WILDERNESS VALUES

(By Alan Watson and Peter Landres, USDA Forest Service, Missoula, MT)

In addition to work on Wilderness use and users as reported earlier in this chapter, scientists at the Leopold Institute have conducted or sponsored other studies aimed at understanding the values of Wilderness protection in the United States. Biologists, ecologists, and social scientists have merged their knowledge in terminology and perspective to seek ways to improve Wilderness management in the future. Current knowledge suggests that values are constantly changing. The source of this change is a combination of general societal trends and specific influences on Wilderness values.

Creation of a National Wilderness Preservation System, with instant classification of over nine million acres of Forest Service lands as Wilderness, reflected the values of U.S. society at that time. Emphasis was on preserving and protecting for the American people of present and future generations an enduring resource of Wilderness. Wilderness was to be administered for future use and enjoyment by the American people. The act stressed both preservation and use of these places, particularly for recreation.

Wilderness areas are receiving increasing numbers of visits by backpackers, day hikers, anglers, horseback riders, canoeists, berry pickers, photographers, and hunters. Recreation use increased steadily through the 1960s and 1970s, into the early 1980s, when it appeared to level off. By the late 1980s, a resurgence of growth in Wilderness visits occurred and it continues today. Along the way, nearly 100 million additional acres were legally classified as Wilderness, adding land managed by the NPS, BLM, and USFWS, as well as more FS land, and that system of protected lands continues to be considered for additional growth today. With many changes in society and how people view protected areas, what are the values we associate with Wilderness today? How has society changed, what forces have worked to influence our beliefs about Wilderness?



Wilderness in 1964: Preserved and Managed for Human Values

When supporters of the NWPS in the early 1960s spoke of future generations, they were talking partially about today's society. Hubert H. Humphrey introduced the original legislation in the House of Representatives. Senator Humphrey passed away in 1978. Howard Zahniser, the person who authored much of the original legislation and who campaigned for passage of the Wilderness Act all through the 1950s and early 1960s died just shortly before passage. The influential philosophers and scientists who were commonly quoted during Wilderness debates (Muir, Leopold, Marshall, Marsh, Thoreau) were mostly of an even earlier era. The baby boom generation was hardly a part of the movement. We are, however, the beneficiaries and stewards of their work, just as future generations will be beneficiaries and stewards of our work.

When the first textbook on Wilderness management appeared in 1978, it relied strongly upon the foundation of these Wilderness philosophers and champions. In the textbook by John Hendee, George Stankey, and Robert Lucas, three major values of Wilderness in our society were acknowledged.

Experiential Value

Muir referred to forests as temples with the trees singing psalms and with these words gave the Wilderness a spiritual quality, with abilities to inspire and provide insight into the connection of all things. Leopold advocated preservation of the American packtrain experience, and Olson found feelings of timelessness important to understanding the ways of the past.

Mental and Moral Restoration Values

Carhart believed that these values contributed to building individual and national character. Leopold, Muir, and Thoreau advocated understanding the challenges of self-sufficiency in order to increase one's self-confidence. The therapeutic values of Wilderness to members of a society challenged by the stresses of modern life were frequently acknowledged.

Scientific Value

At the turn of the century, Marsh thought that there was a scientific value to protecting intact forests. The scientific uses most often mentioned were as baselines for comparison with altered areas. There, complex biological processes could be studied in environments that have escaped the impacts of human progress. Wilderness offered opportunities to study the complex relationships between all organisms and the impacts human activities were causing in areas that were not protected.

General Societal Changes Since Wilderness Protection Began

Many things have changed in our society since 1964. We cannot expect our children to value experiences or places in the same ways we do. And our grandchildren will have different values than our children. With changes in the culture we live in, advances in technology, dramatic changes in the environment, and diversification of the economy, our attitudes toward Wilderness protection are bound to change.

Changing Culture

A spreading U.S. population converts about one million acres of farmland to urban housing, businesses, and roads each year. In our lifetimes we have all experienced basic changes in orientation to the landscape as a result of increasing conversions. Articles commonly appear in National Geographic and local newspapers about the rapid increases in home construction in formerly rural areas. Las Vegas, NV, is adding 6,000 new residents each month. Home construction is proceeding rapidly. From all this development a new culture is evolving. Expectations for recreation, public services, and taxes place new challenges before local administrators. In the United States, education levels are rising. People are improving their understanding of natural processes and how we all fit into the global situation. The racial and ethnic mix of our society is changing rapidly. These cultural changes, among many others, are having profound effects on how our society values protection of wildlands.

Technological Advances

We have advanced technology beyond our expectations of 20 years ago. The World Wide Web provides overwhelming amounts of information for trip planning. The dominant value of our society has been described as efficiency, which is evident in communications (cellular phones, Internet, satellite television, FAX, etc.), transportation (gas mileage, mountain bikes, llamas in trekking groups, etc.) and in medicine (from prevention

to treatment). We are a culture that seeks every technological advantage. Some of this efficiency may reduce our impact on natural places and increase our enjoyment of time we have there. Others, possibly in unexpected ways, threaten our ability to protect unique places and experiences there.

Environmental Changes

Although the environmental awareness movement arose when the Wilderness Act was moving toward passage, we are much more aware of environmental issues today than people were in the 1960s. Commodity extraction impacts are commonly discussed in public arenas. We have changed everything from our deodorants to our vehicle air conditioners to protect the ozone layer. Our attitudes toward beef and the fast-food restaurants that prepare it in quantity have changed due to relationships between tropical deforestation and agriculture.

Diversification of the Economy

Our economy has become much less dependent upon commodity extraction. Just a few years ago, we had many more communities than we do now that were entirely dependent upon the resource base as a source of income. Today, our economy is highly diversified, and we have improved our understanding of how natural amenities influence the local tax base and the local economy.

Specific Influences on Wilderness Values

Some specific things have happened since 1964 that influence how we value Wilderness, and these things seem to continue to affect the beliefs we hold about wildland protection. These changes include our awareness of impacts caused by recreation, media coverage on the beneficial role of natural ecological processes, scientific understanding about the functions of ecological systems, and the loss of natural areas to development.

Awareness of Impacts Caused By Recreation

The images we have of early Wilderness visits often include campsites adjacent to streams or lakes, bedrolls spread on freshly cut boughs of fir trees, heavy cooking utensils, several head of pack or riding stock, and a huge campfire. Times have changed. There is now a higher percentage of solo visitors to Wilderness. The trend is for shorter stays with predominance of day use, and a lower proportion of use depends on pack animals.

While many preferences for naturalness of conditions and lack of crowding persist, Wilderness values have changed. In one in-depth study of values and codes of behavior, Wilderness users in Oregon had changed tremendously in 28 years. In 1965, just one year after passage of the Wilderness Act, 64 percent of visitors believed that they should be able to camp wherever they please in Wilderness. By 1993, that proportion had dropped to only 22 percent. Likewise, 53 percent thought it was appropriate to cut brush or limbs for a bed and wood for a campfire in 1965. In 1993, however, that acceptance rate was down to 17 percent. The symbolic presence of an evening campfire was accepted by 76 percent in 1965, but only 37 percent in 1993. The largest change was in beliefs about appropriateness of burying noncombustible trash. Almost everyone believed it was appropriate in 1965 (87 percent) and almost no one thought it was appropriate in 1993 (9 percent).

In part, these changes in attitudes have resulted from agency-sponsored education programs. Educational signs have been mounted at trailheads and campgrounds to promote Woodsy Owl and a national Leave No Trace program, and we have seen commitment to improved ethics by organizations such as the National Outdoor Leadership School.

Media Coverage on the Beneficial Role of Natural Ecological Processes

At the Eagle Cap Wilderness, only three percent of a 1965 sample of visitors felt lightning-caused fires should be allowed to run their course in Wilderness. By 1993, 44 percent of the visitors expressed that belief. A similar change in attitudes was evident toward native insect infestations. In 1965, five percent of visitors supported allowance of heavy infestations of native insects to run their course in Wilderness, while in 1993, 43 percent of visitors supported that action. It is believed that regional coverage of insect issues and national and regional coverage of fire issues are largely responsible for these swings in attitudes. In fact, there is evidence that accuracy of knowledge about fire effects is closely linked to positive support of prescribed natural fire policies, and that knowledge and support is highest in the regions where wildland fires occur most often and receive press coverage regularly.

Scientific Understanding

Biodiversity, a common goal of ecosystem management today, normally is not highest in currently designated Wilderness Areas. Greater diversity exists in lower elevation areas, which often are privately owned. Ecosystem management reflects concern about the often severe impacts of human activities on natural systems. Today, many people can engage in intelligent conversations about the costs of habitat fragmentation and the impacts of fire exclusion for so many years on the integrity of biological systems.

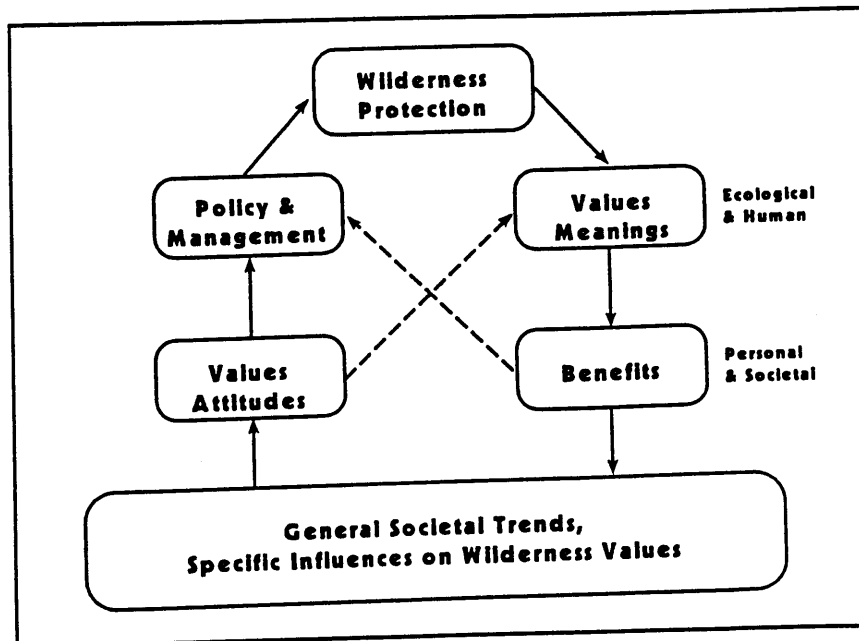
Development and Loss of Natural Areas that Lack Formal Protection

From the local to the national level, there has been a reduction in natural areas. We see it locally in clearing of lands for housing tracts, we hear it regionally when the timber industry and preservation interests debate on the future of remaining, unprotected, roadless lands in the Northern Rockies, and we hear it in stories about wetland development, offshore mineral exploration, and tourism development. Scarcity increases the value of natural landscapes in an urban society that is rapidly developing its unprotected places.

The Importance of Understanding Changes in Attitudes Toward Wilderness

Figure VIII.2 shows how values are modified and eventually contribute to understanding personal and societal benefits of Wilderness protection. In this flow chart the word *values* appears twice. In one place it is equated with *attitudes*. In this case, the general societal trends and specific influences described above combine to influence the beliefs people have about the advantages of protecting Wilderness lands and experiences. These beliefs, attitudes, and values influence formation of legislation, interpretation of legislation into policy, and on-the-ground management activities. In the last few years we have seen increasing mountain bike traffic in nonroaded areas, proposals to open up Wilderness Areas for more motorized access, salvage logging bills that promote commodity values in roadless areas, and increased debate over extending protected status to additional public lands. The challenge of the Resources Planning Act Assessment is to describe societal values accurately in order for the program to prescribe policy for the future. The attitudes of today's society are very different than those found in 1964 due to the many societal and specific influences that have come into existence since that time, and they continue to evolve. That is the difficult aspect of development of policy for the future.

Figure VIII.2: Flow Chart to Understand the Role of Values in Wilderness Management



The second use of "values" can be applied to describe the positive ecological and human services of Wilderness protection. Biodiversity has been judged by humans as a desirable value of Wilderness protection and management. Humans sometimes visit Wilderness for functional reasons, such as hunting, berry picking,

or escaping crowds. On the other hand, some people go to places we call Wilderness because they have personal relationships with that place, or because they desire to acknowledge the significance of entering a place our society has deemed appropriate to protect. These values give rise to either personal or societal benefits, those long-term, higher-order positive purposes of Wilderness protection. Society can benefit ultimately through maintenance of cultural traditions, through physical subsistence, through scientific advancement of knowledge, and through extension of ethical considerations to the natural world. These benefits are ultimately to humans and are constantly changing due to changes in society and specific things we do to influence the beliefs of people about the advantages of providing these benefits. Understanding these changing attitudes toward Wilderness and the human and ecological meanings Wilderness has in our rapidly changing society will continue to be a challenge for public land managers.