

Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute: Publication # 442

CITATION: Watson, Alan E. 2001. Sustainable financing of wilderness protection: An experiment with fees in the United States. *International Journal of Wilderness* 7(3):12-16.

# Sustainable Financing of Wilderness Protection

## An Experiment with Fees in the United States

BY ALAN E. WATSON

**Abstract:** While wilderness protection has traditionally occurred from tax support, there are other options. In the United States, currently there is an experiment to charge fees for recreation access, including wilderness. Questions remain about whether the public supports wilderness recreation fees, how fees might change relationships between people and wilderness, whether a buyer-seller relationship between federal land management agencies and wilderness visitors is desirable, how wilderness fees may differ from recreation fees, and who will be affected most by wilderness use fees.

### Introduction

Wilderness protection has typically been financed through taxes. However, budgets fluctuate, making consistent management difficult. The tasks of monitoring, public education, and restoration of impacted sites and ecosystems is becoming increasingly difficult to accomplish within current budget allocations. There are some good aspects of financing wilderness protection through taxation, however. Federal legislation and federal taxes to protect wilderness in the United States acknowledge the many values of wilderness realized by society as a whole. Nonusers and future generations can be acknowledged as beneficiaries of this protection, and we collectively provide these benefits.

There are alternatives to financing wilderness protection through taxes. Although The Wilderness Act (TWA) made it clear that the secretaries of agriculture and interior were authorized to accept contributions and gifts in order to meet the objectives of the wilderness system, donations to provide wilderness protection services are relatively untried (Martin 2000). Barnes (1998) discussed the need for taxing nonuse values in Namibia as a way to transfer benefits from the international community to local villages. Excise taxes and licenses have been used in fishing and hunting programs in the United States extensively, and national and international organizations,



Article author Alan Watson (far right) and his family in Pyhäunturi (the Holy Field) National Park, Finland. Photo courtesy of the Aldo Leopold Institute.

such as the Nature Conservancy, the Global Environmental Facility, and the World Bank, have been crucial to protection of many threatened places in the world. Local commitment



through "Friends" groups has also provided funding to continue important wilderness management work in many places. While these are all potential new solutions to sustainable financing problems, the approach currently receiving the greatest attention in the United States is user fees.

### Recreation User Fees

The U.S. Congress authorized the National Park Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Bureau of Land Management, and the Forest Service to implement the Recreational Fee Demonstration Program (RFDP) in 1996. The RFDP gave these agencies freedom, even a mandate, to test a variety of new recreation use fees, including general use fees and access and use fees for specific sites, facilities, and programs. The legislation allows at least 80% of revenues to be kept locally for on-site facility and program improvements. Originally the test was only to last for three years, but it was extended for two additional years with subsequent legislation, and then again for one more year in 2000.

The purpose of this article is to reflect on knowledge developed from recent research on recreation fees (Watson and Herath 1999), with a focus on issues associated with charging fees to enter wilderness.

### Important Wilderness Fee Issues

There is no intent stated in TWA (Public Law 88-577) to always provide free access to wilderness, nor are user fees addressed. The only mention of financing within TWA is that no appropriation from Congress will ever be given for expenses or salaries for the administration of the National Wilderness Preservation System as a separate unit, nor for any additional personnel to manage these areas. Thus, wilderness

must be financed as an effort within the larger agency of which it is part. With a growing system of wilderness, and insufficient funds within the land management agencies to finance all needs, user fees have surfaced for consideration as an approach to at least supplement Congressional funding. But, charging for admission to wilderness through user fees raises some new questions not previously addressed in U.S. literature.

### Does the Public Support Wilderness Recreation Fees?

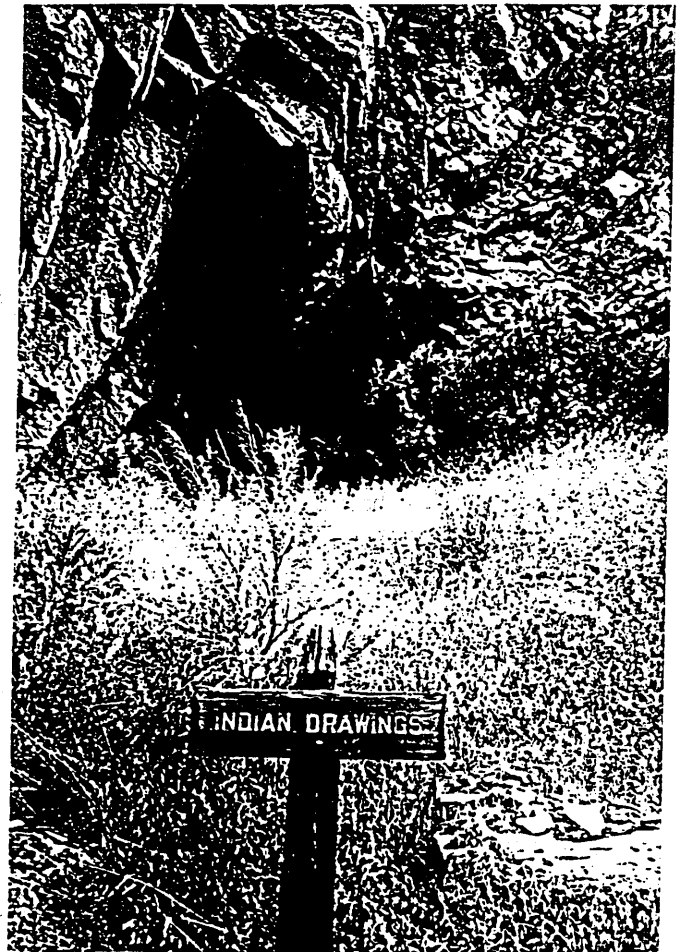
We have heard federal officials claim, and critical voices admit, that the majority of the American public generally support recreation fees on public lands. Some recent studies support that generality. Most of the recent research, however, has depended only upon responses from current visitors who have paid the fees.

In their study of different communities of interest in southern California, Winter et al. (1999) found a vast majority disapproved of fees, and an additional minority expressed only conditional acceptance. Bowker et al. (1999) also found support for providing recreation services from taxes outweighed support for using only fees or a combination of fees and taxes on 6 of 10 types of fees proposed. The user fee approach has been controversial, and it has not yet been resolved if it will become publicly acceptable or not. We have not adequately assessed the opinions of those who have

decided not to pay a fee, or the general public who may or may not visit the area, but are members of the collective community that has established public lands.

### How Might User Fees Change the Relationship Between People and Wilderness?

One of the major complaints heard about the fee program is that it commercializes national treasures of public lands. On the other hand, today in the United States there is a substantial call for government to operate more like the private sector through applying more cost-efficient business and marketing principles. There may be many lessons to be learned from the private sector,



Indian drawings in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness. Visitor support for use of fees suggests public concern about overdevelopment of wilderness. Photo by Alan Watson.

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Exchanging currency for services may be one of the primary differences between places where human influence dominates and those places which are primeval, untrammled, and where self-reliance and independence are highly valued.

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but many questions arise about adopting marketing and business economics to improve efficiency in providing wilderness opportunities. We must ask ourselves if the creators of wilderness in the United States intended for us to manage it for individual utility maximization, as economic theory describes, or as a societal good. Further, many public land managing agencies are working to focus on and increase "customer satisfaction" among visitors; how will user fees affect satisfaction among wilderness customers?

There have been three approaches used in establishing fee levels at recreation demonstration sites in the United States. First, typically the objective is generating maximum revenue (Martin 1999), so information about how many trips would be taken annually at various price levels yields a demand curve that suggests an optimum price. Second, some managers have set prices at a level comparable to those in the private sector for similar services or experiences. This works for campgrounds, but substitutes for wilderness are not available in the United States. Third, fee levels could be based on the cost of providing services. But, costs for providing wilderness experiences are difficult to track, especially within large bureaucratic organizations, and the on-site services for visitors are often a small part of the costs and benefits of wilderness protection.

Consideration of wilderness from a collective perspective suggests the need

to be more concerned with the ability to protect these places as havens where advancing civilization is not welcome. Exchanging currency for services may be one of the primary differences between places where human influence dominates and those places that are primeval, untrammled, and where self-reliance and independence are highly valued. We cannot accurately predict how fees for entry might change a wilderness experience and subsequent beneficial effects.

### **Is the Relationship between Buyer and Seller of Wilderness Experiences Desirable?**

We know from research by Schneider and Budruk (1999) that displacement occurs among some public land visitors due to new fees. But few reasonable substitutes are available for those who might be displaced from wilderness because of user fees. Are we as free as the private sector may be to disregard displacement effects of wilderness user fees?

Trainor and Norgaard (1999) found high incompatibility between economic values and the values placed on wilderness. They found that people had great difficulty placing a monetary value on wilderness experiences. We have specifically avoided this incompatibility as a society by establishing public land as common property in the

first place, and then designating a portion of those lands as symbolically free from the pressures of resource extraction and modern civilization.

Vogt and Williams (1999), found that wilderness visitors tended to support the use of fees to maintain current conditions, at least as much if not more than improving them, suggesting a concern by some about fees leading to overdevelopment of wilderness. There has often been an assurance by public land managers that fees will indeed lead to improved services. This is a common justification for charging fees, much as would be used in a private market situation. For these agencies the easiest way to show results from the fees are by painting, cleaning, or repairing bathrooms, upgrading parking lots, or replacing old signs. But in recent research, the services wilderness visitors want supported by fees are not so easily visible or so materials-oriented. Desolation Wilderness visitors wanted fees spent on restoration of human-damaged sites, litter removal, and information about ways to reduce impacts (Vogt and Williams 1999). Thus, if wilderness user fees are to be used to supplement insufficient wilderness budgets, assurance is needed that the public purpose of the place will not be violated (e.g., developing services and facilities in wilderness).

### **How Are Wilderness Fees and Recreation Fees Different?**

There has been the assumption that the public is more supportive of fees at areas where facilities are provided. Bowker et al. (1999) found that the public supports use of fees to provide boat ramps, campgrounds, special exhibits, and parking areas, but some other facilities were among the least supported. Vogt and Williams (1999) found strongest support among wilderness visitors to be

for several nonfacility-related expenditures. It appears that the public is supportive of fees to accomplish the more general intended public purpose of an area; sometimes the public purpose requires facilities and sometimes it does not. Providing wilderness experience opportunities is not dependent upon facilities. Rather it is dependent upon confidence that the agency is maintaining the wilderness qualities of naturalness and solitude—the wildness—of designated areas. Wilderness user fees must contribute to these purposes, not improved rest rooms, signs, and parking lots.

### Who Will Be Affected Most by Wilderness User Fees?

There is naturally concern that low-income people will be most impacted by access fees. Unfortunately, however, there are much greater financial obstacles to participation by the impoverished than relatively small user fees. More (1999) challenges us to expand our concern beyond the poor to those on the income margins. Stratifying the public to more closely examine the effects of user fees on middle-income, working-class, working-poor, and impoverished people will likely reveal more than separating the American people into “low income” and everyone else. Very low-income visitors are underrepresented among wilderness visitors, and user fees would obviously further reduce their access, but there may be potential income effects on visitors in other income groups as well.

It is unclear whether those most committed to wilderness or involved in wilderness activities would be most supportive of fees. But, those living in closest proximity and most involved have been found less likely to have positive response to wilderness fees (Puttkammer and Watson 1998;

Williams et al. 1999). We need to further understand who is affected by fees in order to understand the costs associated with this potentially sustainable source of wilderness funding.

### Conclusion

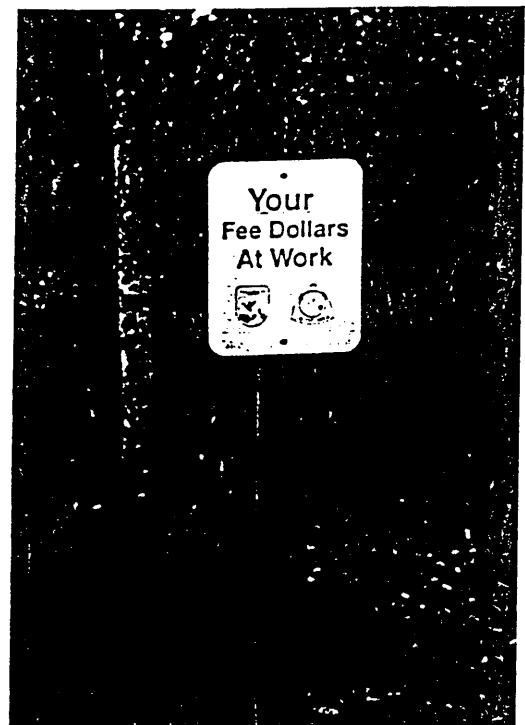
How the public responds to wilderness management actions is not just a function of how well they perceive that action to be in protecting the wilderness. Public response is partly a function of how the public perceives the agency has done in other stewardship responsibilities. Public trust (Winter et al. 1999) cannot be developed through concentration on a single management issue any more than ecosystems can become sustainable by focus on a single element of the environment.

Around the world we are struggling to retain some wildness in our landscapes through legislation, responsible stewardship, and education of visitors and the public about wilderness values. But the success of these efforts depends on funding the continuing needs for management, restoration, monitoring, scientific investigation, and visitor services. So far, general tax revenues appropriated to land management agencies have been the source of funding for wilderness management in the United States. If wilderness recreation fees are to be a long-term source of funding wilderness protection in the United States, we need to implement them in a way that respects the relationship between wilderness and the American people.

Not all countries have established a tradition of public funding of wilderness protection. To understand the land use history of the United States necessarily involves understanding the reasons for mass immigration to avoid restrictions on land in other countries, imposed by more privileged classes. It

may be that as a society we face some choices. Do we want fee support to enable accomplishment of most of the objectives of wilderness protection but with associated displacement and commercialization effects? Or do we continue a campaign to increase and stabilize fluctuating public support of wilderness programs in order to fulfill the original intent of wilderness places? Decisions about whether to charge federal land recreation fees will be made in the political arena. Exactly where to charge fees and how much to charge may be a political decision or left to individual managers. Hopefully, there will be due consideration of the findings from recent research in establishing our public land fee policies, no matter where the policies originate. ❧

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People living in close proximity to wilderness are less likely to respond positively to fees.

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