

# Symbolic Values

## *The Overlooked Values That Make Wilderness Unique*

BY DAVID N. COLE

### Introduction

The symbolic values of wilderness have been largely overlooked, compared with the ecological and experiential values of wilderness. The prominence of the word *untrammelled* as a descriptor of the wilderness ideal suggests that the primary general symbolic value of wilderness is as a symbol of a human–environment relationship characterized by restraint and humility. This value is compromised when wilderness is manipulated for human purposes. This article notes several ways in which the symbolic values of wilderness are mischaracterized and trivialized as being a matter of philosophy (as opposed to science), as being merely aesthetic, and as being only a temporary concern. Symbolic values need to be legitimized and better articulated so their importance can be fairly considered in attempts to prioritize management and to resolve discord between conflicting wilderness values.

Wilderness has many different values. Some of the values of wilderness are readily apparent and easy to describe; others are not. Some values were prominent reasons for creating the National Wilderness Preservation System in the United States (and are reflected in the language of the Wilderness Act); other values (e.g., economic values and biodiversity values) are ancillary benefits of wilderness designation. The most commonly recognized values that are clearly articulated in the Wilderness Act are the ecological and experiential values of wilderness. Ecological values derive from the preservation of natural conditions and lack of interference with the free play of natural processes. The Wilderness Act states that wilderness is “land retaining its primeval character and influence” and is “protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions.” To maximize the ecological values of wilderness, anthropogenic influences on wilderness ecosystems must be minimized. To the extent possible, natural fires should not be suppressed, invasive species should be eliminated, pollutants should be kept from the wilderness, and the impacts of allowed wilderness uses, such as recreation

and grazing, should be kept to a minimum (Cole and Landres 1996).

The experiential values of wilderness stem from the provision that wilderness “shall be administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people,” subject to the constraint that these lands remain “unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness” (The Wilderness ACT, P.L. 88-577). Wilderness experiences are most commonly conceived as being recreational, but for many the experience is better described by other terms, including *spiritual*, *educational*, and *transcendental*.

Few words in the act are devoted to the nature of wilderness experiences, and those few words are not well defined. The type of recreation that should be available in wilderness is to be “primitive and unconfined.” This suggests a minimum of development to make access and recreational use easy and convenient. It also suggests that, to the extent possible, regulations and restrictions on behavior should be kept to a minimum (Hendee and Dawson 2002). The only descriptor of experience contained in the act is the word *solitude*, and the act merely says that wilderness is an area that “has outstanding opportunities for solitude.”

### Symbolic Values

Most management attention has been devoted to protecting the ecological and experiential values of wilderness.



**Figure 1**—Backpacking in the Buckskin Gulch of the Paria Canyon-Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness managed by the Bureau of Land Management in Arizona and Utah. Photo by Peter Druschke.

Much less attention has been devoted to protection of the less commonly articulated symbolic values of wilderness. A symbol is something that has meaning and value far beyond what is physical and tangible. The Statue of Liberty, for example, is a symbol of freedom in the United States. Its symbolic value—as an expression of freedom—greatly exceeds the value of the metal and concrete from which it is constructed. Through time and across cultures, societies have often set lands aside for symbolic purposes. The designation of wilderness in the United States follows in this tradition (Harvey 1994). Such places embody (are symbolic of) significant intangible values. Among their other qualities, symbols allow humans to connect with times and places they may never be able to physically experience.

My intent in this article is not to provide a definitive treatment of what the symbolic values of wilderness are. My less ambitious goal is to argue for the importance of better understanding and articulating these values and for giving them more consideration

than they currently receive. To narrow the scope of discussion further, I differentiate between the symbolic values of wilderness in general and the symbolic values of individual wildernesses. Each individual wilderness has varied idiosyncratic meanings to different groups and individuals. Symbolic values vary among cultural and religious groups, as well as among individuals. For example, wilderness lands in the southwestern United States have symbolic meaning for aboriginal populations as well as for “New Age” groups. Kaye (2000) describes a number of symbolic meanings that various people ascribe to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. My interest in this article is with the symbolic values and meanings that can be generally ascribed to all wilderness lands.

Much of this general symbolic value stems from the idealized definition of wilderness in the Wilderness Act as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man.” *Untrammelled* is among the most important and the most misunderstood words in the Wilderness Act.

“Too often, this word has been misread as untrampled, or misinterpreted as some synonymous variation of untrampled, with the erroneous connotation that it describes the...ecological condition of the land” (Scott 2001, p. 74). When drafting the language of the Wilderness Act, Howard Zahniser purposely rejected the word *undisturbed*, choosing the word *untrammelled* instead. “Synonymous with unconfined, unfettered and unrestrained,” *untrammelled* suggests “freedom from human control rather than lack of human influence” (Cole 2000, p. 78). Understood in this way, keeping wilderness “untrammelled” is seen to be a very different notion from keeping wilderness “natural.” There is some overlap. But wilderness as untrammelled is about means more than ends—about how humans interact with wilderness ecosystems more than the effect of that interaction. That is why the extent to which wilderness is untrammelled has more to do with the symbolic value of wilderness than either the ecological or experiential values of wilderness.

By choosing the word *untrammelled* as the primary descriptor of ideal wilderness, Zahniser makes it clear that, above all else, wilderness designation is a symbol of human restraint and humility. Wilderness lands are the only lands where humans refrain from saying that they know best. To maintain the symbolic value of wilderness as untrammelled, wilderness should not be intentionally manipulated for human purposes. Manipulation of lands for human economic gain is ubiquitous, and wilderness is commonly recognized as a contrast to that. But the notion of untrammelled goes beyond this difference. Manipulation for any human purpose—even to mimic a natural fire regime or to compensate for the effects of acid precipitation—



Figure 2—The Arregetch Peaks in the Gates of the Arctic Wilderness managed by the National Park Service in Alaska. Photo by George Wuerthner.

trammels wilderness and compromises its symbolic value. The arrogance of science, the belief that we know enough to correct problems created by earlier managers, or to compensate for environmental impacts, is often considered to be a hallmark of modern society (Ehrenfeld 1981). Wilderness can only be a contrast to the arrogance of modern society if we refrain from manipulating wilderness—even to enhance its ecological or experiential values.

## **Symbolic Values Are Ignored**

The symbolic value of wilderness as untrammled increasingly conflicts with the ecological value of wilderness as natural. This conflict is emerging as perhaps the primary dilemma of wilderness management (Cole 2000, 2003). Inadequate appreciation of the importance of symbolic values and the difficulty of articulating them makes it difficult to give this conflict the deliberative attention that it deserves. Only by fairly articulating the values in conflict and weighing the costs of compromise for all legitimate wilderness values can we move toward meaningful resolution of this dilemma. Let's look at an example.

Wilderness fire managers and scientists often promote intentionally igniting fires in order to bring more fire back into the wilderness landscape (Brown 1992; Graber 2003). This would increase the ecological value of wilderness (assuming natural conditions have been compromised by fire suppression), but it would decrease the symbolic value of wilderness. Admittedly, fire suppression interferes with natural processes, and the result can be considered a trammeling of the wilderness. However, the purpose of suppression usually has more to do with reducing fire risk outside of wil-

derness than with attempting to manipulate conditions within wilderness toward a desired state. The purpose of igniting fires in wilderness, in contrast, is usually to intentionally mold wilderness conditions to be more in line with the way humans think wilderness ought to be. This represents a much more severe degree of trammeling, taming, and engineering the wilderness than fire suppression—actions that are clearly opposed to the notions of humility and restraint from human control. It may be the appropriate action to take. Please don't

wilderness. Whichever course of action is taken—allowing management ignitions or not—something will be lost. Similar dilemmas abound in wilderness, with ecologists promoting the addition of lime to streams to raise pH that has been lowered by acid deposition, and promoting the breeding and planting of rust-resistant whitebark pine to replace populations decimated by the alien pathogen, white pine blister rust.

Another unfortunate assertion that some have made about this dilemma is that trammeling wilderness from

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## **Efforts to protect ecological values are compromising the symbolic value of untrammled wilderness and vice versa.**

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misunderstand me here. I am not arguing that igniting fires is inappropriate. What I am arguing is that such an action should only be taken following a fair accounting of what would be gained and what would be lost.

It is not uncommon, when talking about this dilemma, to hear people say that igniting fires provides substantial ecological benefits, but that it conflicts with “wilderness philosophy.” This position tends to portray the choice as being between science and philosophy. It detracts attention from what would be lost with a program of management ignitions—the symbolic values of untrammled and untamed wilderness. The choice before wilderness managers is not a choice between science and philosophy. The choice is between two different sets of values, both of which relate to somewhat conflicting views of what wilderness should be and the appropriate relationship between humans and

intentional manipulation can be temporary; it “need not represent permanent loss” of wilderness character (Graber 2003, p. 39). Continuing with the fire example, this argument holds that fires can be intentionally lit until the system gets back to a natural state, after which natural fire can take over again—and nothing is permanently lost. This argument is a good example of failing to appreciate the symbolic values at play and merely focusing on the more tangible ecological values that many ecologists personally hold most dear. This argument is similar to suggesting that loss of virginity is not permanent because the condition of being pregnant is only temporary. Much as the condition of not being pregnant is not equivalent to the symbol of virginity, the condition of not currently being in an altered state is not equivalent to the symbol of untrammled wilderness.

I have also heard intangible symbolic values referred to as being “merely” aes-



**Figure 3—Salmon Glacier in the Misty Fjords National Monument Wilderness managed by the U.S. Forest Service in Alaska. Photo by Lynn Kolund.**

thetic or experiential in nature. Wilderness wildlife biologists recognize that it is controversial to place radio collars on wolves in order to obtain information that will enhance the restoration of natural wolf populations. Some of them ascribe the source of controversy to people not liking to see collars on the wolves—suggesting there would not be a problem if the collars were invisible. Again, there is a widespread lack of appreciation that the more serious problem may be the loss of symbolic value that comes when a wilderness's wolves have been captured, fitted with tracking devices, and remotely observed. Wolves that have been captured and handled inevitably lose some of their wildness. Wolves that can be tracked—so we know where they are and what they are doing—lose some of their mystery. It is loss of wildness and mystery—symbols of untrammelled wilderness—that must be weighed against the benefits of enhanced ecological understanding and the restoration of natural wolf populations.

Wilderness is symbolic of much more than uncontrolled and self-willed places. Naturalness is another symbolic value of wilderness. Although this symbol is much less in conflict with other values, such as the ecological values of wilderness, concern for symbolic naturalness can influence wilderness management decisions. For example, given a goal of reducing vegetation density and fuels that have built up from decades of fire suppression, some wilderness advocates are comfortable with using saws and rakes to cut trees and remove fuels; others are not. This choice seems to turn largely on the importance of naturalness as a symbolic value. Supporters of saws and rakes assert that the end of eliminating the effects of fire suppression in wilderness is most important and that saws and rakes are the most effective way to do that. Adherents of the opposing position are willing to compromise this end to some degree for the symbolism of letting nature find its own way to reduce vegetation and fuels. In another ex-

ample, some managers have proposed that fires suppressed in wilderness be reignited in the same places, during conditions when the fires could be allowed to burn. Choosing to ignite a fire where it was suppressed by humans, rather than where it would most compensate for fire suppression effects, suggests that the symbolic value of naturalness is given precedence over broad ecological values.

## **Symbolic Values Make Wilderness Unique**

Lack of appreciation of the symbolic values of wilderness is particularly troubling because they are so central to the wilderness idea. The ecological and experiential values that can be found on wilderness lands—while highly significant—can also be found on lands outside wilderness. Many large roadless areas, in particular, also have largely natural ecosystems and provide opportunities for wilderness-like experiences. What is most unique about wilderness are the symbolic values, particularly wilderness as untrammelled—lack of intentional manipulation, humility, and restraint. Read the writings of Howard Zahniser and you will find that he wrote relatively little about the natural ecosystems of wilderness and the recreational opportunities they provide. These were clearly important values of wilderness, but not the ones Zahniser went to the most trouble articulating. In 1955, in “The Need for Wilderness Areas,” Howard Zahniser (in Zahniser 1992) wrote that “the *distinctive* ministrations of wilderness [emphasis his]” is “to know a profound humility, to recognize one’s littleness, to sense dependence and interdependence.”

The symbolic values of wilderness are the most radical elements of the wilderness idea. They are the values that contrast most with modern society—with its faith in scientific

knowledge and reliance on technological solutions to problems. This can be clearly seen in the difficulty that many wilderness ecologists have in grasping the importance of symbolic values in contrast to the ecological values they hold most dear. It can also be seen in the difficulty that wilderness access groups have in grasping the importance of these values in contrast to the experiential values that they hold most dear.

## Conclusions

Of the diverse values of wilderness, symbolic values are among the most overlooked and misunderstood. Some symbols are unique to each individual wilderness, whereas others are generally shared across wilderness areas. The most important general symbolic values reflect a unique human relationship with the natural world. They stem from the notion of wilderness as untrammelled—as places where humans exercise humility and refrain from molding the land into their image of what they think it should be. Although they are less tangible and more difficult to describe than ecological and experiential values, symbolic values are what make wilderness most unique. Given this, it is ironic that symbolic values are often trivialized as being temporary or of merely aesthetic or philosophical (as opposed to scientific) interest.

Inadequate understanding of and attention to symbolic values is problematic because society needs to dialogue and deliberate about the relative importance of different wilderness values. Protection of wilderness demands resources, and the resources currently available for protection are inadequate. Consequently, we must focus available resources on protecting those values that are most dear. When debating management priorities it is not uncommon to hear the senti-

ment, “Why do we focus wilderness management on recreation impacts, mere scabs on the land, when we should focus resources on more significant threats to ecosystem health?” This view makes complete sense if we all agree that the ecological values of wilderness are more important than the experiential or symbolic values of wilderness. But are they? And who gets to decide?

More critically, different wilderness values increasingly conflict with each other. In particular, efforts to protect ecological values are compromising the symbolic value of untrammelled wilderness and vice versa. Some people don't want to recognize this conflict—perhaps because they fear the consequences of conflict within the community of wilderness advocates, but often because we tend to be blind to values other than our own. However, the wisdom of decisions about how and when to compromise different values (e.g., decisions about the appropriateness of ecological restoration) will depend on a comprehensive

experiential values of wilderness. But such a decision should turn on the relative importance of different values and not on mischaracterizations of some values as being less scientific or more temporary than others.

Let me close with a personal note, so my intent in writing this article is not misunderstood. My hope is not to convince anyone that the wilderness values I personally hold most dear are the most important values of wilderness. Rather my hope is that this piece will help people pause to think about their own values and how they may differ from the values of others who are concerned about wilderness and its future. I believe we will make wiser decisions about wilderness if we recognize and legitimize all wilderness values (including the hard-to-articulate symbolic values) before attempting to identify a course of action that minimizes costs to the most important of those values. Among other things, I am a trained ecologist with a profound love of natural environments. The ecological values of

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accounting of the costs and benefits of each course of action (or inaction) to all wilderness values. This accounting should inform a deliberative process in which the symbolic values of wilderness are given as much legitimacy as the more commonly recognized ecological and experiential values of wilderness. Ultimately, society may decide that it is better to compromise the symbolic values of wilderness than the ecological and

wilderness are extremely important to me, causing me to believe that active manipulation of wilderness ecosystems will often be necessary to offset serious human insults to those systems. However, I also care about the symbolic values that will be lost in doing so and recognize that these costs are not trivial. Manipulating wilderness with the minimum tool and with

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# Managing federal lands in Alaska is challenging because state residents and visitors often value areas for different and sometimes competing reasons.

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meaning. Our national parks shelter some of our most rich natural and cultural resources, sites that help shape us as a people and define us as a nation. These special places provide a home for wildlife, a playground for outdoor enthusiasts, a place to reflect upon our greatest battles and a venue for historic moments. Our national park system is the key to protecting our nation's heritage.

As is common in other protected areas (Tranel and Hall 2003), challenges at Denali arise when some of these intangible values compete with economic and other "use" values. For example, some people find aesthetic, artistic, educational,

recreational, humanitarian, intellectual, mystical, scientific, and spiritual value in wilderness, whereas other advocates ascribe value to the place only if it can be used for economic benefit. Others see opportunities to merge economic development and the continuation of a self-reliant way of life in remote, aesthetically pleasing frontier settings. **IJW**

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a sense of humility is better than manipulating wilderness with a heavy hand and a mind full of hubris, but it still defiles wilderness and leaves me with a heavy heart. **IJW**

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