

THE CAPACITY TO BE ALONE: WILDERNESS SOLITUDE AND GROWTH OF THE SELF

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ABSTRACT

Wilderness is often justified by the exceptional opportunity it provides modern humans to experience solitude. *Solitude* is generally defined in the philosophical literature as the capacity to cope positively with time spent alone. While loneliness is one of the most powerful of human fears, optimal experience occurs when a person is able to control attention and find personal reward when alone, in the absence of external goals, stimulation, and feedback. To be alone but not lonely; to view isolation as an opportunity for personal growth and development, is the mark of self-realization and self-discovery.

In this paper, we explore, through literature review and survey research, the meaning and structure of solitude as a benefit of the wilderness experience. The findings suggest the capacity to realize positive benefit from wilderness solitude is hierarchical in structure; from physical renewal at the lower end to self-discovery and self-realization at the highest levels. This capacity for personal growth appears to be positively related to wilderness involvement and commitment. A weak or nonexistent relationship existed between the level of wilderness solitude benefit achieved and the physical/social characteristics of the setting. Paradoxically, although wilderness solitude was positively perceived and highly valued, people rarely go alone into wilderness. While a partial explanation can be found in concern for personal safety, evidence also suggests fear of loneliness, along with the overwhelming importance placed on developing intimate relationships at the expense of the need to be alone. Management implications will also be discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of solitude was raised to the level of public policy in the United States with the pas-

sage of the Wilderness Act of 1964. The Act provided a definition that in part declared wilderness to have "... outstanding opportunities for solitude ...". Suddenly, the question, "what is solitude and how can it be measured" became a valid question of scientific pursuit and a vital question for managers who were charged with implementing the language of the Act. As investigators began consideration of solitude, it became apparent the concept was plastic and multifaceted at best. Definitional ambiguity and conceptual confusion still cloud the waters of solitude investigation nearly 30 years later.

Because philosophical abstractions based on belief so prominently influence research process and direction, it is profitable in the present context to consider the relevance of wilderness solitude within the dominant world view. In North America, several presuppositions comprise the dominant worldview, including a belief in limitless resources, the necessity of continuous growth, and faith in the problem-solving abilities of science and technology (Albrecht *et al.*, 1982).

This worldview has directed the focus of human attention away from the natural environment to the social environment. Viewing life from this frame of reference, the ego has been progressively detached from its ecological mooring. Today, much of our self-identity is provided in how we piece together other people's definitions of who we are. Interpersonal relationships are idealized as the touchstone of health and happiness (Storr, 1992). The individual is considered well adjusted relative to society, not necessarily to life itself. This has produced not only an interdependent culture but also a co-dependent one with an attendant fear of aloneness.

We challenge the adequacy of the dominant worldview to accurately envisage the significance of solitude in general, and wilderness soli-

tude in particular, to the healthy development of the individual as an end in itself. This idea was first argued by Albert Storr (1992) in his book, *Solitude: A Return to the Self*. Much of the previous exploration of solitude has been with reference to others in some fashion. Research on solitude has focused on themes as diverse as territoriality, personal space, crowding, secrecy, intimacy, privacy invasion and regulation, self-disclosure, and structure of the built environment, all of which answer to the belief that the functional locus of consequence in solitude is in its impact on, or relevance to, a community of others. We feel that solitude has been marginalized within this frame of reference and an adequate understanding of its contribution to the realization and enrichment of the self has therefore not been obtained.

Enough research exists to convince us that the primary unit of consideration when investigating solitude is the individual proper. The capacity to be alone has long been recognized as a critical component of childhood development. Solitude in the adult facilitates self-discovery, self-realization, and awareness of one's deepest needs, feelings, and impulses (Storr, 1992). Additionally, it compensates for the inadequacies of interpersonal relationships in the search for happiness.

In an era where the mass mind-set so obtrusively succeeds to dominate the psychology and spirit of the individual, we feel a reconsideration of the importance of solitude in the wilderness setting is warranted. The therapeutic and restorative potential of such experiences may extend across several individual levels. We believe the potential benefits of the wilderness solitude experience facilitate a host of possible outcomes, including creativity and expression, awareness and self-actualization, processing bereavement and mourning, escape and retreat, and meditation and prayer. Many in the past have attributed singular benefit to the experience of solitude. Poets and politicians alike appreciate the contribution solitude makes to the overall human well-being.

In the realm of public policy, solitude became a legislated descriptor of wilderness in the 1964 Wilderness Act. This was largely the result of the

efforts of Howard Zahniser and others who could not envision a wilderness vitiated by a lack of opportunity for solitude. Additionally, solitude is recognized, along with naturalness, to be the criterion that distinguishes wilderness from other lands and is, therefore, a principle criterion to guide the management of wilderness (Hendee, 1992).

While the importance of solitude is accepted by many, systematic explorations of the concept have generally diverged along several lines. The definitional ambiguity and vagueness of the concept in living language is reflected in scientific theories of social behavior. The problem may well be illustrated by considering privacy, a concept often confused with solitude in the literature and far more extensively researched. In his excellent synopses of the literature on privacy, Margulis (1977) moves through the concept of privacy as reflected in its common usage, lexical, empirical (behavioral and social), and legal applications and thence offers a distilled definition of its shared-core elements. He identifies *privacy* as representing in whole or part the "control of transactions between person(s) and other(s), the ultimate aim of which is to enhance autonomy and/or to minimize vulnerability." This definition identifies the determinant of causality for privacy essentially to be the control of others to an end for self. This is the question viewed from the presuppositional purchase of the dominant worldview. In the concept of solitude, we suggest the primary determinant of causality essentially to reside in the control of self.

This control is exercised under the condition of aloneness, in our specific context, aloneness in the wilderness environment. Aloneness is, therefore, a necessary but not sufficient condition of solitude. The true determinant of solitude is seen as the intrapersonal capacity to utilize time alone for self-discovery, self-realization, meaning, wholeness, and heightened awareness of one's deepest needs, feelings, and impulses. We suggest that the opposite of solitude is not crowding, as suggested by previous work. The opposite of solitude rather is loneliness, an incapacity or failure to utilize time alone for personal enhancement. Hence our definition of solitude involves a state of mind as well as a state of being or place.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this article is to operationalize and test this hypothesis on a sample of visitors to several wilderness areas in the United States. Towards this end, several objectives were developed, namely:

- to explore visitor perceptions of, and attitudes towards, solitude;
- to offer an operational definition of *solitude*;
- to develop procedures for measuring solitude outcomes of a single wilderness experience;
- to identify those factors influencing the amount or level of solitude obtained; and
- to serve as a preliminary analysis of data being collected for a major study.

METHODS

Involved in this study were five national forest wilderness areas of the eastern United States. For this pilot analysis, the majority of respondents were summer visitors to the Dolly Sods Wilderness Area of West Virginia. A 13-page survey instrument was constructed. The major components of this instrument included:

- A section designed to obtain respondent's perception of, and attitudes towards, solitude. To this end, a semantic differential was developed, employing both Osgood's and our own hypothesized dimensions.
- A section designed to measure achieved solitude by reference to the benefits that solitude facilitates. This consisted of both a summated index and a cumulative scale.
- A section designed to identify factors influencing solitude, including encounter and crowding measures, field conditions, and respondent characteristics.

Table 1. Results of factor analysis on semantic differential items.

<u>Factor</u>	<u>Variables</u>	<u>Variance x 100</u>
Positive	Good (vs Bad)	81
	Important (vs Unimportant)	79
	Opportunity (vs Loneliness)	46
Wholeness	Complete (vs Incomplete)	70
	Full (vs Empty)	62
	Strong (vs Weak)	60
	Attractive (vs Repulsive)	50
Somberness	Hard (vs Soft)	69
	Heavy (vs Light)	62
	Absolute (vs Relative)	43

RESULTS

Attitudes Towards Solitude

The semantic differential of the concept solitude was completed and ordered by magnitude of differentiation for each of 19 dimensions. A factor analysis was then run on the dimensions, resulting in factors that we have labeled *positive*, *wholeness*, and *solemn*. (See Table 1.) This indicates that solitude is both seen as something positive and important and also as something solemn, serious, or consequential. The factor labeled *wholeness* may speak to the perceived benefits of solitude. Solitude is seen as something that completes and fills the self as compensatory to social interactions in the making of a complete person. Wilderness users appear to perceive solitude with sober importance for the consummation of self.

Hierarchy of Solitude Benefits

In the attempt to measure solitude achievement, it was hypothesized that the outcomes possible in a given wilderness solitude experience comprise a progression through levels or domains, each level dominated by a characteristic component of the benefits achieved. Thus, *solitude*, defined as an "intrapersonal capacity," has the potential to involve the whole self. Varying degrees of aloneness either facilitate or hinder a wilderness user's progression through the hierarchy of solitude achievement.

The solitude hierarchy was hypothesized to include five ordered levels: physical, emotional, volitional, intellectual, and spiritual. (See Table 2.) Each level became the focus of a cumulative scale item intended to capture a range of possible benefits, attending that particular dimension of the solitude hierarchy. The dimensions of wilderness solitude discovered by Hammit (1982), Hammit and Brown (1984), and Hammit and Madden (1989) reflect the levels of the hierarchy and contain a similar range of potential intrapersonal dynamics.

In the present analysis, a frequency of respondent agreement with each scale item was found to confirm the expected order of each solitude do-

main. Additionally, as anticipated by the hypothesis, an attrition of respondents is seen in the movement up the hierarchy from physical to spiritual. This lends tentative support to the belief of solitude as hierarchical in nature. Further confirmation must await a scalogram analysis to verify the presence of Gutman Scale types of proper configuration for each domain or level of solitude achievement. A summative index was also devised to capture several distinct but not necessarily related factors. The most important items related to independence, disengaging from social roles, individuality, and escape from social expectations.

Table 2. Frequency of agreement with Gutman Scale items.

<u>Level</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Physical	84	97.7
Emotional	75	87.2
Volitional	67	77.9
Intellectual	55	64.0
Spiritual	49	57.0

Factors Influencing Solitude Achievement

Of interest was the degree of correlation between conditions in the wilderness and actual solitude achievement. Among physical conditions most highly correlated with solitude were those from outside wilderness, presence of horse groups, and amount of time one felt alone. (See Table 3.) Insignificant correlations were found for many indicators traditionally used to gage solitude, including number of large groups seen, presence of human structures, and total groups seen.

Finally, the correlation of crowding perceptions and various predispositional factors for solitude achievement was assessed. (See Table 4.) The *importance* and *involvement* factors proved of relatively high correlation with solitude achievement. We expected to find a strong negative correlation between solitude and crowding, because crowding has often been used as a surrogate measure of solitude. The most striking outcome of the study was the finding of no relationship between solitude and crowding perceptions (where $r = -0.02$ and $p = 0.30$).

DISCUSSION

From this initial analysis of the data, we wish to advance the following points:

- Solitude conceptually differs from privacy. In solitude, the locus of consequence is the self-proper.
- Aloneness is a necessary condition of solitude. Further, the degree of aloneness is one of the major factors of solitude achievement in that varying degrees of aloneness either facili-

tate or impede the capacity for solitude to be realized.

- Solitude compensates for the limitations of social interaction in the search for meaning, happiness, self-awareness, and emotional maturity.
- Solitude achievement is hierarchical in nature from physical, emotional, and volitional to intellectual and spiritual.
- Crowding perceptions and numbers of encounters were weak predictors of solitude achievement. This questions the value of solitude monitoring efforts that depend upon crowding and encounter measures as surrogate indicators of solitude.
- The most effective predictors of solitude achievement were not physical characteristics of the setting, but rather predispositional factors that the visitor brings to the wilderness experience.

Table 3. Correlates with solitude outcomes.

<u>Variable</u>	<u>r</u>	<u>p-value</u>
Noise from outside wilderness	-0.32	0.01
Horse groups camped near campsite	-0.31	0.01
Horse groups walking past campsite	-0.29	0.01
Time felt alone	0.28	0.01
People seen on trail	-0.18	0.10
Total people seen	-0.18	0.11
Groups seen on trail	-0.17	0.13
Wildlife seen	0.15	0.18
Aircraft seen	-0.12	0.28
Horse groups seen on trail	-0.11	0.28
Groups camped near campsite	-0.07	0.51
Groups walking past campsite	-0.04	0.68
Human structures seen	-0.04	0.65
Large groups seen on trail	-0.10	0.34

Table 4. Influence of crowding perceptions and various predispositional factors on solitude achievement.

<u>Variable</u>	<u>Correlation (r) with Solitude Achievement</u>	<u>p-value</u>
Importance of solitude to wilderness experience	0.48	0.0001
Importance of solitude in general	0.29	0.01
Wilderness involvement	0.28	0.01
Crowding perception	-0.02	0.80

Solitude is learned behavior. It is a capacity that results from a natural progression of the self nurtured in the natural environment. The further removed we have become from the natural environment and its attendant exposure to healthy aloneness, the less we have been able to properly develop our capacity for solitude. With much of today's population living almost exclusively in the built environment, it is of little wonder we should see large-scale behavioral dysfunction in solitude development.

The challenge for wilderness managers and other recreation providers then is twofold. First, to manage the natural resource to ensure the necessary condition of aloneness, and second, but no less important, to educate, nurture, and promote the intrapersonal capacity for solitude in the wilderness user. If we would see people receive the full restorative potential of the wilderness experience, we must take seriously our responsibility to both preserve the natural resource and to build solitude receptivity in individuals.

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