

Understanding Place Meanings for Wilderness

Personal and Community Values at Risk

BY KARI GUNDERSON

Abstract: Information about human relationships with wilderness is important for wilderness management decisions, including decisions pertaining to the use of wildland fire. In a study about meanings attached to a national forest, local residents were asked to identify places they valued on the forest, why they valued them, and how fuel treatments affected those values. Local residents attach many meanings to the wilderness part of the landscape and they have opinions about the use of wildland fire as a fuel treatment there. Understanding the meanings humans attach to wilderness and how it influences their perceptions of fire and fuels management there can help managers anticipate public response to planned activities.

Introduction

Information about human relationships with wilderness is important for wilderness management decisions, including decisions pertaining to the use of wildland fire. In a study about meanings attached to a national forest, local residents were asked to identify places they valued on the forest, why they valued them, and how fuel treatments affected those values. Local residents attach many meanings to the wilderness part of the landscape, and they have opinions about the use of wildland fire as a fuel treatment there. Understanding the meanings humans attach to wilderness and how it influences their perceptions of fire and fuels management there can help managers anticipate public response to planned activities.

The importance of considering the interests of local residents in public land decision making is growing (Brandenburg and Carroll 1995; Eisenhauer, Krannich, and Blahna 2000; Endter-Wada, Blahna, Krannich, and Brunson 1998; Mitchell, Force, Carroll, and McLaughlin 1993; Schroeder 1996; Vining and Tyler 1999). Human connectivity is an important influence on public response to public land management policies. The connection between humans and places may be due to emotional attachments, be activity driven, and/or incorporate functional meanings. The study reported here attempts to create an understanding of

the meanings local people attach to the wilderness portion of a national forest landscape and their opinions about the use of wildland fire in fuels management there.

Human Connectivity to Public Lands

People have relationships with places, and scientists have contributed substantially to understanding these relationships. Some locations are more important than others to people, and in order to anticipate public response to proposed resource management activities, managers need to understand these relationships. Tuan (1977) referred to "geopiety" as an individual's bonding with nature in general, and specific places in particular. He described *place* as a center of meaning constructed by experience. Place attachment has been associated with choices of homes, neighborhoods, and communities (Feldman 1990). The concept of place attachment has been an important research issue in public lands planning (Moore and Graefe 1994; Schreyer, Jacob, and White 1981; Williams, Patterson, Roggenbuck, and Watson 1992; Williams and Roggenbuck 1989).



Kari Gunderson. Photo by Anne Dahl.

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The Bitterroot National Forest

The Bitterroot Valley is located in western Montana, south of Missoula. The Bitterroot Front, on the west side of the Bitterroot Valley, features an east to west continuum, beginning with developed private lands in the valley floor, transitioning to the wildland/urban interface, then to roaded national forest lands, then upslope to roadless nonwilderness areas, and finally reaching the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness to the west (see figure 1). About 77% of the property in the watershed is within the Bitterroot National Forest.

Ravalli County, which includes most of the Bitterroot watershed, experienced a 43% increase in population during the 1990s and was the fastest growing county in Montana (Swanson 2001). Today the Bitterroot Valley is characterized by an influx of new people with different values and economic means. The once very rural communities are evolving into communities of commuters to the Missoula area, retirees, and a growing service and high technology business center, while trying to maintain a strong relationship with agriculture and the area's natural resources largely managed by the Bitterroot National Forest. Most of the Bitterroot Range above the Bitterroot Valley is protected as wilderness and is a source of much of the water that flows down and through the otherwise fairly arid valley environment. The quality of life in the Bitterroot Valley is high, and it is deeply connected to the area's natural resources, outdoor recreational opportunities, and naturalness of the mountain landscape.

During the summer of 2000, wildfires burned more than 350,000 acres (141,700 ha) of Bitterroot National Forest, Montana State Trust, and private forest land in southwestern



Figure 1—The meanings local people have for the wilderness portion of the National Forest landscape, like this forest area, need to be heard through their own words. Photo by Kari Gunderson.

Montana. Since the occurrence of these fires, relationships between local residents and the forest, with each other, with the Forest Service, and with firefighters have changed. There is an “inseparability of fuels management and fire psychology” (Daniels 2000). Daniels states (pp. 30–31):

People who built their houses in the valley had powerful feelings about their place in nature. People's dreams as well as their life savings are connected to their homes and their properties; they identify with the land around them, and now it's burned.

A postfire assessment of the Bitterroot Valley fires of 2000 resulted in two major postulates about community member beliefs: (1) there was a need to change current forest stewardship practices to more effectively reduce wildland fire fuels, and (2) there was a lack of trust in the Forest Service to make decisions about fuel and fire management that consider local values (Watson 2001). Research was needed to create understanding of the local values attached to

the 471,000-acre (190,688-ha) Bitterroot National Forest landscape by local residents to allow them to be more efficiently and effectively considered in fuel treatment programs.

Methods

There were 12 semistructured interviews with Bitterroot Valley residents from four principal communities in Ravalli County; eight key informant interviews with people recognized as community leaders (including one member of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes); and two focus groups with intact community organizations. Participants were asked to indicate: (1) the specific places you spend the most time on the Bitterroot Front; (2) the areas that you consider important, but that you have seldom or never spent time; (3) the reasons these places are important to you; and (4) feelings about hazardous fuel treatments, including wildland fire use at these important places. Maps were available for respondents to locate specific places that had meaning to them,

and all interviews were tape-recorded for transcription and analysis.

Participants were also shown two fixed-point photographs illustrating common conditions before and after fuel treatments. Respondents were told that examples of fuel treatments could include using fire alone, using mechanical fuel treatments alone, and using a combination of burning and mechanical treatments, although interviewees were informed that mechanical treatments could not be applied in the wilderness portion of the forest.

Results

Respondents commonly indicated some of the most important areas to them to be in the wilderness (Gunderson, Watson, Titre, and Nelson 2004). A variety of meanings are attached to places they go and don't go within the wilderness boundary (e.g., emotional, symbolic, and functional), using a variety of terms to describe the character of these places (e.g., remote, roadless, pristine, few people). For example:

I think that not very many people get up into any of these. ... [It] is extremely remote, extremely remote. ... It's a long ways from trails up there. Not very many people are willing to crawl on their hands and knees with a full backpack. It's very pristine. The remoteness. In fact, with all of these areas the reason is that it feels like rarely do people get up there. (Interview # 05-01)

I want to pull that wilderness boundary down to where we delineate that that is roadless, that it'll never be roaded and that we should extend the wilderness boundary to that place to give that area the protection the Wilderness Act gives it. (Interview # 02-01)

It is all important. There were certain trails and passes over

the divide, through the wilderness over into Idaho that were used by families for thousands of years and they're continually used. Not only is it our aboriginal territories for the tribes and me individually, I'd say that it's more than just a special place. It's our homeland, you know? (Interview # 06-01)

Several respondents offered opinions on the use of wildland fire in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness and its compatibility with the values they associate with some of the important places they had indicated there. For example:

Fire will reintroduce itself. I don't think we need to go in there with fire. Let nature take over. I would say that with much of this, where these prescriptions may be proposed, let's back off with our intensive practices of scarifying the land and let nature come in. (Interview # 04-03)

Fine, let it burn ... it burned for eons of time before we ever saw it, and we're just a speck on the flow of time there. (Interview # 02-01)

There should be absolutely zero manipulation of woody material in wilderness areas. I think in wilderness fires ought to be let burn. (Interview # 05-01)

If there is a great big, huge forest fire I just say let it rip and not go in there and do anything. See, the problem is that they try to go fix things and when they go in there and fix things and they disturb things that's when they make it worse. But naturally, if a fire burnt through there naturally I wouldn't see that you would need to do any treatments. Because it'd come back naturally. (Interview # 06-03)

If we're talking about fuels reduction ... either the wilderness is going to burn or it's not going

to burn, or we're going to allow that to kind of run its normal course. And if there's a beautiful place in there that I like burns up, that's just what's going to happen in my lifetime. I'm not going to lose any sleep over that one. (FOCUS GROUP # 01)

Responses from Bitterroot Valley residents indicated uncertainty regarding whether wildland fire use is considered a fuel treatment tool and identified some barriers to use of wildland fire on this landscape. For example:

Are you going to classify wildland fire use fires as hazardous fuel reduction? It's not very precise, it's kind of heavy-handed sometimes because, and especially some of those places down in those drainages. They're due to burn up big time, not just nice little pretty underburn to make it look beautiful 10 years from now. It's going to cook. (FOCUS GROUP # 01)

Getting back to wilderness, the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, we do have authorization or authority to allow wildland fire to meet resource management objectives in those areas. But certainly the issue with that is that we're limited in our ability to do that, just based on typical weather patterns, topography, geography of the area, and historically how fires once being established up canyon have a tendency to move out onto the face. But, I mean, that is a fuels reduction tool we have in the wilderness. (FOCUS GROUP # 02)

There was some support for allowing "naturally occurring fire" to play a role in reducing fire hazards both inside and adjacent to the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, if trust between the public and the Forest Service can become stronger. For example:

Local residents attach many meanings to the wilderness part of the landscape, and they have opinions about the use of wildland fire as a fuel treatment there.

I think ultimately we're going to come to the realization, as we have with wilderness, that natural fire will play a role, as it always has. And that will apply also to roadless lands and other lands of the national forest. We will let fire have its head in many instances in the national forest, but this extreme denudation of the landscape with fire I think in the worst of these examples is unconscious. And we really need to stand by research that gives us some balance with this and avoid the pitfall of justifying treatment, fire treatment, where the bottom line is getting the logs out. (Interview # 04-03)

The biggest issue with regards to fuel management on the Bitterroot Front is probably trust, I guess. The public understanding of the need to do the work to accomplish objectives. (FOCUS GROUP # 02)

Conclusion

The research briefly described here provides insight into how current emphasis on fuel treatment on public lands in the United States may influence relationships humans have with landscapes. Many of the comments obtained about wilderness places and needs for fuel management there gravitated toward fuel buildup and things that might be accomplished at the interface between wilderness and nonwilderness in order to protect both. Concern about homes at risk of wildfire and the risk of undesirable landscape modification due to stand replacement fires certainly influ-

ence support of fuel treatment objectives on all parts of the landscape. Fears of hidden agendas connected to fuel management likely suggest the feeling that some members of the public are suspicious of how well the agency understands or represents the values local people attach to this landscape.

This study provided insight into meanings that local residents attach to the wilderness portion of the landscape. This knowledge is needed by agency managers and planners to more effectively consider how fire and fuels management activities inside wilderness and across its boundaries will affect human relationships with the landscape and, in turn, public response to management activities. Managers need to hear from people about their relationships with places, including wilderness, and understand how management actions might influence these relationships.

Efforts to understand human connectivity to the national forest landscape may contribute to building trust in the agency (Liljeblad and Borrie, this issue). Information gained from this research in the Bitterroot Valley was used, along with ecological modeling, to propose fuel treatment locations to accomplish ecological restoration and hazardous fuel reduction targets. When projecting the long-term effects of fire on the landscape, under alternative fuel treatment scenarios, anticipating the influence of social response to alternative treatment options is vital.

Future research needs to provide more complete understanding of the influences of alternative fuel treatments on human

relationships with the landscape. Although there has been progress in capturing variation in the spatial scale of attachments, it is likely that the attachments might also vary in the intensity of feelings about how that place on the landscape contributes to identity, provides some functional value, or is unique.

Future efforts to proactively include this type of social science data in modeling efforts to locate priority areas and determine appropriate methods for fuel treatment are crucial. Currently, fire and fuels management programs on public lands are placing an increased emphasis on building public trust, understanding and protecting economic and noneconomic values at risk associated with public lands, and gaining more collaborative engagement with the public. This kind of research will contribute to all of these objectives. **IJW**

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