

Managing for Primitive Recreation in Wilderness

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The Issue

The Wilderness Act of 1964 (P.L. 88-577) specifically mandates that lands designated as wilderness shall provide outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation. Yet, as we celebrate the 40th anniversary of the National Wilderness Preservation System, very little thought, discussion, and research have been devoted to defining what is meant by primitive recreation in wilderness, the values of the primitive in the American mind, its importance to wilderness recreational visitors, the degree to which this value is threatened, and to management systems that might facilitate or reduce outstanding opportunities for primitive experiences in wilderness. As an example of the problem, many managers in well-intentioned efforts to protect the aesthetic and natural qualities of wilderness are discouraging the use of campfires for cooking in wilderness and even requiring the use of a late 20th-century mechanical gadget, the backpack stove. Where is the thoughtful discussion on what is lost and what is gained as we require late 20th-century technology running on exotic nonrenewable fuels in wilderness?

Writings of the Wilderness Fathers

The fathers of the movement to protect wilderness in America wrote much and clearly about the meaning and values of the primitive in the American mind. Thoreau went to the woods “to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, ... to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life ... lest when I come to die, discover that I have not lived” (Torry and Allen 1949). For us here, the essential path of Thoreau to the wild and to finding truth was to reduce the clutter and the clamor, to simplify, to live life deliberately, and to live in a Spartan-like manner (i.e., to live in a primitive way).

Leopold (1925), at least in his early writings, saw the primary value of wilderness as maintaining and nurturing the essential American character, a character marked by “a certain vigorous individualism ... a lack of subservience to stiff social forms, and an intolerance of drones, all of which are the distinctive characteristics of successful pioneers.” For a young Leopold, wilderness areas were ideal places to allow the more virile and primitive forms of outdoor recreation to survive the receding economic fact of pioneering. Play at pioneering was an improvement over the stern realities of pioneering, because pioneer play could be done under the ethical code of a sportsman. Given this, Leopold defined primitive recreation as knowing there were blank spots on the map, having the opportunity and the skill to lead pack trains of horses away from roads and summer hotels and to tie diamond hitches, and having the opportunity and skill to bag game and catch fish away from roads and the Model T Ford and without a lot of gadgets and gimmicks.

Marshall (1930) added greater specificity to Leopold’s statement of the values of primitive experiences in wilderness. For Marshall, wilderness

denoted a region with no permanent inhabitants, possessed no possibility of conveyance by mechanical means and is sufficiently spacious that a person crossing it must have the experience of sleeping out. The dominant attributes of such an area are: first, that it requires any one who exists in it to depend exclusively on his own effort for survival; and second, that it preserves as nearly as possible the primitive environment. This means all roads, power transportation and settlements are barred. But trails and temporary shelters, which were common long before the advent of the white race, are entirely permissible (p. 141).

Thus, like Leopold, Marshall valued primitive recreation in wilderness for the individuality and skill it fostered (see Figure 1). But in addition, Marshall valued self-sufficiency. For Marshall, the wilderness trip was not mediated; there was no guide.



Figure 1—Man on horseback with pack trail in western U.S. wilderness. Photo courtesy of U.S. Forest Service.

Olson, the bard of the Boundary Waters, perhaps more than any other wilderness writer, developed a philosophical foundation for the value of primitive experiences. In so doing, he provided insight into what is a primitive experience and how it unfolds in wilderness. As a guide in the Boundary Waters, Olson (1938) noted how quickly a man sheds the habiliments of civilization and how soon he feels at home in the wilds. Before many days have passed, he feels that the life he has been living was merely an interruption in a long wilderness existence and that now again he is back at the real business of living. And when we think of the comparatively short time that we have been living and working as we do now, when we recall that many of us are hardly a generation removed from the soil, and a scant few thousand years ago our ancestors roamed and hunted the fastnesses of Europe, it is not strange that the smell of woodsmoke and the lure of the primitive is with us yet. Racial memory is a tenacious thing, and for some it is always easy to slip back into the deep grooves of the past. What we feel most deeply are those things which as a race

we have been doing the longest, and the hunger men feel for the wilds and a roving life is natural evidence of the need of repeating a plan of existence that for untold centuries was common practice. It is still in our blood (p. 397).

In this and other writing, Olson (1945) suggested that primitive recreation is not primarily meditation and contemplation in idyllic settings. It instead unfolds over some time, typically some days. It is fostered by battling the raw elements of nature. Primitive experiences slowly unfold during a life on the move, and they prototypically involve woodsmoke.

Defining Primitive Experiences in Wilderness

Given the writings of the wilderness fathers, a wilderness experience is primitive to the extent to which it represents living/eating/sleeping/traveling/playing in a simple, unguided, multiday, nonmotorized, nonmechanized, non-electronic, and nonfacilitated way. Prototypically, primitive experiences represent immediate and deep contact with raw nature without the clutter and aid of modern conveniences. Defining what is modern is of course a value judgment. Marshall suggested that the demarcation

line might be the arrival of Columbus on the American continent. But most of us with our Kevlar canoes, nylon tents, and polypropylene vests are not quite so primitive.

Benefits of Primitive Recreation in Wilderness

Wilderness managers, as they select indicators, standards, and management strategies to facilitate primitive experiences, should consider the probable benefits of such experiences. The wilderness philosophers and more recent empirical research (e.g., Talbot and Kaplan 1986), suggested the following direct and immediate positive effects: learn woodsman/pioneer outdoor skills, nostalgia or connection with pioneers and early American explorers, learn skills of exploration and travel in wild places, and learn nature's processes and ecology. Likely second-order or indirect positive effects include becoming hardy in body and mind, self-reliant, self-confident, becoming a creature of the Wild or an ecological citizen, developing respect for nature, and increasing humility and joy.

Importance of Primitive Experiences for Current Visitors

Thus far this essay has taken a historical perspective on the values of primitiveness. Do today's wilderness visitors, whose perceptions of nature may be most influenced by the TV, the web, the mall, and Disney (Roggenbuck 2000), seek and receive primitive experiences in wilderness? Shafer (1993) and Shafer and Hammitt (1995) measured the importance of five different experience dimensions of Okefenokee and Cohutta Wilderness visitors, and found the primitive dimension to be second in importance to natural, and more important than solitude, unconfined, and remote. Borrie and

Roggenbuck (2001) measured the extent to which Okefenokee Wilderness visitors experienced “simple living” and “living like a pioneer” during their stay. Primitive living scores were quite low among respondents, but they increased progressively across time in wilderness. Watson and Roggenbuck (1998) found that challenge/primitive/way-finding was one of four important dimensions of the wilderness experience at Juniper Prairie Wilderness in Florida.

Threats to Primitive Conditions in Wilderness

This analysis suggests the following types of wilderness conditions are conducive to primitive experiences: blank spots on the map, long stays, no or few basic facilities, simple trails/pathways, no motorized travel, no mechanical conveniences, no electronic devices, unfacilitated or nonmediated experiences, and simple gear for survival, not comfort. Hende and Dawson (2001) recently listed 17 threats to wilderness resources and values, five of which involved primitive experiences: excessive administrative access, facilities, and intrusive management; advanced technology; trespass and legal use of motorized and mechanical equipment; aircraft noise from aircraft overflights, and urbanization encroaching on the wilderness boundaries. The most insidious of these threats arising from visitor use might be categorized as arising from changes in the structure of leisure time in America (which in turn is shaped by changes in the workplace), changes in the views of nature in America, the revolution in information transfer, and the recent explosion in technology, especially electronic technology.

In recent decades, leisure has become available in smaller and smaller blocks of time, and there is increasing

need for and a capability of last-minute planning. Visits to wilderness are becoming shorter and closer to home. Thus, an increasingly large percentage of all wilderness visits are for a day or less. This reduces the likelihood of attaining primitive experiences.

Because more and more Americans likely learn of nature through TV, the web, the mall, and Disney, more and more wilderness visitors will likely expect the wilderness to be safe, sanitized, clean, comfortable, and exciting. But nature, especially wild nature, is none of these things. To buffer the messiness, unpredictability and unresponsiveness, and slow rhythms of nature, wilderness visitors will turn to outfitters, guides, and travel agents to mediate their experiences in wilderness. This change almost surely reduces contact with raw nature, and primitive experiences are correspondingly reduced.

Leopold (1949) wondered about the value of forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map. Today with the explosion of satellite mapping, remote sensing, and instant two-way communication on the Internet, are we losing the values of freedom, the freedom to explore, and the freedom to escape (Freimund and Borrie 1997)? Today we can click onto the Internet and find out at any moment the availability of permits at each put-in point into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness; we can peruse suggested travel routes; we can learn about characteristics of individual campsites; we can hear the call of the loons; and we can select an outfitter to help us find the loons, the moose, and the big fish. To be sure, much good is coming of this shift. But for certain, some values are being lost, and one of these is the experience of the primitive (i.e., the surprise of encounters with the unknown and the wisdom of direct

contact with the slowly unfolding rhythms of nature).

The explosion in technology with respect to wilderness use and enjoyment is perhaps the most pervasive and complex of all changes regarding wilderness in the 21st century. This is because technology not only changes wilderness, inside and out, but it also changes us (Borrie 2000). Communication and marketing technology is changing our image of what wilderness is, what it can be, and what it should be. The media can convince us that wilderness is what it is not, or at least convince us that wilderness is different from the intent of wilderness managers and wilderness legislation.

Technology has produced lots of innovations to increase the comfort and safety of the wilderness encounter. This permits more people to go more deeply into wilderness at more dangerous times and places. But with the use of increased technology, people can get soft and lazy, they can lose skills and self-sufficiency, and they can develop a false sense of security. With modern conveniences, going to the wilderness can become a lark, simply a fun diversion. People may lose the desire to experience nature on its own terms, and may lose humility and respect for nature. In effect, they may lose the experience of the primitive.

Technological stuff that has altered primitive recreation in wilderness might be classified as four types: those that allow people to live and play comfortably, create ease of travel, permit contact with the outside, and provide entertainment (Sawyer 2002). All, except entertainment, can increase perceived safety and control. For obvious reasons such technological advances are seen as beneficial, but if pushed too far they can reduce or eliminate feelings of the primitive.

Primitive experiences represent immediate and deep contact with raw nature without the clutter and aid of modern conveniences.

Possible Indicators of Opportunities for Primitive Experiences

Wilderness managers must consider three additional practical considerations when they select indicators of primitive experiences. First, wilderness managers are mandated to provide opportunities for primitive experiences. Managers and nature provide opportunities; recreational visitors create experiences. Second, the recreationists or the conditions of the environment outside the wilderness often affect opportunities for primitive experiences as much as what happens inside the wilderness. Third, because recreationists construct their own experiences, managers should be cautious about attempting to engineer experiences too much. The oath taken by medical doctors “to do no harm” seems to apply equally well here. With these cautionary notes, this article concludes with examples of possible indicators of opportunities for primitive experiences in wilderness:

1. Lack of Facilities

- Number of structures for aid and comfort of visitors per acre in wilderness
- Number of administrative structures per acre in wilderness

2. Trail Miles and Conditions

- Number of miles of trail per acre in wilderness
- Percentage of miles of trail in various maintenance condition classes in wilderness

3. Blank Spot on the Map

- Percent of wilderness area more than one mile away from human-made trails and structures

- Percent of wilderness area without available electronic information about its facilities and conditions

4. Multiday Visits

- Percent of visitors who stay more than one day per visit
- Average length of stay per visit

5. Unguided or Unmediated Visits Percent of visitors whose visit is or is not outfitted or guided

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- Miles/percent of trail or acres of area open to commercial or private motorized use

- Amount of administrative motorized use (in hours per year)

7. Modern Technology—Mechanical Use

- Regulations requiring/forbidding use of backpack stoves

- Percent of visitors who use/don't use backpack stoves
- Percent of meals cooked over fire/cooked over a backpack stove

8. Modern Conveniences—Electronic

- Number of cell phone towers visible from the wilderness

- Regulations forbidding/permitting cell phones
- Regulations forbidding/permitting global positioning systems/units in wilderness

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