

WILDERNESS CHARACTER

Resource Brief

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Wilderness Stewardship Division

Background

The National Park Service (NPS) is responsible for the stewardship of 61 designated wilderness areas. Per agency policy, the NPS also manages eligible, proposed, recommended, and potential wilderness. In total, over 80 percent of all NPS lands are managed as wilderness, from Alaska to Florida.

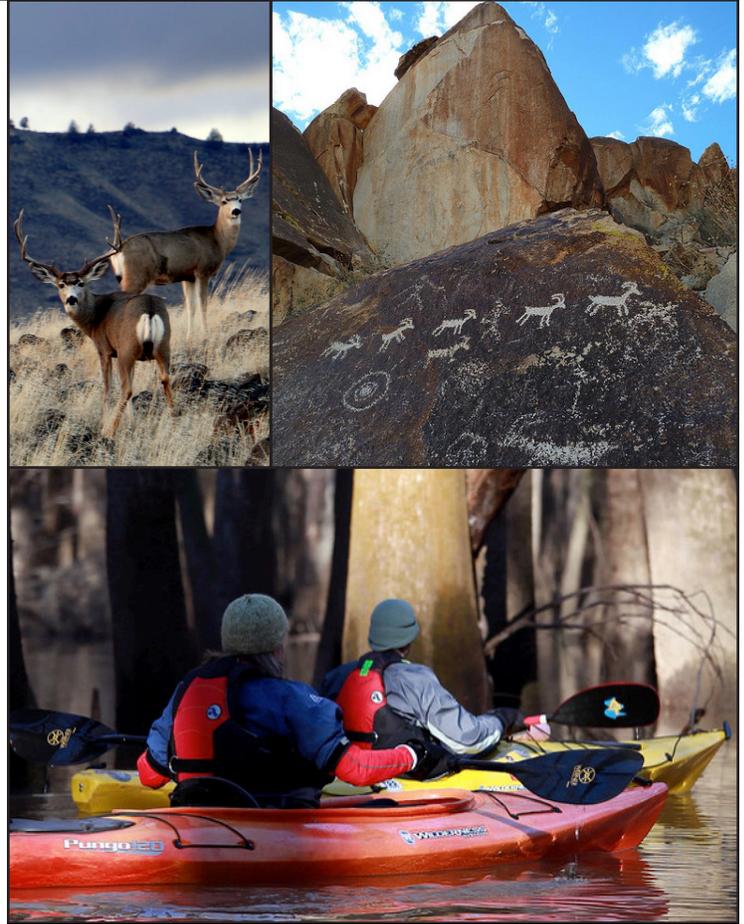
Preserving Wilderness Character

The 1964 Wilderness Act's Statement of Policy, Section 2(a) states that wilderness areas "shall be administered... so as to provide for the protection of these areas, the preservation of their wilderness character." This affirmative legal mandate to preserve wilderness character, and related NPS policy, applies to all NPS wilderness.

Wilderness character is a holistic concept based on the interaction of biophysical environments, personal experiences, and symbolic meanings. This includes *intangible qualities* like a sense of adventure and challenge or refuge and inspiration. Wilderness character also includes five *tangible qualities* associated with the biophysical environment:

- **Natural** - Wilderness ecological systems are substantially free from the effects of modern civilization
- **Untrammelled** - Wilderness is essentially free from the intentional actions of modern human control and manipulation
- **Undeveloped** - Wilderness retains its primeval character and influence, and is essentially without permanent improvement or modern human occupation
- **Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation** - Wilderness provides outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation
- **Other Features of Value** - Wilderness preserves other features that are of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value

These qualities are interrelated and wilderness character preservation often requires thoughtful tradeoffs between qualities.



Monitoring Wilderness Character

How do NPS managers preserve wilderness character? Wilderness character monitoring helps address this question by 1) assessing how management decisions and actions may affect individual wilderness character qualities and overall wilderness character in a park, and 2) improving communication among staff and with the public about wilderness stewardship.

The framework for wilderness character monitoring is outlined in *Keeping It Wild 2: An updated interagency strategy to monitor trends in wilderness character across the National Wilderness Preservation System*.

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To learn more about NPS Wilderness visit:
[NPS.gov/wilderness](https://www.nps.gov/wilderness)

SUMMARY OF QUALITIES, INDICATORS, AND IMPACT EXAMPLES FOR WILDERNESS CHARACTER

UNTRAMMELED	NATURAL	UNDEVELOPED	SOLITUDE OR PRIMITIVE AND UNCONFINED RECREATION	OTHER FEATURES OF VALUE
<p>Wilderness is essentially free from the intentional <u>actions</u> of modern human control or manipulation.</p> <p>“...an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammled by man...” and “...generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature.” Wilderness Act, Section 2(c)</p> <p>Preserved when... actions are <i>not</i> taken to manipulate or control ecological systems and its components.</p> <p>Degraded by... actions that intentionally control or manipulate the flora, fauna, or natural processes.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suppressing or lighting fire • Spraying weeds • Predator control • Translocating wildlife • Damming streams <p><i>Actions may be agency authorized actions or unauthorized public actions and are trammeling while the actions are ongoing.</i></p>	<p>Wilderness ecological systems are substantially free from the <u>effects</u> of modern civilization.</p> <p>“...is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions.” Wilderness Act, Section 2(c)</p> <p>Preserved when... indigenous species and ecological processes are intact and functional.</p> <p>Degraded by... effects (intended or unintended) of modern civilization on the biophysical environment.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence of non-native species • Extirpation of native species • Degradation of air quality • Degradation of water quality and quantity <p><i>Effects may be the result of actions outside the wilderness boundary, and/or occurred prior to wilderness designation and still persist today.</i></p>	<p>Wilderness retains its primeval character and influence and is essentially without permanent improvement or modern human occupation.</p> <p>“...an area of undeveloped Federal land...without permanent improvement or human habitation” and “...where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” Wilderness Act, Section 2(c)</p> <p>Preserved when... human-made features are not located in, and motors or mechanical transport are not used in, the wilderness area.</p> <p>Degraded by... structures or installations, or the use of motors or mechanical transport.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presence of buildings • Presence of radio repeaters • Presence of wildlife radio collars and tags • Use of chainsaws • Use of wheelbarrows <p><i>Development-related degradations focus on those used for administrative purposes - not recreation.</i></p>	<p>Wilderness provides outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation.</p> <p>“...has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation.” Wilderness Act, Section 2(c)</p> <p>Preserved when... visitors experience minimal encounters, observe landscapes without modern human effects, are not encumbered by regulatory restrictions, etc.</p> <p>Degraded by... encounters, indications of civilization, or restrictions on visitor behavior.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sights and sounds indicating other visitors • Infrastructure for visitor support • Access restricted by permits • Designated campsites <p><i>Degradations include developments used for recreational purposes - not administrative.</i></p>	<p>Wilderness preserves other features that are of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.</p> <p>“...may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.” Wilderness Act, Section 2(c)</p> <p>Preserved when... each identified feature unique to the wilderness area is protected.</p> <p>Degraded by... partial or total loss of the feature.</p> <p>Examples:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vandalism of cultural resources • Destruction of paleontological resources • Scenic quality lost to air pollution • Loss of unique habitats <p><i>Features may be degraded from activities within or outside the wilderness area, or when they are not protected consistent with a wilderness context.</i></p>