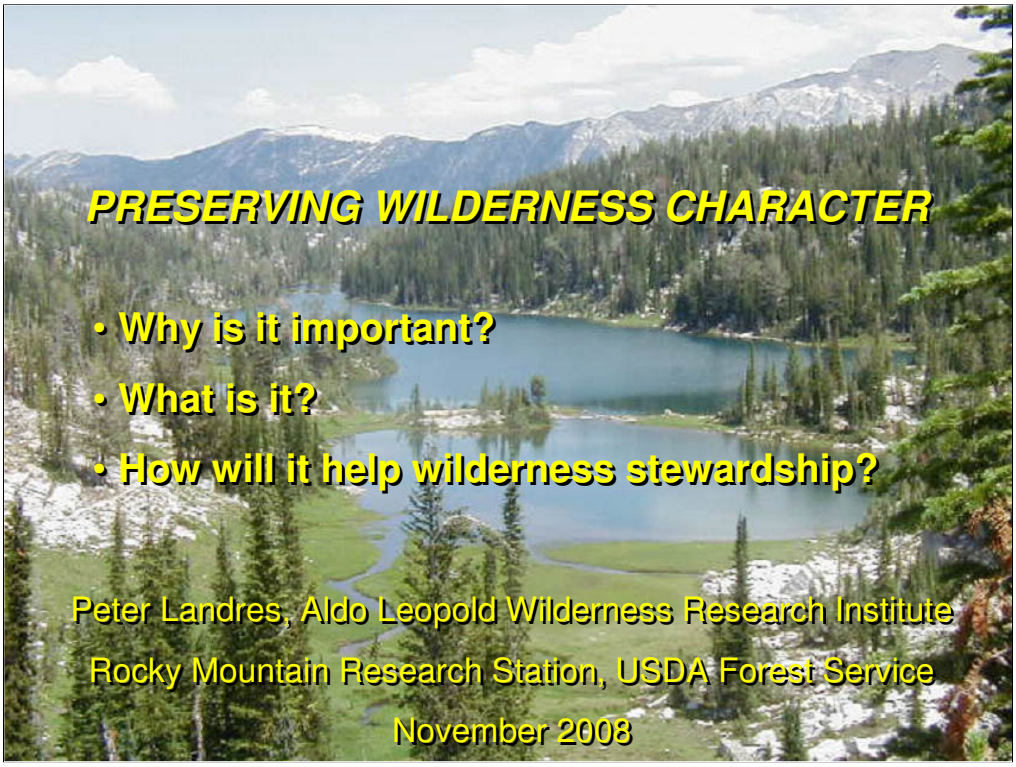

PRESERVING WILDERNESS CHARACTER
• Why is it important?
• What is it?
• How will it help wilderness stewardship?
Peter Landres, Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute
Rocky Mountain Research Station, USDA Forest Service
November 2008

WHO DEVELOPED THIS "WHY, WHAT, AND HOW" ABOUT WILDERNESS CHARACTER?

- US Forest Service Wilderness Monitoring Committee (2001 to 2006)
- Interagency Wilderness Character Monitoring Team (2006 to 2008)

The Forest Service team was chartered to develop recommendations for national wilderness monitoring that would improve wilderness stewardship in all FS wildernesses.

-- this team was dominated by FS wilderness field managers to make sure that its recommendations would be relevant and practical

-- this team also included representatives from each of the other federal wilderness managing agencies (BLM, FWS, NPS) who were active participants, contributing significantly to the recommendations

The Interagency Wilderness Character Monitoring Team was tasked with developing recommendations for an interagency strategy to monitor trends in wilderness character.

-- this team was composed of two people from each of the four wilderness management agencies, plus one person from the USGS

-- the Interagency Wilderness Policy Council tasked the Interagency Wilderness Steering Committee (composed of the national wilderness leads from each of the four agencies) to choose Monitoring Team members and be responsible for completing this task

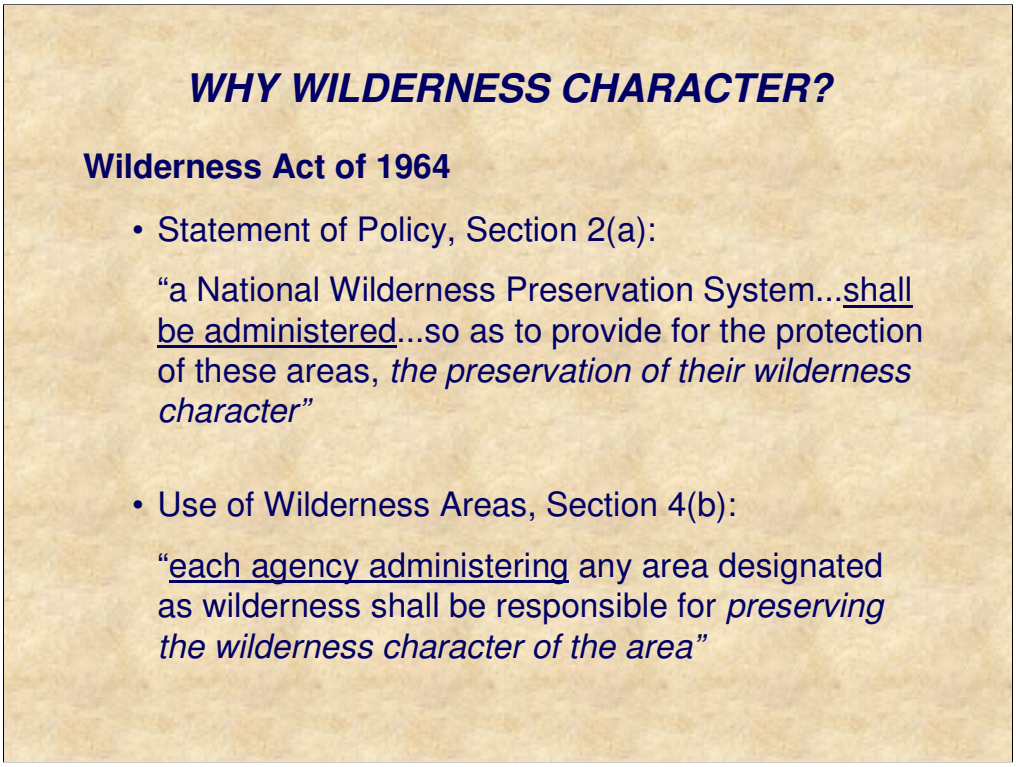
Although the effort to describe and understand wilderness character began with monitoring, its application goes to the heart of wilderness stewardship and affects many if not all aspects of wilderness stewardship.

"Once land is designated as wilderness, how do we preserve the spirit of the land, its wildness and naturalness?"

-- Laura and Guy Waterman, *Wilderness Ethics*,1993

This quote from the Watermans aptly describes the general goal for wilderness stewardship. The big question is, How do we do this?

The answer is to go back to the Wilderness Act and it's central mandate to preserve wilderness character.

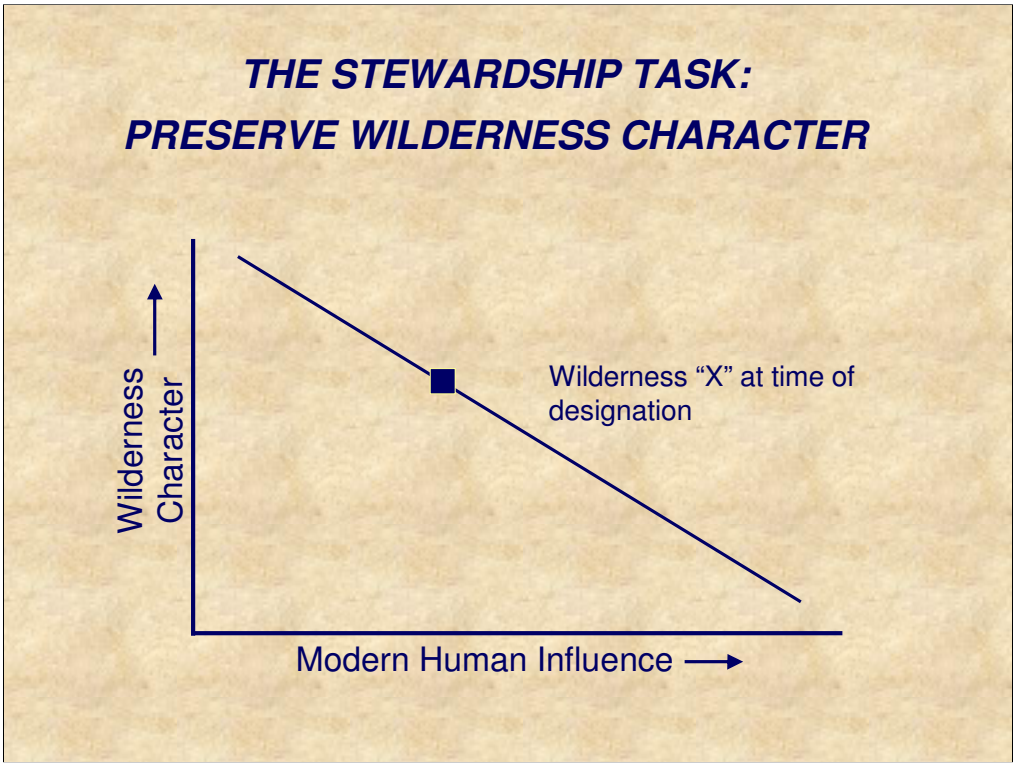


There are two central reasons why wilderness character is important. The first, shown here, is that the Wilderness Act requires the agencies that administer wilderness to preserve the wilderness character of the area. In other words, preserving wilderness character is a legal requirement.

The Statement of Policy in Section 2(a) describes the overall goals for establishing wilderness, and this Section clearly states that the administering agencies shall preserve wilderness character.

Then in Section 4(b) on the Use of Wilderness Area, we again see this clear statement. Congress clearly intended a variety of uses in wilderness ("recreational, scenic, scientific, educational, conservation, and historical use") and in allowing these uses, the agencies must also preserve the wilderness character of the area. Legal scholars point to this Section 4(b) statement as THE primary management mandate in the Wilderness Act, and Congress has reaffirmed that this is the central mandate to the agencies that administer wilderness.

The second reason why wilderness character is important is to understand why and how we take stewardship actions inside wilderness, in other words, to improve wilderness stewardship and bring it more closely in line with the statutory requirements and intent (or spirit) of the Wilderness Act.



The wilderness policies of all the four agencies that administer wilderness (BLM, FS, FWS, NPS) reflect the central mandate of the Wilderness Act to preserve wilderness character. For example, this graph is from FS wilderness policy, and shows how increasing human influence negatively affects wilderness character. The box on the line shows the state of wilderness character at the time wilderness "X" was designated. Every wilderness comes into the NWPS at some point along this line (small, heavily impacted wildernesses at the lower left; large relatively intact wildernesses at the upper right).

The Wilderness Act and all agency policies clearly state that whatever the status of wilderness character is at the time of designation, the agencies are to not let this status degrade, or slide down on this graph.

WHAT IS WILDERNESS CHARACTER?

No definition in the Wilderness Act and no legislative history on the meaning of this phrase

- **Character**

  "The combination of qualities or features that distinguishes one person, group, or thing from another" -- American Heritage Dictionary

  "The aggregate of distinctive qualities" – Webster's 3rd New International Dictionary

- **Wilderness character** – the combination of biophysical, experiential, and symbolic qualities that distinguishes wilderness from all other lands

There is no definition of wilderness character in the Wilderness Act, and there is no legislative history on the meaning of this phrase.

So we're left to our own devices...

The first place to turn is the dictionary, and definitions of "character" from two standard dictionaries both convey the same thing: 1) that several qualities or attributes combine to make this character, and 2) that this combination is unique.

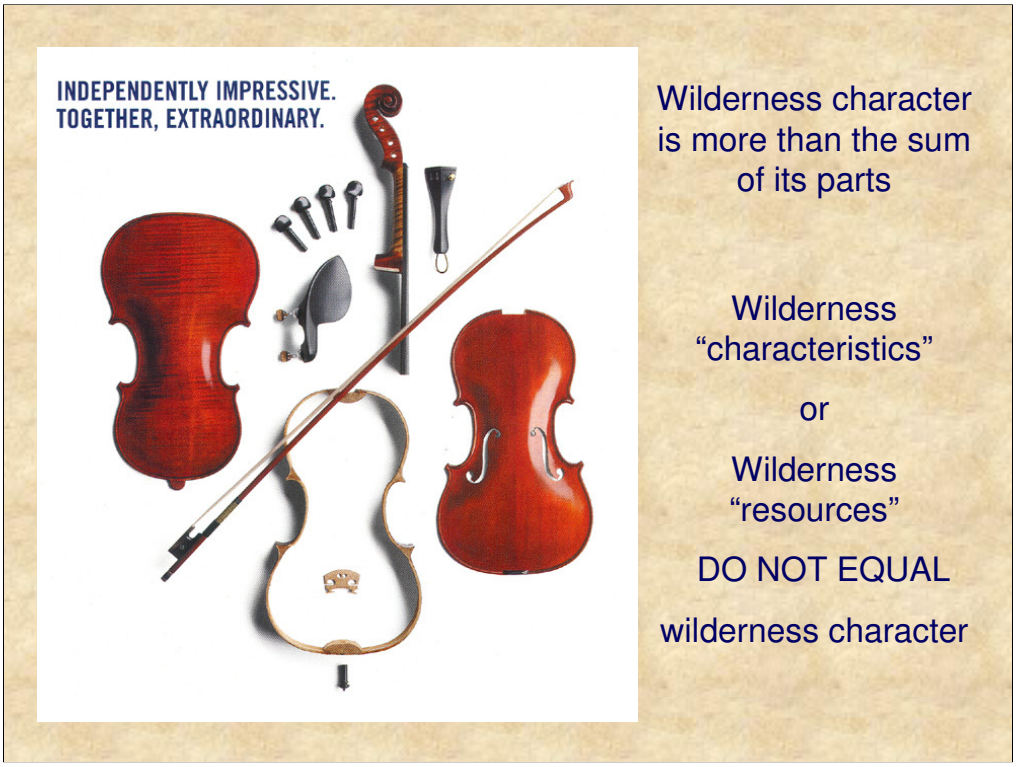
The definition of wilderness character builds on these dictionary definitions, and is based on extensive reading of wilderness literature, especially the writings of Howard Zahniser, the principle writer of the Wilderness Act. In essence, wilderness character is very complex, filled with nuance and symbolism. After much discussion and outside review, for the purpose of improving wilderness stewardship, we define wilderness character in terms of the biophysical, experiential, and symbolic qualities of wilderness. These three aspects are explained, with examples, later on.

Howard Zahniser

"The purpose of the Wilderness Act is to preserve the wilderness character of the areas to be included in the wilderness system, not to establish any particular use."

"To know the wilderness is to know a profound humility, to recognize one's littleness, to sense dependence and interdependence, indebtedness, and responsibility."

The intent behind using the phrase "wilderness character" is expressed by Howard Zahniser, principle author of the Wilderness Act, in his article on "The Need for Wilderness Areas" published in 1956 the magazine The Living Wilderness. There are two reasons Zahniser used this phrase: first as the primary purpose behind the Wilderness Act, and second to get at the deeper psychological and spiritual effects of wilderness.



Just like a violin, wilderness character is more than the sum of its parts.

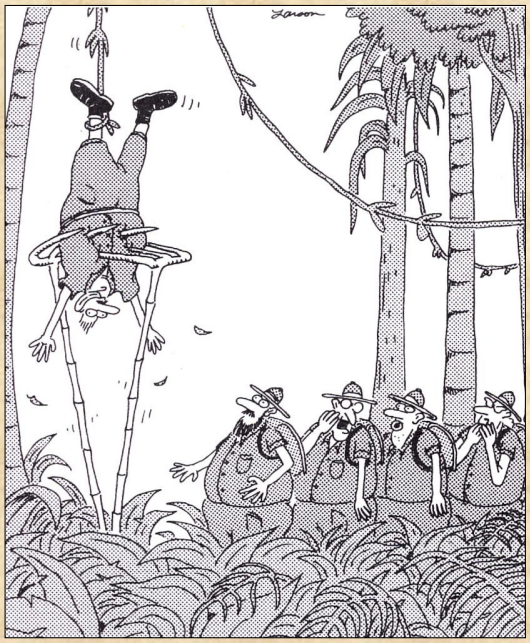
Our tendency is to talk about the air, the water, the animals, the plants, the scenery, the beauty, the quiet of a wilderness; these are the parts, the pieces, the resources of wilderness. But our task as stewards is more important, and that is to preserve the larger, harder to describe, richer and extraordinary idea and ideal of wilderness character.

Sometimes people equate the phrase "wilderness characteristics" with "wilderness character" but just like with the word "resources" the word "characteristics" implies individual parts or pieces and not the whole of "wilderness character."

SO WHAT? IS THERE A PROBLEM?

- Many wilderness managers sense that wilderness character is degrading in the areas they manage
- Management staff are asking for a tool to assess their accomplishments in fulfilling the legal and policy mandate to preserve wilderness character
- There is no integration across different staff areas about how wilderness character is changing over time

HOW to translate this definition of wilderness character into tangible stewardship guidelines that tie directly to the Wilderness Act?

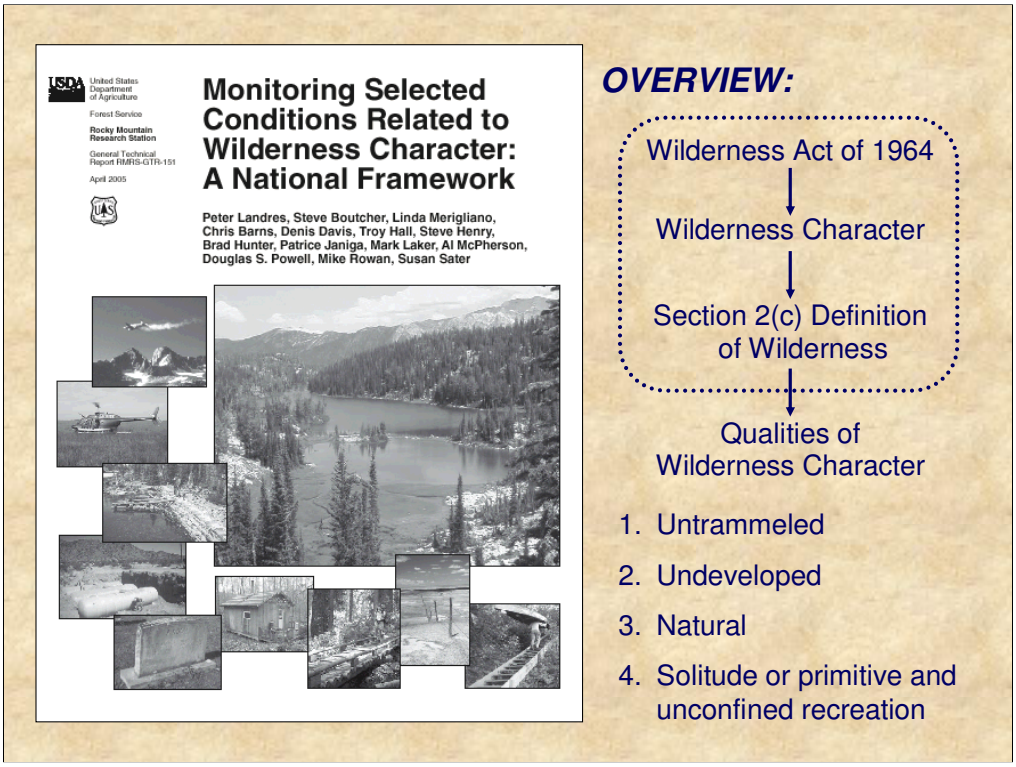


"That's why I never walk in front."

Even though the Wilderness Act was passed more than 40 years ago, the agencies that administer and manage wilderness have not yet developed ways to assess whether their stewardship policies, decisions, and actions are preserving wilderness character. Defining wilderness character is just the first step. Next, we need to translate this definition into practical guidelines to improve wilderness stewardship.

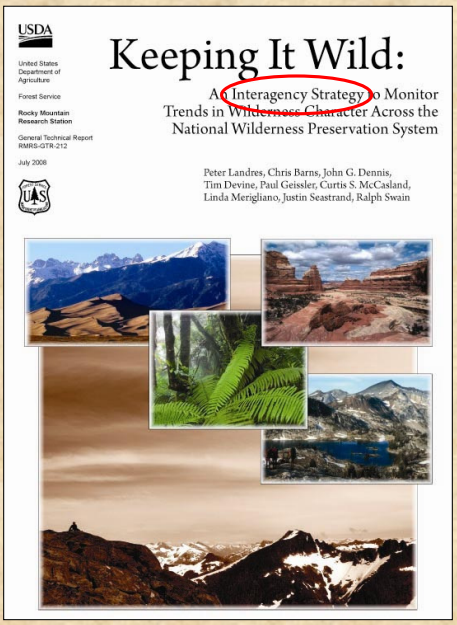
But we have also been criticized by some who assert that wilderness character is ineffable, indescribable, unknowable, and defining it in concrete, tangible terms only diminishes and tarnishes it. We agree that there are aspects of wilderness character that are deeply intangible and that these should always remain that way. But our position is that wilderness stewardship is hindered without a pragmatic definition and guidelines that can help set the goals for wilderness stewardship.

On balance, we strongly feel that it is better to have tangible and practical guidelines that directly link wilderness stewardship to wilderness character and the Wilderness Act than to not have such guidelines. Without such guidelines, different agencies and different managers are left to their own devices, resulting in the current lack of consistent understanding about the goals and means of wilderness stewardship.



This document, produced by the Forest Service Wilderness Monitoring Committee, lays the conceptual framework for using the Section 2(c) Definition of Wilderness from the Wilderness Act to identify four tangible qualities of wilderness character. The dotted line identifies statutory requirements, and the text outside the dotted line is our Committee's interpretation. Using the Wilderness Act to identify these qualities provides tangible stewardship guideposts and ties these guideposts directly to the statutory requirements of the Wilderness Act.

HOW TO MONITOR WILDERNESS CHARACTER?



- Published in July 2008 and is now being pilot tested
- Built on the FS National Framework but designed to be more flexible to work in all four agencies that manage wilderness

This document, produced by the Interagency Wilderness Character Monitoring Team, is an interagency strategy built on the shoulders of the Forest Service national framework (3 people from the FS effort were on the interagency team). This interagency strategy was specifically designed to be more flexible than the FS approach to accommodate the various needs and capabilities of the four agencies that manage wilderness. Both the FS framework and this interagency strategy use the same four qualities of wilderness character to provide tangible stewardship direction that is directly linked to the statutory requirements of the Wilderness Act.

QUALITIES OF WILDERNESS CHARACTER

1. "Untrammeled"

"...an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man..."

and

"...generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature."

Wilderness is essentially unhindered and free from modern human control or manipulation

The untrammeled quality is, according to wilderness scholars, the primary ideal for wilderness. Although the word "untrammeled" is not a common one, Howard Zahniser, the chief architect and writer of the Wilderness Act, used the word "untrammeled" because it was the exact word he wanted to convey the importance of keeping wilderness free from manipulation and control.

The statement in green is our attempt to succinctly describe what this quality means to wilderness stewardship. We use the word "modern" in this statement to clearly separate the past (that is, prior to wilderness designation) effects of native or indigenous people, which are an important part of wilderness, from the effects of modern people.

The Statue of Liberty is important not because it is made of copper and is 151 feet tall (its characteristics), but because it is one of our nation's primary symbols of liberty and freedom from oppression. It is the symbolic value of the Statue of Liberty that makes it so important. Similarly the Vietnam War Memorial is important not because it has 58,256 names engraved on it, or that it is 246 feet long, but for the deep personal and societal meaning it conveys.

Like the Statue of Liberty and the Vietnam War Memorial, one of the most important reasons that wilderness and wilderness character are preserved is for symbolic meanings of humility, restraint, and interconnectedness with nature. Howard Zahniser was clear in his many writings that these symbolic values were the "distinctive ministrations" wilderness has for society.

These symbolic meanings of wilderness occur because of the existence of wilderness and occur regardless of whether people have walked in a wilderness or used a wilderness for recreation. For example, the American public steadfastly supports wilderness protection for the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge even though most Americans have never set foot there.

What are the unique aspects of this quality in the wilderness you manage?

THE UNTRAMMELED QUALITY IS DEGRADED BY MANIPULATING "THE COMMUNITY OF LIFE"

- Authorized actions that manipulate, control, or hinder the "community of life"

Suppressing fire

Lighting fire

Spraying weeds

Collaring wildlife

Killing predators

Stocking fish/wildlife

- Unauthorized actions that manipulate, control, or hinder the "community of life"

"Bucket brigade"

Authorized actions are those taken by the Federal land management agency that manipulate or control the natural conditions inside wilderness, even for positive reasons such as controlling nonnative invasive plants or restoring natural fire regimes.

QUALITIES OF WILDERNESS CHARACTER

1. "Untrammeled"

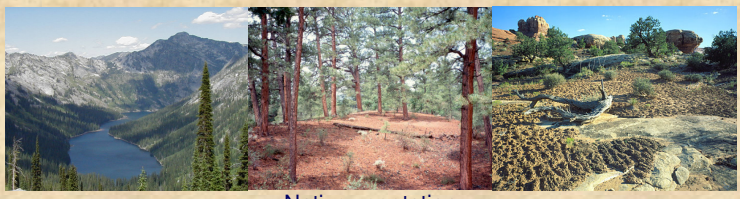
2. "Natural"

"...is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions."

Wilderness ecological systems are substantially free from the effects of modern civilization

Before this description of wilderness character, the untrammeled and natural qualities were typically talked about together and often considered one-and-the-same. In our reading of the Wilderness Act, literature about the Wilderness Act, and the writings of the people who contributed to the Wilderness Act, the strong sense we got was that the untrammeled quality was about the actions managers take towards wilderness, while the natural quality is about the condition of the land, and that this condition is to be substantially free from the effects of modern civilization.

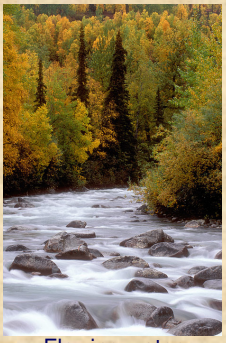
THE NATURAL QUALITY IS THE NATURAL CONDITION OF THE LAND, ITS PLANTS, WILDLIFE, WATER, SOIL, AIR, AND ECOLOGICAL PROCESSES



Native vegetation

Natural disturbance

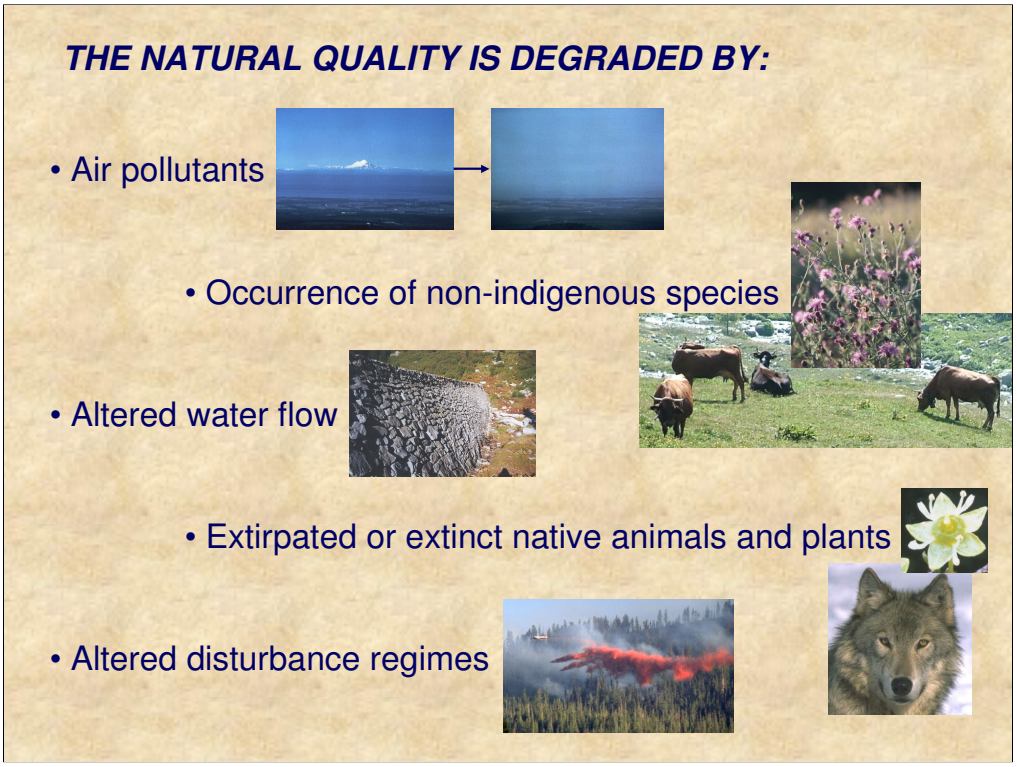
Native wildlife



Flowing water

Decomposition

What are the unique aspects of this quality in the wilderness you manage?



This natural quality tracks changes to the condition of the land caused by:

1) actions managers have taken (e.g., suppressing fires, building dams, killing predators, permitted grazing or mining, etc)

2) regional changes that affect conditions inside wilderness (e.g., spread of non-indigenous species, air pollutants, disruption of wildlife dispersal/migration corridors, global climate change, etc.)

3) loss of indigenous species inside the wilderness

QUALITIES OF WILDERNESS CHARACTER

1. "Untrammeled"
2. "Natural"
3. **"Undeveloped"**

   "...an area of undeveloped Federal land...without permanent improvement or human habitation"

   and

   "...where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

Wilderness retains its primeval character and influence, and is essentially without permanent improvement or modern human occupation

What are the unique aspects of this quality in the wilderness you manage?

Non-recreational structures and installations (such as dams, roads that access inholdings, fences, stock tanks, water developments, communication installations, scientific installations, etc.) are included here under the undeveloped quality because they clearly are signs of developments. We could have placed recreation structures and installations (trails, toilets, bear boxes, corrals, etc.) here because these clearly also degrade the undeveloped quality, but instead decided that it was more appropriate to place them under the solitude or primitive and unconfined quality because these structures are directly associated with wilderness recreation and should be directly linked with the quality that was most strongly associated with recreation. We could also have put recreation structures in both the undeveloped and solitude qualities, but decided double-counting posed even bigger problems.

Photos, from left to right: mining truck in Baker Wilderness; drilling sediment core in AK wilderness; dam maintenance in Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness; transmitting seismic activity data in Ruby Mountains Wilderness; meterological monitoring station in AK wilderness; bighorn sheep guzzler in Oracopia Mountains Wilderness; dam in Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness; inholding cabin in Selway Bitterroot Wilderness

QUALITIES OF WILDERNESS CHARACTER

1. "Untrammeled"
2. "Natural"
3. "Undeveloped"
4. **"Solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation"**

Wilderness provides outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation

The last quality is most strongly associated with experiences of wilderness-dependent recreation.

THE SOLITUDE OR PRIMITIVE AND UNCONFINED QUALITY OFFERS IMPORTANT PERSONAL BENEFITS AND MEANINGS

Primitive recreation and the use of traditional skills

Connection to the natural world

Personal challenge and self-discovery

Freedom from the constraints of culture

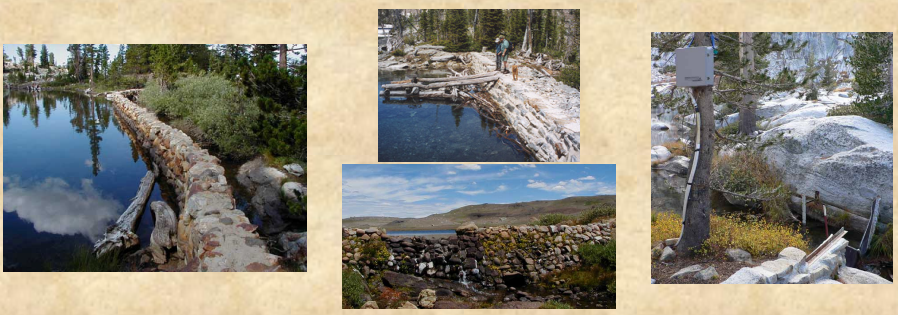
What are the unique aspects of this quality in the wilderness you manage?

Photos (from left to right): outhouse in Sequoia Kings Canyon Wilderness; cabin in Lye Brook Wilderness; bridge in Selway Bitterroot; toilet in Sequoia Kings Canyon Wilderness; designated campsite in Sequoia Kings Canyon Wilderness; light pollution in Death Valley Wilderness; Cruise ship in Tracy Arm-Ford's Terror Wilderness; people on river in Alpine Lakes Wilderness; line of people going up Half Dome in Yosemite Wilderness

For GPRA accomplishment reporting, ONLY measures that are under management authority would be reported. The degraded night sky visibility diminishes this quality but would NOT be reported under GPRA.

IMPLICATION: A SINGLE DECISION OR ACTION MAY AFFECT MORE THAN ONE QUALITY

Example: Dams, weirs, fish barriers, gauging stations



- The decision to build degrades the untrammeled quality
- The altered water flow degrades the natural quality
- The presence of the structure degrades the undeveloped quality

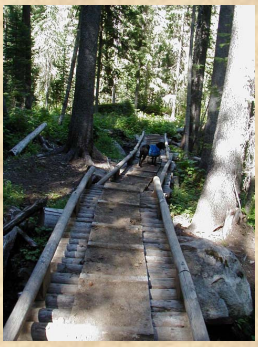
Inside wilderness just about any installation, motorized or mechanized use, or anything that degrades wilderness character will affect more than one of the four qualities of wilderness character.

Photos, left to right: Bigelow Lake Dam in the Emigrant Wilderness; High Emigrant Lake Dam in the Emigrant Wilderness; Holloway Dam in the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness; Gauging stating in Sequoia-King's Canyon Wilderness.

IMPLICATION: A DECISION OR ACTION MAY IMPROVE ONE QUALITY WHILE DEGRADING ANOTHER QUALITY

- Using herbicides to control exotic plants may improve the natural quality, but degrades the untrammeled quality

- Building a bridge to reduce site impacts at a stream crossing may improve the natural quality, but degrades the undeveloped and the solitude or primitive and unconfined type of recreation qualities

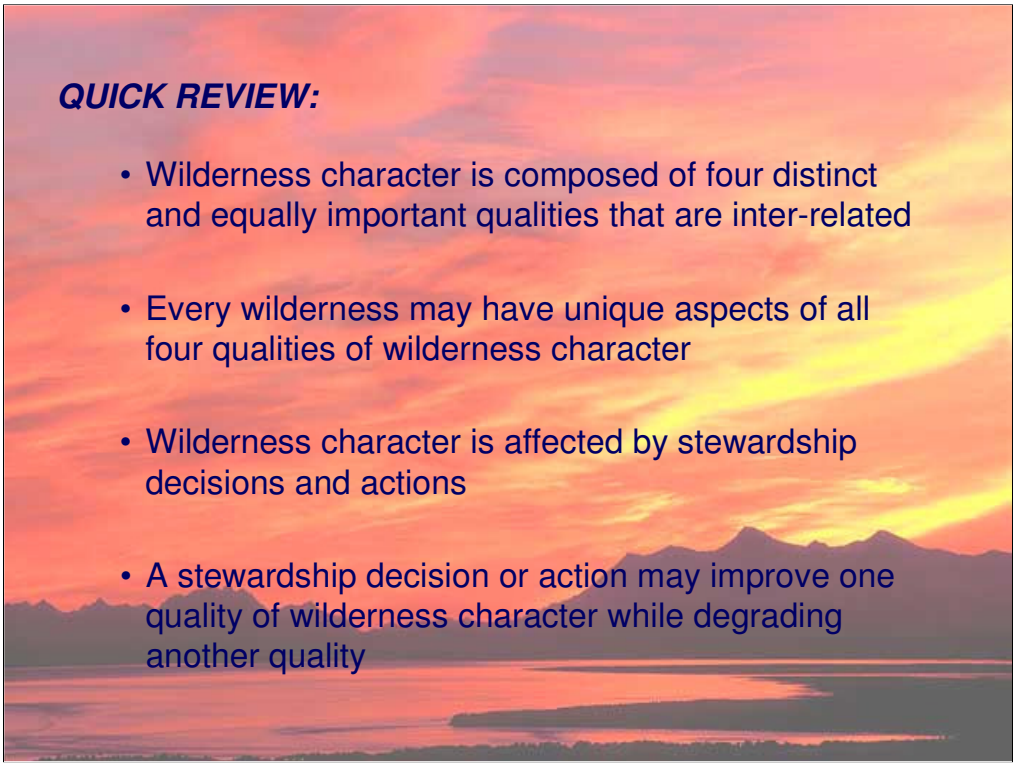


This is simply the reality of wilderness stewardship, and we want to be intellectually honest about what we gain and what we lose in our decisions and actions.

For example, it's common to hear the statement "By spraying herbicides we will have a more untrammeled wilderness." Unfortunately, this statement is based on the misperception that getting rid of exotic invasive plants will allow the wilderness to be untrammeled, confusing the untrammeled quality with the natural quality. By using the four qualities, we acknowledge that spraying herbicides is an action that trammels the wilderness and may improve the natural quality.

Could also talk about fire management as an example.

Photos, left to right: spraying weeds along a trail in the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness; spraying weeds in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness; bridge over Big Creek in Selway Bitterroot Wilderness.

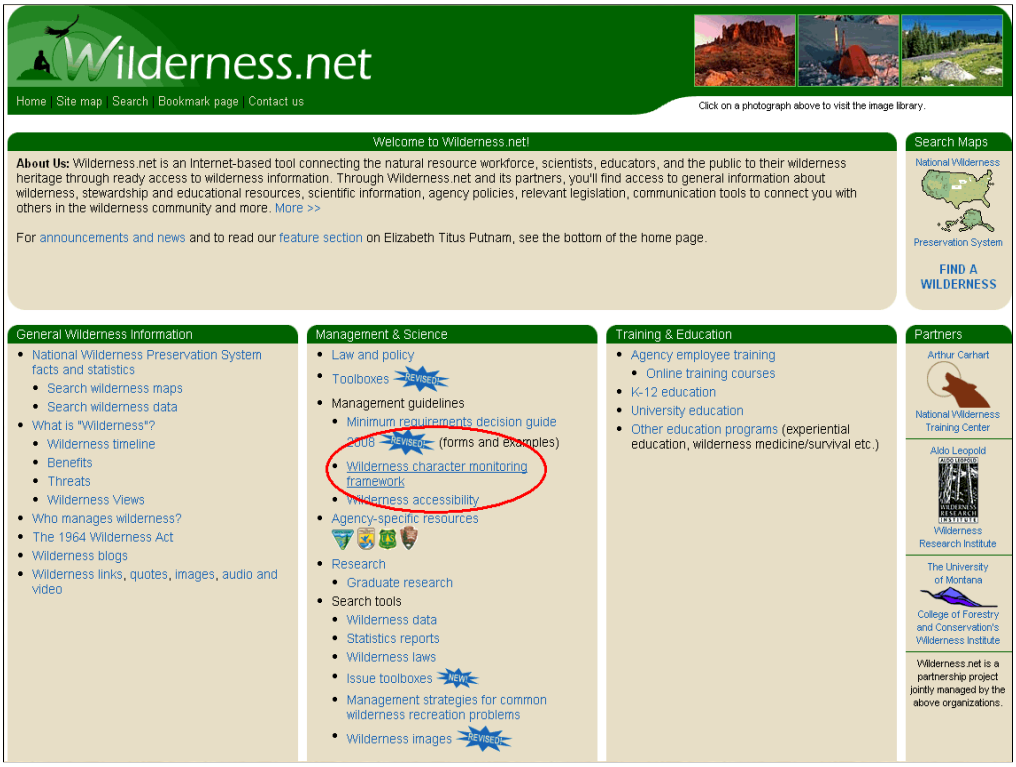

QUICK REVIEW:
• Wilderness character is composed of four distinct and equally important qualities that are inter-related
• Every wilderness may have unique aspects of all four qualities of wilderness character
• Wilderness character is affected by stewardship decisions and actions
• A stewardship decision or action may improve one quality of wilderness character while degrading another quality

HOW WOULD THIS HELP WILDERNESS STEWARDSHIP?

- Understand consequences of decisions and actions on wilderness character
- Improve accountability: evaluate success in preserving wilderness character
- Guard against legal vulnerability
- Provide legacy information that will endure over time when personnel change
- Articulate a positive vision for what wilderness is instead of what it is not

Our intent is that understanding the primary management responsibility for preserving wilderness character, and what these four qualities of wilderness character are and what degrades them, will significantly improve wilderness stewardship in many ways.

You can download these documents at the websites shown here.



You can also find selected information about wilderness character on the wilderness.net website.