



Wilderness Character Questions and Answers

What is the legal mandate?

1. Is there a legal mandate to IMPROVE WC?

There is nothing in the Wilderness Act that mandates federal agencies to IMPROVE wilderness character; it requires us to PRESERVE it. However, agency policy or individual wilderness stewardship plans may direct that wilderness character be restored and/or improved where appropriate.

2. Should we just aim to preserve wilderness character at its current state or condition?

Wilderness managers should focus their resources and prioritize management actions that will preserve wilderness character. If wilderness character is degraded today compared to its condition when the wilderness was legally established by Congress, wilderness managers may, when resources allow and where appropriate, work to restore wilderness character to its original condition. Agency policy and wilderness stewardship plans may provide additional guidance.

3. Isn't it true that there is a clause in the Wilderness Act that says the act is subservient to the underlying legislation for the agency and that this may influence a manager's decision-making concerning the preservation of wilderness character?

No, this is not true. Section 4(a) of the Wilderness Act states that the Wilderness Act is "within and supplemental" to other legislation such as the 1916 National Park Service Organic Act and other Federal legislation. No one law "trumps" another unless it explicitly states that it does. The words "within and supplemental" mean that we have the responsibility of implementing the Wilderness Act along with all other Federal laws that apply to the land we manage.

4. Is the enabling act for each wilderness the best place to determine the original baseline for a particular wilderness?

Wilderness designating legislation does not generally speak to the "condition" of a designated area other than to give size and location. There are a few exceptions where the legislation includes information about a unique resource and special management guidance concerning that resource. However, all designated wilderness areas meet the criteria as described in Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act. The managing agency of a wilderness may have inventory data that was gathered during a wilderness review and study process. Also see the answer to question #4.

5. Do we have the authority to address threats to wilderness character that occur outside of wilderness boundaries (eg. power lines disrupting view shed)?

There are many things outside a wilderness that degrade the different qualities of wilderness character inside. Power lines are one, just as are the sights and sounds of a city where a wilderness abuts urban or suburban areas. Light pollution degrades the night sky visibility. Regional haze and air pollution diminish the scenic value of many wildernesses. Congress ruled against buffer zones to insulate wilderness from adjacent nonwilderness activities—first in the Endangered American Wilderness Act and then the New Mexico Wilderness Act and several subsequent wilderness designation acts. This is a real concern for wilderness managers

because they often have little or no control of what happens outside wilderness. That being said, wilderness planners and managers need to expand their awareness and communication beyond wilderness boundaries and seek to coordinate adjacent-land management activities to minimize their impact on wilderness. Also, the Clean Air Act of 1977 designated some wilderness areas as Class I air sheds and, in so doing, gave wilderness managers some authority regarding air quality issues that arise outside of wilderness (Dawson and Hendee 2009). The suite of Natural Resource Management online Carhart courses provides further direction on a variety of threats. Go to this link for more information:

<http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=elearning>

6. When making decisions regarding actions in Wilderness are all agencies required to examine the issue through public process?

Actions taken inside wilderness are no different from other public lands when it comes to the requirement of a public review. If an action meets the requirements under the National Environmental Protection Act for a public review (“...a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment under section 102(2)(C) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969, 42 U.S.C. 4332(2)(C)(NEPA)”) then it will need to follow the NEPA process.

7. Is there a list of actions that have been authorized within wilderness?

No. Remember that every situation in wilderness is different making it impossible to develop a list of potential and/or authorized actions. Also, it is contrary to one of the principles of wilderness management—to apply only the minimum tool, regulation, or force to achieve management objectives. In other words, we focus on NOT doing actions in wilderness first, and then consider actions when they are the minimum necessary for the administration of the area as wilderness. The Wilderness Act requires this in Section 4(c).

What is wilderness character?

1. Between 1964 and 2001, did wilderness character change?

No, the meaning of wilderness character did not change between 1964 and 2001 or any other year. The Wilderness Act of 1964 defines wilderness in Section 2(c) and it does not define “wilderness character.” Different agency teams working from Section 2(c) described wilderness character in tangible terms to provide a practical link between wilderness stewardship and this language of the Wilderness Act. See “Monitoring Selected Conditions Related to Wilderness Character: a National Framework” (Landres et al, 2005) and “Keeping It Wild” (Landres et. al 2008) for a detailed discussion of why and how these teams derived the qualities of wilderness character.

2. What are signs of degradation of wilderness character?

Untrammeled: Actions that intentionally manipulate, control, or hinder the “community of life” inside wilderness degrade the untrammeled quality of wilderness character, even though they may be taken to restore natural conditions or for other purposes.

Natural: Air pollutants, occurrence of non-native species, altered water flow, extirpated or extinct native animals and plants, and altered disturbance regimes are examples of things that degrade the natural quality.

Undeveloped: The presence of non-recreational structures or installations, use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment, or mechanical transport, and inholdings degrade the undeveloped quality.

Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation: Agency-provided facilities that decrease self-reliant recreation, management restrictions on visitor behavior, sights and sounds of people inside wilderness, and sights and sounds of occupied and modified areas outside wilderness are all examples of things that degrade this quality.

Unique and Other Features: Anything that negatively affects ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value that are unique to a wilderness area degrades this quality.

3. When you say Congress determines the state or condition of wilderness character at the time of designation, how is that assessed or defined by Congress?

Congress has not formally assessed or defined the state of wilderness character in any legislation establishing wilderness. Congress is the only entity that can formally determine whether the wilderness character of an area is suitable to allow designation of that area as wilderness. At the time of designation, the state or condition of the qualities of wilderness character is the only baseline wilderness managers have to determine Congressional intent for the area's wilderness character. Designating legislation or legislative history may include special language that identifies particular features or overall conditions that spurred Congressional action to designate the area as wilderness and this language, if available, may be important for managers to understand and use in preserving wilderness character.

4. How can we convey the definition or meaning of potential wilderness? How does that relate to wilderness character?

Wilderness character provides a standard framework and nomenclature for talking about wilderness, the values of wilderness, and wilderness stewardship. This framework and nomenclature has been shown to greatly improve discussion among agency staff and with the public. However, each wilderness managing agency has specific policy regarding the identification, inventory, study, and/or subsequent recommendation of public land for wilderness designation. Depending on the agency, the categories of land identified in the wilderness review process are managed in varying degrees that tend to protect or maintain wilderness character. Be sure to check your specific agency policy for details and clarification.

How do we manage recommended or potential wilderness or Wilderness Study Areas (WSA's)?

1. Is there a difference between designated wilderness and recommended or potential wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) regarding preserving wilderness character?

This is specific to each of the agencies that manage designated wilderness and WSAs. Check your specific agency wilderness policy for complete details.

<http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=legispolicy>

How do we evaluate tradeoffs?

1. How do wilderness managers balance the need to preserve the untrammelled quality and the need to monitor or restore the natural quality?

The tension between the untrammelled and the natural quality is particularly difficult for many people with a natural resource background who are involved in wilderness stewardship. The threat, for example from nonnative invasive species, may be acute and may push a strong desire for action that would degrade the untrammelled quality. The responsibility to preserve BOTH qualities makes any decision difficult. The general approach is to first ask if any action is necessary and appropriate, and only if the answer is “yes” should the next step be taken to determine what is the minimum necessary. Actions should be considered from multiple perspectives, including timeframe (ranging from short to long term), frequency (ranging from one time to many), intensity (ranging from mild to huge), area affected (ranging from small to large), and effects on the other qualities of wilderness character. In other words, this is complex!

2. Isn't it possible that an increase in human influence (for a short time at least) might actually increase the wilderness character of an area in the long term?

Yes, and this question gets at the complex nature of wilderness stewardship and the tradeoffs between short and long term actions. Management actions in wilderness often degrade one or more quality of wilderness character while improving others. It is important to understand the different qualities of wilderness character and what impacts or preserves them so we can realize what is gained and/or lost by our actions. And only by fully understanding what we gain and what we lose can we make an informed decision. Read this article for more information: <http://leopold.wilderness.net/pubs/749.pdf>

3. Some administratively provided facilities decrease self-reliance for expert wilderness users, but are almost necessary to increase opportunities for self-reliance for less expert users. How do you think about and balance this?

Again, this involves looking at the tradeoffs and effects to the different qualities of wilderness character our decisions have. Every situation is different. You need to look at what other opportunities are available in or near the area (both in and outside wilderness). Are there other areas that have facilities (or not) that offer more or less primitive conditions for users? The Wilderness Act says that wilderness provides outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation, and we should strive for that. However, some facilities are the minimum necessary to protect natural resources or are necessary for safety reasons. There's not a black and white answer, but understanding wilderness character will help you make more informed decisions.

4. Although the wilderness act does not provide prioritization among the qualities of wilderness character, decisions must be made which prioritize one character over another. Is there a framework that helps managers work through these problems? How do managers prioritize actions where the decision does positively affect one character and negatively affects another?

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Miscellaneous Questions

1. Is there any guidance on how to address concerns about providing adequate safety in wilderness? This is brought up more and more often as a reason for providing recreational structures (particularly bridges/stream crossings) in wilderness, despite the traditional wilderness goal of providing opportunities for solitude (managing individual exposure to risk)? Agency policy for the different agencies generally directs managers to provide recreational structures (e.g. bridges) primarily if they are necessary to protect the wilderness resource, and also if they are the minimum necessary to protect the wilderness visitor from dangerous safety hazards. Be sure to check your agency policy regarding this guidance. See the "Safety" toolbox on wilderness.net: <http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=toolboxes&sec=safety> for a detailed discussion of this.
2. What defines "modern humans"?
In the context of wilderness stewardship and wilderness character, this phrase refers to the population in America roughly from the time of European settlement and specifically since 1964 and the Wilderness Act. As explained in the documents described above, Native Americans have in many cases had a large and long-term effect on the land that we now call wilderness, and we strive to honor and respect these traditions and their effects. The phrase "modern humans" is used to refer specifically to the actions that we take today to separate these modern actions from those of the past that occurred before the 1964 Wilderness Act.
3. What management options, besides capping visitor access levels, exist for very pristine wilderness units characterized by low visitation and no recreation management restrictions (such as permitting, registration, or backcountry orientation requirements)? In other words, what attempts to increase management of visitor behavior in order to mitigate resource impacts might be justified in extremely remote settings?
There are a number of strategies that have been identified to manage visitor behavior in wilderness. They include: modify timing of use, modify location of use, limit or reduce use, and modify type of use or visitor behavior. The particular impacts you are trying to mitigate will determine your strategy. For a more complete discussion of this take the online Carhart course, "Visitor Management: Strategies." Go to this website for more information: <http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=elearning> or visit the Visitor Use Management toolbox on wilderness.net: <http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=toolboxes&sec=vum>