



Wilderness Character Questions and Answers

Wilderness Character and its Application to Wilderness Stewardship, Session 2, Wednesday, March 14, 2012

Assessing Impacts to Wilderness Character

1. How do you address wilderness character issues associated with air quality/deposition issues (e.g., airborne contaminants, sulfur and nitrogen deposition)?

Air quality is an important part of wilderness character and that's why we include it in our monitoring framework; it's a key part of the scenic value of wilderness and airborne pollutants can directly impact the natural quality through impacts to soil, plants, and water. Agency policy generally directs wilderness managers to identify and protect air quality related values (AQRVs) in wilderness, and many wildernesses are Class I airsheds that have the highest level of protection. Law and agency policies provide requirements and guidance. For more detailed information, go to the Air Quality Toolbox on wilderness.net:

<http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=toolboxes&sec=air>. There is also an online Carhart course on air quality. Click here for more information:

<http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=elearning> – click on Natural Resource Management in Wilderness and scroll down.

2. How can we use the Natural quality, at the expense of the other three qualities, to justify active management in Wilderness when species type, number, and distribution under future climate conditions are unknown?

This is a highly value-laden subject, a classic “wicked” problem discussed in the webinar. Some people argue that wilderness should be the place where we watch change happen, including the change caused by climate change. Other people argue that we must protect the natural quality even if the actions taken degrade the other qualities. Neither view is completely correct, or completely wrong. This is exactly why each situation must be looked at carefully. The framework of wilderness character provides a comprehensive and systematic approach for looking at what is gained and what is lost by any proposed actions to restore elements of the natural quality, whether in the face of climate change or any other threat. Making our life more challenging, specific agency policies related to climate change response in wilderness do not yet exist. The Carhart Center, Leopold Institute, and others have joined efforts to create a “Climate Change Toolbox” on wilderness.net:

<http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=toolboxes&sec=climate#>

You will find agency guidance and strategies, other literature, and other resources related to climate change in wilderness.

Visitor Safety in Wilderness

1. Isn't there a trade off between safety and the importance of sense of independence and solitude?
2. How do we define "unsafe"?
3. When we are considering taking action in wilderness should safety be an overriding factor all the time?
4. Since the Wilderness Act indicates that wilderness should be managed in contrast with the nation at large, to what extent would we modify the undeveloped and primitive character of wilderness to protect visitors from natural hazards (including getting lost in the lava flows)? Aren't these natural hazards part of wilderness character? Obviously the probability, severity and number of people affected by the hazard come into play.

Webinar participants might have come away thinking that safety overrides all other concerns, and that cairns and other installations for safety are easily rationalized. This is far from the case. Generally, trail signs and markers are used to *keep visitors on trails*, primarily for resource protection purposes and sometimes secondarily to provide access. To this end, it is perfectly appropriate to place cairns on a designated route that is difficult to follow, such as over bedrock, tundra, or lava beds. In fact, it's a common practice in all agencies. It's the purpose of these features that confuses some people. While improved visitor safety is a product of these features, as well as resource protection, safety is not the reason they are constructed. Visitor safety cannot be allowed to trump wilderness character, and we must be careful about suggesting otherwise. Generally, we have no obligation to mitigate natural hazards in wilderness, nor should we. To do so compromises wilderness character and fundamentally changes the nature of wilderness recreation opportunities, which depend on primitive landscapes and inherently carry greater risks, personal responsibility, challenge, and self-discovery.

What is Wilderness Character

1. Provision of trails is seen as an impairment of wilderness character because it is asserted to diminish self-reliance and "opportunities" for SPUR (Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation). The questions I ask are "what is an opportunity" and "for what user group is the opportunity"? Low experience users will have an amazingly positive wilderness character on a trail, where they would have no real opportunity to experience wilderness without one.

The Wilderness Act requires that we provide "Outstanding Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation." Those opportunities are going to mean

something different in every wilderness. Developments, like trails, do negatively impact wilderness character. HOWEVER, it may be determined that a trail is the minimum necessary for the administration of the wilderness. That may mean that the trails are in place to protect the natural resources, are a necessary safety element, or are to provide recreation opportunities for some visitors. Managers of individual wilderness areas must assess the opportunities in their individual wilderness areas. Are there areas without trails that provide more primitive opportunities for those who seek that? Are there resource protection or safety issues that require trails? It's not black and white, but if we keep in mind that our goal is to preserve all of the qualities of wilderness character as much as possible, we shouldn't go too awry from the law.

Miscellaneous

1. Is there a precedent for management of rock climbing in the wilderness and/or dealing with remaining bolts in the wilderness?

Management of rock climbing and bolting in wilderness has been an issue for a long time and there is a substantial amount of experience and information available. Policy and guidance for rock climbing and bolting differ among agencies and specific wilderness areas. You'll need to check your agency policy and with your regional/state wilderness leads and/or your Carhart Center representative for agency-specific information.

2. At what threshold are NEPA and public involvement invoked when making wilderness tradeoff and perceived impact management decisions?

Federal actions in wilderness are no different than actions in other federally managed land. If the action may "significantly affect the quality of the human environment," it would be appropriate to involve the NEPA process.