

VISITOR USE MANAGEMENT in WILDERNESS

Protecting Opportunities for Solitude or Primitive and Unconfined Recreation in Wilderness Areas on the National Forests

Defining Solitude, Primitive and Unconfined Recreation

Section 2(c) of the Wilderness Act defines wilderness in part as a place that “has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation”. However, what the framers of the Wilderness Act specifically meant by solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation is not recorded in the legislative history of the Act. Fortunately early wilderness writings paint a rich picture about the type of experience envisioned in wilderness environments. So, let’s begin by exploring the concepts of solitude, primitive and unconfined recreation.

• *Solitude*. Solitude is defined as the “state of being alone or remote from society” (Webster’s Dictionary 1976). The precise meaning of solitude has been at the center of considerable debate among researchers and the public (see for example the compilation of essays prepared by the Washington Trails Association 1997). Meanings range from a lack of seeing other people, to privacy, to freedom from societal constraints and obligations, to freedom from management regulations (Hollenhorst and Jones 2001). Given the content of early wilderness writings, it is likely that solitude was viewed holistically, encompassing attributes such as separation from people and civilization, inspiration (an awakening of the senses, connection with the beauty of nature and the larger community of life) and a sense of timelessness (allowing one to let go of day-to-day obligations, go at one’s own pace, and spend time reflecting). Marshall (1930) expressed the notion of solitude as: *“For me, and for thousands with similar inclinations, the most important passion of life is the overpowering desire to escape periodically from the clutches of a mechanistic civilization. To us, the enjoyment of solitude, complete independence, and the beauty of undefiled panoramas is absolutely essential to happiness.”* Leopold (1949) wrote, *“Recreation is valuable in proportion to the intensity of its experiences, and to the degree to which it differs from and contrasts with workaday life.”*

• *Primitive recreation*. Primitive is defined as “pertaining to an early age; characterized by simplicity” (Webster’s Dictionary 1976). Primitive recreation in wilderness has largely been interpreted as travel by non-motorized and non-mechanical means (such as horse, foot, canoe) that reinforces the connection to our American heritage. However, primitive recreation also encompasses reliance on personal skills to travel and camp in an area, rather than reliance on facilities or outside help. Leopold (1949) expressed the sense of primitive recreation as: *“Wildernesses are first of all a series of sanctuaries for the primitive arts of wilderness travel, especially canoeing and packing.”* Marshall wrote that *“a wilderness journey provides the ideal conditions for developing physical hardiness. If he gets into trouble he must get himself out of it or take the consequences”* (quoted from Zahniser 1956).

• *Unconfined recreation*. Unconfined means “not kept within limits” and encompasses attributes such as self-discovery, exploration, and freedom from societal or managerial controls (Lucas 1983, Nash 1996, Hendeo and Dawson 2002). The idea here is to provide opportunities for the physical and mental challenges associated with adventure and self direction as well as the personal growth that results from facing and overcoming obstacles (Dustin and McAvoy 2000, Borrie 2000).

Leopold (1949) addressed the importance of opportunities for unconfined recreation when he wrote, *“I am glad I shall never be young without wild country to be young in. Of what avail are forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map.”* Marshall (1937) wrote passionately about the adventure and challenge of primitive, unconfined environments: *“To countless people the wilderness provides the ultimate delight because it combines the thrills of jeopardy and beauty. It is the last stand for that glorious adventure into the physically unknown.”*

It must be acknowledged that the complexity of human experiences suggests that additional factors contribute in known and unknown ways to the experience of solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation. Factors largely beyond the control and influence of managers may influence wilderness experiences, including characteristics of the physical landscape, the presence of certain animals (such as grizzly bears), local weather, group dynamics, and the skills and knowledge an individual brings to the experience. Further research is needed to more fully understand the meaning of solitude, primitive and unconfined recreation within the wilderness context, particularly how managerial actions distract from or enhance the opportunities available. That said, enough is known about these concepts for wilderness managers to at least address those factors they do control or influence (e.g. use levels, distribution of use, level of development inside and outside of wilderness, kinds of regulations imposed) so that the requirement of the Wilderness Act to provide “outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation” is met.