Wasteland, Wilderness, or Workplace: Perceiving and Preserving the Apostle Islands

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> What must have been once a far more striking and characteristic landscape of dark coniferous original forest growth has been obliterated by the axe followed by fire.... The ecological conditions have been so violently disturbed that probably never could they be more than remotely reproduced.[1]

This was the judgment of the National Park Service (NPS) representative who was sent in 1930 to assess the suitability of the Apostle Islands for national park designation. Lest there be any doubt, Harlan Kelsey continued,

> The hand of man has mercilessly destroyed [the islands'] virgin beauty, and, therefore, a largely controlling element as outstanding national park material ... the project does not meet National Park Service standards.[2]

Seventy-three years later, it seems that Kelsey was badly mistaken. By the 1960s, the island forests had grown back. In 1970, in the midst of a national environmental awakening, Congress created Apostle Islands National Lakeshore. Currently, NPS is conducting a wilderness suitability study to determine how much of the park should be included in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

The history of wilderness at the Apostle Islands turns the prevailing narrative of American environmental history on its head. Environmental historians usually explain America's past as a tale of how misguided personal ambition and unchecked industrial capitalism have resulted in a degraded modern environment. This history has helped to make wilderness a precious commodity in the early 21st century. At the Apostle Islands, though, the traditional story is turned upside down. The past is denuded, scarred by logging and other human activity, the present seemingly a wilderness.

One result of this backward narrative is that modern perceptions of wilderness seem to threaten the visible evidence of the islands' human past. Today's Apostle Islands, seemingly so wild, are the product of intricately connected processes of human and natural history. This history includes the experiences of men and women living, and making a living, in a challenging environment.

An archipelago of 22 islands in Lake Superior, the Apostle Islands lie off the northern tip of Wisconsin. Although the Apostles provided a stage for French fur trade and missionary activity since the 1700s, and a home for Ojibwe and other native groups for far longer, the extractive industries that so marked the islands intensified with the opening of Lake Superior to large-scale commerce in the 1850s. Island residents fished, farmed, quarried the region's red sandstone, and participated in a buoyant tourist economy throughout the late 19th century. Without question, though, logging had the greatest impact on island landscapes: nearly all of the islands were logged at one time or another.

How are we to understand this human history, these human stories, in a place that today seems wild? The history of logging and farming in the islands is every bit as important as ecological succession in the creation of the

modern landscape. Land use patterns dictated by extractive industries and settlement shape the way that the landscape appears today. The wilderness itself has a history, one created by intertwined human and ecological processes.

Natural and cultural history have combined to shape landscape patterns on a large scale at Outer Island. The Schroeder Lumber Company established a logging camp on the island in 1923. Logging operations there were extensive: the camp housed over two hundred lumberjacks who built a narrow-gauge railroad to transport equipment and logs. Between 1924 and 1930, Schroeder removed an estimated 40 million board feet of lumber from the island. Logging operations on Outer ceased by 1931; over the next decade, fires swept across the southern, logged-over portions of the island, fueled by the slash piles left behind by loggers. These fires did not burn on the northern, unlogged portion of the island. Today, evidence of Outer Island's human history is clear only to those who know what to look for: the old railroad grade now serves as a trail carrying unsuspecting visitors through a seemingly pristine forest, but a close examination of the vegetation pattern reveals a clear break between the 60-year-old second-growth forest on the southern half of the island and mature northern hardwood forest in the north.[3]

This kind of connection between natural and cultural history can be found on a much more intricate scale at Sand Island, the only island within the park that provided a home for a year-round community. At its height around 1910, the Sand Island settlement had about 75 residents, primarily Norwegian immigrant families who participated in a mixed economy that balanced fishing, farming, logging, and tourism. The community boasted a one-room schoolhouse, a post office, a cooperative store, and a road. By the 1920s, though, the community was already in decline, primarily because economic opportunities for the second generation of island residents were so limited. In 1944, the last year-round residents left the island. Some of the homes and farms fell into disrepair, others were converted into summer homes. The fields gradually shrank as woody plants grew in from the margins, and the apple trees disappeared as the forest grew up around them. But to view this transition, this returning of the wilderness to Sand Island, as only a result of ecological succession, as purely a natural and not a human phenomena, misses an essential part of the process.

Consider what is happening to the fields at Burt Hill's farm on the island's southeastern corner. In the 1920s and 1930s, Hill cleared several acres of forest to expand his dairying operations. When maintenance of these fields stopped, woody vegetation moved in from the old boundaries, disregarding the barbed wire fence that Hill installed to mark the edge of the cleared land. In some areas of the clearing, willow, hawthorn, mountain ash, and serviceberry have moved into the meadow in straight, regular lines, following the drainage ditches that Hill dug when he expanded his fields.[4]

The impact of human choices made 60 or 100 years ago can be found all over Sand Island. The Norings were the last family to live on the island year-round; now, all that remains of their homestead are rows of moldering logs. But the spruce trees they transplanted to the northeastern side of their house to form a windbreak still mark the site of their home, as do lilac bushes that Bergitt Noring planted by the side of the house. Nature alone cannot explain the way that Sand Island looks today; history—the choices of individual men and women—helped create this landscape, too.[5]

Environmental historians do not have an accurate term to explain what has happened at Sand Island over the past century. Terms like "exploitation," "degradation," and "destruction" are usually used to describe the impact of American industrial activity on the landscape; terms like "healing" and "recovery" are employed to characterize the return of wilderness characteristics to a once-degraded place. These terms might apply to Outer Island, where a large lumber company logged virgin forest, leaving behind ugly piles of slash, refuse, and fuel for forest fires.

But what about at Sand Island? Is it right

to characterize the choices of Burt Hill or Bergitt Noring in this way? Were their decisions to plant apple orchards or lilac bushes acts of destruction and degradation? If not, then perhaps "recovery" is not the correct word to explain what has happened to the Sand Island landscapes that their lives helped to shape. We prefer the term "rewilding."

Rewilding landscapes should be interpreted as evidence neither of past human abuse nor of triumphant wild nature, but rather as evidence of the tightly intertwined processes of natural and cultural history. Rewilding points toward a narrative that explains the seemingly denuded past and pristine present of places such as the Apostle Islands, but does so without characterizing any human activity as a wound in need of recovery. Human activity certainly can be destructive and degrading, but it isn't necessarily so. The Apostle Islands are becoming wild again primarily because of human choices—the choices made by the Hills and Norings to leave Sand Island, but also the choice to turn the islands into national park, to allow some kinds of activity but not others. The narrative of rewilding helps explain human action that is not always destructive and exploitative, as well as the implicit human involvement in the return of the wild to the Apostle Islands.

Federal agencies charged with overseeing wilderness areas struggle to manage rewilding landscapes like those of the Apostles. To guide individual park managers in the interpretation of legislative mandates, NPS has produced a set of management policies, applicable nationwide. Do these policies have room for wild places with human pasts? One reading would seem to indicate that wilderness designation is not inconsistent with preservation of human history:

> Cultural resources that have been included within wilderness will be preserved and maintained according to the pertinent laws and policies governing cultural resources, using management methods that are consistent with the preservation of wilderness character and values.[6]

However, the same document directs,

> The Service will re-establish natural functions and processes in human-disturbed components of natural systems ... [and] will seek to return human-disturbed areas to the natural conditions and processes characteristic of the ecological zone.... Efforts may include, for example ... [r]emoval of contaminants and non-historic structures or facilities....[7]

Passages such as this call into question the place of cultural resources in the midst of a wilderness. Reconciling the contradictions inherent in these mandates will be the key to successfully preserving and interpreting these rewilding islands. How can the agency reconcile these seemingly contradictory imperatives?

NPS management policies do provide some guidelines in reconciling these contradictions. In most circumstances, the decision to treat a site as a cultural resource is guided by the standards of the National Historic Preservation Act. If a site meets National Register criteria, it merits preservation; if not, it is to be removed, along with other "contaminants."

But using National Register status as a litmus test presents its own suite of problems. To state that those traces of human occupation listed on the Register are resources to be preserved, while those not listed are contaminants to be obliterated, is to freeze the interpretation of a site's history to that prevailing at the time of wilderness designation. The history of the National Park System is replete with examples of the rash, and later regretted, removal of features thought by one era to be without significance.

It also forces us to privilege some human stories over others. Again, Sand Island can serve as an example. The West Bay Club, an Adirondack-style lodge, was built in 1911 as hunting and fishing retreat for wealthy St. Paul businessmen. When evidence was found showing it had been designed by the influential architect Henry Buechner, the building

was ruled eligible for the National Register as "the work of a master." But across the island is another summer home: less grand, yet to many eyes, more graceful. The small cottage known as "Plenty Charm" was built in 1943 for a schoolteacher named Gertrude Wellisch by a local carpenter named Clyde Nylen. Both Wellisch and Nylen are interesting characters in their own right. Wellisch was a pioneer in her own way, occupying the cabin with the woman who was her life partner. Although lacking Buechner's fame, Swedish immigrant Nylen was locally renowned as a carpenter of unmatched intuitive skill; a half-century after his death, people still speak of his uncanny way with wood. And though unschooled in classical architecture, Nylen built for Wellisch a cabin of extraordinary elegance that fits harmoniously into its surroundings, and never fails to elicit exclamations of admiration from those who encounter it.

However, it has been ruled that Plenty Charm does not meet National Register criteria. Will NPS management policies mandate obliteration of this embodiment of Clyde Nylen's work and Gertrude Wellisch's life? And if such action is taken, will future generations agree with the decision?

Why does NPS employ such rigid policies of wilderness management? Two reasons suggest themselves. First, the definition of wilderness advanced in the 1964 legislation, and the management policies that have resulted from it, is predicated on the standard narrative of environmental history, on the myth of the pristine past and the degraded present. Evident human use—especially modern, Anglo American, use—necessarily degrades wilderness. Scholars from a wide variety of fields have started to tear down this standard narrative. Native Americans everywhere consciously shaped their environments with their agricultural practices, their use of fire, and their residential patterns. Scholars have also analyzed the cultural construction of wilderness. Places such as the Apostles—where the present is more wild than the past—complicate this picture still further. Although the traditional narrative of environmental history has begun to change, the management policies established to tell this story have been slow to catch up.

A second reason NPS employs a rigid definition of wilderness is its need for what might be called a "legible landscape." James Scott, in his book *Seeing Like a State*, uses the concept of legibility to explain practices as diverse as the creation of permanent last names and the codification of property division. Scott explains these as a part "of the state's attempt to make a society legible, to arrange the population in ways that simplified ... classic state functions...."[8] The same logic can be applied to wilderness management. The federal government has rigidly specified the way that a wilderness should look and feel so that wilderness management can be consistent across federal lands, no matter the local conditions in any specific place. Such a management policy is easily applied—and the environment thereby more easily controlled.

Concepts such as narrative constructs and legible landscapes might sound abstract, but they have on-the-ground consequences at the Apostle Islands as NPS conducts its first wilderness suitability study in over two decades. Park managers need to decide which, if any, islands will be recommended for designation as wilderness. Whether Sand Island is included will dictate what NPS managers can do there.

Among the wilderness designation alternatives currently under consideration is one that excludes all of Sand, Basswood, and Long islands, along with small portions of several other islands, from wilderness status. This would still confer wilderness designation upon about 80 percent of the park's land area, yet provide maximum flexibility in the preservation and interpretation of a broad cross-section of the islands' cultural features.

Under currently prevailing interpretations of the Wilderness Act, this scheme may provide the most satisfactory resolution of the conflicting mandates in the case of the Apostle Islands. However, even under this plan, virtually every island will still have a mix of natural and cultural resources to manage and preserve. Moreover, at other park areas faced with similar dilemmas, it may not be possible to

draw such convenient boundaries. In the long run, it seems clear that NPS must work toward a wilderness management policy that recognizes the interconnections between natural and cultural history, rather than placing boundaries between them.

Endnotes

1. Harlan Kelsey to Horace M. Albright, January 20, 1931, National Archives, Record Group 79, Box 2822, Entry 7, proposed national parks, 0-32.
2. Ibid.
3. Mary T. Bell, *Cutting Across Time: Logging, Rafting, and Milling the Forests of Lake Superior* (Schroeder, Minn.: Schroeder Area Historical Society, 1999); Aerial photos, Outer Island.
4. John Harrington, "Shaw Farm vegetation survey," University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1982, in Apostle Islands National Lakeshore (APIS) Library; APIS Library; Emmet J. Judziewicz and Rudy G. Koch, "Flora and vegetation of the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore and Madeline Island, Ashland and Bayfield counties, Wisconsin," *Michigan Botanist 32:2* (1993), p. 110.
5. William B. Tishler, Arnold A. Alanen, and George Thompson, "Early agricultural development on the Apostle Islands," (Madison: Apostle Islands National Lakeshore/Department of Landscape Architecture, University of Wisconsin, 1984).
6. National Park Service, *Management Policies 2001* (Washington, D.C.: NPS), section 6.3.8.
7. Ibid., section 4.1.5.
8. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 2.