

Extending the Wilderness Concept as a Cultural Resource

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Introduction

Wilderness areas, “wild” places, and landscapes evoking wilderness experiences are the natural environments at the core of many protected area systems. In this paper we explore how people from different cultures view these same wild places and the importance to protected area managers of including an understanding of cultural processes in wilderness management frameworks. Protected area management in New Zealand has been referred to as being about “parks for the people.” In the United States, similar sentiments, espoused in policy, highlight the importance and richness of demonstrating cultural equity in park management. Internationally, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Man and the Biosphere (MAB) reserves program provides management mandates to “promote and demonstrate the balanced relationship between people and nature.” An individual’s culture affects his or her perception of landscapes, thus mediating behavior and actions and so playing an important role in the ability of managers to manage and mitigate biophysical impacts. The principle of ecological and social resilience, in integrated social–ecological systems, underlies some cultural perspectives toward wild places. Practices based on resilience, found in a range of cultural beliefs, are significant for the sustainable management of protected areas. We present some preliminary findings on cultural understanding of natural environments that highlight the need for park managers to think about wilderness as a cultural resource as well as a natural resource.

The Dominant Culture of Wilderness

Wilderness areas, wild places, and the wilderness experience in countries such as the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand have a strong cultural meaning. The dominant Eurocentric view of wilderness, widely documented (Nash 1973) and enshrined in the United States Wilderness Act of 1964, harks back to a pioneering spirit, a pristine environment void of humanity, and a back-to-basics outdoor recreation that in part could be considered a reflection of a national psyche. This dominant idea of wilderness is therefore a strongly cultural concept—Callicott (2000) refers to the wilderness idea as being ethnocentric. The prevailing notion of wilderness has been the subject of an ongoing research agenda with numerous management strategies and techniques aimed at

protecting, enhancing, and managing legislated Wilderness. The National Wilderness Research Conference, held in Fort Collins, Colorado, in 1985 (Lucas 1987), summarized the efforts to understand wilderness as a recreation resource and the biophysical conditions, sociological understanding, and management approaches associated with that resource. This view of wilderness management was perpetuated, though on a foundation of more sophisticated science, in a follow-up meeting, the Wilderness Science in a Time of Change Conference, held in Missoula, Montana, in 1999 (Cole et al. 2000). The post-colonial Westernized view of wilderness is valid, and has a strong science base supporting it, and the places identified as wilderness by its proponents deserve protection and are important as a cultural resource.

A variation on the single purist definition of wilderness à la the U.S. Wilderness Act is

that there are different places that are associated with wilderness according to an individual's perception of the environment. This has led to the idea of multiple perceptions of wilderness, devised as a methodology in New Zealand for mapping the variation in areas that elicit a wilderness experience for back-country users (Kliskey 1994). Other departures from the purist or received wilderness idea (Callicott 2000) have considered alternative environments, for example urban wilderness (Wali et al. 2003), and subterranean or marine places that elicit a wilderness experience (Smith and Watson 1979; Barr 2001). Thus new boundaries in wilderness are possible so that wild places and wilderness experiences are not restricted to terrestrial environments or the land base defined as the National Wilderness System of the United States. These departures are, however, variations on the same theme, since the major components of the wilderness experience are still rooted in the dominant Western cultural view of wilderness that rests on a dualistic idea of nature—the cultural environment being separate from the natural environment. However, there is an increasing awareness that people can be, as they often have been, part of wild places. This includes suggestions that areas perceived as pristine wilderness are frequently in fact complex systems that integrate social and ecological characteristics (e.g., Flanagan 1992; Martin and Szuter 1999).

Alternative Cultural Views of Wild Places

The dominating view of wilderness and its management has been interspersed with contrasting ideas (Colchester 1997) that emphasize alternative cultural notions of wilderness, wild places, and the wilderness experience. These “other” notions of wilderness should inform cultural resource management if resource managers are to encompass the richness of diversity in users of natural environments. For example, the wild expanses of Alaska, whether delineated and protected as wilderness or not, define a range of relationships that cultures and communities have with natural environments (Alessa and Watson

2002). Traditional and subsistence use by indigenous people and by rural Alaskans of the wilderness resource in Alaska is recognized in the National Wilderness Preservation System, acknowledging, whether consciously or not, the cultural nature of these areas. This is apparently at odds with the remainder of the wilderness system, in the lower 48 states of the U.S., where traditional values associated with lands protected as wilderness have been ignored (Alessa and Watson 2002). Wilderness in the Circumpolar North is not empty or excluded from permanent human activity—rather it is a wilderness for work rather than play.

Numerous indigenous cultures with Earth-based beliefs view the human-nature relationship holistically rather than dualistically (Colchester 1997). These viewpoints see society as inseparable from the natural world, and indeed many of the wilderness areas that people from Western cultures consider to be “empty of civilization” are considered by indigenous people as part of their everyday life—both physically and spiritually. In Australia the post-colonial view of wilderness areas as *terra nullius*, or an empty land, is considered a fantasy by Aboriginal people for whom the concept has the effect of denying their cultural relationship with those landscapes (Langton 1998). These are homelands that are “known and loved, sung and recounted, owned and cared for to promote life” (Rose 1996).

In *Aotearoa* (New Zealand), the indigenous Maori similarly view the natural environments that comprise the country's protected area system as landscapes with which they as a people have long-standing generational ties and intimate connection (*wahakapapa*, or genealogical association) with—we are one with the world in which we live. These areas may have traditionally been considered *mahinga kai*, or a food-gathering area. Management of natural areas by Maori (and is gradually becoming again) based on concepts of *mauri* (life force of the natural world), *tapu* (respect for sacredness), *whanaungatanga* (interaction with the environment as kin), *manaakitanga* (care and hos-

pitality), and *kaitiakitanga* (guardianship and responsibility for a place; Patterson 1994). Thus wild places can be harvested from, provided that these traditional virtues are adhered to. So wilderness is a dynamic, multifaceted cultural concept from which the dominant view and approach toward management can learn.

Resilience in Cultural Views of Wild Places

A distinguishing feature of the cultural viewpoint of these indigenous understandings of wild places is the practice of linked systems of people with nature, or what are contemporarily referred to as “social–ecological systems” (Berkes and Folke 1998). The view that wild places are social–ecological systems, as Aboriginals, Maori, and others inherently believe, incorporates the concept of resilience—the capacity of ecosystems and

human communities to absorb disturbance and recover from such perturbation (Folke et al. 2002). Recent work has shown that visitors to protected areas who perceive high ecosystem resilience in coastal ecosystems exhibited significantly more depreciative behavior than those who perceived low ecosystem resilience (Alessa et al., in press). So building social–ecological resilience requires an understanding of ecosystems that incorporates the knowledge of local users, including the long-standing knowledge of indigenous societies and local communities. We represent this as a conceptual model (Figure 1) where the human/cultural component of the system interacts dynamically with the biophysical/ecological component and in which management may intercede in adjusting this interaction. Such management processes are inherently dependent on the values, perceptions, and understandings of people and their result-

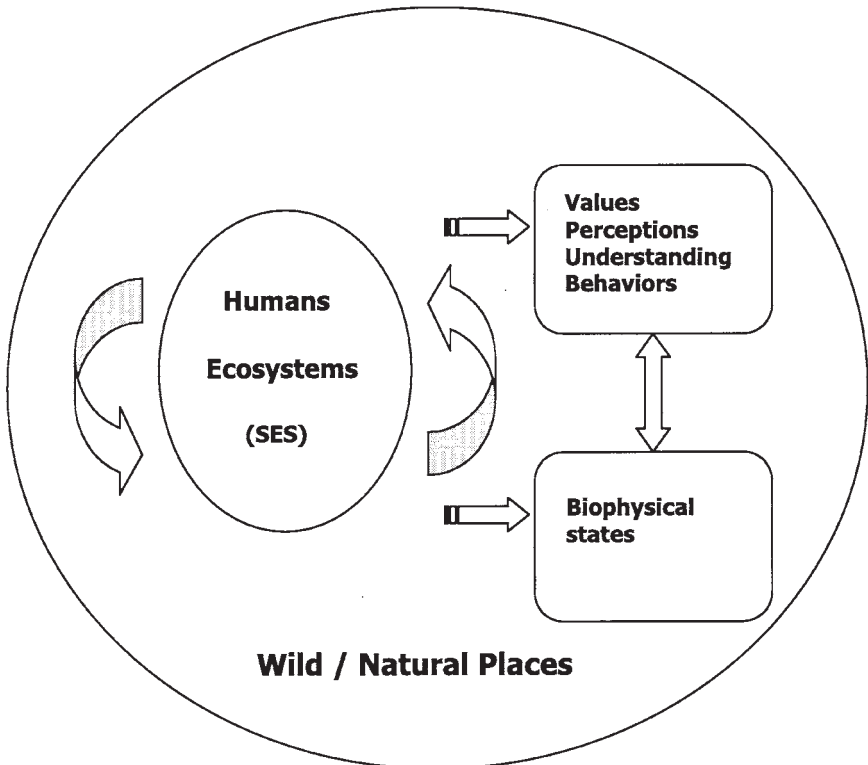


Figure 1. Conceptual model of wild places as a social–ecological system

ant behaviors with respect to potential biophysical states of the environment.

We documented the knowledge of people from a Maori *iwi* (tribe) in New Zealand in order to identify similarities and contrast differences in values and perceptions of natural environments by local indigenous users of wild places. Using focal group discussions and open-ended questionnaires, the following perceptions, values, and understandings were elicited from 12 respondents:

- Natural environments important to them;
- Images these environments evoke;
- Reasons for going to these environments;
- Activities carried out in these environments;
- Experiences or feelings that arise from being in these environments;
- Factors that influence their experiences in these environments;
- Factors that threaten their experiences in these environments; and
- Ways of minimizing these threats to their experiences.

These perceptions, values, and understandings of indigenous people toward the natural environment were compared with the dominant wilderness view (e.g., Lucas 1987; Cole et al. 2000). There were a number of broad similarities in images of natural environments between the indigenous sample and the dominant wilderness view, including forests, lakes, rivers, wildlife, and tranquility, indicating some consistency in these two views. However, specific points of difference were the recognition of *whakapapa* (an individual's inherent connection to a place), *mauri* (life force within elements of a place), and *mahinga kai* (traditional food-gathering places) in the Maori view. Major reasons for being in natural environments that accorded with the Maori view only included the life essence of elements of the environment, reminders of identity and ancestry, and a strong wish to undertake traditional food gathering. There were numerous activities in common between the Maori view and the dominant wilderness view, including fishing, recreation, wildlife

watching, meeting with friends, and spiritual activities. An activity that accorded strongly with the Maori view was sharing and meeting with families. Although this is also an activity that is consistent with the dominant wilderness view, it tends to be emphasized less. Specific activities consistent with the Maori view but not the dominant wilderness view included gathering food and greeting ancestors. Awareness of ecosystems, therapeutic feelings, and spiritual renewal were experiences realized in natural environments consistent with both Maori and dominant wilderness views, while connection to the world, awareness of the past, *mana* (pride in places as home), and sadness at the health of places were experiences that were important in the Maori view but not obvious in the dominant wilderness view.

Important influences on experiences of natural environments that were specific in the Maori view were the *mauri* (life-giving force of a place) and the oral knowledge and customs. There were several threats to the experiences of natural environments that both views recognized, including increasing recreational and tourism use, loss of biodiversity, and encroaching resource extraction. Specific threats in the Maori view included lack of tribal consultation (although this could be compared with lack of local community consultation in the dominant wilderness view), legislation that restricts traditional food gathering, and sickness (biophysical and spiritual) of a place. There were numerous suggested ways of minimizing threats to natural environments that were common to both views, including restricting recreational use, protection of biodiversity, restoration of habitat and ecosystems, and increased education and research. Approaches to minimizing threats that were specific to the Maori view included acknowledging customary food gathering in legislation, and tribal involvement in management.

Implications

These results highlight contemporary views of Maori with respect to natural environments and contrast how these differ from the dominant wilderness view. Notably con-

Wilderness and Wildness

cepts of *mahinga kai* (food gathering), *mauri* (life force), *whakapapa* (genealogical tie to the land), and *whanaungatanga* (kinship and family activity with the land) set the Maori view apart from the dominant wilderness view. These concepts are all consistent with the customary virtues of Maori toward the environment (Patterson 1994). We acknowledge the small sample size used in this pilot study and from which these exploratory results have been derived. Yet the results indicate a valuable direction for research coupled to management and a larger study is now in progress that will further explore Maori views toward natural environments and compare and include Alaskan Native views using more substantial sample sizes.

The concepts that are uniquely identified above as Maori are ones that tightly intermesh people with ecosystems, consistent with viewing wild places as social-ecological systems (Figure 1). Such cultural concepts and this cultural-ecological integration can, we believe, strongly accommodate resilience in the management of wild places. This knowledge of values, understanding, and percep-

tions is likely to be a valuable tool in preventing depreciative behavior (Alessa et al., in press). The value in treating wild places as social-ecological systems lies in the integration of values, perceptions, and understandings of local communities (indigenous and rural societies) with biophysical knowledge to identify vulnerable ecosystems and social systems (Figure 2). In ecosystem management we have to accommodate both natural variability and human activities (the source of stress in a system) and so we are constantly dealing with social and biophysical change as multiple stressors in social-ecological systems. Current approaches are largely missing an important component by focusing predominantly on highly valued areas. The awareness and incorporation of alternative cultural views of natural environments are necessary if wilderness management approaches are to include vulnerable social systems and indigenous or local rural groups, and therefore be effective for high-risk systems, both social and ecological (Figure 2). We reiterate Flanagan's (1992) recognition of the need for wilderness to be inherently important to all people, transcending its bio-

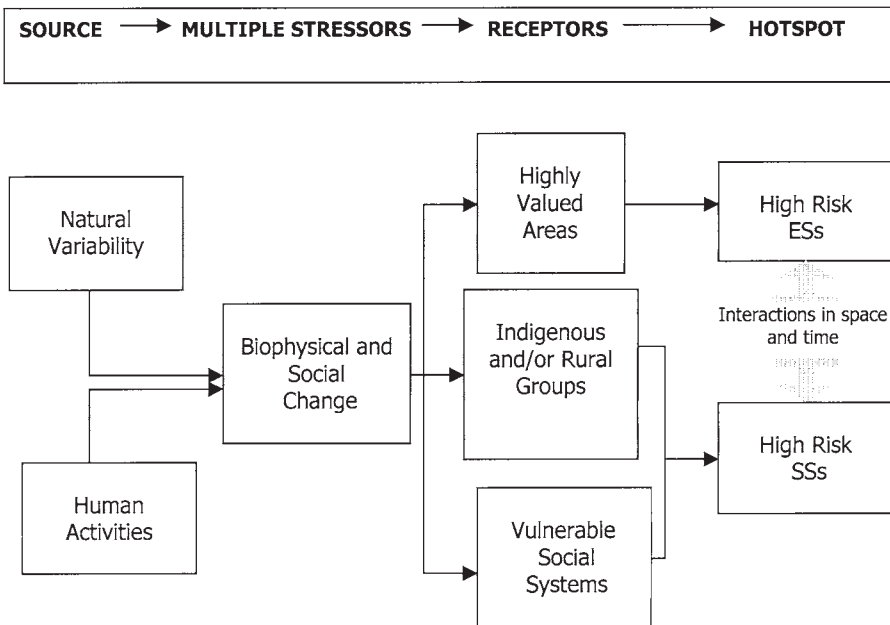


Figure 2. Conceptual model for resilience and impacts in social-ecological systems of wild places

physical boundaries, a step that will only happen when we cease to see wilderness as something separate from ourselves, and recognize that it is an integral aspect of our individuality and our collective societal existence, and that we are an integral part of wilderness.

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Wilderness and Wildness

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