

“True” Wilderness Preservation: Looking Forward to a Better Nature

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Wilderness management needs to adopt a new philosophy in order to better manage the lands as they were meant to be. Today’s wilderness areas are dominated by values that oppose those originally set forth within the Wilderness Act of 1964. Management has been confounded by its own severe lack of humility and restraint, which is encouraged by advancements in the science of landscape-scale management. The United States’ wildernesses are on a downward trend as the symbolic value, wilderness character, wildness, naturalness, and untrammled values continually diminish with intentional, hands-on, intensive management. In order for this problem to be solved, our current wilderness management system needs to adopt the recommendations within *true* wilderness philosophy.

True wilderness preservation is a culmination of several current wilderness philosophy ideas with a slight alteration to give the idea a more concrete practical application. First, the “symbolic values [surrounding wilderness management] need to be legitimized” (Cole 2005, 23). Symbolic value is the essential foundation to wilderness preservation in the Lower Forty-eight, and has been slowly belittled and forgotten. Legitimizing the symbolism of wilderness preservation will allow it to regain its full power and influence. Next, an in-depth discussion of the meaning and key definitions within the Wilderness Act of 1964 will be presented. These are the components, which can be fully and truly realized only after the symbolic value has been restored to its original priority. Lastly, a concrete starting place for wilderness preservation will be defined.

The symbolic value of wilderness needs to be the first priority of wilderness management. It is not new and is one of the main tenets of those who created the Wilderness Act of 1964, and will empower wilderness character and the correct starting place for wilderness preservation. Howard Zahniser stated “we deeply need the humility to know ourselves as the dependant members of a great community of life . . . to know the wilderness is to know a profound humility, to recognize one’s littleness, to sense dependence and interdependence, indebtedness, and responsibility” (Zahniser 1957, 37). Here Zahniser encapsulates the symbolic value concept. Wilderness is not only a set of physical characteristics, but also a gesture by humans to show humility, respect, and restraint for the natural world around them through actively allowing tracts of land to remain out of reach from intentional human manipulation. As Kaye states, “sacrifice for an ideal is the strongest gesture of respect. . . . Zahniser’s words suggest that chief among our criteria should be the purpose of the action, the spirit in which it is carried out, and the effects it will have on our way of thinking” (Kaye 2000).

Sacrificing for ideal wilderness preservation—an act of humility, restraint, and respect—is not being carried out within our current wilderness management system. Achieving this symbolic value is not an end result of proper wilderness management, but rather the means (Cole 2005) and a starting place. “The prominence of the word untrammled as a descriptor of the wilderness ideal suggests that the primary general symbolic value of wilderness is as a symbol of human-environment relationship characterized by restraint and humility”

(Cole 2005, 23). *True* wilderness preservation recommends that symbolic value be the first priority and most important guiding principle of wilderness management.

The widespread intentional manipulations of our lands within the wilderness preservation system are severely undermining the symbolic value of wilderness. "The arrogance of science, the belief that we know enough to correct problems created by earlier managers, or to compensate for environmental impacts, is often considered to be a hallmark of modern society" (Cole 2005, 25). Encouraged by increasing scientific research and knowledge, managers are becoming less humble in their decisions by allowing manipulation to continue. The current designation of 'natural' is an arbitrarily desired social distinction with significant limitations. First, managers need to fully comprehend the range of natural variability and the limitations of historical conditions (Landres et al. 1999). There is still a well-deserved debate over how applied historical ecology should be used for widespread land management (Landres et al. 1999). Next, Swetnam et al. (1999) explain that (1) our understanding of the range of natural variation is still assumption laden and incomplete, (2) several well documented cases have shown that assumptions can highly distort the quality and accuracy of the data, and (3) that "ultimately, decisions about 'desired' conditions, and what is 'natural' are inherently subjective and value laden" (p. 1202). Third, management agencies are experiencing difficulty in accessing or obtaining all the necessary data for an informed decision. Fire management and forecasting is a good illustration of where the problem of available data is apparent (Miller and Landres 2004; Miller and Parsons 2004). Lastly, "natural" does not include historical anthropogenic influence such as indigenous ignitions that most likely have shaped areas we now consider "natural" (Arno et al. 1997).

The increasing knowledge base surrounding wilderness and large-scale land management is useful, but should not be applied to trammeling our wilderness areas. Managers are unaware of all the factors that influence decisions and the unforeseen impacts of said decisions. Believing that we as a species are omniscient and therefore can restore poorly understood historic decisions is not appropriate in wilderness. Within those sacred boundaries we must be humble and accept that we are not omniscient and could be unable to restore a system to a certain state. Instead, this growing knowledge base needs to be applied to the areas surrounding wilderness, increasing their qualities as natural buffers. The constant trammeling through manipulation is decreasing the wildness of the wilderness system. Each time a manager allows a trammel to occur the strength of the symbolic value is decreased. If this continues, soon we will not be able to comprehend this idea, for it will be lost to the historians.

The symbolic value of wilderness is central to the wilderness idea and the philosophical justifications for its preservation (Cole 2005; Kaye). If managers continue to degrade this concept, the spirit of the Wilderness Act will vanish (Cole 2005). Within *true* wilderness philosophy, symbolic value is a central theme, embodying the need to show respect, restraint, and humility when agencies decide how to properly manage wilderness areas. Symbolic value and the related ethical values need to be accepted. Decisions should not be made simply by empirical values, but through ethical values, which give the symbolic value its needed foundation. This idea of symbolic value and what it entails is essential to keep in the forefront when reading the Wilderness Act and defining its key terms.

In order to facilitate the management of symbolic value, *true* wilderness preservation needs to be implemented through a diachronic lens. Federal agencies' currently use a wilderness concept with a synchronic view. The agencies usually look for the most pristine and natural areas for wilderness designation, only to become frustrated by the widespread impact of our species. This may have been more appropriate in the past, but it is not today. A diachronic approach is better suited. Here we have the idea that it is not the current state of wilderness, but its potential to enrich the symbolic value, wildness, and untrammelled qualities that are important. The desired future state is unknown to the managers, it is not a relapse into historic conditions, but rather an opportunity for the land to develop and evolve on its own. A diachronic path would recognize lands that need to be preserved, whether they are highly affected or not at all by humans, and designate them wildernesses because of their potential to enrich all the qualifying factors: "wilderness character," "natural conditions," "untrammelled," "unimpaired," and so forth. When these factors are met at a high standard, the overall symbolic value of the wilderness is also increased.

Within the range of key qualifiers in the Wilderness Act of 1964, "wilderness character" is the most important. It embodies the overall objective definition of wilderness, and contains many keystone qualifiers such as "natural conditions" and "untrammelled." In order for wilderness character to be complete, each of the terms comprising this subset of qualifiers will need to be fully realized. If these qualifiers are not properly understood then the concept of wilderness character will be corrupt. "The Wilderness Act does impose a general requirement . . . to manage wilderness areas so as to preserve the land's wilderness character" (USDC 2007, 6). The symbolic value is the modern application of the appropriate approach (hands-off management) needed to fully realize "wilderness character."

True wilderness recommends that "untrammelled" be defined as un-hobbled, or without any significant, intentional direct manipulation by humans. Untrammelled is closely connected to the symbolic value of wilderness. Wildness has become a synonym for untrammelled since both suggest "freedom from human control rather than lack of human influence" (Cole 2000, 5). If an area is untrammelled, then the symbolic value of leaving the area undisturbed and not manipulated is being brought about successfully. "The fundamental character [symbolic value] of wilderness is to be free from human manipulation" (Worf 1997, 30).

"Natural conditions" is currently understood to "mean that the influence of post-Columbian peoples should be generally absent" (Cole 2000, 5) and that it captures "this biological sense of wilderness" (Landres et al. 2000, 377). Within current wilderness management managers are trying to use science to ecologically restore wilderness ecosystems to their historic levels. Almost all of the time, this involves some sort of trammeling or direct manipulation of the wilderness ecosystem. In turn, every time a manager tries to manipulate the system, the overall symbolic value and wilderness character are detrimentally affected. The most important components of *true* wilderness preservation are maintaining the symbolic value of an area by humbling restraining ourselves to keep the area untrammelled by human forces.

Where humans fit into the sliding scale of "natural" becomes a heated point of contention for wilderness managers. *True* wilderness preservation's classification of humans as "natural" becomes a bridge between the social and natural disconnect between humans and

nature. Biologically humans are natural; socially we remove ourselves from wilderness in order to omit our direct manipulative influence. The supposed dualism between wilderness and humans is a social, not a biological, phenomenon. *True* wilderness works to clarify this confusion by emphasizing that we as a social species are making the humble gesture to restrain ourselves from certain areas we socially designate as wilderness. This further explains *true* wilderness preservation's recommendation that humans may be allowed in the wilderness ecosystem as a biological agent (even though there needs to be some in-depth discussion on the definition of "primitive"), but human trammeling (even though biologically natural) is not allowed in wilderness for social reasons.

Determining "natural conditions" under *true* wilderness preservation is a difficult task because it does not follow our current assumption within society. First, under *true* wilderness preservation humans are considered natural. This includes human-related things such as migration of invasive species on cargo ships or global warming. Even though humans are considered natural, *true* wilderness preservation still depends on the social act of humans to humbly not manipulate the wilderness systems or degrade the values surrounding its preservation. Wilderness is a social distinction, not a natural one. Therefore our definitions of "natural conditions" are also social distinctions. Invasive species are a good example to explore this logic. Certain species were introduced by humans and are currently considered unnatural to their new environments. *True* wilderness preservation recognizes that their mode of transportation by human-made mechanical means is natural, but makes two social distinctions: (1) that in other non-wilderness areas we view them as unnatural and/or harmful, and (2) even though distinction one has a negative connotation we humbly allow for the wilderness ecosystem to deal with the naturally immigrated species on its own. Since under *true* wilderness preservation humans are considered "natural" in a biological sense, we must restrain ourselves from managing the wilderness for social reasons.

We as a society must also restrict human dependant systems and organisms from the wilderness. Again, this is not a natural designation since independent cattle in a wilderness area would be considered natural (as long as they are feral), but since our social use of them makes them dependant on us as a species, *true* wilderness preservation recommends making the social distinction and removing and/or abandoning any human-dependant organisms or systems within wilderness areas. If human-dependant organisms or systems were allowed to remain in wilderness areas we would be making a social decision to continue to degrade and manipulate both the wilderness ecosystem and the values set forth under *true* wilderness preservation. If we either remove or abandon the systems or organisms we are removing our influence. The abandoned cattle will either die off naturally or they will adapt and become independent feral animals. It does not matter whether the system or organism was there before the designation of wilderness, only that we are not actively or directly supporting the said subject's survival within wilderness areas.

In order to practically implement the concepts within *true* wilderness philosophy a formal baseline or foundation needs to be declared. *True* wilderness philosophy proposes that the time at which managers accept *true* wilderness preservation is when the managers should determine "natural conditions." Once natural conditions are set; the process of removing all those that are not natural such as human dependant cattle will need to commence. After-

wards the manager's job will be to maintain the highest level of wilderness character and symbolic value. This will be completely a hands-off approach within the wilderness boundary itself. However, outside the boundary, within non-wilderness land, many of the conservation techniques such as ecological restoration, and fire management should continue to work towards finding a more symbiotic relationship between human influences and other natural systems and their components. The buffer zones surrounding wilderness areas will play an active and important role in helping to preserve the land by giving it adequate ability and shelter from harmful non-intentional impacts. Declaring a formal baseline will be a key to successfully reaching the highest level of symbolic value and wilderness character within our wilderness preservation system.

The acceptance and application of *true* wilderness may be at the cost of other wilderness values. Biodiversity, scenic beauty, historical natural conditions, or ecosystem values may be significantly altered or lost forever. The spotted owl could become extinct, fire-adapted ecosystems could disappear or be permanently altered. Wilderness preservation needs to look towards the future and accept the detrimental affects of the past, rather than constantly trying to right them. The significant probability of drastic changes within our current wilderness ecosystems does not discredit *true* wilderness preservation. It is important to keep in mind the spirit of the Wilderness Act of 1964 and those who drafted its key language. In a world, heavily modified and manipulated by human culture and civilization, areas of land to be left alone are a rarity and much needed component to our culture and the world itself. *True* wilderness preservation recognizes the potential loss and change.

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