

## A Wilderness Ethic for the Age of Cyberspace

The concept of restraint is essential to wilderness preservation. The history of American protection of wild country began in the 1920s and 1930s with a determination by some U.S. Forest Service personnel to keep roads out of designated environments. These so-called "roadless areas" later formed the core of the 1964 National Wilderness Preservation System. The point is that roads could have been built, but society opted instead to restrain itself in the interest of protecting wilderness and the wilderness experience.

In the 1960s, it became increasingly apparent to land managers that restraint would have to be exercised, as well, with regard to wilderness visitors. The concept of "carrying capacity" gained importance as managers realized that wilderness could be loved to death. The new management tool was visitation quotas (and the associated wilderness permits) which were first applied to Mt. Whitney in the California Sierra and to the Grand Canyon, both in 1972. Filling out forms and going through lotteries or long waiting lists, we learned another dimension of restraint with regard to wilderness.

Minimum-impact camping procedures—part of a rising wilderness "ethic"—also indicated a willingness to accept restraint. Thoughtful wild-land users now refrain from building wood fires, trenching tents, and trampling multiple trails into wet meadows. The reason for these ethical codes—and, sometimes, land-use

rules—was, again, respect for wilderness and the wilderness experience.

What is important to think about today, at the dawn of the millennium, is the impact of the communications revolution on wilderness. It began, in one sense, with map-making. Classic wilderness was *terra incognita*—the blank space on the map. For much of the 20th century, there were wild holes in the U.S. Geological Survey's ambitious effort to map the entire nation on a scale of at least 1 to 62,500. I can recall the excitement of planning a trip that was literally off the charts. Sometimes I suggested that students leave the maps at home and just go out there and see what lay around the bend or over the next ridge. The compensation for the occasional navigation mistake was a heightened sense of wilderness. After all, risk, uncertainty, and lack of control, coupled with self-reliance, lies at the heart of the wilderness experience.

About 1980, the last of the topographic maps were released. You could lay out the entire continent, edge to edge, if you had a big enough floor! It was a great technological achievement, but something of the old wild continent died when the mapmakers filled in the last blanks. And now we have satellite imagery that, as every reader of Tom Clancy novels knows, can show a cigarette pack from outer space. You can purchase satellite photos of every inch of the planet, and they are updated every few hours. Moreover, the satellite-based Geographical Positioning System means that, with a pocket-sized receiver costing about \$500, you can determine your latitude and longitude within a few yards. And Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacons, prized by pilots and mariners, allow you to transmit your location, again via satellite, to search and rescue teams. Columbus or Lewis and Clark would have been amazed and maybe a little saddened. The world is a lot smaller now, the human being somewhat diminished despite his technological prowess.

Telephone communication technology is exploding in sophistication. A few years ago, a reasonable measurement of wilderness was the distance to the nearest telephone. But now, with cellular telephones, it is possible to place and receive calls from the heart of many wildernesses. Even in the Grand Canyon with its mile-high walls, cellular contact is almost total. And where the cellular service stops, the Internet begins.

Using the World Wide Web, adventure travel companies like Mountain Travel-Sobek are actively marketing cyberspace "chats" between, say, an expedition in Antarctica and armchair explorers of virtual reality. The computer screen will also keep the home audience updated on prevailing weather conditions and present digital images of the landscape. Next stop on the Internet, promises Mountain Travel-Sobek, "Virtual Galápagos." You won't have to go to the wilderness to go to the wilderness!

So, is it fair to ask, what? You still can't get pizza delivery out there. The person on the other end might listen to you become a pizza for a hungry bear, but they can't do much about it except call for the helicopters. And don't people bring communication technology into the wilderness all the time in the form of books and audio tapes? Yes, of course, but such things do not have an interactive, two-way capability for providing instant, updated contact with the "outside." *This* technology really dilutes the wilderness experience; for many it destroys the wilderness just as thoroughly as clearcutting.

It is well to remember in this connection that wilderness is a state of mind. It has more to do with perception of place than with the place itself. Consequently, it is fragile, vulnerable to the disruptive influences of civilization, even if they arrive electronically.

The upshot of this is that the potential of communication technology

to impact adversely on wilderness once again requires the exercise of restraint. Maybe language could be added to the 1964 Wilderness Act mandating that not only non-mechanized travel but also non-mechanized communication be banned from protected wildland. More feasibly, outdoor educators, guides, and land managers should take a stand on this issue. We do at Grand Canyon Dories, a wilderness-oriented outfit-

ting company specializing in Grand Canyon river trips. Leave the laptop and the cellular phone home, we tell our guests. Or, conversely, if you want things to be just the way they are at home, stay at home. For two weeks of your life, let the old rhythms and the vast silences be your guide; let the river be your information highway. Without this kind of self-restraint, we risk preserving wilderness that is no longer wild.



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