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## Ah! Wilderness

**A**s the National Park Service in Alaska lauches into a new generation of ANILCA-mandated wilderness studies—to replace the shelved minimalist ones of the Hodel-Horn era—I thought it might be useful to discuss the concept of wilderness again, as one human construct among many others.

As prelude, I wish to dispose of the abstruse arguments currently fashionable that Wilderness, as concept (and as counterpoint to Homeland), lacks philosophical and logical validity. For human beings have always ordered and explained the universe by using such abstractions. Ancient myths incorporate them, as do modern scientific syntheses. These abstractions are ultimately qualitative, but they start with quantitative and functional elements—which give rise to cohering ideas. These ideas, these abstractions are good or bad, productive or unproductive, depending on one's value system and point of view, which constantly evolve to meet changing social and cultural needs.

Example: The driving force of the 19<sup>th</sup> and part of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was Progress. Development and Industry were its watchwords. But too much of a good thing! So people started talking about Conservation, which would, for example, reform industrial practices in national forests and save parts of America in national parks. As our population and its demands increased, so did the scope and intensity of Development and

Industry, along with a newcomer, industrial-scale Tourism. The compromises of old-style Conservation could not contain these increases. So national policy shifted selectively to Preservation—of which Wilderness, as a land-use option, is a subset. Stunning mind-set changes marked this evolution. For example, in the Rocky Mountain states, new values tied to major demographic shifts (including flight from ruined urban settings) transformed the old Development vs. Preservation debate into Old West vs. New West—implying dedication of a whole region to a higher use than the destructive extractive economy of the past.

In this light, Wilderness is an evolved, functional element of a larger conservation movement that began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The national parks branch of the movement created a national aesthetics policy (as distinct from the utilitarian policy, only recently modified, that governed national forests). After World War II, increasing populations and matching industrial responses set the scene for the Environmental Movement.

This movement produced a

quantum leap from site-specific conservation to a systemic, ecological approach. Evolving biological and geophysical understandings soon showed that political boundaries sheltered no part of the world from growing concerns over environmental health, biological diversity, climate change, and a host of other natural-system alterations. Now Wilderness has transformed from solely aesthetic value to a higher social utility: these remote and restricted-use places host both Call of the Wild aesthetics and scientific studies in the last relatively untrammelled natural-system baselines left on Earth.

Wilderness, in this progression, became the cohering construct that allows us—as a society, as a species—to draw the line and say: “Thus far, no farther!” It gives us a way to say: “Hey! The world is limited, we must not consume it all.”

Thus, Wilderness—as ideal—is a driving force for reform in a world much overused by the world’s dominant species. Wilderness—as land designation—gives point and substance to that ideal, which comprehends a growing spectrum of older and new values: aesthetic, conservation, spiritual, adventure, discovery, physical and mental health, inspirational, ecological, and so on.

Nor is Wilderness, as some assert, solely a national romance with the Edenic legends and explorations of the Old West. In the Western tradition the lure reaches back to the desert retreats of biblical prophets and the Homeric journeys of ancient

Greeks. All of us, from whatever culture, share antecedents of vision quest and walkabout, meditation and spiritual renewal in remote, undistracted places. All of us still need such places, especially modern people whose electronically interlinked lives define distraction.

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A great deal of current discourse on these matters—both in Alaska and elsewhere—pits Wilderness against Homeland. Lacking the buffered cultural boundaries of earlier times, when people were few and spaces were large, national parks and other conservation units overlap and overlay Homeland.

Fortunately, ANILCA values ongoing indigenous and historical lifeways as nationally significant parts of our national heritage. As well, it provides the means through Title VIII and other provisions to respect and help perpetuate these lifeways by:

- Protecting and preserving the land base and wildlife habitat;
- Providing cultural choices for those local rural Native and non-Native people who want to pursue living-off-the-land lifeways in the new parks and park additions established by ANILCA; and
- Allowing reasonable access for hunting, fishing, and trapping in those parts of the new parks and new additions where comparable customary and traditional uses have occurred.

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Yet the Wilderness versus

Homeland argument persists. The bass-drum beat in this argument asserts that Wilderness represents a modern intrusion of a frivolous sort that threatens the very existence of homelands and the cultures shaped and nurtured by them. The argument centers on indigenous people, with thousands of years of experience in these special places. Conclusion: Wilderness and Homeland are mutually exclusive, both intellectually and in terms of shared use and activity.

This argument, it must be said, carries much plausibility. For Homeland and all it implies is, indeed, very serious.

I have had the opportunity to work with homeland people both in the old NPS Southwest Region and in Alaska. In particular, I learned much from the people of Nuiqueut, an Inupiat village near the mouth of the Nechelik Channel of the Coleville River, which flows into the Arctic Ocean. My task was to translate from their conceptual world their concerns over their homeland environment, their cultural landscape. The resulting Nuiqueut heritage cultural plan was designed to minimize threats to their hunting and fishing way of life by protecting their homeland from feared destructive oil development in the then newly established National Petroleum Reserve. (That was more than 20 years ago, but the plan is still around and the threat has gathered new steam.)

In the plan, I wrote down—for that other world Outside—the ideas

about Homeland that these Nuiqueut people had expressed to me. This was the translation that they finally agreed to, as a close approximation of their ideas:

The cultural landscape of Nuiqueut is occupied by a heritage community that perpetuates Inupiat culture by harvesting the wild resources of land and sea, by preserving places and ideals of value, and by transmitting this heritage to future generations. It is a place that cannot be truly owned by any transient human group nor consumed for any ephemeral human purpose, for it must be passed on intact. It is a cosmos that unites time and space, people and nature, resources and values. This place cannot be understood in simple economic or physical resource terms. Such tools of understanding are too primitive. Yet those from afar who have plans to alter this landscape are using such primitive tools, as did their predecessors.

Now, who among the readers of these compelling words—this approximation of the grand ideal of Homeland—can remain unmoved? And who does not see a convergence of the most enlightened of modern and ancient ideals, of Wilderness and Homeland?

Raymond Dasmann, an inspirational environmental conservationist, provided a basis for this convergence, which became a shaping theme of the philosophical debates leading to Title VIII in ANILCA, in a 1976 article entitled “National Parks, Nature Conservation, and ‘Future Primitive’” (*The Ecologist* 6:5, 164-67). He believed that “biospheric” (modern) people and “eco-

system” (indigenous) people must learn to live together, to share and conserve natural landscapes, to mutually respect each others’ distinct ways of life, and to find common ideals—no matter how diverse our lifestyles—that equally sanctify and protect those special cultural landscapes we share. Among his urgent concerns, Dasmann feared the loss of the deep knowledge and science of place that only ecosystem people have carried forward from our anciently shared origins and experience. Nor was this concern simple nostalgia. Dasmann firmly believed that modern people must reconnect with the living, supporting world to survive. Traditional ecosystem people are the last survivors amongst us who can teach the living connections and perspectives that would make us all, once again, part of the web of life.

Two observations:

1. Both modern and indigenous people share a need for sanctified and protected places. After all, we all descended from hunter-gatherer ancestors. The split between modern and surviving indigenous people occurred only moments ago on the human timeline. Compare that brief separation to the millions of years and thousands of generations when we all lived essentially the same way, varied only by local adaptations. So, not so long ago we all passed through landscapes animated by spirits and marked by shrines and numberless associations. Those of us moderns who have had some tutoring from elders

on the land have felt the stirrings, in gene and soul, of that ancient, timeless present we once shared—and, which, for mutual benefit we should share again.

2. More immediately, the plain fact is we must learn to share these overlapping Wilderness-Homeland sanctuaries. For the Earth presently trembles from the surging demands placed upon it. If biospheric people come to see no value except physical-resource economics in the remote places where ecosystem people live, these places and the cultures dependent upon them will be destroyed. Look around the world for confirmation of this tragic trend. And there is another side to that coin, the displaced people side. Again, look around the world, say to Africa, where desperate displaced people fight small wars with game-park wardens to kill elephants for ivory, which can be sold to avert starvation. Dasmann shows us both sides, and in doing so states our mutual interests:

National parks must not serve as a means for displacing the members of traditional societies who have always cared for the land and its biota. Nor can national parks survive as islands surrounded by hostile people who have lost the land that was once their home.

It boils down to this: preservation of indigenous cultural landscapes is prerequisite to perpetuation of indigenous cultures. National parks and their designated wilderness lands form a very large part of Alaska’s homelands that are safely in

the bank. It was this prospect that created the so-called Unholy Alliance between preservationists and Alaska Natives during the nine years of struggle that eventuated in ANILCA. In essence, Native people accepted a tradeoff. I have heard it stated by Native friends something like this: "We knew we would have trouble with you guys, with regulations and such, once the law was passed. But saving the land itself—the places where we live and hunt and fish—was the most important thing. If the land is wiped out there's nothing left. We figured that we could somehow work out the details so we could continue to live off the land."

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So here we are. It's the year 2000, the beginning of a new millennium, the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of ANILCA. The law is on the books. The parks and monuments and preserves are here to stay. And so is Title VIII, Subsistence, with its living-off-the-land provisions. These are givens.

Where do we go from here?

One of the places we go is to new studies that could result in additional designations of wilderness. This will cause political apoplexy in some circles. We will need allies to get new wilderness recommendations through a Congress presently dominated by resource politics—especially in Alaska. Think of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and the Tongass National Forest.

In the long view, both preservation and customary-and-traditional

lifeways benefit from wilderness designation. It is another layer of legal protection for both Wilderness and Homeland in a world that trends evermore to the short view of resource politics.

But it's not just resource politics that complicate this issue. The old Unholy Alliance must be reconstituted for this second round of wilderness recommendations. But the erstwhile allies have fallen out of sorts.

The National Park Service's management of Title VIII has had successes, in the Northwest Areas under Mack Shaver, at Gates of the Arctic with the land exchange, and elsewhere. And since the superintendents' revolt in 1995 much progress has been made generally: in strengthening the involvement of Regional Subsistence Councils, so that they become co-managers in guarding their own subsistence landscapes; in reviving the on-going, locally adaptive, negotiated process approach, rather than the hard-set, wrapped-in-a-box regulatory approach; and in supportive and steady village contacts. This quiet work has allowed mutual self-interest to develop, for example, in ORV limitations—which in the long view benefit subsisters as much as park management.

There are still many problems, a lot of them caused by the NPS-culture syndrome, which plays out all over again whenever new folks join the ranks in Alaska to face ANILCA's mandated social and operational practices. In-depth

training—as we did years ago—could avert much of this culture shock, and must be uniformly required for all new personnel. Ten years of trust can be wiped out by one ignorant motor-mouth the first day on-site—whether a regional director, superintendent, or clerk.

But basically, as far as I know, the old tradeoff still holds over most of the region, despite abrasive issues and contretemps. (The Alaska Legislature's intransigence over rural preference surely contributes to this.) I believe this judgment is truer of Native subsisters than of non-Native ones. Think of Glennallen.

The conservation community, united during the ANILCA struggle as the Alaska Coalition, is more problematic. It would help to get together with people like Celia Hunter and Chip Dennerlein—old Alaska hands—and, working with them, do some missionary work among the more zealous crusaders. There should be some strategy meetings that bring key people together. For some consensus must be reached before this presently disparate and critically necessary constituency can play a constructive role at the essential national level. Ricochet shots during congressional hearings would first alienate the subsistence constituency, then kill the wilderness-proposal package.

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Meanwhile, we need to reinforce the day-to-day alliance between the NPS and the traditional people

whose special privilege in the Alaska parklands resulted from a right and generous impulse of our nation. We have to see ourselves and our friends as parts of a larger, bioregional mosaic who happens to share, in part, the same geography. Without these friends we would be more exposed to political attack and incremental erosion of the integrity of the parklands in our trust. We have to ensure that they see that that integrity, under the sanctions of law, preserves their homeland and, thus, their traditional cultural options.

Working together we can, with sensitivity and trust, help each other to curb high-tech recreation and industrial-scale tourism. For these things, unleashed, damage to biological health and integrity of both park and homeland.

We have to be sensitive, as well, to the preservation of cultural privacy, so that ignorant or exploitative tour operators do not turn functioning villages and fishing and hunting camps into live dioramas and curiosities for the titillation of tourists. Guides and tour directors operate under our permit; we, with suggestions from our friends, must limit such intrusions.

Park and homeland occupy different planes and dimensions overlapping the same spaces. But we are not talking about cohabitation. Rather, the goal is a trustful, respectful cultural distancing, which yet brings us together for a mutual benefit, however different our purposes. The common ground is indeed the

ground itself—a healthy, productive park landscape; a healthy, productive cultural landscape. These are two distinct perspectives and realities, though sustained by the same source.

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Finally, an anecdote from my history of the central Brooks Range—Gates of the Arctic region, *Gaunt Beauty ... Tenuous Life*(1988).

In September 1930, after a summer trek up the North Fork of the Koyukuk River almost to the Brooks Range divide, Bob Marshall wrote a letter to his family describing the trip:

[It was] ... an explorer's heaven, the sort of thing a person of adventure-some disposition might dream about for a lifetime without ever realizing.... I realized that though the field for geographical exploration was giving out, the realm of mental exploration—aesthetic, philosophical, scientific—was limitless. Nevertheless, I still maintained a suppressed yearning for geographical discovery which I never seriously hoped to realize. And then I found myself here, at the very headwaters of the mightiest river of the north, at a place where only three other human beings aside from myself had ever been and with dozens of never visited valleys, hundreds of unscaled summits still as virgin as during their Paleozoic creation.

As far as Bob Marshall knew or could know, this was a fresh world—unvisited, virgin. The facts are that the upper Koyukuk was a natural travel route and hunting area that had been used by Native Americans for millennia. Archeological investigations in 1985 found scores of historic and prehistoric sites in these

upper drainages. Scientific dating and artifact morphology give strong evidence of at least 6,000 years of human presence, and more recent discoveries point to several millennia more.

Since the early dispersions of humankind, geographical exploration has been a generational thing, a renewable resource in the world's wildlands where forgotten histories left few reminders. When Marshall spoke of preserving wilderness for its human values, this was part of what he meant. In wilderness, certain psychological processes would be revitalized—among them the sense of discovering an Earth fresh and whole. That he had unwittingly partaken of his prescription for others—experienced the discoverer's exaltation where many had trod before—is fine irony and validation of his prescription.

Anthropologist Richard Nelson drew a beautifully complementing conclusion to Marshall's experience, in a 1977 study of the subsistence way of life in what were then the proposed Alaska parklands:

The areas proposed for new parks remain in an essentially pristine condition, with healthy populations of wildlife and virtually unaltered floral communities. Except for scattered cabins and threading trails, subsistence users have left the landscape practically free of visible human impact. Thus several thousand years of continuous subsistence use has left us with environments worthy of preservation as the most wild and beautiful in our nation.

I ask this one question: With proper dedication to the principles

and prescriptions of Wilderness and Homeland, why shouldn't these two distinct yet complementing worlds of perspective and experience—both of them beautiful and necessary in our rapidly diminishing world—reach mutually supporting harmony?

If Homeland people follow their own ancient precepts of sufficiency, and if the seekers of Wilderness truly preserve rather than overrun it—both, in other words, rigorously

applying their stated value systems—there is no reason why harmony and perpetuation should not be achieved.

And practically we need each other. For in combination the two value systems strengthen the common necessity: perpetuation of the common land base. The trendlines and headlines of the modern world proclaim every day how vulnerable that land base is.

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