

Bob Krumenaker

Wilderness and Natural Resource Management in the NPS: Another View

[Ed. note: This comment on wilderness management from GWS president Bob Krumenaker continues the dialogue begun in the last issue by outgoing GWS president and National Park Service historian Richard West Sellars in his Box 65 article “The Path Not Taken: National Park Service Wilderness Management.” The Society invites further discussion on the topic of wilderness management in the national parks, or of other topics of interest to the readers of THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM. There will be a plenary session on the new interagency report on wilderness at the upcoming GWS conference in April.]

My friend and colleague Dick Sellars quite rightly points out in the last issue of the FORUM that many in the NPS natural resource management community are reluctant to take on wilderness management responsibilities. It may be indifference towards, or even outright distaste for, the restrictions placed on management activities within designated and proposed wilderness areas. I suspect, however, that it involves something more. In fact, in my own experience I would say that NPS natural resource managers are generally among the strongest supporters of wilderness values on the park staff.

Supporting wilderness values and taking on the organizational responsibility for wilderness management are, however, different (although related) things. What do we mean by “wilderness management,” anyway? Some, of course, think it is an oxymoron—that wilderness, by definition, should not need to be managed. While that may be an ideal, if we didn’t need to manage wilderness we would also not be lamenting that wilderness values are eroding. For wilderness management, in reality, is

about (as the 1964 Wilderness Act says) the “preservation of outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation” on lands that retain their “primeval character.”

Preservation of wilderness, then, is really about minimizing human influences on wilderness lands and on the wilderness experience of those who venture forth into these places. In that regard, I believe that our mandates for preserving natural resources within wilderness are no

more and no less than they are for other natural areas within the National Park System. And, as natural resource managers within NPS are already responsible for providing park superintendents with technical support and programmatic advice on how to preserve, restore, or maintain natural values in parks, organizational changes would make little difference in this regard. Hence, natural resource managers already have the *natural resources* responsibility within designated and proposed wilderness—but to preserve wilderness values, we have to manage more than resources.

Managing wilderness users and managing administrative intrusions are the real challenges of wilderness management, and it is in these areas that the legal and policy constraints of wilderness designation differ from other backcountry. The on-the-ground truth is that, in most parks with wilderness, users move from non-wilderness to wilderness and back in the course of their use of the park. We should make it clearer than we do when they are in wilderness and when they are not, but the key point is that a visitor-use permit system cannot and should not be separate and distinct for wilderness and non-wilderness. Use restrictions ought to be different in each area, and we can and must make that clear before visitors start their off-road trips.

I believe the reluctance of park natural resource staff to take on wilderness management stems more

from the circumstance that backcountry permitting and use regulation, as well as decisions on administrative facilities, generally do not fall within the organizational purview of most natural resource managers, rather than from a lack of interest in seeing wilderness managed in accordance with legal intent. Few resource managers are eager to take on new responsibilities when they lack sufficient staff, and in most cases organizational power, to do their current jobs, let alone the new ones. That's true of everyone—so Dick and I certainly agree that to do wilderness “right” in the national parks, regardless of where it falls in the organization, we need to make sure there are people dedicated (in every sense) to the task and accountable for their performance.

Do resource managers have the expertise to take on wilderness management? Certainly they can develop it, just as good park rangers do. Interpreting the Wilderness Act on the ground is not a technical proposition, but one of managerial direction and the will and skills to implement it. I think the real problem is that in too many parks we still think of natural (and cultural, for that matter) resource management as separate from park operations. Where we have integrated resource management effectively with other operations, wilderness responsibilities make tremendous sense within the natural resource management program. At Isle Royale, for example, where 98% of the land area of the park is desig-

nated wilderness, the natural resource management staff led the design and implementation of the backcountry and wilderness permitting system in the 1980s, and are still today part of an interdisciplinary team that decides on use limits and site-specific design issues for trails and campsites. At Shenandoah, where 40% of the park is wilderness and the park organization has more depth, backcountry and wilderness management is a branch of the park's natural and cultural resource management division. The park's wilderness coordinator is the branch chief and oversees trail maintenance as well as the permit system. It works quite well, and the real opportunity that an integrated program encourages is that the expertise the park already has in natural resource inventory and monitoring can be applied

to evaluation of wilderness conditions—which means measuring the impact of people on soils, vegetation, and other people's perceptions of solitude and enjoyment.

So, in sum, Dick Sellars and I agree that many in the NPS do not take our wilderness mandates seriously, and we need to change that. I don't care where wilderness management resides in a park, however, as long as our legal mandates for wilderness are taken seriously and field staff are provided the fiscal, personnel, and leadership support to do the job. I believe that in many parks, the wilderness role fits well into the natural resource management program, but the real need is to integrate resource management fully into park operations. If we accomplish that, wilderness can work well anywhere.

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