47 On common ground: an enduring wilderness as cultural landscape and biotic reserve

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Of all the American public lands set aside as an endowment for future generations, surely wilderness is the most fragile, misunderstood, and politically divisive of all. That should not be a surprise to anyone, for wilderness preservation is the result of a uniquely American form of social schizophrenia.

Our free-market economic system abhors a utility vacuum, while our form of government, in response to strong societal pressures, is compelled to find some counterbalance through legislation for the rapidly accelerating destruction of our natural and cultural heritage. However, the underlying reasons for conserving something of wild America are never simple or unified when one gets beyond the lawful purpose statements. To further complicate matters, the term "wilderness" has become so misconstrued and diluted in meaning as to be nearly all things to all people. The average American often talks as though anyplace out of town and beyond the edge of agriculture is wilderness.

If the goal of "civilizing activities" and the free-market system is to make maximum use of the natural world to improve the human condition, then preserving wilderness areas through legislation is an odd byproduct, like a alcoholic drinking up the kids' future and assuaging his guilt by buying them presents occasionally. Obviously, the unheralded standard of living we have achieved allows us the luxury to conduct this democratic experiment. Recent polls indicate that 75% or more of urban Americans, willing to talk to pollsters during supper, "strongly support the preservation of wilderness." I do not doubt for a moment that this broad mandate is like the Mississippi River: a mile wide and an inch deep. Scratch the surface of that support and confusion prevails. Wilderness is a 105-million-acre social anachronism. As a result of this growing confusion and rampant political correctness, these symbolic places have increasingly become targets for "deconstruction" from every quarter of society—even self-proclaimed conservationists of every stripe.

Before we focus on Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve as a cultural landscape, a couple of macro-scale wilderness preservation issues should be mentioned. On a global scale, our resource consumption and multinational corporate partnering in rampant extraction continues to seriously diminish the remaining wildlands of many other countries and destabilize their cultural traditions and subsistence economies. In this context, our high-minded calls for conservation are hypocritical in the extreme. On the national scale the political drumbeat of reducing threats to our national security by developing America's resources, thus reducing the length of the pipelines (but not the diameter), while conservation measures are pooh-poohed as an economic slowdown, are reverberating from coast to coast. These socioeconomic imperatives will seriously challenge the collective backbone and the fundamental principles of those who support preserving an enduring wilderness resource.

Of the many lesser threats that continue to seriously erode wilderness values, it is these that concern me the most. Our lack of interagency will to manage for a ***spectrum*** of wilderness areas, using as a yardstick measurable quotients of wildness and naturalness. In the National Park System, the wilderness areas at Fire Island National Seashore and Gates of the Arctic are as night and day. It is incredible that we would

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pretend otherwise. A "prudent person" would say that most designated wilderness areas, to one degree or another, require restorative actions to meet threshold standards we are loath to describe. We have long talked of rejuvenating our public education efforts to try to counter the loss of empathy for wilderness values in the rapidly changing face of America. Good luck counteracting the 24/7 corporate spin bombarding a public nearly devoid of any direct experiences with real wildlands. Further, our agency record in fulfilling stewardship responsibilities for wilderness in parks by successfully developing wilderness and backcountry management plans is abysmal. Lastly, there is the embarrassing fact that after seven years of teeth-gnashing over setting measurable performance goals mandated by the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, the National Park Service (NPS) has no Servicewide wilderness stewardship goals at all!

No real surprises in this for most knowledgeable observers. The irony is that despite the well-documented reluctance of NPS to embrace the Wilderness Act of 1964 (Sellars 1998), the American people have repeatedly joined the wilderness concept to that of parks. Nearly 41% of the entire wilderness system in the USA is within parks, and more that 57% of the vast designated Alaska wilderness acreage is found in parks. With 52% of the entire NPS acreage designated as wilderness, and a total of more than 85% found suitable for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) the National Park Service is fundamentally a ***wilderness preservation*** agency. The agency is also the pre-eminent keeper of our incredibly complex cultural heritage. Anachronisms are us!

On the subcontinent of Alaska, the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980 enlarged the NWPS by over 62%. The 8.4-million-acre Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve embraces 7.2 million acres of designated wilderness, with another million acres studied and deemed suitable. That's about 18% of the wilderness in the entire National Park System. Looking west to the adjacent Noatak National Preserve adds 5.7 million acres, bringing the total designated wilderness to nearly 13 million acres. When fused with neighboring parks, preserves, and refuges, nearly 39 million acres of Arctic wildlands, spanning the northernmost major mountain range on earth, are set aside as a physical embodiment of unparalleled wildness and naturalness.

And what about this fabled ANILCA wilderness? We often hear talk about big "W" and little "w," "landmark legislation seriously compromised by unacceptable use provisions," and "illusions of wilderness" from our allies! Suffice it to say that the detractors are many and their comments much more colorful. But most of that is pretty superficial in my mind. We have unheralded opportunities to achieve the greater public good in these large, intact northern biotic systems precisely because they are meant to be inclusive of, and imbued with, human culture. Biomes that still blur the arbitrary distinctions between people and nature. Human associations of nearly infinite variety. Verbal. Symbolic. Sensory. Physical. Mythic. Spiritual. Landscapes as a mutable stage for rich living traditions, cultural time capsules from the past, and human oral histories that continue to evolve. Infinite meaning in "empty landscapes" (Brown 2000)—whether we are ready to recognize it or not.

This opportunity necessitates creative and unconventional agency management strategies. Unique solutions for unique challenges. We have made some real progress in fulfilling the dream of preserving an Arctic heritage in an unconventional way. But it is daunting to realize how much more we must accomplish before the crush of human needs reaches the Brooks Range, as it certainly will.

In the last decade at conferences like this the academic debates on the meaning of wilderness seem mind-numbing and artificial. Orwellian double-speak comes to mind. In thousands of pages of convoluted text the "post-modern deconstructionists" have reminded us that reality is always culturally framed, that the wilderness idea is a social construct, and that there are many perspectives on the meanings of wilderness. Another Blinding Flash of the Obvious!

You know the charges. Standard bearers for this polemic describe the "received" wilderness idea as "ethnocentric, androcentric, phallocentric, unscientific, unphilosophic, impolitic, outmoded, even genocidal" (Callicott 1998)! In Alaska, urban rednecks just call it a lock-up!

It is also true in Alaska that many people are closer to real nature and know that wildness is a biophysical reality—far more than some "philosophical torturing" of concepts. The land base is the referent reality; rural people in Alaska know this (Brown 2000). And ANILCA reflects this reality in allowing traditional uses, in maintaining a human face on the wildest landscapes we know.

Much of the academic debate sounds like self-serving nit-picking by people whose finger nails are far too clean. After all, the world of park management is based almost entirely upon social constructs in the form of laws, policies, and scientific theories about the natural world and human history. The wilderness idea as embodied in law is indeed a social construct. Right along with the National Historic Preservation and the Civil Rights acts.

Wilderness is often an illusion precisely because its value is in the eye of the beholder. So social hindsight and scientific insight necessarily redefine the reasons for conservation. How could it be otherwise? Although there are many socially redeeming reasons for conserving a system of protected areas—from the spiritual to the aesthetic to utility to sanctuary—it is the reconnection with our original nature in a primordial setting that without fail inspires people. As Dave Foreman and others say, wilderness is simply a "self-willed land". A key phrase in the Wilderness Act is "untrammeled." So many detractors purposely misconstrue that to mean "untrampled" or "untrodden." The term simply means "unfettered," "unhobbled" and "unrestrained." A landscape that endures precisely as a result of sustainable human associations and practices.

So let's talk about a different way of seeing the Gates of the Arctic wilderness and focus on something we can change. Re-framing the wilderness question can reduce the ***internal*** threats to the wilderness resource from the disintegrated NPS approach. Perhaps thinking of wilderness as a cultural landscape would reduce organizational barriers and increase the comfort level with the need for collective restraint. I think organizational subcultures, program separation, and the quasi-military structure of NPS have created serious barriers to success on the ground, in the mind, and among disciplines. Internal agency rhetoric and actions are often at cross-purposes and result in greater public confusion about the enduring benefits of wild places, as well as falling far short of stewardship. The benefit of an integrated approach to an overarching legal responsibility such as wilderness preservation is a shared sense of what appropriate human behaviors are in such a place. Restraint is the key.

Is this a novel criticism of reluctant stewardship? No, but if repeated often enough perhaps we can find a synthesis of expertise and raise the level of agency discussion. We've heard repeatedly about the seminal findings of previous NPS wilderness task groups since 1986—findings that have mostly been ignored. And re-described by the next task group. But one important idea—that of a national wilderness steering committee—finally took root in 1996 and is bearing sweet fruit. As discussed in plenary conference panels earlier this week, this committee's energy has resulted in the excellent stewardship policies and guidelines embodied in Director's Order #41. Not perfect by any means, but they are a quantum leap forward for NPS. And they clearly respond to the many understandable concerns of cultural resource specialists and others always complaining about isolation from the management of wilderness.

New NPS policies are unequivocal in speaking to the cultural values found in wilderness. "There has been extensive prior human use in most areas now designated as wilderness, resulting in archeological sites, historic structures, cultural landscapes and associated features, objects, and traditional cultural properties that are contributing elements to wilderness." We are appropriately reminded that the suite of laws intended to preserve our invaluable cultural heritage, such as the National

Historic Preservation Act, are applicable in wilderness. The steering committee reminds managers that cultural resource specialists (along with all other disciplines in interdisciplinary teams) will participate in wilderness planning and that managers are responsible for maintaining an affirmative cultural resource management program in wilderness. It is important to note that the directive makes absolutely clear that even though "cultural resource management tasks within wilderness are the same as those elsewhere, these sites must be additionally treated in a manner that preserves other ***wilderness resources and character"*** (emphasis added)**.** Measures to protect and inventory cultural resources in wilderness must comply with the Wilderness Act provisions on access and the use of the minimum requirement concept. The importance of this last reality check is inestimable.

In NPS parlance, a cultural landscape is defined as "a geographic area, including both cultural and natural resources and the wildlife or domestic animals therein, associated with a historic event, activity or person, or that exhibit other cultural or aesthetic values." There are at least 4 general types of cultural landscapes that are not mutually exclusive: historic designed landscapes , historic vernacular landscapes, historic sites, and ethnographic landscapes (NPS 2000). The concept has evolved greatly from the limited inclusion of the grounds immediately surrounding a historic structure and tangible features described in the 1960s.

The central idea embodied in ANILCA is that the long cultural traditions of indigenous groups and more recent immigrants are subtle and complex historic associations with a vast wild region in the central Brooks Range. It seems to me that at least the categories of "historic vernacular landscapes" and "ethnographic landscapes" could be construed to describe the human associations of Gates of the Arctic wilderness. I suppose that hard-core cultural specialists will claim that cultural landscapes are by definition limited to an area containing associated features, and that those cultural features are human "built" scenes. But I think that the wilderness idea embodied here is a cohering social construct inclusive of many vibrant human associations. Just for starters, how about the inclusion of the vast headwater valleys and ragged peaks where Bob Marshall found inspiration, and its seminal influence on the eventual formation of the Wilderness Society and passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964? Then there is the austere homeland of the recently nomadic Nunamiut and hinterland of other adjacent Alaska native groups and their predecessors. And what of meanings derived from sledge-hauling geologists, tump-line-weary prospectors, military expeditions living off the land, old-time, fair-chase, wall-tent hunting guides, backpacking field biologists of the Murie era, and solitary cabin dwellers more recently seeking respite from modern society?

Gates of the Arctic is a vibrant reflection of what was once the dominant feature of a thinly peopled world precisely because it remains unbuilt and untrammeled. A heritage cultural landscape. A reservoir of answers for questions we have not yet thought of about the dynamic nature of the natural world and human adaptations and responses. "Relevance is mostly organized around function" (Brown 2001).

This is a repository of sustainable lifeways, abiding understanding of Arctic life, and reminders of the eons of simple relationships that stands in stark contrast to our modern ways. So I see conceptual advantages and potential program coherence in treating the Gates of the Arctic wilderness as a complex cultural landscape. The increased opportunities for collaborative planning, the ease of incorporation of traditional knowledge, and reducing the public misconceptions through more easily understandable relevance are reasons enough to consider embracing this notion.

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