

Conclusion

COMMENTARY

Through the looking glass: What value will we see in wilderness in 2064?

By Jeff Rose and Dan Dustin

THIS QUESTION IS INCREASINGLY relevant to people around the world as we enter the 21st century and look forward to the 100th anniversary of the Wilderness Act. Domestic and international demographic projections portend a future filled with more people making more demands on Earth's limited store of nonrenewable resources, a problem exacerbated by climate change (Dietz et al. 2003). The assumption that wilderness will always remain secure for its intended purposes rests on democratic processes and the will of the American people.

The National Park Service (NPS), the U.S. Forest Service (FS), the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) are entrusted with the stewardship of our nation's wilderness. One of their primary charges is to preserve wilderness's "biophysical, experiential, and symbolic ideals" (Landres 2004, p. 9). Protecting wilderness for its multiple purposes, including biodiversity and recreation, is no simple task. Nevertheless, among these purposes the job of the National Park Service is to ensure that national park wilderness forever retains the relatively untouched character of which Thoreau spoke, while also serving as the "geography of hope" that Stegner (1992) imagined it to be.

The National Park Service and the other bureaus are obliged to ensure that the values of wilderness are upheld and that there will always be recreational, scenic, scientific, educational, conservation, cultural, and historical uses of wilderness as codified in the Wilderness Act.

However, there is also a philosophical, spiritual, and political base upon which to guarantee the existence of wilderness as a reflection of our national conscience. As Roderick Nash (1967) teaches us in *Wilderness and the American Mind*, wilderness is socially constructed. Wilderness is our psychological response to untramed nature as much as it is untramed nature itself. It is a decidedly American creation infused with values that many Americans hold dear: a desire for freedom, privacy, solitude, independence, and self-reliance. Wilderness, in this sense, serves as a mirror unto ourselves. It reflects who we were, who we are, and who we aspire to become. But as the United States transforms into an increasingly urban, sedentary, and technologically dependent society, and as many of our children come to prefer the indoors over the outdoors (Louv 2008a; Pergams and Zaradic 2006, 2008; Zaradic 2008), who is to say wilderness will retain the same meanings, the same significance in 2064, as it does today?

As the planet becomes more congested, as space for human habitation becomes scarcer, and as the appetite for resources intensifies, those physical places we call wilderness will become more and more enticing for their natural resources—be they oil, timber, coal, natural gas, uranium, copper, or other precious metals. Paradoxically, wilderness will also become more valuable as a scientific and ecological laboratory, as the best "baseline" against which to measure the advance of civilization. Despite claims that Earth has now entered the "anthropocene," a geological epoch characterized by human impact

(Crutzen and Stoermer 2000), wilderness will likely remain the most unaffected of any natural areas in the United States, serving as an important classroom for ecological understanding.

From a broader perspective, wilderness will also be a test tube, a type of philosophical and material experiment in human restraint. Wilderness will likely be valued more as a wellspring, the headwaters from which pure water flows to quench the thirst of an increasingly parched country—especially west of the 100th meridian. But such a practical appraisal of the scientific value of wilderness leaves something to be desired, as there is much that escapes the caliper's claw. Safeguarding wilderness will yield important health benefits to help sustain our species along with several furry, feathery, and flowery others. In this regard, there should be more to us, our sensibilities, our dreams, our spirituality, and to what it means to grow and develop as ethical human beings that manifests itself in our relationship with wilderness.

This brings us back to Nash's (1967) claim that wilderness is more than a space or a place; it is a psychological state of mind. We see in wilderness what we will. We infuse it with our own meanings, and these meanings may change over time. Historically, the existence of wilderness symbolized our civilization's capacity to exercise a modicum of restraint in its otherwise relentless march forward in the name of progress. In a spatial sense, wilderness has been a rare exception to the rule, a geographic concession to modesty doled out by a civilization rich in developmental and

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commercial hubris. It has been a gesture of humility, not unlike a Sunday morning offering following a week of considerable profitability. When it comes to the future of wilderness in the United States, one has to wonder what new concessions, what new gestures, what new offerings we will feel compelled to make in 2064.

Whatever we value in wilderness in 2064, it will not be the result of something that is thrust upon us from the outside—be it crowding, dwindling natural resources, climate change, or biodiversity loss. Rather our values of wilderness will be something we create from within. Wilderness will continue to mean what we want it to mean. Perhaps we will see wilderness much the same way as we envisioned it in 1964. But it is much more likely that our view of wilderness will change with evolving cultures, politics, and social norms. Wilderness in 2064 may well be a function of a highly urbanized, sedentary, technologically transfixed, stay-inside citizenry that embraces fundamentally different core values, a citizenry that is further disengaged from an intimate relationship with the natural world. Should such a future come to pass, then, as Stegner feared, something will have gone out of us as a people. A society increasingly detached from its biological moorings is in danger of thinking it no longer needs nature, much less wilderness. In the end, such a society risks making the mistake of assuming it controls nature and

that nature plays only a supporting role in the human drama.

As poets, philosophers, and wilderness visionaries have trumpeted throughout our nation's history, and as science now echoes as well, we humans are part of nature, after all, and our well-being ultimately depends on the welfare of the larger living and nonliving world around us. Ecology teaches us that wilderness—that intricately formed, wonderfully configured landscape of unfettered magnificence—is one of the most telling expressions of what nature and humankind look like when both are in robust health. While the nonhuman world might be healthy without human interference, a healthy society is a constant struggle that requires active engagement. A healthy ecosystem, one that includes both human and nonhuman systems working together, needs active and thoughtful management. The National Park Service is at the forefront of this vitally important work of integrating people into the wild nature that surrounds us. Louv (2008b) calls this “sacred work.” Indeed it is.

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About the authors

Jeff Rose recently received his PhD from the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City. His research employs political ecology to examine public space and nature-society relations under neoliberalism. **Dan Dustin** is chair of the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism at the University of Utah, Salt Lake City. He is the author of several books that examine the values and ethics underpinning the management of our nation's wildlands.