

EASTERN WILDERNESS USERS: PERCEPTIONS FROM TWO SMALL WILDERNESS AREAS

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Abstract.—This study explores perceptions of wilderness recreationists in the eastern United States, with a focus on definitions of wilderness areas and factors that may decrease enjoyment of the wilderness experience. The eventual aim is to compare these data with information collected from wilderness users in the western United States. The few studies performed on this comparison over the past 25 years have produced inconsistent results and indicated a need for more research. This survey was conducted at wilderness areas in the Allegheny National Forest in Pennsylvania.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Wilderness areas in the eastern United States are generally very different from those in the West. Eastern Wilderness areas tend to be smaller because much of the land in this region is privately owned and thus there is far less government land to designate. Eastern Wilderness areas also have largely been disturbed in the past, such as through farming or timber operations, while many of those in the West still retain their pristine state. Additionally, many eastern Wilderness areas tend to be closer to population centers and are more easily accessible than many western areas, and they usually receive higher numbers of visitors as a result. This leads to more congestion, as the larger visitation rates take place in smaller areas than in the West (Roggenbuck & Watson 1989).

As there are clearly differences between eastern and western Wilderness areas, are there differences in the users of these areas as well? Given the more congested conditions at their local Wilderness areas, would eastern users be more tolerant of encountering other people in

the Wilderness? Would western users be more adamant than their eastern counterparts that the Wilderness areas they use be untouched and have no history of disturbance than their eastern counterparts? Some research has examined this topic in the past, particularly in a spurt in the late 1970s and early 1980s, but it was largely inconclusive. Some studies found that there were few differences between users from the East and those from the West (Boteler 1981, Lucas 1980, Roggenbuck 1980). Other researchers, however, found more differences between Eastern and Western Wilderness users (Donnelly et al. 1981). Little if any study has been performed on this topic since the early 1980s, and the lack of a consensus suggested a need for further study.

The goal of this study was to examine the wilderness perceptions of visitors to two small Wilderness Areas in the Allegheny National Forest. These data will provide a baseline for comparison with data collected in the future from Wilderness Areas in the Western U.S. to see if there are differences in the perceptions between the geographic regions.

2.0 METHODS

2.1 Study Area

This study was conducted at the Wilderness areas in the Allegheny National Forest in north-central Pennsylvania. This forest was established in 1923 after most of the area had been denuded of trees, and as a result is composed almost entirely of second-growth forest (Allegheny National Forest 2005). At 513,325 acres, it is the largest tract of federal land in Pennsylvania, and of that acreage, 2 percent is designated as Wilderness. The first Congressionally-designated Wilderness that was surveyed in the Allegheny was Hickory Creek Wilderness. This area was designated in 1984 and comprises 8,633 acres of previously clear-cut land. Its borders are delineated by a paved state-maintained road and a gravel U.S. Forest Service Road. It is adjacent to Heart's Content Scenic Area, which also serves as a trailhead. Heart's Content has proved to be an effective site for studying the Hickory Creek Wilderness (Graefe et al. 2000). The second Wilderness area studied was the Allegheny Islands

Wilderness. Like Hickory Creek, it was established in 1984. This Wilderness area comprises seven islands that stretch along 56 miles of the Allegheny National Wild and Scenic River. Some of these islands were formerly farmland, while others have always been wetlands. The total size of the islands is 368 acres, which makes this area one of the smallest Wilderness reserves in the United States (Allegheny National Forest 2005). To the west of the river lie numerous farms, roads, and towns. U.S. Route 62 parallels the river to the east, and traffic counts conducted as part of the National Visitor Use Monitoring (NVUM) survey indicated that an average of 2,000 vehicles, including many commercial trucks, use this highway each day. These reserves were of special interest in this study because of their small size and former use. They are quite different from the traditional western Wilderness areas that covers tens or hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of acres of relatively pristine landscape, such as the Bob Marshall Wilderness in Montana, Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness in Idaho, and the Gates of the Arctic Wilderness in Alaska. A glance at a map reveals that these preserves are all several times larger than the entire Allegheny National Forest. There is no spot in the Allegheny Islands Wilderness where a visitor cannot see development on either side of the river or at least hear the traffic on Route 62. Hickory Creek is quieter because of its more secluded location and larger size, but inside, visitors will find the remains of an old World War II-era artillery range and other signs of former use.

2.2 Survey Methods

The survey was performed in conjunction with the 2005 NVUM Survey conducted by the U.S. Forest Service in the Allegheny National Forest. This survey, held every five years in each national forest, is designed to elicit information about visitor demographics as well as what types of activities recreationists are doing in the forest and how long they are staying. The Wilderness surveys were conducted on 20 different days during the summer and early fall of 2005. For Hickory Creek, the survey sites were at Heart's Content trailhead and along Forest Road 119, which borders the Wilderness. Surveys for the Allegheny Islands were performed at canoe pullouts along the Allegheny River. Additional survey days were added to the NVUM survey days assigned to those locations

by the Forest Service, which were randomly chosen. Interviewees were self-identified Wilderness users, and were further screened to ensure that they had indeed visited a Wilderness. This second step became necessary when it was noticed very early on, especially at Heart's Content—which unlike the adjacent Wilderness area contains a tract of old-growth trees—that many visitors believed they had been in the Wilderness when in fact they had not. All interviews were conducted as visitors were finished with their recreational experience and preparing to leave the site.

2.3 Survey Design

The first part of the survey contained six statements about Wilderness areas and interviewees were asked to identify on a Likert-type scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “strongly disagree” to 5 being “strongly agree,” how much they agreed with the statements. These statements were devised to reflect ideas codified in the Wilderness Act of 1964 (Wilderness Society 2005), as well as isolate some conditions in Eastern Wilderness areas that may be different from those in the West, such as prior development.

The second part of the survey was designed to determine how encountering certain situations in a Wilderness area might detract from the user's experience. This detriment was measured on a Likert-type scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being “no bother” to 5 being “major annoyance.” Again, many of these situations were selected based upon how conditions vary between the East and West, such as congestion along trails (Roggenbuck and Watson 1988) and distances from population centers. Many of these potentially detrimental conditions were also taken from previous studies, such as encountering campfire rings in the wilderness (Roggenbuck and Watson 1993) and hearing noise from passing aircraft while in a wilderness (Fidell et al. 1996, Tarrant et al. 1995).

3.0 RESULTS

This survey produced 49 responses in the Allegheny National Forest Wilderness areas in the summer of 2005. One interviewee from California was not included in this study owing to his Western roots. Most respondents came from over 100 miles away, with the majority coming from western Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio. Some items

Table 1.—Results of Survey in the Allegheny National Forest

	Mean	Standard Dev.
Statements about Wilderness areas		
1=Strongly disagree 3=Neutral 5=Strongly Agree		
A wilderness area is one that is free of human disturbance	4.69	0.72
A wilderness area is one that has always been free of human disturbance	3.60	1.36
A wilderness area is a place where nature is primarily in control	4.77	0.59
A wilderness area is a place that needs to be specifically designated as such by the government	2.85	1.65
A wilderness area is a difficult place to access	2.94	1.21
A wilderness area is a danger place	2.35	1.16
Detriment to Wilderness experience		
1=No bother 5=Severe detriment		
Seeing other people	2.75	1.23
Hearing other people	3.31	1.24
Seeing development outside of the wilderness area from within	4.08	1.20
Hearing development outside of the wilderness area from within	4.40	1.03
Seeing trails	1.27	0.74
Seeing fire rings or other signs of previous camping	1.92	1.18
Seeing items left behind by others	4.85	0.55
Seeing aircraft overhead	2.56	1.40
Hearing aircraft overhead	2.81	1.47
Encountering dogs	2.04	1.34
Encountering horses or other pack animals	2.15	1.37

showed a strong consensus among the users, such as distaste at finding items left behind by others, satisfaction in finding trails, and agreement with the statements that Wilderness areas are places free from human development and are areas where nature is primarily in control. There was less agreement about other questions, such as the need for government designation of Wilderness areas, the effects of seeing and hearing aircraft overhead, and the presence of dogs and horses in the Wilderness. Full results are shown in Table 1.

The gathering of data proved more difficult than had been anticipated, as is reflected in the low sample size. One difficulty was that many visitors who believed they had visited a Wilderness area had in fact visited the old-growth forest at Heart's Content, which is not designated as Wilderness. Thus, they were not eligible for the survey even though many wanted to take it. Second, Forest Service personnel stated that the Allegheny seemed to be experiencing lower-than-normal visitation during

the summer of 2005. They attributed this to rainy and cold weather that lasted late into the season, as well as the surge in gasoline prices experienced during that summer. Third, there seemed to be low wilderness usage in general. Even during the Memorial, Independence, and Labor Day holidays, which were by far the busiest times of visitation in the Allegheny National Forest, the parking area at Hickory Creek was far from full. Randomly selected weekend days also hinted at low usage. Finally, many of the sites chosen by the Forest Service for the NVUM survey along the Allegheny River proved to be less than ideal for gathering data from Wilderness users. Most river sites selected were public boat and canoe access points run by the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission. However, observations over the summer indicated that the majority of canoeists using the Allegheny River Islands access the river via privately run canoe services. These businesses own property along the river, which canoeists use as their pullouts. As very few survey days were scheduled at these privately owned

canoe pullouts, the number of respondents for both the NVUM and our Wilderness survey along the river were very low. Only six of the 48 Wilderness surveys collected came from the Allegheny Islands.

4.0 CONCLUSION

It appears that few people visited the Wilderness areas of the Allegheny National Forest in 2005. Of those who did, most agreed on some statements about Wilderness areas and situations that could detract from their Wilderness experiences, but disagreed on others. In general, visitors to the Hickory Creek and Allegheny Islands Wildernesses share the traditional view that Wilderness areas are free of development and human disturbance.

In the summer of 2006, it is hoped that this survey can be conducted at Wilderness sites in the Mt. Hood National Forest and Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area in Oregon, as well as possibly in Alaska. The same questions will be asked, and the data will then be compared with that gathered from the eastern U.S. to determine if any regional trends can be detected.

5.0 CITATIONS

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