

OUR WILDERNESS HERITAGE: A STUDY OF THE COMPATIBILITY OF CULTURAL AND NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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Abstract: The Wilderness Act of 1964 recognizes the value of Cultural Resources yet we often struggle with how to address these values in the management of specific Wilderness Areas. This paper will discuss how Heritage Resource Values compliment and enhance the wilderness experience. It strives to provide a broader understanding and appreciation of the role of land use history in developing management plans for designated Wilderness Areas.

Introduction:

The Wilderness Act of 1964 states that wilderness is an area "where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." It goes on to say that it is "an area which retains its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation."

While the Act goes on to specifically include "features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value" as important aspects of Wilderness characteristics, it is the idea of separation of man and his works from nature that seems to have become the primary focus of many Wilderness managers over the years. This is especially interesting considering the passage of The National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. This legislation directs Federal Agencies to manage cultural sites on Federal lands, including Wilderness Areas, which have been determined to be significant parts of national, regional, or local history.

The Wilderness Act and the National Historic Preservation Act represent Congress's recognition of two equally important and inherently compatible resource values according to Mike Beckes, Regional Archaeologist for The Northern Region of The U.S. Forest Service (Beckes 1994). "Neither act supplants or replaces the other; and the challenge to the Forest Service is to meet our responsibilities under both in a sensitive, thoughtful, and informed manner." He goes on to say that he believes the Forest Service has moved past the stage of unproductive philosophical arguments on the "pure preservation" of either resource at the expense of the other, and is making rapid progress towards balanced management (Beckes

1994). Unfortunately while there are many examples of balanced management there are just as many examples of imbalance. The exclusion of human influence from our national view of what makes nature or Wilderness what they are, is still widespread. It is not only the complimentary aspect of these two laws which needs to be emphasized, but the place of humans as important contributors too, rather than detractors of, the very essence of what Wilderness values are. If we look at the long history of human land use and land management which is at least 12,000 years old, it becomes strikingly clear the role humans have had in helping to shape what we call Wilderness. It has only been in fairly recent times that "modern humans" have chosen to emphasize human history apart from nature.

If we look closely at land use history we might find that most, if not all, of the areas set aside as Wilderness have been "subjected to" human influence since at least the sixteenth century (McCorvie and Welch 1996).

The designation of wilderness areas reflects society's need for places of solitude and inspiration. The 1964 Wilderness Act culminates centuries of land use and ethics, from the Native Americans through the settlers, developers and conservationists. If a cultural landscape is defined by its layering of historical periods-as places that have been settled, controlled, manipulated, or altered for many generations-then wilderness, and particularly eastern wilderness, should qualify as cultural landscapes.

(McCorvie and Welch 1996:5)

Conclusions:

Every wilderness has a heritage and the phases of its prehistory and history provide a framework upon which defensible Wilderness Management plans can be developed

Human land use history plays a principal role in shaping the ecosystem or Wilderness setting. That setting, to a large extent, is the Wilderness experience we have today.

Few if any, Wilderness Areas in America are primeval or pristine. They are, however, dynamic natural settings influenced by natural-including human-actions over thousands of years.

It is time to rethink how people interact in nature. To once again view ourselves as a part of, not separate from, the natural environment. It just might be an important step towards making sound Natural Resource Management decisions as we approach the Twenty First Century.

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