

Wilderness Issues for Urban-Proximate Areas

Urban Perceptions of the Natural Landscape: Implications for Public Awareness of Wilderness as a Distinct Resource¹

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Abstract: As more and more of our population move from rural to suburban to urban to metropolitan settings, the connections between people and the land of which they are a part become less obvious, less immediately important and less clearly understood. The contrast between a complex, highly structured social and cultural urban environment and the natural world seems bipolar. The urban dweller, accordingly, sees only a continuous natural landscape. The implications of this difficulty need to be examined and understood by urban wilderness managers.

Although the concept of wilderness has a long and spirited public history, which resulted in the Wilderness Act of 1964 and subsequent wilderness legislation, the influence of that history and legislation has not been manifest in an urban awareness of this subtle and uniquely American value.

Urban dwellers seem to view the natural world primarily as the antithesis of their complex, structured cities—a place of absolute freedom. The urban dweller who comes to the forest does so to escape from the city, not to marvel at the rhythms of nature or learn of the place of natural events in their lives. The motive is more akin to running from a burning building—getting away in any direction from the heat rather than deliberating the merits of the destination.

An understanding of this distinction is essential if we are to effectively communicate the goals and direction of wilderness management to urban forest visitors.

Examples

1. "Where Are We?"

A wilderness patrolman encountered a group of four young men at a campsite located immediately next to a mountain stream. Scattered around them were paper and plastic shopping bags, a variety of pots, pans and dishes that came from a home kitchen, an ice chest, household bedding items, military surplus packs, a large radio/cassette tape player and tapes, an axe, .22-caliber rifle, empty food cans, wrappers, beer cans and numerous soiled paper towels. A ring of blackened rocks contained a smoldering campfire of green freshly cut alder limbs, the source of which could be seen immediately adjacent to the campsite. After a patient discussion of the need to "leave no trace" and the reasons therefor, suitable apologies are offered with the declaration "We didn't know." As the patrolman left, and almost as an afterthought, one young man asked, "By the way, where are we?"

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2. "Ye Ye Frank"

A wilderness patrolman came upon a camping area where eight sites had been established. Each site consisted of a framework of freshly cut Alder tree trunks, a pile of moving van furniture pads and orlon-cotton blankets. Each site was scraped clean to bare earth. There were also three benches or altars constructed of freshly cut alder saplings by lashing them together with baling twine. A large pit contained institutional-sized food containers, some bearing identification as Federal public assistance foods. Scattered throughout the area were institutional plastic plates, cups, pots, pans, utensils, literally hundreds of individual teaspoon-sized packets of sugar, salt and pepper, honey, catsup, mustard and mayonnaise, books, clothing, discarded flashlight batteries, empty gallon camping fuel cans, a broken radio, numerous unwound tape cassettes, food wrappers, gum wrappers, empty cigarette boxes and countless cigarette butts, and two bibles coated with dirt. A large oak tree had been completely and irreparably girdled by a hatchet. Other trees in the area had been hacked and chopped with no apparent goal. On one tree was carved: "Ye Ye Frank." It took 2 days and half a gallon of diesel oil to incinerate the debris and clean up the area around this site. In a month the same scenario had been replicated a mile further up the canyon.

3. "I Didn't See Any Sheep."

A wilderness patrolman encountered a woman in her early fifties walking along a wilderness trail struggling to manage four large dogs on leash. The patrolman advised the visitor that this particular wilderness area contained a herd of protected desert bighorn sheep, which were frightened by the presence of dogs and that she should consider using a portion of the trail outside the sheep area when walking her dogs. The woman replied indignantly, "I didn't see any sheep."

What's Going on Here?

Clearly the foregoing examples offer a view of wilderness visitors that is not in keeping with our traditional image of the skilled, well prepared backpacker who is sure of his or her place, destination, and purpose—but what is going on here?

In example 1, the group had decided to "get away" from the Torrance area (a suburban community within the Los Angeles Basin) and go to the mountains. They had no clear destination in mind, and in fact no destination other than "the mountains" had been gained. The southern California weather was benign and required no consideration. The distance traveled on foot was less than 2 hours. The visit was only to last overnight. No particular interest in the nature of the area was expressed. This group saw

only that this was not the city and knew that a few items with which they were familiar would be sufficient for their stay.

In example 2, a bit of investigation revealed that the group that had occupied this site was a Christian inner city gang/drug/alcoholic rehabilitation group. It took the enrollees out of the environment that offered those vices and sequestered them (voluntarily) during the weekdays in the forest, away from those temptations, and delivered them home on the weekends when other friends and family would be available to support their rehabilitation. This group had no awareness of the forest other than as a place where the things common to their behavior did not exist.

Example 3 represents two growing trends: to use urban forest and wilderness trails to walk and exercise pets, and to keep dogs for personal protection. The former practice is a result of increasingly strict urban laws regarding pets, their attendant excrement and barking, and the ever-shrinking urban open spaces in which they are allowed. The latter is a result of the need to provide some method for self-protection against potential assail-

ants. Indeed, three different women indicated that they would not hike or jog without their dogs.

What Does This Mean?

The foregoing examples illustrate a significant change in the way more and more people from the Los Angeles area view and use their public lands and the compromise of wilderness values attendant thereto. This increasingly utilitarian view of the land is fundamentally different from the esthetic, spiritual, reverential, land-nurturing mindset that created wilderness legislation and policy.

Whether this trend reflects a response to the pressures of life in the Los Angeles basin, a changing system of social values, or the influence of the growing cultural diversity of the area is unknown. What this means for wilderness managers, however, is that communication with the current visitors from the Los Angeles basin is going to require a much higher level of effort, both in community-based environmental education and field contact.