

Emerging Adults and the Future of Wild Nature

BY HARRY C. ZINN and ALAN R. GRAEFE

Abstract: Many resource managers and wilderness advocates see links between appreciating wild nature, participating in traditional outdoor activities, and support for protecting wild areas. Some of these individuals express concern that the values and recreation behavior of today's young people may suggest less support for protecting wilderness in the future. Although emerging adults appear to express strong pro-environmental values, they exhibit outdoor recreation patterns strikingly different from the past. More questions than answers exist about emerging adults' environmental and wilderness values, and how these values relate to their outdoor recreation behavior.

Introduction

Those who manage, study, advocate for, and care about wilderness sometimes express concern about the values and recreation behavior of young people and implications for the future of wilderness protection. We suggest that this concern is, in part, a product of three factors. First, there are links between traditional outdoor recreation and support for protecting wilderness (e.g., Knudson 1980; Moore and Driver 2005). Second, there is strong support for protecting wilderness among urban, educated members of society (e.g., Schmitt 1969). Third, there is a perception that today's urban, educated young adults seem to be rapidly reinventing outdoor recreation by developing new activities and relying on new technologies (A. E. Watson, personal communication, April 2007). In response to these expressions of concern, our purpose is to: (1) review literature about values and outdoor recreation trends among today's urban, educated young adults; (2) consider possible implications for the future support for protecting wilderness; and (3) identify questions for future research.

In our title we refer to urban, educated young adults as *emerging adults* (Arnett 2000), a term increasingly used to describe young people who are in "a prolonged period of independent role exploration during the late teens and twenties" (Arnett 2000, p. 469). A key characteristic of

emerging adulthood is semiautonomy, which often occurs when young people attend postsecondary school or when they have completed their studies and work outside the home while continuing to be partially supported by parents (Arnett 2000). We use the term *wild nature* in our title to refer to statutory designated wilderness, de facto wilderness, and environments that are widely perceived to be little-influenced by human activity. By using the term *wild nature*, we emphasize that the general population tends not to make the same distinctions between wilderness and nonwilderness that are made by wilderness managers, researchers, and highly involved advocates.

Human Values, Environmental Values, and Wilderness Values

Human values are deeply held, enduring, "trans-situational" (Schwartz 1996) beliefs about good and bad ways to behave and good and bad goals to pursue in life (e.g., Rokeach 1979; Schwartz 1996). Research suggests that fundamental human values take shape and stabilize during the transition from adolescence to adulthood, in other words, during emerging adulthood (e.g., Arnett 2000; Pascarella and Terenzini 1991), and that, among adults, values are more enduring or stable than other types of beliefs (e.g., Rokeach 1979; Schwartz 1996). Many typologies

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of fundamental human values make no overt reference to nature or the environment (e.g., Rokeach 1979). Schwartz's (1996) typology, for example, identifies 10 broad value types, including power, achievement, hedonism, stimulation, self-direction, universalism, benevolence, tradition, conformity, and security. Empirical research is limited, but environmental values may relate to at least three of Schwartz's 10 value types. First, the power value type includes deeply held beliefs about domination and control and may underlie anthropocentric versus biocentric environmental values. Second, the universalism value type includes, for some individuals and/or cultures, deeply held beliefs about natural beauty, living in harmony with nature, and protecting the environment (Schwartz 1996). Third, for some individuals and/or cultures, the benevolence value type may include deeply held beliefs about benevolence toward the natural world.

Researchers have developed a number of different environmental values typologies. For example, Dunlap and colleagues created the "new environmental paradigm" scale (e.g., Dunlap and Van Liere 1984), which was later modified and renamed the "new ecological paradigm" (e.g., Dunlap et al. 2000). Stern and colleagues created a scale measuring overall environmental values (e.g., Stern et al. 1993). Other researchers have focused more narrowly on either wildlife or forests. Kellert and colleagues, for example, identified nine types of values or attitudes toward wildlife (e.g., Kellert and Barry 1987). Manfredo and colleagues introduced and continue to refine the "wildlife value orientations" concept (e.g., Manfredo et al. 2003; Zinn and Pierce 2002). To

study deeply held beliefs about forests, several researchers have adopted the value orientations approach (e.g., Vaske et al. 2001; Zinn et al. 2003), and others have developed new scales (e.g., Tarrant et al. 2003).

Although each of these approaches to environmental values uses unique items and terminology, one characteristic they share is measuring

protected. Whether or not wilderness should be protected, why wilderness should be protected, and what behaviors are compatible with wilderness are different but related questions. In this review, we address all three questions as they relate to the environmental values, wilderness values, and outdoor recreation behavior of emerging adults

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the relative weight individuals or groups put on human use versus human protection of the natural environment. This characteristic highlights an important distinction between the environmental values concept and the wilderness values concept. Environmental values researchers tend to study the degree to which different individuals or groups hold use-oriented or protection-oriented values toward the natural environment. Wilderness values researchers, in contrast, tend to study (1) the relative importance different individuals or groups assign to different "meanings" wilderness (Watson and Landres 1999, p. 387) can provide (e.g., Johnson et al. 2004) or (2) judgments about the appropriateness of different wilderness management philosophies (e.g., Watson and Landres 1999). Environmental values research tends to focus on understanding the balance people strike between using and protecting the natural environment. Wilderness values research tends instead to be based on an implicit assumption that wilderness *should be*

Emerging Adults and Values in the United States

A book published in late 2006, *Generation Me* (Twenge 2006), captured the attention of major media in early 2007 (e.g., Green 2007; National Public Radio 2007) by asserting that research had revealed American youth were more narcissistic and self-centered than earlier generations. This assertion was based on a series of national surveys of American young people (e.g., Twenge and Campbell 2001). Others have suggested contemporary emerging adults are self-centered and materialistic (e.g., Astin 1998; Hornblower 1997). One thing missing from media coverage of these assertions is context. For example, Astin (1998) analyzed 30 years of data (1966–1996) from an annual college freshman survey and found that, over time, students placed increasing importance on "being very well off financially" (p. 124) and "be[ing] able to make more money" (p. 125) after attending college. Although it is possible to interpret these results as a rise in crass materialism among emerging



Figure 1—Little research has been conducted about the wilderness values held by emerging adults. Photo in the *Olympic Wilderness* by Bryan Bell.

adults, it is also possible to interpret the results as a logical outgrowth of current trends, including increased borrowing to finance college, widely fluctuating energy prices, dire predictions about the future of Social Security benefits, erosion of lower- and middle-class earnings relative to upper-class earnings, and increasing uncertainty about long-term employment. Furthermore, other research puts emerging adults' values and goals in a more positive light. For example, college students in one study gave highest rank to "a warm, caring relationship with another adult ... mastery of skills ... a secure financial future ... a comfortable relationship with their original family ... [and] to be physically fit" (Eskilson and Wiley 1999, p. 66), goals which may seem positive to many. More importantly, it is not clear how reported increases in narcissism, self-centeredness, and materialism might relate to environmental values or wilderness values.

Although we found no studies of emerging adults' environmental val-

ues, research conducted over nearly three decades repeatedly links protection-oriented environmental values with more educated, more urban, younger adults. For example, data from a 1979 national survey demonstrated that pro-environmental values were stronger and more centrally held among younger, more highly educated, more urban adults than among their older, less educated, more rural counterparts (Mohai and Twight 1987). Surveys conducted during the early 1990s showed that younger adults in Pennsylvania expressed more pro-environmental values than older adults (Scott and Willits 1994) and younger, urban adults in Colorado were more likely than older, rural adults to express protectionist wildlife value orientations (Manfredo and Zinn 1996). Although age and urban residence were not tested, another 1990s Colorado survey showed that level of education was positively related to both biocentric forest value orientations and beliefs that human use of forests (for extractive production purposes or recreation) was less important than protecting wilderness, natural conditions, and forest health (Vaske et al. 2001). Data from the 2002 National Survey on Recreation and the Environment revealed protectionist forest values were higher among younger, urban respondents than among older, rural respondents (Tarrant et al. 2003). Finally, among a sample of adults (≥ 18 years old) living within 150 miles of Allegheny National Forest (an area centered on northwest Pennsylvania that includes parts of New York, Ohio, and West Virginia), protectionist forest value orientations were higher among younger, more highly educated respondents than among their counterparts (Zinn et al. 2003).

In our review we uncovered no data specifically about wilderness values of emerging adults (see figure 1), and only one study that suggests a relationship between wilderness values and age. In a study comparing wilderness values of native-born and immigrant Americans (Johnson et al. 2004), endorsement of seven of 13 wilderness values was significantly related to age. However, because the study focused on comparing native-born and immigrant Americans, age was treated as a control variable, and details of the wilderness values-age relationship were not examined.

In summary, trend data about fundamental human values can be interpreted to suggest that emerging adults are increasingly self-centered and materialistic, but how this trend relates to environmental or wilderness values is unknown. Although not specifically comparing the environmental values of emerging and older adults, multiple studies conducted from the late 1970s through 2002 demonstrate that younger, more urban, more highly educated Americans tend to express stronger pro-environmental values than older, more rural, less highly educated Americans. Wilderness values of emerging adults remain, to our knowledge, unmeasured.

Emerging Adults and Outdoor Recreation in the United States

Like values, the outdoor recreation patterns of emerging adults have been a subject of little focused study, but existing data suggest both stability and change. On the one hand, traditional activities such as hiking (see figure 2), backpacking, camping, canoeing, and fishing continue to be practiced by many Americans, and some studies suggest participation numbers for these traditional activities are generally

increasing or stable (e.g., Cordell 2004; Kelly and Warnick 1999; Outdoor Industry Association 2006), whereas other studies suggest participation is down, particularly among emerging adults (e.g., Outdoor Industry Association 2003, 2007).

Although participant numbers remain large for traditional outdoor activities, four recreation trends suggest substantial change in the outdoor recreation of emerging adults. First, the “park and play” phenomenon can be seen, for example, among 20- to 30-year-old rock climbers, whitewater paddlers, and backcountry skiers as they spend less time in backcountry travel and more time participating in their activities at roadside destinations (e.g., Boulder Outdoor Center 2007). Second, speed and competition, which were formerly uncommon in activities such as rock climbing, backpacking, and whitewater boating, are becoming more common. Speed climbing, for example, now occupies an important new niche within a traditional activity, with speed being used as measure of skill in both competitive and noncompetitive settings (e.g., Florine and Wright 2004), and speed backpacking is one of the activities addressed by a new magazine, *Backpacking Light*. Third, “tow-in” surfing and “sled-skiing” by 20- to 30-year-old recreationists represent a degree of motorization in sports that were formerly nonmotorized (e.g., Lutz 2007; Towsurfer.com LLC 2007). Fourth, entirely new activities continue to emerge. During the last two decades, activities such as snowboarding, freestyle skiing, freestyle kayaking, sea kayaking, kiteboarding, and freeriding on mountain bikes have grown from outdoor fads to established outdoor sports. More recently, “parkour” has appeared



Figure 2—A group of youth learning orienteering in the Yosemite Wilderness. Photo courtesy of WildLink.

among emerging adults in the United States (American Parkour 2007). Parkour is a gymnastic form of freestyle running, jumping, vaulting, and balancing, which began in outdoor urban settings and is now spreading to resource-based recreation areas. Interestingly, although the activity seems entirely new, participants link it to very old roots, saying, for example, “In some sense, Parkour has been around as long as man’s need to hunt and avoid being hunted” (American Parkour 2007).

All four of these outdoor recreation trends appear to be related to a general speeding up of outdoor recreation. The speeding up of outdoor recreation can be seen in a decades-long tendency toward shorter outdoor recreation trips. For several decades, one-week, two-week, and longer outdoor recreation trips have gradually become less common, whereas trips less than a week long have become more common (e.g., Cordell 2004; Kelly and Warnick 1999). Like other outdoor recreation trips, wilderness visits have grown shorter and more frequent (e.g., Geary and Stokes 1999; Cole 1996),

occur more on weekends and holidays (Geary and Stokes 1999), and are more often made by day-users (Cole 2001).

The speeding up of outdoor recreation may have multiple causes. First, Americans’ free time is becoming more fragmented, causing people to experience “time famine” and recreate more frequently for briefer periods of time (Robinson and Godbey 1997). Second, some scholars suggest attention spans have grown shorter, perhaps because of children’s extensive exposure to the fast pace of television programs such as *Sesame Street* (e.g., Curtis 2000; Zimmerman and Christakis 2005). Third, ongoing technological innovation has allowed people to travel to and from outdoor recreation sites more quickly and comfortably and allowed them to move more easily and rapidly during recreation activities.

The speed and ease of travel to outdoor recreation sites has been improved by technological innovations including aircraft, automobiles, railroads, and steamships, listed in *reverse* chronological order. Automobiles, in particular, played an

important role in the wilderness movement, on one hand by provoking a reaction against congestion and sprawl, but on the other hand by facilitating wilderness visits (Sutter 2002). Earlier, automobiles and railroads contributed to the protection of national parks, national forests, and state parks by facilitating visitation (e.g., Shaffer 2001). Earlier still, railroads and steamships contributed to interest in natural scenery and the protection of New York's Adirondack and Catskill Mountains (e.g., Brown 1997).

Examples of technological innovations (see figure 3) that make participation in traditional outdoor recreation activities easier and faster include improvements to firearms and archery equipment; materials and coatings that have made tents, packs, clothing, and shoes lighter, more durable, and more water resistant; materials that have made skis, snowshoes, and canoes more durable, more slippery, and easier to master; and information tools ranging from accurate, affordable government maps and charts to global positioning

systems. In addition to impacting traditional outdoor recreation activities, technological innovation has repeatedly spawned new activities, many of which emphasize speed. Snowboarding, freeriding on mountain bikes, freestyle skiing, freestyle kayaking, and kiteboarding are recent examples, all of which are embraced by emerging adults. Many of these new outdoor activities have links to skateboarding and extreme sports and have deeper roots than commonly recognized. Extreme sports have been traced backward in time by one author through a chain of gravity-defying activities including skateboarding, bungee-jumping, surfing, mountain climbing, hot-air ballooning, and parachuting, the last three of which can be traced back to the 18th century (Soden 2003).

Considering changes in the pacing of mass media, the ways in which Americans spend their time, access to outdoor recreation opportunities, and the pace of outdoor recreation participation, it should not be surprising that a 2003 press release from

the Outdoor Industry Association included the following observations:

"Time compression is still a macro trend with Americans taking less vacation, as is virtual recreation via computers competing for time," said Casey Sheahan, president of Kelty. ... Marked increases in participation occurred in climbing (ice and rock) and kayaking (all formats), which require specialized gear, places to recreate and skill to perform, but reward with a rush. ... 16- to 24-year olds are ice climbing, kayaking, camping, climbing artificial walls, cross-country skiing and hiking more than they were in 2001. ... Predictably, most of the sports that entertain today's youth and show signs of growing popularity are the ones that provide excitement, require demanding physical skills, and are cool—and I don't mean zip-off nylon hiking pants.

Unanswered Questions about Emerging Adults and Wild Nature

Data show that emerging adults are pursuing new, fast-paced forms of outdoor recreation in increasing numbers, but participation in more traditional forms of outdoor recreation remains higher than participation in newer activities. Studies designed specifically to track participation by age cohorts and project it into the future would give managers a much clearer picture of future outdoor recreation participation and its potential impacts on wilderness and nonwilderness resources. Studies of the extent to which recreation participant behavior and expectations evolve over time might also provide valuable information about future impacts. Although not a wilderness example, snowboarding began two decades ago with a reputation (among participants and nonparticipants



Figure 3—The development of more flexible and lightweight equipment has made rafting a popular sport even in remote wilderness areas. Photo in the Bob Marshall Wilderness by Gordon Ash.

alike) as an activity for rebels. Many skiers demanded that resorts ban snowboards, and many resorts complied (e.g., Vaske et al. 2000). Since that time, driven partly by financial considerations, but also by changing behavior and expectations, snowboard bans have become uncommon, snowboarding's reputation appears to have softened, and snowboarder-skier conflict appears to have diminished (Thapa and Graefe 2003). Focused study of new activities and their relationship to established activities in wilderness may help managers understand factors that facilitate or inhibit similar evolution.

More is known about emerging adults' outdoor recreation than about their environmental or wilderness values. Although numerous studies of environmental and wilderness values exist, few have used directly comparable measures, few have specifically targeted emerging adults, and, to our knowledge, none have tracked the environmental or wilderness values of age cohorts through emerging adulthood and beyond. Thus, neither the content of emerging adults' environmental or wilderness values, nor values trends as emerging adults mature, can be described. Furthermore, we found no studies of emerging adults that examined relationships among environmental values, wilderness values, and specific wilderness-related behaviors. Questions about these relationships cannot be answered without targeted research, but the answers may help wilderness managers anticipate future recreation behavior, conflict, responses to wilderness management philosophies, and the acceptability of specific management actions.

Questions about emerging adults and their relationship to wilderness greatly outnumber answers. Yet today's

emerging adults will eventually become the country's primary voters, taxpayers, opinion leaders, and wilderness visitors. Our current state of knowledge suggests that emerging adults may differ in important ways from older adults. Better understanding the extent of those differences and their implications will lay the groundwork for successful wilderness management in the future. **IJW**

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HARRY C. ZINN is associate professor at The Pennsylvania State University, Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management, University Park, PA 16802, USA. Email: hzinn@psu.edu.

ALAN R. GRAEFE is associate professor, The Pennsylvania State University, Department of Recreation, Park and Tourism Management, University Park, PA 16802, USA.

