

Alaska Exceptionality Hypothesis: Is Alaska Wilderness Really Different?

Gregory Brown

Abstract—The common idiom of Alaska as “The Last Frontier” suggests that the relative remoteness and unsettled character of Alaska create a unique Alaskan identity, one that is both a “frontier” and the “last” of its kind. The frontier idiom portrays the place and people of Alaska as exceptional or different from the places and people who reside in the Lower Forty-Eight States, especially in regard to human perception and interaction with the surrounding landscape. The notion that Alaska represents the “last frontier” leads to what may be called the “Alaska exceptionality” hypothesis, the idea that the concept of wilderness in Alaska, one that was constructed in a “frontier” setting, is different from the “received” idea of wilderness in the Lower 48 States. Three dimensions of the Alaska exceptionality hypothesis with respect to wilderness are explored here—geographical context, set of social conditions, and subjective response to place—with indepth analysis of subjective response to place. Using survey data collected as part of the Chugach National Forest planning process, this paper describes Alaska residents’ subjective response to the concept of wilderness (attitudes, values, and beliefs) and compares this response with results from the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment (NSRE). It is argued that the subjective response of Alaskans to the concept of wilderness is similar to residents in the Lower 48 States on some wilderness values, but some differences in wilderness values are present that provide support for the Alaska wilderness exceptionality hypothesis. It is further argued that the geographical separation of Alaska from the Lower 48 States contributes to the difference in subjective response to the concept of wilderness, one that may not be present in countries that are largely or exclusively circumpolar.

Introduction

In his book “Community and Identity on the Alaska Frontier,” Cuba (1987) describes how the forces of migration and mobility have served to reinforce and strengthen Alaska place identity among its residents. Symbolic images of a wild Alaska frame the expectations of migrants to Alaska, with some migrants identifying themselves as different from other people (for example, more adventurous or more independent) even prior to moving to Alaska. Once migrants arrive, they establish and perpetuate an identity based on comparative experiences with the world “outside” Alaska. The constructed Alaska image is one where the people are friendlier and more independent, economic opportunities are greater and more challenging, and its government more accessible and immediately felt. The distinctiveness of Alaskan life is reinforced through travel to the Continental United States where friends, family members, and even strangers expect them to display visible signs of their Alaskan experiences. Indeed, some Alaska residents begin to think of themselves as Alaskans only after they travel outside of the State. As Cuba (1987: 165) notes, “residents of Anchorage assume a frontier mien because it is expected of them.”

But the construction of an Alaskan identity is not purely symbolic. The meaning of place is derived through everyday, local interaction and cannot be separated from its location. Accordingly, “the content of the Alaskan place identity is anchored in the particulars of place” (Cuba 1987: 170). In other words, it is the subjective response of Alaska residents to the place of Alaska that constructs and reinforces the image of Alaska as exceptional or different. In his analysis of Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, Cuba (1987: 14) writes that Turner actually references three distinct types of frontiers: (1) as a geographic territory with identifiable physical characteristics (for example, “the margin of settlement which has a density of two or more to the square mile”), (2) as a set of social conditions resulting from human interaction with the environment (for example, “a form of society”), and (3) a subjective response

Gregory Brown is Associate Professor of Environmental Policy in the Environmental Science Department, Alaska Pacific University, 4101 University Drive, Anchorage, AK 99508, U.S.A. E-mail: gregb@alaskapacific.edu

In: Watson, Alan E.; Alessa, Lilian; Sproull, Janet, comps. 2002. Wilderness in the Circumpolar North: searching for compatibility in ecological, traditional, and ecotourism values; 2001 May 15–16; Anchorage, AK. Proceedings RMRS-P-26. Ogden, UT: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station.

to place that includes attitudes, beliefs, and values (for example, “a state of mind”). Thus, the concept of “frontier” is an ambiguous one without reference to the definitional type of frontier. With respect to Alaska, Cuba believes that Alaskans, particularly residents of Anchorage, have adopted a frontier “state of mind” that is quite far removed from a daily routine that requires coping with primitive living conditions.

The adoption of a “frontier” state of mind stands in stark contrast to the realities of everyday life (social conditions) for the majority of Alaska residents. Historian Stephen Haycox (1999) notes that the majority of Alaskans live in what he terms a “replication corridor,” consisting of a narrow strip of human habitation that mirrors urban conditions found outside Alaska. Here, life in both the large and smaller urban centers is nearly indistinguishable from life in cities and towns across the Western United States. Residents can access all the amenities, conveniences, and comforts of urban life found elsewhere in America. Haycox believes Alaska’s replication corridor “manifests little that is different from the American west” despite its more remote location and the potential within it for an embrace of wilderness values. For Haycox, the culture where the majority of Alaska residents live does not support the Alaska exceptionality hypothesis, at least with respect to the set of “social conditions.”

The concept of “frontier” is predicated on contrasting images—civilization versus wilderness, urban versus rural life, and conformity versus individualism. Without the concept of “wilderness” there would be no “frontier.” The argument set forth here is that the concepts of wilderness and frontier are derivatives of each other and, therefore, share the same basic typology and conceptual ambiguity. Like the frontier, wilderness may alternatively be conceived of as a geographic territory (for example, an area within the National Wilderness Preservation System), as a set of social conditions (for example, a subsistence lifestyle), or as a state of mind (for example, a natural or pristine area).

The first two concepts of wilderness—as a geographic territory and as a set of social conditions—are briefly described below followed by the main thrust of this paper, wilderness as a state of mind or perception.

Wilderness as “Exceptional” Geographic Territory

Since passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964 (Public Law 88-577), substantial additions have been made to the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) in Alaska. Most of the Alaska wilderness acreage was added in 1980 with passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (Public Law 96-487), which added over 56 million acres (22,680,000 ha) to the NWPS. Alaska now has more than 58 million acres (23,490,000 ha) of wilderness in 48 units located in National Wildlife Refuges, National Parks, and National Forests spread from the extreme Southeast (Tongass National Forest) to the Arctic Coast (Arctic National Wildlife Refuge). Over 55 percent of the entire NWPS acreage is located in Alaska, and Alaska wilderness has more land area as a percent of total State land (15.4 percent) than any other State (Landres and Meyer 2000). The largest wilderness unit in Alaska is the Wrangell-St. Elias Wilderness at 9.7 million acres (3,928,500 ha), and the smallest unit is the Hazy Islands Wilderness at 32 acres (13 ha).

The geography of Alaska wilderness appears exceptional from an ecological perspective. Alaska is dominated by the “polar” ecosystem domain (Bailey 1980) with “tundra” and “subarctic” divisions comprising the largest area of land. The tundra climate is characterized by very short, cool summers and long, severe winters. Polar ecosystems contain vegetation dominated by grasses, sedges, lichens, and willow shrubs. Subarctic ecosystems are shaped by a climate with great seasonal range in temperature, severe winters, and small amounts of annual precipitation concentrated in the three warm summer months. Subarctic vegetation is dominated by a large belt of needleleaf forest referred to as boreal forest. These tundra and subarctic areas comprise approximately 14.5 percent of the total land area in the United States (Bailey 1980). The other ecosystem division present in Alaska is the “marine” division that shares some characteristics with coastal areas in the Pacific Northwest. The marine ecoregions occupy a relatively small land area in the United States (3.7 percent) along the Pacific coast. These ecosystems of Alaska support abundant

populations of faunal species not found elsewhere in such large concentrations, including brown and black bear, caribou, and moose.

Alaska contains relatively few public roads for its size, a total of 12,686 miles (20,412 km) of roads (Federal Highway Administration 1999). Only the smaller States of Hawaii, 4,257 miles (6,850 km), Delaware, 5,748 miles (9,249 km), and Rhode Island, 6,052 miles (9,738 km) have fewer road miles, but with significantly higher road densities.

Thus, from a size and ecology perspective, the geographical territory of wilderness in Alaska is “exceptional” from that found in the Lower 48 States.

Wilderness as Social Conditions

Are social conditions surrounding Alaska wilderness more “primitive” or “wild” than in the Lower 48? The population of Alaska, like many Western States, is urban with over half the statewide population of 627,000 (United States Census 2000) living in Anchorage or the nearby Matanuska-Susitna Valley. Alaskans who live in the “replication corridor” are not self-sufficient in the frontier sense, many holding jobs in the service or government sectors of the economy. These people live ordinary lives and are accustomed to all the conveniences and nuances of modern, nonwilderness living that are nearly indistinguishable from cities and towns in the Lower 48. The much touted “higher cost-of-living in Alaska,” a general characteristic of frontier geography, has largely faded, at least in the “replication corridor” through efficient transportation and distribution channels. As Haycox (1999) writes, “in the human culture of the replication corridor...there is little to distinguish the places as Alaskan.”

The “primitive” living conditions, generally associated with a frontier and wilderness existence, are absent in the “replication corridor,” although primitive conditions continue to exist in rural or “bush” Alaska where the traditional “honey bucket” persists. For example, 89 of the 192 Alaska Native villages do not have water piped or trucked to homes, and as many as 20,000 of the 86,000 Alaska Native villagers depend on the so-called “honey bucket” system of waste disposal (Rural Alaska Sanitation Coalition 1999). But for most Alaskans, water, waste, and health conditions are similar to those found elsewhere in the United States.

And yet, even in the area of social conditions, one could argue, perhaps unconvincingly, that small things in Alaska add up to “differences” in social conditions. Anchorage is the only large urban area in the United States where mega fauna such as moose and bears coexist, uneasily at times, with urban residents. Anchorage is the only major city with a 500,000-acre State Park (including State-designated “wilderness”) located within its municipal boundary. And Alaska has a relatively high population (98,000) of American Indian and Alaska Natives whose unique and traditional culture continues to color the lives of Alaskan residents.

Wilderness as a State of Mind

If wilderness is a social construct, as Cronin (1996) and others suggest, the Alaska wilderness exceptionality hypothesis would posit that Alaskans perceive and value wilderness differently than other United States residents in the Lower 48. How do Alaskans perceive their wilderness landscapes compared to those “outside”? Ideally, one would construct a study to measure wilderness perceptions and values, sampling both Alaska and “outside” residents utilizing commonly recognized wilderness themes and places. Unfortunately, this data is not available. An alternative approach—one that is attempted here—is to compare national level measures of wilderness values with Alaska-based measures of wilderness values.

Comparing Alaska Wilderness Values to National Wilderness Values

Two national surveys (National Survey on Recreation and the Environment) were conducted in 1995 and 2000 that provide national level statistics and regional summaries of wilderness values (Cordell and others 1998) based on a typology of 13

wilderness values. In Alaska, Brown and Reed (2000) collected landscape values data as part of the Chugach National Forest (CNF) planning process. This value typology also consisted of 13 values. A comparison of the two methodologies appears in table 1.

The 1998 Alaska study was conducted as part of the CNF planning process. A multipart survey was sent to Alaska residents living in communities surrounding the CNF and also included a Statewide random sample of Alaska residents. The questionnaire contained five sections: (1) questions about the familiarity of the recipients with CNF (number of times visited, level of subsistence use, employment relying on the CNF, and level of interest in the CNF's future); (2) measurement of attitudes toward 19 potential forest uses on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Favor" to "Strongly Oppose"; (3) a series of eight policy questions specific to the CNF plan revision such as how much logging, wilderness, "wild and scenic" river designation, and new roads should be included in the revised plan; (4) a set of 13 landscape values in which respondents were to rank personal value preferences and to spatially locate these values on the landscape; and (5) selected demographic information including age, gender, level of education, occupation, and race. The overall survey response rate was 31 percent, yielding over 800 usable responses.

The initial list of landscape values to be included in the questionnaire was based on the typology suggested by Rolston and Coufal (1991). In addition to their 10 values, two additional values—cultural and therapeutic value—as suggested by Rolston (1989) were added. In deference to the importance of subsistence as a legal, social, and political concern to Alaskans, subsistence value was also included in the typology. Each of the 13 values was accompanied by a short phrase to communicate the intended meaning of the value.

Although the wilderness value methodologies appear too different for direct comparison, with great trepidation, the results from the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment (NSRE) and Alaska surveys appear in table 2. Because the rating scales differed between surveys, the most reliable comparison is the relative ranking of value importance in the two surveys. One obvious difference is the high value Alaskans assign to recreation compared to respondents in the Lower 48. Alaskans rank recreation as the highest value compared to rankings of 10th and 12th for the 1995 and 2000 NSRE studies, respectively. This result may be partially explained by the fact that the Alaska survey asked about the entire CNF, including

Table 1—Comparison of wilderness values methodologies.

	Wilderness values scale (Haas and others 1986)^a	Ecosystem values scale (Brown and Reed 2000)
Number of values	13	13
Application	Specific to wilderness	General landscapes (terrestrial and marine)
Scale of measure	Rating: 5-point Likert from "extremely important" = 1 to "not important" = 5	Ranking/rating: Allocation of 100 points among 13 values
Type of survey	Phone	Mail
Place specific	No	Yes
Attributes of measure	Rating of values (interval). Easy to administer and simpler to complete. Conducive to parametric statistics.	Ranking of values (ordinal). Values are manifestations of choice. Measures force distinction between values.
Weakness of measure	Results in lack of differentiation among values and "end piling." Respondents not forced to make choices required by ranking. Lack of differentiation can weaken correlations among variables, and important relationships between value ratings and other variables may be overlooked (Greenleaf and others 1999).	May force distinctions between values where none exist. Ranking task is more difficult to administer. Difficulty increases when number of items to be ranked are more than four or five. Difficult to administer by telephone. Analysis limited to use of nonparametric statistics. ^b

^a The National Survey of Recreation and the Environment was conducted in 1995 and 2000.

^b The measurement scale asked respondents to allocate 100 points among 13 values. An advantage of this method is that the resulting data may be treated as either interval or ordinal level measures and analyzed accordingly.

Table 2—Comparison of important national wilderness values (1995, 2000) and Alaska ecosystem values (1999).

Wilderness values scale (Haas and others 1986)	Ecosystem values scale (Brown and Reed 2000)	1995 NSRE ^a very or extremely important	2000 NSRE ^b very or extremely important	1998 CNF ^c very or extremely important
Recreation	Recreation	48.9 (10) ^d	56.7 (12)	40.9 (1)
Spiritual	Spiritual	43.2 (12)	58.2 (10)	8.0 (10)
Scientific	Learning	46.3 (11)	57.4 (11)	5.2 (11)
Scenic beauty	Aesthetic	59.7 (7)	74.3 (7)	34.1 (3)
Future generations	Future	76.9 (4)	85.1 (4)	21.7 (5)
Knowing it exists	Intrinsic	56.1 (9)	74.1 (8)	8.4 (9)
Tourist income	Economic	22.8 (13)	33.3 (13)	21.0 (6)
Air quality	Life sustaining	78.0 (3)	91.7 (1)	37.0 (2)
Water quality		78.9 (1)	91.4 (2)	
Endangered species	Biological diversity	73.7 (5)	82.9 (5)	29.7 (4)
Wildlife habitat	—	78.6 (2)	87.2 (3)	
Preserving ecosystems	—	66.5 (6)	79.7 (6)	
Future use option	—	59.4 (8)	73.2 (9)	
—	Therapeutic			9.0 (8)
—	Cultural			3.2 (13)
—	Subsistence			19.9 (7)
—	Historic			3.3 (12)

^a Source: Cordell and others 1998. Value scores ranged from: extremely important = 1, to not important = 5.

^b Source: U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, National Survey on Recreation and the Environment 2000 Summary Report No. 2. Value scores ranged from: extremely important = 1, to not important = 5.

^c Raw value scores ranging from 0 to 100 were recoded into five categories where: 1 = extremely important (raw score = 21+); 2 = very important (raw score = 11 to 20); 3 = important (raw score = 6 to 10); 4 = slightly important (raw score = 1 to 5); and 5 = not important (raw score = 0).

^d The numbers in parentheses rank value importance from 1 to 13 based on the percent of respondents who rated that value as either very or extremely important.

roaded areas, not just potential wilderness areas in the forest. Nonetheless, most of the CNF is roadless and has landscape characteristics that would legally qualify as Wilderness under the 1964 Wilderness Act.

An important area of agreement between Alaska respondents and national respondents is the importance of wilderness to sustain life—as a source of clean air and water, and as a repository of biological diversity. These values ranked high in both studies.

Four values appear in the Alaska study typology that do not appear in the national study of wilderness values. Two of the values—cultural and historic—ranked the lowest in the Alaska study and probably do not significantly detract from the comparability of the Alaska and national studies. But two other values—therapeutic and subsistence value—do rank high enough (seventh and eighth) in the Alaska study to undermine direct value comparisons of the studies. Subsistence value, in particular, must be accounted for in Alaska research of wilderness values to be meaningful, and yet this value is probably not significant to wilderness in the Lower 48.

If a difference in perception in wilderness values exists among Alaskans, it would be that Alaskans hold a more instrumental view of wilderness. Wilderness is a place to use, recreate, and explore, not a place to be left alone. Alaskans also recognize the economic value of wilderness from a tourism perspective and fully expect that the landscape will be exploited for its tourism potential (economic value in Alaska ranked 6th compared to 13th in the NSRE studies). Alaskans also acknowledge the extraordinary scenic beauty of the landscape and place a high value on aesthetics (aesthetics ranked third in the Alaska study and seventh in the national results).

An attempt was made in both the Alaska and national studies to determine whether the value typologies contained latent variables, and if so, how much variation these variables could explain. When exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the Alaska and national value survey responses using comparable methods (principal components, varimax rotation, and eigenvalues greater than 1 as the factor breakpoint), different results appear (table 3). The Alaska values typology is more resistant to data reduction, producing four factors compared to two factors, while explaining about the same level of overall variation. Arguably, factor analysis produces little additional insight for either value typology. The values typology utilized in the national study yields variables that are too general (protection and utilization), and the Alaska values typology yields latent variables that are difficult to ascribe meaning. Neither

Table 3—Factor analysis of wilderness values^a.

NSRE (1995) ^b	Chugach NF Planning Study (1998)
Factor 1 (wildland protection 47.4%) Wildlife habitat Endangered species Protect ecosystems Future generations Air quality Water quality Future use option Knowing it exists	Factor 1 (wildland utilization 17%) Spiritual Therapeutic Economic
Factor 2 (wildland utilization 9.7%) Tourist income Recreation opportunities Spiritual inspiration No loading Scenic beauty Scientific study	Factor 2 (wildland knowledge 11%) Learning Historic Cultural
	Factor 3 (wildland legacy 10%) Biological diversity Future Subsistence
	Factor 4 (wildland aesthetic 9%) Aesthetic Recreation No loading Life sustaining Intrinsic

^a Principal components extraction, varimax rotation, eigenvalues >1, and factor loadings > 0.5.
^b The National Survey of Recreation and Environment was conducted in 1995.

factor analysis does well in capturing a high percentage of the overall variation in the model. Factor analysis does indicate that a “wildland utilization” factor appears to be present in both typologies, while the “wildland protection” factor in the national study appears similar to the “wildland legacy” factor in the Alaska study.

Characteristics of Alaska Wilderness Supporters and Opponents

Perhaps more meaningful to understanding wilderness values in Alaska is an assessment of those who support and those who oppose formal wilderness designation of public lands in Alaska. In the 1998 CNF planning study, a specific survey question was asked to determine support or opposition to additional designation of Wilderness (capital “W” wilderness) in the CNF. Respondents were also given the option of supporting the amount of wilderness recommended in the 1984 forest plan (status quo option). Alaska residents were divided on the issue of whether to recommend designation of more wilderness for the CNF, with about one-third favoring more wilderness, about one-third favoring less wilderness, and about one-third opting for the status quo 1.7-million-acre (688,500-ha) 1984 CNF plan recommendation.

Demographics

Table 4 presents a summary of the demographic characteristics of supporters and opponents of additional wilderness designation in Alaska—individuals who responded that they would prefer more or less wilderness designation. Individuals who preferred the same amount of designated wilderness in the CNF are not included in table 4. The results indicate that wilderness supporters in Alaska tend to be younger, are more disproportionately female with a higher level of formal education, have lived in Alaska a relatively shorter period of time, and more likely live in an urban rather than rural locations.

The results also suggest that Alaska Natives are less likely to support wilderness designation compared to non-Natives, although this result is not statistically significant, likely due to the small number of Alaska Native respondents in the study.

Attitudes and Policies

Alaskans who oppose more recommended Wilderness designation in the CNF exhibit positive attitudes toward resource utilization activities including logging, mining,

Table 4—Characteristics of Alaska Wilderness proponents and opponents (source: Chugach National Forest Planning Study 1998).

Characteristic	Wilderness supporter	Wilderness opponent
Demographics		
Years lived in Alaska ^a	19	26
Years lived in community ^a	13.5	19
Age ^a	41.0	47.7
Gender ^a		
Percent male	52.5	73.4
Percent female	47.5	26.6
Residence ^b		
Percent urban	55.2	44.8
Percent rural	46.5	53.5
Education ^a		
Percent college graduate	46.0	33.6
Race		
Percent white	48.6	51.4
Percent Alaska Native (n = 28)	35.7	64.3
Landscape values		
Highest ranked	Life sustaining Aesthetic Biological diversity	Recreation Economic Life sustaining
Lowest ranked	Cultural Historic Economic	Spiritual Cultural Learning
Attitudes toward public land uses (selected)		
Commercial logging ^a	Oppose	Favor
Commercial mining ^a	Oppose	Favor
Motorized recreation ^a	Oppose	Favor
Oil and gas drilling ^a	Oppose	Favor
Communication sites ^a	Oppose	Favor
Policy issue positions		
Building new roads ^a	None to a few new roads	A few to many new roads
Snowmachine area use ^a	Current level or decrease	Increase areas available
ATV/ORV use ^a	Current level or decrease	Current level or increase
Wild and Scenic Rivers ^a	All possible rivers	None or a few rivers
Timber harvest levels ^a	Decrease harvest levels	Increase harvest levels

^a Significant difference $p < 0.05$.^b Residents of Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau were classified as urban.

oil and gas drilling, motorized recreation, and placement of communication facilities. The opposite is true of individuals who support more Wilderness in the CNF.

The attitudinal differences were also reflected in potential CNF policies regarding road building, snowmachine and ATV/ORV use, designation of wild and scenic rivers, and timber harvest levels, with wilderness supporters favoring preservation options (less road building and timber harvesting with more wild and scenic river designation) over resource development options (more logging, road building, and few to none designated wild and scenic rivers).

Values

An examination of landscape values between supporters and opponents of additional recommended Wilderness in the CNF indicates strong value differences. The most important values to supporters of additional wilderness were life sustaining, aesthetic, and biological diversity values, while recreation, economic, and life-sustaining

values were the most important values to opponents of additional wilderness (see table 5). The largest differences in value rankings between supporters and opponents were expressed for economic, spiritual, and recreation values, with supporters of additional wilderness expressing higher spiritual value but lower economic and recreation values. Those favoring less wilderness ranked economic value as the second highest value out of 13, compared to a rank of 11 out of 13 for wilderness supporters.

Conclusions

Is Alaska wilderness exceptional compared to other wilderness in the NWPS? In support of the argument, one could point to the tangible differences between Alaskan wilderness and that found in the Lower 48 States: (1) wilderness areas in Alaska are significantly larger and less fragmented; (2) wilderness areas are located in ecoregions not found elsewhere in the NWPS; (3) wilderness areas receive significantly more subsistence use by both Alaska Natives and rural residents; (4) wilderness areas are the destination of a large and growing “ecotourism” market; and 5) wilderness in Alaska is managed by a set of legal guidelines from the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (PL 96-487), 1980, that provide a series of “exceptions” to wilderness management such as the construction and maintenance of cabins, the use of motorized vehicles including snowmobiles, motorboats, and aircraft, and temporary fishing and hunting camps.

Table 5—Ranked landscape values for wilderness proponents and opponents (source: Chugach National Forest Planning Study 1998).

Value	Alaska Wilderness preference	n	Mean ^a	Standard deviation	Mean ^b	Value ranking ^c	
						Less wilderness respondents	More wilderness respondents
Aesthetic	Less	295	10.95	11.82	3.23	4	2
	More	267	12.49	11.93	2.95		
Economic^d	Less	295	13.34	17.09	3.18	2	11
	More	267	3.26	7.18	4.40		
Recreation^d	Less	295	17.77	17.22	2.62	1	4
	More	267	10.55	12.16	3.27		
Life sustaining^d	Less	295	11.74	13.95	3.16	3	1
	More	267	15.09	14.35	2.76		
Learning^d	Less	295	2.34	4.17	4.49	11	10
	More	267	4.69	5.45	4.03		
Biological diversity	Less	295	10.12	11.40	3.32	6	3
	More	267	12.02	12.07	3.05		
Spiritual^d	Less	295	1.71	4.75	4.65	13	8
	More	267	6.32	9.56	3.91		
Intrinsic^d	Less	295	3.28	6.64	4.38	9	6
	More	267	6.59	11.28	3.92		
Historic^d	Less	295	2.34	4.48	4.50	10	12
	More	267	3.23	5.30	4.34		
Future^d	Less	295	6.96	11.05	3.83	7	5
	More	267	10.46	11.69	3.27		
Subsistence^d	Less	295	10.62	15.55	3.53	5	9
	More	267	5.75	11.24	4.07		
Therapeutic^d	Less	295	3.73	6.42	4.27	8	7
	More	267	6.50	8.38	3.82		
Cultural	Less	295	1.89	5.16	4.61	12	13
	More	267	1.78	3.77	4.62		

^a Mean value of scores ranging from 0 to 100.

^b Mean value of scores converted to 5-point scale (1 = extremely important to 5 = not important).

^c Ordinal ranking of values (from 1 to 13) based on mean value of responses 1998.

^d Indicates significant difference in mean value ($p < 0.05$).

To refute the exceptionality argument, one could point to technology such as the airplane, helicopter, or snowmachine that negate size and scale differences in wilderness areas. The scale of the landscape may be larger, but technology can greatly diminish the physical challenges required to access wilderness areas. Regarding the exceptionality of wilderness management, one can point to other wilderness areas in the NWPS that contain ANILCA-like management exceptions, such as the use of airplanes in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness in Idaho.

If the physical size, location, ecology, and management of Alaska wilderness appear exceptional, what can one say about the social construction of the wilderness concept in Alaska? Alaskans perceive themselves to be exceptional even if the social conditions (at least within the replication corridor) appear unexceptional. Alaskans hold higher instrumental values (for example, subsistence, recreation, and economic) toward the landscape, influenced to some extent by the concept, culture, and history of subsistence in Alaska. Even as the physical necessity of subsistence hunting and fishing diminishes in postmodern Alaska, the culture of subsistence as a surrogate for Alaska Native rights and land access increases in importance. For rural and Alaska Natives, the land is a place that provides sustenance (even if only symbolic) for survival.

The Alaska Native view and the Western concept of wilderness clearly diverge. Visitors to Alaska appear disappointed to encounter Alaska Natives living in so-called wilderness areas, a situation that appears contradictory to the 1964 Wilderness Act. For Alaska Natives, the landscape is “home,” a land to be respected, but equally important, a land to be utilized. But for Alaska urbanites and visitors to Alaska, the landscape is valued as a place to recreate and enjoy the scenic beauty rather than as a place for permanent habitation or resource exploitation. This romantic view of the landscape is more consistent with the Western “received” idea of wilderness whose ideals are embodied in the 1964 Wilderness Act (Callicott and Nelson 1998).

Thus, there is a paradox of the wilderness idea in Alaska and it pertains to the Alaska exceptionality theme. Migrants (and visitors) to Alaska, particularly new professional migrants, are attracted to Alaska for the Western “received” idea of wilderness as one of the last places where the landscape is largely “pristine” and “empty.” Over time, migrants to Alaska embrace the exceptionality of Alaska wilderness, which is to acknowledge that Alaska wilderness is not, in fact, the “received” idea of Wilderness as experienced in the Lower 48, but rather wilderness that is a living and working wilderness, a “blue-collar” wilderness rather than a “bourgeois” wilderness. In the words of a colleague, “people come to Alaska as wilderness purists but evolve into wilderness pragmatists” (Rawson, personal communication). The enormity and challenges of the Alaska landscape mollify the purist wilderness ideals of newcomers and visitors. Airplanes, helicopters, and snowmachines become the pragmatic tools of the Alaska wilderness user and reinforce the exceptionality of Alaska wilderness in the NWPS.

There are three factors in combination that make Alaska wilderness exceptional in a Circumpolar North context: (1) the geographic separation of Alaska from the corpus of the country, (2) a history of significant migration and settlement from the corpus of the country, and (3) an indigenous Native population that has managed to preserve traditional land claims and subsistence rights despite the increase and political power of migrants to Alaska. No other circumpolar country can claim a similar set of circumstances. The only country that can claim a large, distinct circumpolar geographic area isolated from the more populous corpus of the country would be the country of Denmark and its territory of Greenland. But Greenland has not experienced significant migration and settlement as has occurred in Alaska.

I have raised the supposition that Alaska wilderness (as a state of mind) is exceptional—its unique geographical and historical context resulting in a different subjective response to wilderness among Alaskans. The data in support of the supposition is limited and would benefit from further research. Specifically, it would be beneficial to compare the values and attitudes of Alaskans and non-Alaskans directly using the same measurement scales. It would be beneficial to apply wilderness “purism” scales to selected resident populations in Alaska to compare with Alaska visitor ratings. And it would be beneficial to closely examine ethnic groups that have migrated to Alaska to determine if their ethnic culture bonds have been modified or become “exceptional” in Alaska.

References

- Bailey, Robert G. 1980. Ecoregions of the United States. Misc. Pub. No.1391. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service.
- Brown, Greg; Reed, Pat. 2000. Validation of forest values typology for use in National Forest planning. *Forest Science*. 46(2): 1–8.
- Callicott, J. Baird; Nelson, Michael P., eds. 1998. *The great new wilderness debate*. Athens: University of Georgia Press. 696 p.
- Cordell, Ken H.; Tarrant, Michael A.; McDonald, Barbara L.; Bergstrom, John C. 1998. How the public views wilderness. *International Journal of Wilderness*. 4(3): 28–31.
- Cronin, William. 1996. The trouble with wilderness or getting back to the wrong nature. In: Cronin, William, ed. *Uncommon ground*. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.
- Cuba, James L. 1987. *Identity and community on the Alaskan frontier*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press. 206 p.
- Federal Highway Administration. 1999. Highway statistics, 1999. [online]. Available: <http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/ohim/hs99/tables/hm15.pdf>
- Greenleaf, Eric A.; Bickart, Barbara; Yorkston, Eric A. 1999. How response styles weaken correlations from rating scales surveys. Working paper, Stern School of Business, New York.
- Haas, Glen E.; Hermann, Eric; Walsh, Richard. 1986. Wilderness values. *Natural Areas Journal*. 6(2): 37–43.
- Haycox, Stephen. 1999. The view from above: Alaska and the Great Northwest. Paper presented at: A region in transition: a Pacific Northwest conference. 1999 February 11–13; Corvallis: Oregon State University.
- Landres, P.; Meyer, S. 2000. National Wilderness Preservation System database: key attributes and trends, 1964 Through 1999. Gen. Tech. Rep. RMRS-GTR-18-Revised Edition. Ogden, UT: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station. Available: <http://www.wilderness.net/nwps/db/default.cfm>
- Rawson, Timothy. 2001. [Personal communication]. April 15.
- Rolston, H.; Coufal, J. 1991. A forest ethic and multivalue forest management. *Journal of Forestry*. 89: 35–40.
- Rolston, H. 1989. *Philosophy gone wild*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books. 269 p.
- Rural Alaska Sanitation Coalition. 1999 [Waste disposal]. [Online]. Available: <http://www.anhb.org/sub/rasc/san.facts.html>