Wilderness Experiences as Sanctuary and Refuge from Society

William T. Borrie
Angela M. Meyer
Ian M. Foster

Abstract—Wilderness areas provide a sanctuary from human domination, for the plants and animals that exist there and also for the visitors who come there to escape the demands and pressures of modern society. As a place of refuge and sanctuary, we have found wilderness to allow experiences of connection, engagement and belonging. Two studies help illustrate the role of wildness (freedom from intentional human control) in wilderness, one focusing on gendered experiences of wilderness and another considering spiritual experiences in wilderness. Following the intent of Howard Zahniser, architect of the Wilderness Act of 1964, we call on managers to maintain the freedom and wildness of wilderness, lightening the burden on nature and on the experience of nature.

Introduction

The definition of wilderness used to establish the National Wilderness Preservation System (*Public Law 88-577* (16 U.S. C. 1131-1136)) clearly places wilderness in contrast to a human dominated location:

> Sec. 2. (a) "In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness."

Wilderness provides a counter to modern, technological society; a society in which we continue to grow, expand and occupy. Protected areas such as wilderness provide a space for freedom of movement, unrestrained by outside human intention, not only for animals but also for visitors. As such, wilderness areas provide a sanctuary or refuge in which plants, animals and visitors can freely engage with each other and potentially with spiritual beings or gods. In wild places, the demands and impositions of human society are distant and less intrusive. This autonomy, or wildness, was a central purpose of the Wilderness Act according to its primary author (Zahniser 1992a). Likewise, in 1946 influential conservationist Sigurd Olson (2001) suggested that the "real function [of wilderness] will always be as a spiritual backlog in the high-speed mechanical world in which we live" (p. 65).

This paper explores the role of wilderness as a contrast to the highly human-modified world in which most of us live. Jack Turner (1991) suggests that while wilderness is both a concept and a place it is wildness that is the important quality. In discussing wildness, it will be apparent this quality applies both to ecological as well as experiential conditions in wilderness. Indeed, in contrast to a dualistic separation of humans from nature, we suggest wilderness offers outstanding opportunities for healing that separation. As a place of refuge and sanctuary, we have found wilderness to allow feelings of connection, engagement, and belonging. Two studies are described here that examine these experiences of wilderness, one focusing on gendered experiences of wilderness and another examining the phenomenology of spiritual experiences in wilderness. We begin first with a discussion of wildness, noting however that to distill down the many facets and meanings of wilderness into any one quality, such as wildness, is problematic; there are other qualities, such as naturalness, that are deeply intertwined.

Wildness

Trying to define wildness is tricky at best. While it is quite common to view it as freedom from intentional human control, the process of explaining and diagramming the concept is itself a human practice of containment. Henry Bugbee (1958) has argued that,

> "The world does not become less 'unknown' … in proportion to the increase of our knowledge about it. We might be nearer the mark in saying that the understanding of our position is not fundamentally consummated merely as knowledge about the world. The world is not unknown, for example, as a secret withheld from us is unknown to us. As Marcel would put it, our experience of the world involves us in a mystery which

Authors: William T. Borrie, College of Forestry and Conservation, University of Montana, Missoula, MT; Angela M. Meyer, Faculty of Physical Education and Recreation, University of Alberta, Edmonton, AB; and Ian M. Foster, College of Forestry and Conservation, University of Montana, Missoula, MT.

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> can be intelligible to us only as mystery. The more we experience things in depth, the more we participate in a mystery intelligible to us only as such; and the more we understand our world to be an unknown world. Our true home is wilderness, even the world of every day" (p. 76).

Just because wildness is by definition less knowable, however, does not make it any less valuable. Perhaps to understand wildness is to first acknowledge what science does not, and may not be able to, know. There are some excellent discussions (such as, Landres 2010) and source writings (such as, Griffiths 2006; Snyder 1990; Turner 1996) that can help us identify the aspects of wildness worth thought and protection. That is, instead of a predictive goal, a descriptive role may suffice. Our actions may need to be less grounded in predictable circumstances and more in the context of unknowable and presumably chaotic occurrences and consequences. A certain humility of unknowing and an openness to experience may be important. As one of us has written elsewhere (Borrie 2004, p. 18), there is a,

> "deliberate setting apart of wilderness from the forces of change that are associated with modern, technological society. … Wilderness is symbolic of restraint and reserve, suggesting the importance of lightening the burden of humanity on nature and upon the experience of nature."

The Wilderness Act of 1964 makes particular use of the word "untrammeled" in its prescription that:

> "A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. "(Sec. 2. (c))

While some scholars (such as, Callicott 1991; Cronon 1995) have interpreted this as a separation of humans from nature, Zahniser (1992b) saw it differently, noting in 1955 that:

> "We are a part of the wildness of the universe. That is our nature. Our noblest, happiest character develops with the influence of wildness. Away from it we degenerate into the squalor of slums or the frustration of clinical couches. With the wilderness we are at home" (p. 65).

A trammel is a hobble or shackle used to teach a horse to amble. It restricts and restrains free movement. Additionally, a trammel net is a gill net in which fish are entangled and caught in mesh. Cole (2000) in similar fashion suggests that untrammeled is, "synonymous with unconfined, unfettered and unrestrained, however, "untrammeled" actually suggests freedom from human control rather than lack of human influence" (p. 78). This parallels how Ridder (2007) suggests "an area is wild if the behavior of the nonhuman inhabitants is wild" (p. 10), by which he means a minimal degree of rationally planned human intervention or agency. As Whitesell (2001) notes, "Wild is the quality of freedom from human control. Its geographic expression is wilderness" (p. 187). Wildness is uncaged, self-willed, self-governing, and not subject to the impositions of another. While wildness is conceptually different from naturalness (Aplet & Cole 2010), it is a mandate for natural process to operate freely.

Wildness is also a characteristic of human action. That is, visitors seek a place to escape the worries of human society, a place free from external constraints and full of freedom of movement. As Driver and others (Driver & Knopf 1977; Driver 1983; Manfredo and others 2000) have found, wild places are often sought, or preferred, for escape from the personal and social expectations, pressures, and demands of everyday life. Patterson and others (1998) described one wilderness area in which seeking challenges and decisions not faced in everyday life is a dominant theme of the experiences there.

This suggests that the idea and reality of wilderness is more than spectacular scenery, more than charismatic megafauna and more than outstanding challenges for one to dominate and win. Instead, it is a place for the full expression of what it means to be human in a wild place. As Zahniser (1992b) suggested in 1955, "the true wilderness experience is one, not of escaping, but of finding one's self" (p. 66). In passing through wilderness, as compared to conquering and claiming it, we can find ourselves clearly reflected back. With a humility of action that matches the place we may experience previously unexpressed aspects of who we are. Pohl (2006) suggests that "experiencing wilderness calls upon us to develop skills, patience, openness, humility, reverence and perceptiveness to the things around us" (p. 161-2). Freedom of being can allow greater fullness of life. Nelson (2001), for example, says, "I never feel more fortunate, more free, and more alive than when I am afoot in the wild country of home" (p. 191).

Wildness calls for a humility of action by humans. While it is a place of freedom and feelings of being fully alive, we should seek a relationship with other beings that does not impose on their freedom and ability to live according to their own path. Gary Snyder (in Ebenkamp 2010), for instance, posits that "the wild requires that we learn the terrain, nod to all the plants and animals and birds, ford the streams and cross the ridges and tell a good story when we get back home" (p. 26). Wilderness is not so much an enemy as it is a chance for kinship—to wildness, both within and outside of ourselves.

Whereas wilderness was once commonly viewed negatively, as a threat to civilization (Nash 2001), given the dominance of modern, technological society today it is less so. Light (1995) points out that if, "Wilderness is bad, evil and cruel, it must be separated from humans —it must be marked off as distinct and kept out of civilized spaces" (p. 197). But, if wilderness is considered a home, a place we feel comfort, connection, and an ease returning to, then it is part of us and we no longer need separation from it. Instead of thinking of wilderness contributing to a separation between humans and nature, it provides a space in which to freely explore society's relationship to nature and how we should act ethically and wisely within it (Havlick 2006). As Vandana Shiva is quoted as saying, "the wild is not the opposite of cultivated. It is the opposite of the captivated" (Griffith 2006, p. 37).

Wildness thus presents a challenge for managers (Turner 1996). That challenge is to be guardians, not gardeners. Managers should not feel the necessity to always 'play God' and determine the conditions under which particular species can flourish. Rather than modifying wilderness and other protected areas in compensation for outside sources of anthropocentric change such as habitat destruction, global climate change and ubiquitous air pollution, it is a call for the reduction of those human actions. In addition, wildness is a call for managers to cautiously reject the manipulation of wilderness for human preference. For instance, management should question such practices as the stocking of fish species in wilderness for recreation benefit, the impoundment of wilderness watersheds for downstream irrigation benefit, and the use of fire suppression and fuel reduction burns in wilderness to protect life and property outside the boundary. While each of these practices has been extensively studied, wildness fundamentally questions our ability to fully understand the processes of nature as well as our ability to know the full range of consequences of our actions. Having good intentions does not excuse failed experimentation or unanticipated outcomes (Landres 2010). To be clear, the presence of humans does not negate wilderness, but our actions there may. Snyder (in Ebenkamp 2010) says, "it is a matter of how much wildness as process is left intact" (p. 12).

Two recent studies, while not specifically designed to investigate wilderness as a contrast and sanctuary from human society, have provided illumination along the lines discussed above. Each was conducted in the generalized context of opportunities for experiences in wilderness. The first considered how people with non-heteronormative genders and sexualities experience their bodies and their genders in wilderness. What we found were stories of freedom, refuge, safety, relationship and a sense of ecological belonging. The second documented a phenomenology of spiritual experiences in wilderness. Building, reinforcing and extending previous studies, we found study participants to be talking about the importance of immersion in primitive and simple ways of being, escaping information technology and their digital selves, reconnecting with themselves, their gods, and their story of the land. Across both studies we find the importance of wilderness as a place to fully be, a place to re-orient identities and self within relation to one's environment. The essential wildness of wilderness, as described above, thus allows a necessary refuge and sanctuary.

Gendered Experiences in Wilderness

A significant body of research explores how outdoor experiences can foster empowerment for women (for example, Beale 1988; Brace-Govan 1997; Burden and Kiewa 1992; Mason-Cox 1992; McDermott 2000; Miranda and Yerkes 1985; Scherl 1990). Similarly, most of the literature that looks at gender and wilderness also focuses on women and empowerment (Angell 1994; Bialeschki and Henderson 1993; Hart and Silka 1994; Kohn 1991; Mitten 1994; Pohl and others 2000; Powch 1994; Stopha 1994). While these studies have been insightful and important, we believe the focus of much of this work on self-improvement and empowerment only captures a part of the many ways that women experience the outdoors, nature and wilderness. The study described here aims to document how women, in particular gbtlq (gay, bi-sexual, transgendered, lesbian and queer), experience their gender and body in wilderness.

Twenty self-identified gbtlq women volunteered to participate in semi-structured, in-depth interviews which were held either in private residences, quiet study rooms on campus, or over the telephone. All participants had recreated or worked in wilderness. With permission, all interviews were audio-taped with lengths ranging from thirty-nine to ninety-four minutes. After transcription and coding, the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA was used to follow a grounded theory approach (Corbin and Strauss 2008) to identify overarching themes and analytical stories present in the data. We provide here only a portion of the full analytical story. Complete details can be found in Meyer (2010).

A sense of ecological belonging represented the overarching wilderness experience for most study participants. We heard stories of a profound sense of connection and of how wilderness was a safe place to escape the structures, judgments and technologies of society and re-connect to the body and to the natural world. Bodily experiences of wildness were commonly described, mirroring the suggestions of Abram (1996) that, "ultimately, to acknowledge the life of the body, and to affirm our solidarity with this physical form, is to acknowledge our existence as one of the earth's animals, and so to remember and rejuvenate the organic basis of our thoughts and our intelligence" (p. 43).

As study participant Sage explained,

> "And when we got there—we were hot and tired and dirty and we hadn't seen water like this in a while. And so we all just stripped off our clothes and you know threw down our packs and stripped off our clothes and frolicked in the water. And we felt—to me—it was like such perfect embodiment of—we were so animal in our bodies at that point. They were our tools, they were our engines, they were the things that were sustaining us, they were us. And we were a community of that together. And ah—in a way that felt like wow—I'm not gonna get to glimpse this kind of connection to myself and connection to others and connection to a landscape simultaneously."

Note that wilderness does not so much offer space for women and gbtlq to *resist* hetero-patriarchy as it offers space for creative expression and to experience engagement with other, non-judgmental things. In saying this, we recognize wilderness not as a separation from nature but a reclaiming of the 'ground of continuity' (Plumwood 1998). This reflects what Gaard (1997) would describe as a different kind of "perceptual orienteering, a different way of locating oneself in relation to one's environment" (p. 17).

In contrast to feelings of alienation, separateness and otherness that participants described in society, in wilderness they described feelings of wholeness, integration and connection. In wilderness, our study participants described feelings of

kinship, neutrality (in that nature does not seem to care about gender or perceived sexuality) and comfort. For instance, study participant Beatrice said,

> "Wilderness is a place away from society… kind of at times away from reality. It's a place for me where I can be comfortable being myself and not fitting into anything and really a way just to get away from life, get away from everything—just relax… And early on I didn't know what it was. I didn't know what I was feeling. I didn't know why I felt comfortable. And really I think a big part of it was I was just really comfortable in not having to look at myself as male or female or straight or gay or lesbian or bisexual. It didn't matter. It really didn't matter. I was just another creature out in the woods."

In wilderness, notions of being watched or monitored are replaced largely by positive feelings of vulnerability (predator-prey relationships, heightened senses and awareness of surroundings, connection as animals in an ecosystem) in contrast to a gendered vulnerability (fear of rape, violence, judgment, discrimination or shame). At the heart of this vulnerability is control, and in wild places humans are no longer in control. As an example, when asked what it feels like to be physically immersed in wilderness, Zara expressed,

> "The places I go are usually pretty high risk. You know god forbid I'd ever have to shoot or spray at anything. But you know if I was without protection then that puts a whole different aspect on it. 'Cause then all of a sudden it's the hunter-prey and you're prey and you'd better watch your butt…. So—for me going by myself in the backcountry and like say an area of high concentration of grizzlies. To me—that's exciting. You know and it's scary 'cause you could die and I think that's the allure of it to me. It's because you're not in control of everything as we are in this society. The rules change. The games change."

Across our sample, people distinguished between society and wilderness not solely on legal designation, but also on features of wildness such as unpredictability, boundlessness, potentiality, exploration, lawlessness, and unpatrollability. Being immersed in such wildness was described as providing opportunities to touch what is wild within us. As study participant Sophia-Margeaux describes, "It supports the wildness that's beyond human culture within me".

In wildness, we can find a freeing of social systems, structures, and rules. As Margret says,

> "It's in part an escape from society and from you know social definitions or interactions… It's this kind of escape… I guess I go into wilderness because for me it's like a more pure existence and it makes me feel more alive."

In wilderness, participants also described finding unpredictability, challenge, and a way to live in the moment. Sasha, for example, explains,

> "I think it feels very freeing. I think there's a contentment or satisfaction that comes from you know being present or just feeling like you know today I have to chop wood or today I have to build a fire. Now I have to eat… or go do whatever I'm doing. Go climb to the top of this summit. So it's very day to day—moment by moment—which is very different from how our society is structured."

In some ways, our findings mirror the ecotheology scholarship of Susan Bratton (1993; 1998) in which she describes a thousand year monastic tradition of reciprocity in wilderness. Early Christian experiences in wild areas are shown to be providing freedom from secular and worldly concerns and the opportunity to practice Christian virtues such as simplicity, fellowship, love, contemplation, faithfulness and harmony. The second study described below further explores spiritual experiences in wilderness.

Phenomenology of Spiritual Experiences in Wilderness

In this study, thirty-two semi-structured interviews were conducted in-situ with overnight visitors to a U.S. water-based wilderness to update and add to our understanding of the spiritual aspects of experiences in wilderness. Previous work (Young and Crandall 1984; Stringer and McAvoy 1992; Fredrickson and Anderson 1999) was also set in such a wilderness. Along with other work (Ashley 2009; Ellard and others 2009; Fox 1997; Heintzman 2000, 2010; Marsh 2007; Schmidt and Little 2007), this provides a basis for saying that natural settings have important characteristics that support spiritual experiences.

Within the peak visitation season of July and August 2010, respondents were approached late afternoon/early evening in their campsite. These campsites were randomly selected on each of six wilderness lakes (three lakes being closer to the periphery of the wilderness area and three more internal). At each campsite, after reading the recruitment script, the person with the most recent birth date was specifically asked to participate. In two exceptional cases, two respondents were interviewed at once but each was asked to tackle each interview question. All interviews were conducted *in-situ* a short distance away from the center of the campsite, either lakeside or just above the camp.

As in the first study described above, these interviews were voluntary and were tape-recorded for later transcription. Both idiographic (individual-level) analyses along with nomethetic (overall pattern) analyses were conducted using the techniques of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss 2008). A phenomenological study such as this aims to situate comments made in the moment (lakeside, inside the wilderness, in this case) within the life-world of the respondents. Thus, we were able to identify important characteristics of the wilderness setting, as well as a comparison of wilderness settings with other locations of spiritual practices and processes. Themes of the role of spiritual experiences in wilderness within a person's life surfaced in the data, with a particular contrast to the heavy imposition of information technology outside of wilderness. The themes presented here are a selection and summary of the full study. More details can be found in Foster (2011) and in Foster & Borrie (2011).

For the respondents, wilderness means different things to different people. For some, wilderness was just another place, just slightly different from their regular fishing location; for others, it is a wholly different world; and for yet others the area is not even true wilderness, given that it is possible to paddle the tracts of wild country immediately north without seeing people for weeks.

However, a majority of respondents explained their attachment to wilderness as comparable to no other place. The wilderness context provides unique opportunities and potential for spiritual experiences because of its naturalness, its pristineness and its remoteness. Sometimes on their own, but often in combination, the solitude, roughness, beauty, intricacy, and/or the calmness or fierceness of the weather offered conditions very different from the ordinary. The activities of paddling, carrying canoes, and daily routines of gathering firewood, filtering and carrying water, and cooking in the open all provide or provoke the opportunity for contemplation and acknowledgement of different ways of being. Fewer distractions, more immediate concerns, direct and unambiguous feedback for actions, and the general sense that larger forces are at play, all contribute to a lessened sense of individual power and control. Wilderness provides a window into a powerful, mysterious unknown. As one participant explained, "This environment is … you are right there—God has total control over you, the wind, the waves, the weather, all of that. That isn't bad, it is pristine. When you leave God alone, it is pristine."

Spiritual experiences are understood as complex and multidimensional, but our interviews particularly revealed the importance of rituals in facilitating spiritual experiences and development. Many of these rituals, such as rising early in the morning and seeking solitude and silence a little ways from camp, are learned from mentors and become quite habitual. Several study participants mentioned a relative or family member taught them the beauty of doing things the 'right way'.

Visitors also remember and draw upon spiritual practices from prior memories and experiences. It is mentioned that they revisit and search out the feelings and emotions that they had experienced. The meaning of those experiences is then explored, discussed and shared and then folded into their personal and social worlds. One participant, for example, described her perspective saying,

> "I definitely feel more connected to my girls and feel more connected to—I feel more stationed in my life. I feel like being out here gives you more time to think about your goals and what is actually important to you. So I guess I feel more sturdy and planted in what I believe."

Participants underscored that through immersion in the primitive and simple we remember basic needs, life supporting practices and remember the core of our being. While the notion of primitivism may be problematic (Borrie 2004; Potter 2010), our participants described the clarity and simplicity that wilderness practices allow. One noted that,

> "Whatever sorts of problems you may have in your everyday life, you can come out here or reflect on here, and realize how unimportant they really are; this is definitely a place for me to let go and be myself."

The idea is that visitors go to wilderness to gain perspective on their lives. A common phrase was "recharging their batteries". Wilderness was a means towards being more grounded. Words with a *re-* prefix were common (re-center, re-focus, re-discover, re-consider, re-define, and re-develop). Wilderness allows a remembering and a reinvestment in identity and relationship.

The data contain numerous mentions of a desire to disconnect from the information society, feeling free from technology's grasp and stressing the growing importance of escaping routines that are choreographed by information technology. Many participants highlighted the freedom that exists in wilderness, particularly the freedom to choose what to pay attention to and when. As one explained,

> "I feel that I can be myself more; you know, with friends and stuff. I just kind of have to—I don't know—pay attention all the time, I have to be involved in everything that is going on. Up here, I can be involved as much as I want. I can just sort of wander off and be on a rock alone. And I like that."

In wilderness, visitors can leave behind their 'digital selves' and not feel the necessity to maintain their online presence and image, as well as leave behind the stresses and expectations of the digital world. Nearly three-quarters of study participants mentioned the joy of disconnecting from communication technology (phones, emails, texts, tweets, and status updates). For example, one of the participants said,

> "I guess I just turn off everything else and just soak in what is around me and take time to be thankful for it. (pauses) Hmm, I guess I don't think about these things much unless I am here and have the time—I am just able to be thankful that I am here and it is here."

These results highlight the importance of wilderness in allowing for unplugging and leaving behind the intrusions of modern, technological society. The isolation, freedom, and simplicity of being in wilderness allow a different pace and a different focus, which in turn allows space for renewing and reinforcing relationships. We found frequent mention of the intimacy and privacy that wilderness provides, which in turn strengthens communication and attention whether they be to self, to other species, or with higher beings. Wild places teach and remind what it means to be human in relation to the natural world. Escaping daily routines, demands, interruptions and expectations into a time and space of refuge and sanctuary allows exploration of our place in the wider world. In wilderness, we found that social constraints are lessened. The cultural information to be processed is limited, immediate practices are common, and unfiltered or raw encounters with the natural world more frequent. In these conditions, the human relationship with the larger wild can be kindled, stoked, and sustained.

Discussion

While wilderness managers may feel challenged in their ability to provide opportunities for spiritual experiences in

wilderness, our respondents reinforced the importance and significance of those experiences. Furthermore, while managers frequently limit their intrusions into wilderness, they are still potential conduits or facilitators for such intrusions. Interactions with rangers (and researchers!) inside the wilderness can interrupt the tone and rhythm of visitor experiences, setting up potential concerns of surveillance, monitoring, and policing. Managers and management facilities such as huts, airstrips, and ranger stations may have communication and other technologies such as satellite phones, internet links and entertainments like CD and mp3 players. Rangers and scientists may carry radio-like walkie-talkies that can announce their presence well before visitors see or otherwise know those people are there. These remind and propel the outside world into the context of wilderness. While it may be relatively easy for visitors to deny or avoid these elements of the outside world, the burden to do so has been imposed upon visitors, a form of subjugation in itself. An untamed state may be unsettling or somewhat threatening to an ethos of management. But such wildness and freedom should be considered the norm and part of the purpose of wilderness areas.

The challenge for researchers remains the hesitancy to document and elucidate the very personal, intimate and core concerns of wildness, identity, security, relation and freedom. The line between description and understanding on the one hand and measurement and monitoring on the other is a fine line, indeed. To document and judge the achievement of particular experiential outcomes is an act of taming in that things shift into the realm of knowing and known. Wilderness is in this way being thought of through a machine metaphor—capable of efficiently producing predictable outcomes given the input of preferred conditions. All of which diminishes "discovery and surprise and independence and the unknown, the very qualities that make a place wild" (Turner 1991, p. 22). The hazard, then, is a spiral of greater and greater intrusion rendering increasing evaluation, accountability, regulation and control. This would be a taming, an objectifying and a profaning of the experience of wilderness. It is our intent here to help elucidate the very nature of wilderness as a place of wildness, self-determination, and refuge such that it is a call for restraint, humility and acceptance of unpredictable fallibility.

Both the studies mentioned here demonstrate the role wilderness can play as a haven or sanctuary from modern society. Much as the notion of wildness can mean freedom from human domination for the plants and animals there, so too should wilderness provide a respite for humans from the demands and pressures of modern society. In that space, away from the expectations and watchfulness of secular and societal concerns, we have room for personal expression, identity and relationship. In wilderness, there is time for the unknown, the new, and the profound. It is a place to belong, connect and fully, freely be.

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