

Imagining Wilderness

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Abstract—The future of wilderness is open for discussion and debate. In this paper we invite readers to consider four wilderness scenarios, any one of which, or combination of which, seems possible based on current demographic, social, and cultural trends. The purpose of the paper is not so much to try to predict the future as it is to prod readers into pondering the future—a future where wilderness may or may not be valued in the same fashion it is today.

“All America lies at the end of the wilderness road, and our past is not a dead past, but still lives in us. Our forefathers had civilization inside themselves, the wild outside. We live in the civilization they created, but within us the wilderness still lingers. What they dreamed, we live, and what they lived, we dream.”

— T. K. Whipple, *Study Out the Land*

The purpose of this paper is to encourage readers to ponder the future of wilderness in the United States. In 2064, the 100th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, what meanings might we ascribe to wilderness? What might visitor experiences be like? How might wilderness be managed? In short, what place might wilderness hold in our lives?

Speculation of this sort is tenuous for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that the future of wilderness may well take a number of different twists and turns depending on a number of different occurrences—some anticipated, some not. Moreover, to assume that the future of wilderness will be largely a function of human planning is also dubious. There are many countervailing forces at work, from changing demographics, to advancing technology, to climate change, to the depletion of non-renewable natural resources, to energy exploration, to increasing globalization, all of which will likely impact the wilderness condition. Consequently, any attempt on our part to predict *the* future of wilderness would most certainly be futile.

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The best we can do is offer up a range of alternative wilderness scenarios, any one of which, or combination of which, seems plausible given current demographic, social, and cultural trends. Specifically, we begin by briefly describing several features of contemporary life, including a growing urban population, an increasingly diverse citizenry, a widening separation between city dwellers and ecological systems, the prominence of technology, and the generally sedentary nature of modern life. We then project where these trends might lead us in relation to wilderness by imagining four different wilderness scenarios that typify how wilderness might be viewed in 2064. Fifty years down Whipple’s (1930) “wilderness road” is not so far away. If we truly value wilderness, it is none too early to think seriously about its preferred state, and then to see what we can do about achieving it.

Demographic, Social, and Cultural Trends

The United States is approximately 85% urbanized. We are a nation of city dwellers and our lifestyles tend to reflect urban upbringings. The implications are far reaching. In *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, Louv (2005) describes the deleterious effects of distancing young people from their biological moorings. Whether this distancing will result in a greater perceived need to reconnect future generations with nature or whether it will lead to a heightened sense of disengagement from nature is unclear, but the fact remains that modern American life is spent largely inside the city limits.

Widening this divide between America’s citizenry and the land that sustains us are rapidly advancing technologies that make it easier and easier to remove ourselves from a sense of being connected to, and dependent on, the surrounding environment. Technology often serves as a buffer that insulates us from the elements. Most of our life is lived in comfort and convenience, and we spend 95% of our time indoors, leaving little time for outdoor activity (Robinson and Godbey 1997). Pergams and Zaradic (2006) even coined a term, “videophilia,” to describe the degree to which our lives are now ensconced in electronic media. We are a stay-inside society that is increasingly tethered to electrical outlets. Our lives, in turn, have assumed a sedentary quality that has led to an epidemic of obesity, diabetes,

and a host of other maladies attendant to physically inactive lifestyles (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services 2008).

Adding to the complexity is an increasingly diverse citizenry. We are a multi-colored people reflecting a wide range of ethnic, racial, and spiritual origins. We come from dramatically different social and cultural traditions that result in a wide range of differing attitudes and beliefs about our relationship to, and interest in, the natural world. Outdoor pursuits are less homogenous these days, and for many groups of people, less appealing than they were in bygone years. Indeed, as active engagement with the out-of-doors has lessened among children (Outdoor Industry Foundation 2008; Clements 2004), and as visits to national parks have declined in recent years (Pergams & Zaradic 2006), federal land managing agencies have had to turn their attention to the question of how best to generate a newfound enthusiasm for nature among the nation's rapidly expanding minority populations, as well as among youth.

In sum, we are experiencing a fundamental shift in the way Americans live life. This shift is illustrated in part by a growing urban population that is largely disengaged from recreating in the out of doors. Rapidly advancing technology makes it possible for many of us to live increasingly insulated lives, connecting with others in cyberspace without having to leave the confines of our own homes or communities. At the same time, and via the same technologies, the outside world is brought inside for our viewing pleasure. We can remain stationary and sedentary and still feel like we are participating in the larger unfolding of events. In many ways, we are becoming a nation of onlookers.

These demographic, social, and cultural trends portend a future flavored by more of the same in greater intensity—more people, more globalization, more urbanization, more congestion, more sophisticated technology, and more stay inside sedentary lifestyles. Just what this might mean for the future of wilderness is an intriguing question to ponder.

Range of Wilderness Possibilities _____

As we consider the implications of these demographic, social, and cultural trends, four scenarios emerge as possible wilderness futures: 1) a growing disinterest in wilderness for recreational purposes combined with increasing scientific interest in wilderness for its biodiversity value; 2) a heightened interest in wilderness as an antidote to an increasingly congested, urbanized, technologically transfixed, and stay inside society; 3) mixed feelings about wilderness as reflected in disputes over access, safety, and technology; and 4) a radical new conception that views wilderness not as the antithesis of civilization, but as a profound expression of what it means to be civilized. These four scenarios are by no means exhaustive. They merely represent what, in our opinion, are the most likely possibilities for wilderness in 2064.

Wilderness Scenario #1

More people, more globalization, more urbanization, and drastic environmental problems have led to a future

characterized by an emphasis on sustainability. The American concept of wilderness has been modified to embrace a focus on local and global sustainability that has resulted in the establishment of large biodiversity reserves, increased greening of urban centers, and protection of surrounding natural areas. This shift in thinking would not have occurred without years of effort by environmental educators who promoted ecologically responsible living practices, which have now been integrated with economic principles, resulting in a deep cultural awareness of the value of sustainable living.

The year is 2064. As the number of people populating the planet has continued to increase, as oil reserves have been diminished, and as climate change has put increasing pressure on modern lifestyles around the world, people have turned increasingly to science for answers. However, there has been a deep shift in the way science is pursued, understood, and applied. No longer are scientists criticized for maintaining a narrow focus on their own specific areas of study. Instead, scientists now employ integrated, interdependent thinking that requires collaboration across disciplines to focus on interrelationships. This new scientific worldview has ultimately influenced the way Americans view wilderness.

No longer is science primarily interested in the extraction of natural resources for profit. The growth and development economy has been completely dismantled because modern people have listened to scientists and understood that only an economy that is based on sustainability will support human life on earth long into the future. People appreciate and respect that there are limits to growth and ecological principles drive that understanding. The new economic framework has grown out of a philosophy founded on scientific knowledge that has gained political traction as the environmental health of the planet declined throughout the 21st century. Ecologists explained the interconnectedness of the natural world, and corporate business leaders and politicians finally acknowledged the integrated relationship between nature's health and economic health (Heinberg, 2010).

The need to protect large tracts of land to support global environmental health is no longer debated and the idea of wilderness in America has been altered. Where wilderness areas were once preserved largely for humans to visit and enjoy, the primary purpose of wilderness protection programs in the modern world is to add to the growing number and scope of biodiversity reserves. The focus is on protecting threatened and endangered species of plants and animals while simultaneously trying to better understand the workings of complex and highly interdependent ecosystems.

This "new" wilderness is largely devoid of people, save the ecologists and botanists who make their daily rounds. Animal rights activists are pleased, as they truly believe that biodiversity reserves offer the best chance of species preservation, and Deep Ecologists are on board as well. These and other supporters of biodiversity reserves see wilderness as the embodiment of a philosophical and ethical stance put forth by Aldo Leopold over 100 years ago. "A thing is right," Leopold reasoned, "when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community..." (Leopold, 1989, p. 224).

In these biodiversity reserves, recreational activities are strictly regulated. Wilderness is still roadless and untrammelled, but it is protected with even more vigilance. Recreational use is secondary to protection and scientific study. Other areas, selected for their recreational quality as well as their proximity to urban centers, have been set aside to support recreational pursuits. While there have been some disgruntled wilderness enthusiasts, most have come to understand the need for increased regulatory efforts, and they have supported efforts to protect wilderness through expanding the biodiversity reserve system.

This framework for managing and protecting wilderness is an outgrowth of a dramatically new cultural perception of nature. We now realize that we can no longer conceptualize wild nature as a place that exists beyond a Forest Service or National Park Service sign. We now live with the awareness that we are ecological beings. We have removed the duality from our teaching and thinking. Wilderness is no longer “othered,” “out there,” “strange,” and “disconnected” from us. We see ourselves as part of nature (Cachelin and others 2011), and that perspective has seeped deeply into the American psyche.

There is also widespread agreement that the promise of present and future conservation efforts lies in our ability to educate young people about basic ecological principles in such a way that they develop a lasting sense of connection to wild places. Well-informed educators understand the importance of early life experiences in shaping interest in the natural environment, and their educational efforts now focus on helping young people develop basic understandings of ecological principles as they connect with the outside world.

Environmental and outdoor education is now an established part of public and private school systems. These educational programs were designed in response to the recommendations of early 21st century scholars and visionaries such as Sobel (1996), Louv (2008), and Chawla and Cushing (2007). These programs no longer focus on making young people aware of humanity’s role in the failing health of the planet, and no longer focus on “shoulds” and “oughts,” or “dos” and “don’ts.” Instead, they focus on inspiring young people to connect with wild nature. Over time, this has resulted in a citizenry that values the conservation of natural areas. We are experiencing extraordinary growth in the greening of urban centers and extensive protection of natural areas in and around our modern cities.

Increasing access to wild nature for youth is now deemed a practical necessity for cultivating ecologically responsible adults. It is also widely understood that books alone cannot suffice for this kind of environmental education. Decades ago, Cachelin, Paisley, and Dustin (2009) observed that an emphasis on both knowledge and affect is required to encourage responsible environmental conduct. This understanding now guides our decision-making when designing environmental education programs. Johnson (2007) summed it up well: “If we are serious about education for sustainable living, we must do more than piecemeal, infusion-model teaching. We need integral, coherent education programs that help people construct ecological understandings, develop feelings for the natural world, and craft appropriate lifestyles” (p. 93). Such

efforts have been so successful that the natural areas in and around our modern cities serve as new and highly accessible wildernesses.

Many years ago, Johnson (2007) suggested that outdoor education programs should include four key content areas; energy flow, matter cycling, interrelationships, and change. He reasoned that these topics should be delivered through authentic opportunities to interact with nature as a way to promote both conceptual understanding and to develop personal feelings toward the natural world. Viewing outdoor education programs from Johnson’s perspective has taught us to move toward the integration of content knowledge and personal experiences. It has resulted in a new concept of wilderness that is now integrated into our daily lives as well as protected in biodiversity reserves. Wilderness in America has been transformed from what in years past was a narrow mandate of Congress to what is now a widespread culturally embedded focus on interdependence and sustainability that was required in response to the devastation caused by previous economic models and the failure to respond quickly enough to rapidly growing environmental problems.

Wilderness Scenario #2

Wilderness is understood to be a powerful antidote to a highly congested, urbanized, technological, and stay-inside society. Wilderness is valued for the same reasons the National Wilderness Preservation System was established in 1964, only more so, because civilization has advanced 100 years farther “down the track.”

The year is 2064. The number of designated wildernesses has grown steadily over the one hundred years since the establishment of the Wilderness Act. Recently, in fact, many public lands have reverted to the wilderness character they once displayed. Not only has every president since Lyndon Johnson established new wildernesses, but members of state legislative and executive branches have demonstrated their support for the expansion of the Wilderness Preservation System by rededicating state park land as wilderness, thereby contributing it to the expansion of the system. By 2009, 109 million acres of land had been set aside as wilderness. Since then, that number has increased to nearly 130 million acres. A large portion of the new acreage is the result of wilderness designation of state park lands “becoming” wilderness in fiscally challenged states such as California and Oregon as a result of the economic downturn early in the century.

As is often the case, designation of new wilderness has been met with resistance by locally affected populations; however, such designations have generally enjoyed widespread national support (Appell 2010). Some local citizens believed converting state park lands to wilderness was an abandonment of the state park system and the people that earned their livelihood from park visitation, while others in locales such as Texas and Georgia, where states rights were traditionally considered tantamount, were happy to shift the financial burden from state to federal coffers. Not surprisingly, wilderness advocates thought it was in keeping with the original intent of the

Wilderness Act, believing that humans were truly “visitors” to these wild places. A handful of creative conservationists with an economist’s eye saw that the management of typical visitation was, by default, being minimized in many state parks with wilderness characteristics, and lobbied the public to embrace this retreat and return those lands to an approximation of the pristine lands they once were.

Anza Borrego Desert California State Park (the nation’s second largest state park), for example, which contained tens of thousands of acres of land possessing wilderness characteristics, was neglected over time by land managers unable to keep up financially with maintenance demands. At the same time, remote washes like Anza Borrego’s Coyote Canyon were experiencing a revival in visitors seeking solitude and spiritual renewal, while traditional users of the area who expected recreation opportunities closer to the developed end of the spectrum were declining in number. Poorly maintained trails and access points were slowly being reclaimed by the desert, and motor vehicles were stopped several miles short of destination campsites due to washed out or poorly maintained roads. These were tangible signs of a nation’s fiscal inability to provide recreational opportunity and access to places containing spiritual, scientific, and historical value. These desert landscapes once contained the San Antonio to San Diego Mail routes and the Butterfield Stage Line, which followed the Great Southern Overland Route between 1857 and 1861 to San Francisco. Battalions of soldiers had once traveled through this desert to fight in the Civil War, and American Indian Tribes had established many trails and villages throughout the area (Bice 2011). Conservationists argued that letting these places return to the condition they were in during the pioneer days would allow people to experience a glimpse of their nation’s history. All the while, of course, commercial enterprises outside the park worried that wilderness designation would reduce an already dwindling visitation to insignificant numbers.

Despite increasing contention over wilderness “regeneration,” wilderness areas have continued to be set aside. Roads have disappeared, group sizes have decreased, and the designation of wilderness has brought a new mystique to former state park lands. The result has been a change in the type of visitation, and an increased interest in wildness. These “new” wilderness areas are now being visited by individuals who are trying to escape the continued growth, congestion, and urbanization characterizing modern American life.

These have not really been new considerations as much as they have been a revival of the rationale invoked in the years preceding the establishment of the Wilderness Act in 1964 (Nash 2001). Similar to the beliefs of Emerson, Thoreau, Leopold, and Marshall, conservationists behind the movement to “return to wilderness” explained that the state parks no longer represented what was uniquely American. These places were becoming symbols of American disappointment rather than symbols of American heritage.

More so than ever before, wilderness is now viewed as an antidote to urbanization and technological advancement. Transcendentalist ideals, such as Thoreau’s belief that “in wildness is the preservation of the world,” are becoming widely apparent

to those who experience less and less wildness in their daily existence. Visitors who may have come to state park lands as children are now coming to wilderness areas to reconnect with nature and the simplicities it affords. Yet, despite an increased yearning for wild places, current generations are less experienced in the outdoors, less connected to the environment, and more sedentary than generations before them. This dualism has created a unique visitor who is seeking adventure, but who is not particularly well-suited to encounter one.

For instance, it is common to see multi-day backpackers attempting to “go light.” They carry minimal equipment and intend to travel quickly on foot covering many miles each day. Despite their intention, these ambitious wilderness enthusiasts remain tethered to their psychological safety nets of technology. It is rare to encounter visitors who have genuinely disconnected from the civilization they intend to escape. Most visitors carry cell phones, global positioning systems, or both. Furthermore, many carry trip reports, internet posts of route descriptions, and details of good campsites, all of which can serve as buffers between the visitors and their desire to experience adventure and exploration.

As a result of the increase in wilderness visitation by a more civilized visitor, the need for guide services and outdoor recreation education has increased. These services are needed to fortify potential wilderness adventurers with the necessary skills to safely enjoy wilderness. Similarly, wilderness users are now more likely to encounter wilderness rangers on patrol to ensure that visitors are minimizing their impacts, traveling appropriately, and otherwise providing assistance to wayward travelers when necessary.

The uniqueness of the American idea of wilderness is also now profoundly demonstrated by the increase of visitors from developed nations across Europe and Asia. Internationally, globalization has pushed nations, both developed and developing, into the same quagmire of desire for economic advancement at the cost of wilderness. As battles for preservation are lost abroad, support for wilderness in America has strengthened. Not surprisingly, international visitation to America has increased by over 80% as it has become one of the few accessible places remaining for individuals to seek solitude from urbanization and places “untrammeled” by humankind. Wilderness experiences in America have become events that build national pride and a sense of global responsibility. Internationally, America is seen as a steward of wilderness and the efforts made to return public lands to their wild condition have become a model for nations worldwide.

Wilderness Scenario #3

Wilderness looks the same, but there are serious conflicts revolving around issues of access, safety, and technology. There is much debate about the intent of the language in the Wilderness Act as words like “primeval,” “primitive,” “untrammeled,” and “solitude” are parsed in search of a common interpretation of the place wilderness ought to occupy in contemporary life.

The year is 2064. Wilderness today looks pretty much like it did at the turn of the 21st century: islands of relatively untrammeled lands sequestered in the United States' various public lands, most of which are disproportionately located in the American west. As our human-inhabited spaces have become more crowded and contested, the country's wilderness spaces have become more crowded and contested as well. The last half century has seen a number of political battles, with various environmental groups staking claim to wilderness expansion while resource extractors exercised various legal techniques to open preserved areas to the still growing "needs" of humanity and modernity. In sum, the 1964 Wilderness Act, Howard Zahniser's crowning legislative achievement, has been supported, defended, derided, and amended, but in many ways, wilderness today is just as it was back then—except not exactly.

Some of the inherent contradictions of the capitalist world economy (Boswell and Chase-Dunn 2000; Li 2008) are finally starting to expose themselves more fully, with the incompatible goals of growth and conservation illustrating that one cannot really exist simultaneously in concert with the other. Population growth peaked in 2027 in the United States, with a slowly decreasing population ever since. With a more chaotic and desperate political and social world of 10 billion people inhabiting a crowded and finite planet, it appeared as though wilderness might be an unfortunate sacrifice to a resource- and space-hungry humanity in competition with itself. Oil, coal, uranium, copper, and a host of other extractable non-renewable resources have long since passed their peak extraction rates (Heinberg 2007), with many of them being close to total depletion.

Many years ago, Jackson (2010) hypothesized that "the future of agriculture long before the end of the fossil fuel interlude will depend on knowledge gained from our ecosystem's wild ecosystems" (p. 7). He was right. The rapidly urbanizing world of the early 21st century lost much of the environmental knowledge that is not only helpful for advancing the natural sciences, but also the knowledge that has sustained humanity for thousands of years (Heinberg 2007). Today, some of the nation's most pristine wildernesses do not allow citizen access (for example, Southern Nantahala, Marble Mountain, and Pecos), primarily because they are being used as "laboratories" for testing genetic variations of various plants and animals for medicinal, agricultural, and horticultural uses. Other wildernesses are also closed to humans (for example, Glacier Peak, Golden Trout, Mount Evans, and Sycamore Canyon), primarily because these areas contain the headwaters for our most precious and valuable resource: clean water. We have learned that wilderness areas are vital to the human condition; they are often the sources of our streams, our drinking water on a planet where the price of potable water long ago outpaced the price of fossil fuels or any other singular component of our energy needs. In the American west, the sites of most of our wilderness and park lands, the arid climate has only exacerbated these drinking and agricultural difficulties, prompting many groups to support further efforts to preserve watersheds, designating them wildernesses, national parks, or affording them some other protected status.

Long ago, scientists predicted that climate change would have significant impacts on the national parks (National Park Service 2010), but they failed to see the implications. The geothermal energy provided by the Yellowstone Caldera now supports electrical production throughout much of the Intermountain West, as do the solar arrays in Joshua Tree and Saguaro in the southwest. There was stiff resistance to privatizing portions of these national parks, but it remains preferable to the bio-prospecting (Hayden 2003) that has taken place in other parts of the world where there are even fewer environmental regulations. The subsequent phenomenon of privatizing biodiversity forced land management agencies to guard these spaces with increased fervor, lest the knowledge be stolen and patented, as takes place throughout the world (Shiva 2005). Because wilderness is one of the few places where biodiversity still exists, there is increasing commodification of the knowledge and materials that can be extracted there. Within this expanding economic horizon, biopharmaceutical, biotechnological, and biomedical industries—in conjunction with governmental agencies—figure as prominent actors and drivers of important economic and social policy that have both global and local ramifications. With all of this taken into account, most wildernesses appear today just as they might have 50 years ago, save dramatic changes in vegetation types and unpredicted animal migrations and extinctions resulting from globalization and its inherent burning of fossil fuels.

And what can be said of the human experience with wilderness? Recreation ecologists have long documented the detrimental effects of various outdoor experiences (Hammit and Cole 1998), ultimately leading to many outdoor pursuits being regulated and curtailed significantly, if not eliminated completely. Since the turn of the 21st century, advocates of wilderness recreation, feeling pressure to expand the number of individuals who have more regular interactions with wilderness, continue to want more people to hike the trails, climb the mountains, and canoe the lakes. This is understandable, but it is at odds with the realities of visitor impacts. Basically, more people in wilderness relates directly to more material impacts on wild ecosystems. This inherent contradiction sits at the center of many land management debates, and it ultimately underscores the largest and most pressing issue of our time: What is and what ought to be people's relationship with the natural world?

Due to access, technology, and safety issues, today's human-wilderness experience is highly orchestrated by land managers, leading to a false sense of security while experiencing the outdoors. Wilderness today, while in some sense existing as it always has, is much more of an illusory construct (Leitch 1978), a romanticized remnant of a past that may or may not have ever existed.

Decreased public support for wilderness has required the cultivation of a new kind of citizen that values nature more than we have in the past, and what better way for folks to value wilderness than to have them experience wilderness? Part of the access problem is rooted in basic demographics. In an increasingly urbanized world, fewer and fewer people come into direct contact with natural processes on a regular

basis. Beyond our rapid movement to cities, our cultures have become increasingly interwoven, partly through processes of human migrations, and partly through the cultural processes of globalization. We increasingly encounter large swaths of people who have never left the cities in which they grew up. This phenomenon is often associated with young people, and is frequently counteracted through initiatives such as the “No Child Left Inside” movement decades ago, or other educational and/or experiential programs.

It is in this broad socio-demographic landscape that access to wilderness is so inescapably entangled. Should wilderness access be expanded to “reach out” to individuals, groups, and communities? If so, how might this be done in a way that is thoughtful, compassionate, reasonable, and just? If wilderness access is, in fact, expanded, does it then lose some of the qualities that made wilderness what it was to begin with? Would this expansion compromise the ecological integrity of the wilderness ecosystem? Would it compromise traditional notions of what a wilderness experience “should” be?

Picture yourself backpacking through a remote alpine valley only to find that your desired camp spot near the lake is already occupied by two groups of 6th graders from downtown Cleveland who are part of a program seeking to expose urban youth to the outdoors. Not only will you forego your favorite camp spot, but your new spot, a few hundred feet away, features an evening filled with the students’ favorite pop songs belted out at full volume, punctuated by intermittent nighttime screams and giggles, and one student who stumbles through your site looking for a bathroom spot. The next morning, as you wearily pack up to continue on your way, you notice the visible “traces” of the group’s experience—increased litter, a campsite that was too close to the alpine lake, and a forgotten tent pole.

As the population increases and as wildernesses maintain their current sizes and regulations, defensive and offensive battle lines place people and nature in difficult positions. Groups demanding greater access and availability of wilderness now seek greater permitting flexibility, while other groups actively oppose such a move. The traditional views of environmentalists, wilderness advocates, land managers, and scientists all point to increased access as a direct path to degradation of the qualities that made the area worthy of wilderness designation in the first place. Can a place be “primitive,” “untrammelled,” and promote “solitude” (as mandated by the 1964 Wilderness Act) while simultaneously allowing for greater access?

Of course, the dichotomy between increased access and maintenance of wilderness character is a false choice. There is a balance to be worked out, a dynamic balance that adjusts for seasonality, the ecology of the place, and the level of “need” for access. However, as we seem to see daily in our local, state, national, and global political processes, the tendency for particular advocacy groups to seek a moderate amount of resources is fairly exceptional. One instance of granting greater access is often met with another demand for even further access. One denial of access to wilderness strengthens future requests being denied.

The way out of this ideological stalemate now rests with the legislatures and the courts. Political processes in the United States are saturated with lobbyists, campaign contributions, and donations. The courts offer both avenue for democratic review and an endless line of lawsuits and appeals, both of which are also directly corrupted by the influences of money. Advocacy groups, either for or against greater access, turn to their legislators to get laws on the books, and then turn to the courts to either strike down those laws or condemn those who try to fight them. Either way, the stalemate that many citizens feel regarding political processes only intensifies, and the losses are felt heavily by both people and nature.

With this increased focus on legal stratagems as a response to the intensified wilderness debate, a tool of both sides continues to be the perceived and actual safety of visitors to wilderness areas. Lawsuits continue to wreck havoc on court systems and communities, and the ultimate reliance upon a logic of “safety” remains paramount. Such a premise is not without (rhetorical) merit. Who wouldn’t want this world to be a little safer, a little better, and a little more comfortable than it used to be? Imagine if an increasingly safe world *wasn’t* the case, if each generation had life a little tougher, a little harder than the generation before. The arc of human existence hasn’t pointed us in this direction yet, and it remains difficult to imagine a world in which society (with the legal system being part of it) would support such a stance.

While proposals for “no rescue” wilderness scenarios (McAvoy and Dustin 1981) offer insight into human psychology and behavior, there remains little support for such practices on the ground. Debates currently rage as to who should pay for wilderness rescues (the user? private insurance? the land management agency?), and there is little to suggest that the rescues themselves might be eliminated, whether due to managers’ policies or due to a basic sense of human compassion for others in need. There is a trend toward people wanting greater safety and security while recreating in the wilderness, not less. With regard to this aspect of the internal contradictions of “wilderness management,” the opposing sides are people who spend time in wilderness and those who are ultimately responsible for their safety in the case of emergencies, the land management agencies.

When considering such a dilemma in practice, fundamental questions arise. Is it appropriate for there to be a log crossing where a trail intersects a stream at spring melt? Should there be a handrail? Should trails be well marked, or even marked at all, if a hiker loses a map or doesn’t know how to read one effectively? These questions have persisted for years, even before the Wilderness Act of a hundred years ago, and they continue to persist today.

The safety question is further complicated by the technological aspects of the contemporary visitor experience. At the turn of the 21st century, many wilderness managers were struggling with GPS technologies. Some managers banned GPS use due to the increased numbers of rescues, while other managers went the opposite direction, requiring GPS-enabled satellite phones while recreating in the backcountry. Today, this “controversy” has largely subsided, as managers have succumbed

to the massively interconnected social world in which we live. Almost all visitors now carry their phones into the backcountry, and with satellite positioning and internet capabilities, there is very little difference technologically between camping in the Tuolumne high country versus sitting in an apartment in downtown San Francisco. Most land management agencies have adapted by implementing full-time switchboard operating systems to accept incoming distress calls from wilderness recreationists. These automated systems then make instant decisions as to when to initiate a rescue or not.

Most wilderness managers see the increases in technology as a bad thing; it is an imposition on what used to be “real” wilderness experiences when we had to think for ourselves and deal with the consequences of our decisions. However, paper maps are a thing of the past, and we haven’t had a lost party in over three decades now. Many groups who do not have sufficient outdoor skills are able to just look up the skill on their mobile devices. The devices also help by allowing visitors to coordinate with other backcountry users as to when and where they plan to camp, and by updating others in real time about the conditions of trails, trailheads, and facilities.

Despite the material advantages that technology brings, it leaves many wilderness enthusiasts questioning just how wild our wildernesses are nowadays. It’s easy to find videos, blogs, and photographs of any hike, climb, or camping spot. The detail of online maps is so great that one barely has to look at the world in order to navigate it. We no longer have animal attacks on humans because most mobile devices emit a high pitched frequency that deters animals, but animal encounters are also increasingly rare. Detailed weather forecasting has enabled people to head into wilderness areas with fewer and fewer articles of gear, which helps lighten the load, but it also means more rescues when the forecasts are slightly off. All of these technological advancements are subject to visitors’ choices, but rarely do visitors choose to be less comfortable, less in the know, or less safe.

It has been 75 years since McKibben (1989) predicted the end of nature as we know it, and that time is now upon us. Change is inevitable, both in the material existence of wilderness and in the various ways in which we conceptualize our relationship to the natural world. Land managers, wildlife ecologists, environmentalists, and participatory citizens ought to take notice of what is, with the intention of thoughtfully assisting in guiding what is to come. We may find that in the coming years humans will have to continue to adjust to a world without pristine nature, forcing us to manage environments in ways that go beyond creating and maintaining protected areas (Wapner 2010). Today’s wildernesses and wilderness experiences may indeed be less wild than they were 100 years ago, but our cities, suburbs, farms, and industrial sites are most certainly wilder.

Wilderness Scenario #4

Wilderness, rather than being seen as the antithesis of civilization, has come to be seen as an integral part of what it means to be civilized. People are considered part of nature

rather than apart from nature, and they come home to wilderness rather than visit it.

The year is 2064. In a sense, wildness is now internalized. Wilderness is no longer “the antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul” (Cronon 1996, p.80). Nor is it “a place of freedom in which we can recover the true selves which we have lost to corrupting influences of our artificial lives” (Cronon 1996, p.80). In fact, designated wilderness areas no longer exist. They no longer make sense. When we learned that the inherent dualism of separate wilderness areas fostered irresponsibility at home, the soiling of local landscapes, and a fragmented sense of the environment that was out of step with reality, we recognized the need for radical change. Rather than depending on conceptions of backcountry that demanded differential treatment (that is, leaving no trace) for physical and spiritual renewal, we have incorporated green spaces within bioregionally-based communities and we welcome other living things as part of the larger ecosystem that we depend on.

We are able to see that ecological health begins with the places in which we work, live, learn, and play. It includes the places that our food and materials come from and the places that stuff we cannot use goes to. Environmental education no longer includes field trips to remote places; rather, it is about learning to live well in our own places. We have learned that we cannot use parts of ecosystems (natural resources) more quickly than ecosystem processes can renew them, and that we cannot discharge wastes more quickly than they can be absorbed (Hardin 1985). The environment has become a powerful context for integrating all disciplines. This conception alleviates many issues of environmental justice because internalized wildness mandates emphasis on community, a place-based approach, and a holistic sense of responsibility for what, how, and where we produce and consume. We have come to appreciate that an internalized wildness is the only way to truly protect the landscape and the biotic community as a whole.

Across the globe, people have come to realize that humans impact all the earth, no matter how remote or how devoid of human presence. From climate chaos to toxins in remote areas of the ocean, human behavior has touched every corner of the planet. People have come to understand that the best way to maintain wilderness and healthy ecosystems is to control humans, not “natural resources.” In this future, it is widely understood that by designating certain places as *wilderness*, or *backcountry*, or *Nature* we defined them as “other” and there was a critical sense in which we literally changed them from subject to object. We now understand that our past orientation to nature was not one of awe and humility, but of control. We commodified nature and wildness with fees attached not only to transportation, access, and experiences in designated wilderness, but even in the peddling of outdoor wares through the promotion of fear appeals of what might happen if one “braved” wilderness without expensive gear. But now the majority opinion holds that the best way to protect wild places is to reduce the human footprint at the broadest possible scale, and to return to humility and awe, not just of the far away, but of wildness in all forms near and far.

Birding is the epitome of this new wilderness experience. Birders are an amazing sort. They see and hear things that most of us don't. Sure they dress funny, move slowly, and have ridiculous hats. But they have a connection to wildness, a connection that many other people lack. They view the landscape as an opportunity for discovery, not in a controlling way, but with a sense of humility and awe. The landscape offers bright visual and auditory "gifts" that feed them without requiring consumption. Ask them why they have devoted their time to learning to identify birds by ear or sight and they'll use words like magic, beauty, diversity, liveliness, wonder, connectedness, seasonality, camaraderie, and artistic appeal. They understand that there is always something more to learn. Add to the list freedom, beauty, amazement and transformation, and there you have it. They know what birds share their home environment and when to expect them. They also know what habitats support what sorts of birds. The return or departure of certain birds speaks to the seasons and indicates appropriate human behaviors like planting vegetables or putting up storm windows. When birders travel, they look for new birds to introduce them to new landscapes, connecting with the newly discovered places and with each other. Information is freely exchanged between birders: what they've seen, where they've seen it, and how sightings this year compare to sightings in years past. Really, it's a poor "sport," valuing cooperation over competition. You'll never see a birder wearing day-glow colors; the birder's costume, silly hats aside, is intended to blend into the landscape. There is one vision of how people can relate to place, finding the wildness in every landscape, regardless of political designation or geography. According to the poet Gary Snyder, "a person with a clear heart and open mind can experience the wilderness anywhere on earth. It is a quality of one's own consciousness" (as cited in Cronon 1996, p. 89). In this way, we can begin to see ourselves as a part of something larger, as a part of nature rather than apart from it.

This future has required a complete metamorphosis of thought about human-environment relationships. Now, rather than seeing people as separate from nature, people are seen *as* nature. While this may seem improbable, consider that human conceptions of wilderness changed from seeing nature as savage and brutish to seeing nature as sanctuary or cathedral (Cronon 1996). Rather than write humans out of wilderness, we have now come to recognize that we are a part of wildness, a part of nature. We recognize "environmental" problems for what they really are—social problems—and we seek treatment of root causes rather than symptoms. We have transcended the current vision of modernity, recognizing our problem as:

"the positive-feedback system comprising overpopulation, urbanization, outrageously high standards of living, outrageously unjust distribution of basic goods; the conjunction of classical science, technology, the state, and market economics that supports the high standard of living; the endless presumptions concerning our rights, liberties, and privileges; and the utter absence of a spiritual life that might mitigate against these forms of greed" (Turner 1994, p. 180).

The beginnings of these transitions from global to local happened as far back as the early part of the 21st century as evidenced by the number of farmer's markets increasing five-fold between 2004 and 2010 (USDA 2010), urban "buy local" movements' rampant growth, and experimentation with local currencies in many cities. "Modern" ideas were increasingly rejected in favor of progressive ones.

Because the preservation of wilderness required a revolution against social pathology, we have learned that human management rather than land or resource management is the most productive and enjoyable way to protect ourselves and our fellow species in intact landscapes. We have learned to give our homes and local communities the level of care and respect that used to be reserved for the backcountry, so that the distinction between wilderness and home, between frontcountry and backcountry, has dissolved. "Homo petroliens," as Foreman (1994) referred to our fossil fuel dependent selves, are now extinct, having been replaced by true *Homo sapiens* who embody Leopold's land ethic with a resurgence of community economies and ecologies.

Just like birders, we have finally learned to find wildness in our everyday landscapes, living by the credo that cooperation is a better strategy than competition. While we continue to find magic and meaning and important ecologic lessons in large and diverse landscapes, we also find less need and less virtue in traveling to faraway places to repair damaged souls. The healing now begins and ends at home, as we carry on our work together, creating and maintaining healthy localized communities based on informed restraint, responsibility, and holism.

The Path Home

We have presented four wilderness scenarios from an infinite pool of possibilities. Just which one, or which combination, is likely to become a reality is open for discussion and debate. Perhaps some other scenario, even an unimaginable one, will come to pass. Time will tell, of course. In the meantime, it is easy to be pessimistic about the future. It is easy to assume current trends are irreversible and that the future is in large measure already set, already predetermined by choices we have already made. If the path to the United States of America's future is going to be paved with more cities, more technology, more people, more demands on limited non-renewable natural resources, and more staying-at-homeness, then how can the prospects for wilderness possibly be good? People are, after all, highly adaptable creatures (Dustin and McAvoy 1982), and why should we believe that the general public is incapable of adjusting to a future without wilderness?

We take some comfort in the thought that our forbearers put certain legislative, executive, and judicial safeguards in place to help protect wilderness should future political uncertainty challenge the wilderness idea. Indeed, the tendency to date has been to afford parks, monuments, and primitive areas even more protection over time. Moreover, the creation of

new national parks, monuments, and wildernesses has been a common legacy left to us by virtually all of our outgoing presidents since Theodore Roosevelt, no matter their political persuasion (Dustin and others 2005). When our nation's leaders begin thinking about what they want to be remembered for, they typically do something good for the environment (Dustin and Barbar 1998). And as Appell (2010) has observed in his review of wilderness and the courts, the judicial branch of government has looked favorably upon wilderness as well.

We Americans, it seems, are generally in favor of wilderness even if we do not visit it. The idea of wilderness pleases us. While there are certainly widespread differences of opinion about the ways in which wilderness should be managed, any objection to the existence of wilderness per se is likely to be overruled by popular opinion. The real threat to wilderness is much more likely to come from external forces than from wilderness enthusiasts loving wilderness to death. Running out of fossil fuels or clean water or precious metals that we depend on for our collective material well-being should be of more immediate concern to anyone who cares about protecting the sanctity of wilderness. Recreational impacts on wilderness can be mitigated in ways that impacts from non-renewable natural resource extraction cannot.

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