

Backcountry as an Alternative to Wilderness?

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ABSTRACT—Backcountry areas have been suggested as recreation alternatives to wilderness. A problem with the concept is that areas which could be managed as backcountry are already used by recreationists. Visitors to a wilderness in Oregon and to a nondesignated roadless area in northern Idaho held many of the same values and sought the same kind of experiences. Therefore, redistribution, as proposed by backcountry proponents, may be equivalent to shifting use from officially designated wilderness to de facto wilderness rather than from wilderness to a backcountry recreation area.

As wildernesses¹ have become crowded with more and more recreationists, several alternatives have been proposed for relieving the resulting pressures. Often suggested is the establishment of backcountry areas (Lucas 1973, Lucas and Stankey 1974, Hendee et al. 1978). These roadless recreation areas with a semi-wilderness character would be less restrictive in management of vegetation, wildlife, landscape, and facility development than wilderness. With proper controls, timber harvesting, mining, and motorized travel might take place in some backcountry areas.

Past arguments for the backcountry concept have stressed the benefits to recreationists and recreation management. Although the backcountry concept has been criticized both by commodity interests and by preservationists (Hendee et al. 1978, p. 373), it has generally been considered beneficial to recreation management. Our purpose here is to point out a drawback in the concept. We will support our argument with data gathered from visitors to two areas in the northern Rocky Mountains.

Two major benefits have been associated with the backcountry concept. First, backcountry areas would help fill the critical gap between intensively developed sites and wildernesses (Lucas and Stankey 1974). Second, backcountry areas could relieve use pressure on wildernesses. Although some visitors depend on the special opportunities provided in wilderness, others may neither require nor desire a wilderness environment to satisfy their recreational needs (Hendee et al. 1978). Lucas (1973) suggests that if backcountry areas were explained to the public, considerable use might be diverted to them, thus not only lessening impacts on the resource but also increasing opportunities for solitude in wilderness.

A drawback to promoting backcountry as an alternative to wilderness is that areas capable of being managed as backcountry are already used by recreationists. We found that many of the recreationists held the same kind of values and sought the same kind of

experiences as current wilderness visitors and would be negatively affected by increased use. Therefore, diverting users from wilderness to backcountry areas may be equivalent to shifting use from wilderness to de facto wilderness. The extent to which our findings apply to other areas depends on the homogeneity of user characteristics within wildernesses and nondesignated roadless areas. Evidence from other studies indicates that broad similarities exist among wilderness users, despite large differences on specific characteristics or attitudes from area to area (Stankey 1973, Lucas 1980). And, although the variability among nondesignated roadless area users is unknown, we suspect it is similar to that of wilderness users.

Study Description

We used a questionnaire to investigate three major topics: (1) characteristics of roadless area users and their views toward backcountry recreation, (2) wilderness visitors' opinions about backcountry, and (3) information programs for redistributing use. Our purposes were to understand and compare the views of the two sets of users, to anticipate possible adverse effects of diverting some wilderness use to backcountry, and to help design information programs that might be used to divert use from wilderness areas.

On randomly selected days between mid-June and mid-September of 1977, an interviewer contacted visitors at the more heavily used trailheads to the Selkirk area in northern Idaho and the Eagle Cap Wilderness in eastern Oregon. Weekdays, ordinary weekends, and holiday weekends were represented in the 25 sample days for each area. All users age 16 years and older were asked to complete an on-site questionnaire; 186 wilderness questionnaires and 126 backcountry questionnaires were completed. The same questions were asked in both areas, but the context was changed for a few questions. For example, backcountry visitors were asked if they knew of wilderness areas where they could go and wilderness visitors were asked if they knew of backcountry areas. Using the same questions and format made responses readily comparable between the two areas.

Because the distinction between wilderness and backcountry was crucial in this study, a paragraph at the beginning of the questionnaire explained the meaning of each term. The backcountry paragraph read, "Some of the questions ask for your opinion about two different kinds of areas: wilderness and backcountry. The questions about 'wilderness areas' refer to designated areas of the National Wilderness Preservation System and the primitive areas of the U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service. The questions about 'backcountry areas' refer to remote, undeveloped areas like the one

¹As used in this article, the term wilderness refers to land designated under the Wilderness Act of 1964 and its amendments.

you are now visiting. These areas are similar to wilderness areas, but lack any official designation as a wilderness area." The paragraph presented to wilderness users was identical except for the placement of the phrase "like the one you are now visiting." The interviewer emphasized that the beginning paragraph should be read, answered visitors' questions, and clarified any points of misunderstanding before the visitors responded to the questionnaires.

Both the Selkirk and Eagle Cap areas contain alpine lakes and granite peaks with timbered slopes at lower elevations. Motorized trail travel is permitted in the Selkirk area, but few motorized trail users were contacted during the study. For convenience, the Selkirk area will be referred to as "backcountry" even though it is not officially designated as such.

Findings and Implications

Our primary finding is that, in the two areas studied, roadless area visitors were very similar to wilderness visitors in their views toward facility developments, motorized travel, and encounters with others.

Selkirk users had the same range of views toward development in backcountry areas that Eagle Cap visitors had toward development in wildernesses (table 1). For example, some Selkirk visitors would have liked to see more development in roadless areas, but others preferred little or no development. Most of the wilderness visitors favored developments that have traditionally been provided in wilderness to facilitate hiking access and safety, such as hiking trails, trail signs, and bridges over rivers. Less traditional developments and activities such as Adirondack-type shelters, developed campsites, cutting trees to open scenic vistas from trails, and stocking with non-native fish were seen as desirable by a smaller percentage of wilderness visitors.

Although not consistent with the goals of wilderness, these kinds of developments and activities could be provided in a backcountry area. Many Selkirk users, however, viewed these less traditional developments as undesirable in backcountry. So, developing roadless areas as backcountry apparently would satisfy a small percentage of wilderness visitors but displease a larger percentage of current roadless area users. This trade-off does not indicate absolute numbers of users affected, of course. But, data for roadless areas are not reliable enough to permit a quantitative estimate of the potential effect of diverting use from wilderness.

Desirability of development and management activities were not the only areas where Eagle Cap and Selkirk users essentially agreed. Most visitors to the roadless area viewed motorized trail use as undesirable, just as did wilderness visitors. Thus, careful management of motorized recreation will be crucial in determining the success of backcountry areas as alternatives

Table 1. Response of Eagle Cap and Selkirk visitors to desirability of development and activities in wilderness and backcountry, respectively.

Development, and area ¹	Responses				
	Very undesirable	Undesirable	Neutral	Desirable	Very desirable
	Percent				
Hiking trails					
Eagle Cap (183)	3	2	6	21	68
Selkirk (122)	2	1	6	35	56
Trail signs					
Eagle Cap (185)	4	2	8	38	48
Selkirk (125)	1	1	9	44	45
Wooden bridges over large rivers					
Eagle Cap (184)	8	7	11	38	36
Selkirk (124)	6	2	18	39	35
Adirondack-type shelters					
Eagle Cap (179)	32	22	26	14	6
Selkirk (125)	25	20	31	13	11
Developed campsites					
Eagle Cap (186)	70	17	5	6	2
Selkirk (126)	52	14	14	14	6
Cutting trees to open vistas from trails					
Eagle Cap (184)	50	20	15	10	5
Selkirk (123)	36	22	19	14	9
Stocking with non-native fish					
Eagle Cap (185)	30	13	30	17	10
Selkirk (125)	30	15	32	17	6
Trail biking					
Eagle Cap (185)	93	4	1	1	1
Selkirk (125)	69	13	6	2	10

¹ Number of respondents given in parentheses.

to wilderness. Further, 31 percent of the Eagle Cap users thought the absence of motors from wilderness and their potential presence in backcountry was a key difference between the two types of areas.

Because our wilderness and backcountry users saw motorized recreation as undesirable, we think areas with motorized use should not be expected to serve as redistribution alternatives to wilderness. Unroaded areas will need to have restrictions, such as temporal zoning of motorized trail use if they are to attract current wilderness and backcountry users.

Roadless area users showed more sensitivity to encounters with others than did their wilderness counterparts. As figure 1 shows, the Selkirk sample is closer than the Eagle Cap sample to responses from a 1969 study of three western wilderness and primitive areas (Stankey 1973).

The effects of encouraging use of a roadless area

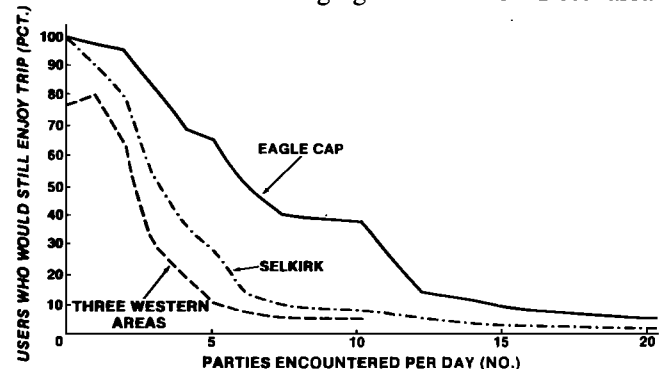


Figure 1. Number of other parties per day that Eagle Cap and Selkirk users could meet and still enjoy their trip. (Data for three western areas from Stankey 1973.)

through backcountry designation are likely to be concentrated on people who live close to the roadless area. In our sample nearly all of the Selkirk users came from the immediate area—northern Idaho and northeastern Washington accounted for 93 percent with the remaining 7 percent coming from nearby Montana and southeastern Washington. By contrast, only one-third of the Eagle Cap visitors came from the immediate area of southeastern Washington and northeastern Oregon—40 percent were from northwestern Oregon (Portland area), and the remaining 29 percent from distant areas in Washington, Idaho, and other states. Because users of a roadless area are likely to be local, designating an area as backcountry may be perceived by the users as changing “their” area and encouraging outsiders.

If, after weighing the pros and cons, managers and planners decide to redistribute use, the first step is to make wilderness visitors aware of existing roadless or backcountry opportunities. Only 31 percent of the Eagle Cap visitors knew of a backcountry area where they could participate in the same activities as in the wilderness. By contrast, 69 percent of the Selkirk users knew of a designated wilderness area where they could go.

Several channels are available for getting information to visitors. Word-of-mouth was the most frequent source of information for both Eagle Cap and Selkirk users. More than half of each group had learned about the area they visited from friends or relatives. Information provided by agencies possibly is an important initial source in the word-of-mouth network, but it is not enough. Administrative designation of areas may be necessary to make alternatives to wilderness better known.

The differences that Eagle Cap users perceived between wilderness and backcountry areas were not universal. Therefore, information to users about backcountry areas should cover a variety of attributes (Krumpe and Brown 1982, Schomaker 1975). We asked Eagle Cap visitors what led them to choose the wilderness over a known backcountry area. The more frequent answers were the setting or scenery (35 percent), no motors (15 percent), close to home (13 percent), favorite area (13 percent), and seeking solitude (9 percent). Clearly, motor policy, regulations, scenic quality, degree of development, and amount of use are important pieces of information to the potential users of a new backcountry area and should be included in redistribution programs. Almost all (92 percent) of the Eagle Cap visitors said they would be amenable to redistribution under the right circumstances. Of course, for a small percentage of visitors there is no satisfactory substitute for a favorite area.

Trade-offs

A more thorough, quantitative study of the net gain or loss in various recreation opportunities at the primitive end of the spectrum is needed before the effects of redistribution can be fully anticipated. One thing is clear. A diversion of use from wilderness to roadless areas will be an increased challenge to wilderness management. Some people now use roadless areas because they perceive them as less crowded and less developed than wilderness. If nearby roadless areas are developed, these “purists” will be displaced and their only alternative may be officially designated wilderness. The challenge to management will be to maintain the recreation

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Redistributing Backcountry Use Through Information Related To Recreation Experiences

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ABSTRACT—A controlled experiment in Yellowstone National Park tested a “trail selector” consisting of a brochure and map containing information designed to enable visitors to select trails offering the type of recreation experience they desired and to provide alternatives to the most highly used trails. In decision-tree format, the trail selector gave information on specific backcountry characteristics for 28 lightly used trails. The experiment demonstrated that simple information about trail attributes could redistribute use. Recreationists considered the trail selector useful, most said they would use it in planning subsequent trips, many had showed it to others planning a backcountry trip in the study area.

Concentration of users in wilderness and backcountry areas has presented challenges to resource managers. Managers often ask, How can users be better distributed? In this article we offer one answer by reporting a test of a trail selector device.

While evenly distributed use might undesirably spread impacts over a wide area, concentrated overuse can degrade both the resource and the social aspects of the backcountry experience.

Of management actions available to redistribute use, more are permissible in undesignated backcountry areas than in wilderness, where legal mandates preclude most physical site-management techniques such as paving trails or erecting facilities. In wilderness and many national park backcountry areas, management is accomplished either directly through regulatory controls or indirectly through less obtrusive practices (Hendee et al. 1978). The latter attempt to influence visitor choices through such things as facility design and dissemination of information. In wilderness, information dissemination is preferred because it preserves the recreationist's sense of freedom and spontaneity (Fazio 1979). In addition, since many wilderness visitors follow familiar routes and have limited knowledge about alternatives, information may heighten satisfaction by increasing users' options (Lime and Lucas 1977).

Experimental Attempts to Redistribute Wilderness Use With Information

Despite its popularity and public acceptance, information dissemination has rarely been tested in experimental attempts to redistribute recreation use. One early effort, although not in a wilderness, demonstrated that informational roadside signs distributed visitors more

The argument put forth here and elsewhere (Gregersen and Contreras 1979) is basically that if use of ACE is an acceptable, existing policy then it should be taken into account in calculating project rates of return. If it is not a policy in force and is not expected to be adopted, then its effect should not be included. The justification for using ACE depends directly on assumptions concerning policy. An analysis of the difference with and without the ACE assumption would give a measure of the effect of the ACE policy.

The ACE example may be compared with the previous example of agriculture vs. forestry. In both cases a project can be rendered economically feasible by the existence of a policy. In the land-use restriction example the costs would have been too high in the absence of the policy. In the ACE case, "when an immediate increase in harvesting is rationalized by using ACE, the attractiveness of investments in timber production is often increased" (Schweitzer et al. 1972). Both examples illustrate how a project analysis boundary is pushed and pulled by the forces of policies.

Other Implications

In some areas, regulations require replanting after harvest. Thus, current harvest and replanting are linked by policy and should be considered together in an economic analysis of harvesting. In fact, both would be nonseparable parts of one "project," since policy states that the former cannot be undertaken without the latter. If reforestation were not a requirement after harvest, the economic value of the harvest project should be considered separately from the value of the reforestation project,

since harvest and reforestation essentially would be separate decisions. One could harvest without reforesting. Here again is a simple example of how policies can have a marked effect on the appropriate boundaries of an economic analysis and the resulting costs and benefits used to appraise the project.

There are many other instances when evaluation of forestry projects can produce irrelevant or confusing results if policy conditions are not taken into account properly. Examples include labor pricing and wage policies in a situation of unemployment, and product pricing under conditions of minimum prices and price ceilings. In all cases, it would seem that the analyst should take into account policies that are judged to be fairly permanent within the time frame for the project being considered. If the analyst also is asked to explore benefits and costs associated with a policy, then that becomes a separate matter and should be treated in a separate analysis. ■

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opportunities within wilderness at the extreme, primitive end of the spectrum. ■

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