

FOSTERING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE WILD

Oral History's Role in Recreation Management

Alison Steiner and Daniel R. Williams

Place

Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks (SEKI) encompass much of central California's most stunning scenery. Dramatic peaks and passes, perennial snowfields, remote lake basins, alpine meadows, steep canyons, and shockingly big trees characterize the more than 800,000 acres of wild land that lie within the parks. Drought-resistant chaparral and blue oak woodlands blanket SEKI's low-elevation western slopes, while stark mountain summits (some more than 14,000 feet high) define its eastern boundary. Giant Sequoias—up to 270 feet tall and 30 feet in diameter—stand in sharp contrast to the gnarled and weathered trunks of whitebark and foxtail pines. The exceptional biologic and geographic diversity of SEKI is matched by its long and varied history of human use. Over the years the southern Sierra Nevada has served as a home, a playground, and a worksite for Native Americans, miners, mountaineers, horse packers, and hikers alike.

Oral history with William Tweed by Alison Steiner, Three Rivers, California, June 7, 2010; oral history with Nathan Stephenson by Alison Steiner, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, Ash Mountain, California, June 17, 2010

In June 2010 SEKI launched an oral history project to document long-term changes in the character, management, and use of the approximately 808,000 acres of wilderness located within the parks' boundaries. Over the next six months Alison Steiner conducted

in-depth interviews with local experts, longtime employees of, visitors to, and commercial operators within SEKI.¹ Interviewees typically had over four decades of experience in the parks. Several even recounted stories that dated back to the mid-1930s. During the interviews these narrators explored a variety of topics: the public's perception of park policies, personal accounts of early wilderness outings, and descriptions of how visitor use patterns, as well as the condition of the parks' natural resources, have changed over time. William Tweed and Nathan Stephenson were two of the twenty-three people interviewed.²

William Tweed and Nathan Stephenson began backpacking in California's southern Sierra in the mid-1960s. They grew up in an era defined by the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964 and the subsequent preservation of wilderness areas. As such, they developed a fierce love of wild land, which fueled countless visits to SEKI's wilderness, as well as long careers within the two parks. Tweed's and Stephenson's stories illustrate how wilderness experiences and ethics evolve over time and highlight the power of narrative in weaving together events to form a coherent personal identity.³

William Tweed

William Tweed was born in Visalia, California, in 1949. He began working summer jobs in the southern Sierra in 1967 and joined the National Park Service as a seasonal naturalist in 1974. In 1978 Tweed joined the permanent staff at Sequoia and Kings Canyon, where he remained until he retired from federal service in 2006. During those three decades he served as a supervisory park ranger, park planner, concessions management specialist, and public affairs specialist. His final position at the parks was as chief park naturalist. Tweed holds a PhD in history from Texas Christian University. He is the author or coauthor of *Challenge of the Big Trees: A Resource History of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks* (Three Rivers, CA: Sequoia Natural History Association, 1990), *Death Valley and the Northern Mojave: A Visitor's Guide* (Los Olivos, CA: Cachuma Press, 2003), and *Uncertain Path: A Search for the Future of National Parks* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011).

ALISON STEINER: Can you describe your very first experiences in the park?

WILLIAM TWEED: I began backpacking in this park forty-plus years ago. The first serious backpacking I did was in the summer of 1966, which now sounds like a long time ago, doesn't it?

I was seventeen years old. It was between my junior and senior years in high school. I talked a friend into [it]. I said, "Why don't we hike across the Sierra?" It was the thing. It was the 1960s. People were getting into this. Looking back, I guess we were sort of on the opening wave of that whole surge of baby boomer interest. I was born in forty-nine, so I'm sort of a classic baby boomer.

We talked our parents into dropping us off at Whitney Portal, and we hiked back across the mountains. We lived in Visalia. We hadn't done much of this. Went down to the army surplus. I paid five dollars for a pack. Had a little Sterno stove. And we spent ten days hiking across [the park]. We had

a good time, and we lived. Nothing bad happened to us. We did this with something that was between profound innocence and profound naiveté by modern standards.

This was in a world where the level of [wilderness use] regulation was quite nearly zero by the standards of the last quarter century. You stopped by at the Forest Service [Office], and you got a campfire permit. I remember we ran into the ranger at Crabtree [Ranger Station].

We didn't know much. But we didn't have any trouble. We had canvas sleeping bags and a tube tent. Mostly we cooked over fires. There was no regulation. You just did what you wanted in those days.

And so I first hit the backcountry as a teenage user, at the very end of the old era, the unregulated era. This was really just the beginning of the backpacking boom that came about in the sixties. I liked it a lot, and I got hooked. I've been in the High Sierra every summer, except one, since that [time]. And so, I was able to see sort of a long and incremental transition from one era to another.

STEINER: On your first trip across the Sierras, what were your expectations? You said you were naive and innocent. Did you have an idea of what you were getting into?

TWEED: I had read *The Thousand Mile Summer* by Colin Fletcher. It was published by Howell-North in 1964. It was one of the defining baby boomer experience books. *The Thousand Mile Summer* was the story of a hiker, in this case a man in his thirties, who wanted to find a new niche in life. Bought a Kelty pack and hitchhiked his way to the Mexican border and walked to Oregon through eastern California. He made his own route and wandered through places, both well-known and completely remote. It was just the kind of book to capture the imagination of a fifteen-year-old boy. I think it defined expectations for those of us who had no idea what we were doing.

We were going out to see wilderness, whatever that was. We were going to see nature. We were going to see unoccupied places. We were going to see grand scenery. We were going out to be independent, self-reliant. We were going out to be free. This was the sixties, after all. There are a bunch of clichés in there. You're asking what was on the minds of a sixteen-year-old. Sixteen-year-olds aren't famous for their sophisticated thinking. We were chasing clichés, and we found some of them.

STEINER: Did the trip meet your expectations?

TWEED: Yeah, we had a very good experience. We did feel independent for sixteen-year-olds. It was physically fun. The equipment we had was crude, but nothing challenged us that required better equipment. We had one rainy cool day, and we hid that night at the head of [Lost Canyon]. We hid under one of those big glacial boulders. That was what led me to want to work in the park after I got out of high school as a summer job. [Beginning] in 1967, for half a dozen years while I was in college and graduate school, I worked for the

concessioner in Giant Forest. I was running around as fast as I could on the weekends, trying to get [to] as many places as possible.

STEINER: When you started working for the park, did your perceptions of wilderness change?

TWEED: It didn't change much initially. I would say for something approaching a decade what I did was simply exploring. One of the wonderful things about this park is that you can wander almost forever and keep going [to] different places. You're twenty years old, and you can walk all day. There was a long time that it was simply, I suspect, exploring geography.

Then in 1973 I switched over from being a concession employee to being a summer ranger. The naturalist branch actually believed that its employees should know something about the backcountry. They had a program where for every day of service you could get a paid day in the backcountry to add to your days off. And so we began to explore more aggressively.

I suddenly had a job that changed my perspective in several ways. First, I was now being paid to explain the park. In the seventies there was a great deal coming out about what was happening to the environment as a whole. This was going on at a national scale. But it was certainly affecting how people thought about National Parks and how staff thought inside National Parks. We were beginning to see environmental damage that we had never seen before. Up until then National Parks were perceived—even by those who worked in them—as pristine islands. At the same time, we were rapidly marching toward the climax of the baby boomer backpacking surge, which peaked out around the bicentennial, around Seventy-six, Seventy-seven. There were an awful lot of people in the backcountry. And so the park began to experiment with [wilderness use] regulation. Since naturalists were the primary staff in the visitor centers, we found ourselves having to talk about all this stuff. Suddenly there were limits.

STEINER: How did all of this affect your wilderness experiences?

TWEED: In some ways it changed the experience relatively little. In some ways it improved the experience. In some ways it made us think differently about wilderness. Psychologically it did something for this wilderness that was being done for the environment as a whole. We began to perceive wilderness as something that was fragile. Isn't that the endless adjective for wilderness? Fragile wilderness. That cliché has been used endlessly now for thirty or forty years. Right? I suppose it goes back to the wilderness conferences the Sierra Club sponsored in the fifties and sixties. It was David Brower and Wallace Stegner and [Howard] Zahniser. I am struck by how far we have drifted from the dreams of the 1950s. Brower, Zahniser, Stegner saw wilderness as this meditative state of respect[ful] consideration of the natural world.

This modern—what I call “aerobic wilderness experience” is so common these days. Can I make my thirty miles a day with my ultralight pack? That's one of the most profound changes that I see over time. It wasn't my change.

By the time aerobic wilderness use became the standard, I was too old. I was happy just to be plodding along. But the younger users of wilderness often carry very different values [than those] described fifty years ago. I perceive more and more of a gap between the meditative, contemplative character of the Wilderness Act and what actually goes on.

STEINER: You've been a wilderness user for many years. Have the things that you're looking for in your wilderness experiences changed over time?

TWEED: Yes. I started off as a young man to see country. I just wanted to see, I wanted to explore. That's a young man's dream. Eventually, when I became part of the park staff, I had more complex goals. The simpler of my goals was that I wanted to understand it all, to see it all. And I pretty well walked it all eventually, from one end to the other, because I found it useful when someone said "Castle Dome Meadow" or "Dumbbell Basin" or "Upper Wallace Creek" or "Tulainyo Lake" to know what they looked like. I'd been there. I cared that I knew about these places. I also wanted to understand what was happening to them, which was part of the bigger puzzle.

Today I'm past those phases. Today I'm not in a hurry. I'm now perfectly happy if I'm moving six or eight miles a day. I'm not very often going someplace new. I like to stroll and simply absorb it. I think I have finally achieved Zahniser's goal of 1952. I'm finally having a contemplative wilderness experience. It took me forty years. Maybe most people don't last long enough in wilderness to become contemplative. Maybe it comes with time. I don't know. It did for me. My wilderness experience has evolved a great deal.

Nathan Stephenson

Nathan Stephenson was born in southern California in 1957. He graduated from the University of California at Irvine in 1979 and began working in the resource management and research division at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. After receiving his PhD from Cornell University in 1988, Stephenson was hired as an ecologist by the National Park Service, where he established a long-term research program as a "place-based" scientist in the Sierra Nevada. He has carried this work into the present with the US Geological Survey. Stephenson is the author and coauthor of numerous journal articles, as well as the essays "Shifting Environmental Foundations: The Unprecedented and Unpredictable Future" and "Responding to Climate Change: A Toolbox of Management Strategies," which appear in Beyond Naturalness: Rethinking Park and Wilderness Stewardship in an Era of Rapid Change (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2010).

ALISON STEINER: Can you describe your early experiences in the parks' wilderness?

NATHAN STEPHENSON: I'll start with some context, because I've been coming to these parks since probably the early 1960s with my family. My first extended backpacking trip was in northern Kings Canyon. We went into Evolution Valley and Evolution Basin. That would have been the early sixties. I remember how

difficult that trip was. But that was what primed me to like the outdoors, even though as a little kid it was very difficult to carry all that weight and struggle across the creeks.

And so that put me on the path to coming back on my first independent trip in the parks. I think I had just graduated from high school. A bunch of my high school buddies and I got together. This would have been around 1975, somewhere in the mid-1970s. We came in over Lamarck Col into Darwin Canyon. I did not have a very sophisticated view of wilderness at the time. I wanted to get out. I wanted to go places that not many people went.

I still remember, to this day, a couple of things that we did that didn't feel quite right. In hindsight I look back and go, "Ooh, that wasn't good at all." One was in the McGee Canyon area, [on a] ridge looking down into Davis Lakes. Now this wasn't my idea. But my buddies got the idea to push rocks off and listen to them crash. I did participate. That wasn't a very sophisticated vision of wilderness.

I also remember building a rock shelter in Darwin Canyon and thinking, "I really shouldn't be doing this." One of the reasons I was [doing it] is that you saw rock shelters around. People had more windbreak-, rock shelter-type things. Those are actually uncommon today.

I can remember another trip I did. This would have been the mid- to late seventies. I went into Goddard Canyon in Kings Canyon National Park with a couple of college buddies. My whole objective was "Let's go cross-country and get as far away from people as we can possibly get."

So that would've been the mid-1970s. In 1979 I had just graduated from college. I knew I loved backpacking and the outdoors, and I had applied through the front door to get a job here in the Park Service. And as you would expect, I got no response.

So I just jumped in my car and drove up here and volunteered. One of my first volunteer jobs was [working] on the backcountry campsite inventory. By the spring of 1980 the research office actually hired me on. And again my wilderness ethic was not well developed. One of the greatest joys was just getting out there and backpacking and looking at the campsites.

STEINER: What kind of experience were you looking for on those early trips?

STEPHENSON: We wanted to have fun. To challenge ourselves was part of it. We wanted to be gnarly. That's not very sophisticated, being gnarly.

By the time I was working here, I started to ask myself, "Why do I go in the backcountry? Why do I enjoy that so much? Why do I like solitude?" For me, a big part of it is escaping the structure of human society, escaping all the expectations of having to look at your clock, having to meet a schedule. It's a form of liberation.

I'll give you another concrete example. I can be an overworker and overachiever. I remember in the late eighties, I realized I had been in the office every day for the last forty [days]. I was feeling on the brink of a mental breakdown.

I [told my boss], "I need to leave." I went to one of my favorite places, and part of what rejuvenated me was look[ing] at the ground and see[ing] all these foxtail pine needles scattered haphazardly. There was no structure to it. I had been doing nothing but structure . . . making tables, making graphs. This was my liberation from it, to see pine needles scattered. They fell where they wanted to fall. What a joy. No structure to it whatsoever. To think there's a chunk of the world that's not following our rules.

I [also] enjoy solitude because a lot of who we are as people or who we think we are as people is based on what we've mirrored from other people. I relish the opportunity to not get feedback from other people. It forces me to be with myself. It forces me to figure out a little more who I am without the interactions of other people . . .

What I think has changed since [those early days is that] people have pulled back to the main trails. There's not as much either aimless or directed off-trail wandering as there used to be. And part of that concerns me. I worry for our society.

A couple of trips I've been on recently stuck in my mind. I was at Crabtree at the trail junction below the ranger station. A woman said, "Have you summited yet?" I realized, "Oh, she must mean Mount Whitney." I said, "I'm not going to summit." She said, "Then why are you here?"

That makes me worried about wilderness. People's use of the wilderness is more goal-oriented and -directed. They want to climb the biggest peak or they want to accomplish the John Muir Trail. They're paying less attention to their surroundings and more attention to that goal.

That same trip, as I went north, there was a guy who said, "You're doing it backwards." I went, "Doing what backwards?" He said, "The John Muir Trail." That really struck me. Again I said, "I'm not doing the John Muir Trail." His question was "Well, what are you doing?" It wasn't quite as blunt as the other woman's, like "Why on earth would you be here unless you're climbing Mount Whitney?" I said, "I'm just wandering around and happen to be on the John Muir Trail right now."

The idea that there's a forwards-way and a backwards-way to do the John Muir Trail—to me, that seems like the antithesis of wilderness, which is all about not [being] on a schedule, not having to do things a certain way, not sticking to an itinerary. You're recreating in the old sense of the word: re-creating, getting away from things and reinvigorating yourself in a whole different way.

Those incidents helped me put together this idea that a shift had happened. Most of the people I was talking to were younger than I was. I was wondering if there is a shift happening through time.

On my way out from that trip, I did encounter somebody my age or older. I asked him what he was going to be doing. He said, "I'm going to wander off trail and find some nice site and read my books." That was a fairly sharp

contrast to these more goal-oriented people. People aren't going [to] the same places they used to go. I love to be alone out there. I love to find the places where nobody goes. And at the same time it disturbs me that nobody's going there anymore. Part of me is happy they don't, and the other part of me is sad. They're missing out on what wilderness is all about. I do ask myself, "Why on earth should that bother me?" People are still using the backcountry. Maybe the only reason it bothers me is they're not using it for the reasons I want to use it for.

I've thought, "If we could interview the people who were in the wilderness in the thirties and forties, what would they say [about] the 1970s?" I bet one of the differences they would see is [that] trips were shorter than they used to be. Trips are shorter. People have it easier. Maybe they would say, "People just don't stay out long enough to appreciate the wilderness anymore. They come out for a week, and then they're gone."

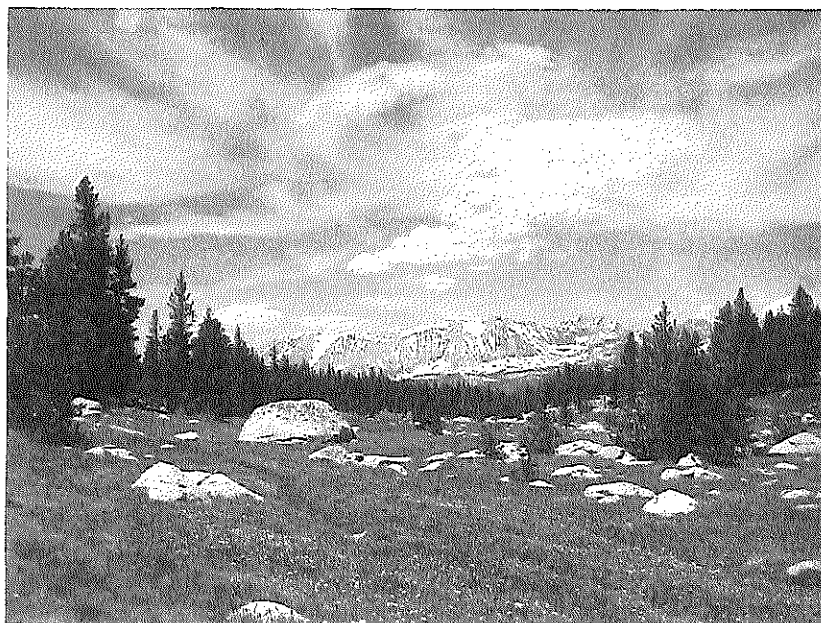
I recognize that my limited experience comes from the sixties up to the present. But I think society as a whole is revved up. People have less down time, less contemplative time. Maybe when you have less down time and less contemplative time, that doesn't become something you seek. I think that's all contributed to the change in use in the wilderness.

Commentary

Coming-of-age stories often take place in the wilderness, and oral histories are frequently the medium through which people tell these tales. Yet researchers rarely use oral history to understand how people experience wild land. What can oral accounts contribute to the field of recreation management? How do they challenge our assumptions about wilderness and the people who visit it? What do they tell us about the relationship between protected landscapes and the broader culture within which they exist? And how can they encourage park managers to rethink the way they regulate wilderness?

The interviews with Tweed and Stephenson provide a point of departure for such discussions. While talking about their transformations—amateur to expert, adolescent to adult—they explain an important evolution in their wilderness ethos and also express their identity as inextricably linked to these experiences. This chapter explores how these two concepts—evolution and identity formation—can redefine the relationship between wilderness users and the wild lands in which they recreate. In so doing it offers a unique approach to wilderness research and the regulatory practices that it informs.

On September 3, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Wilderness Act, a law that awarded wild country an unprecedented degree of government protection. After nine congressional hearings, sixty-six drafts, and eight years of effort, his action marked a victory for wilderness enthusiasts who had long supported a federal policy that would preserve, in perpetuity, the natural conditions



Along the John Muir Trail lush alpine meadows give way to striking views of the Kaweah Peaks, one of the most remote mountain ranges in Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. The trail is a 211-mile route that passes through Yosemite, Kings Canyon, and Sequoia National Parks. Over three thousand people attempt this two- to three-week hike every year. *Photo by Alison Steiner*

of the nation's wildest land.⁴ The act assigned wilderness designation to more than nine million acres of national forests and created a mechanism that allowed Congress to add to the National Wilderness Preservation System in the future. Today federal agencies manage more than 100 million acres of wilderness, more than 800,000 of which are within SEKI.

The path to wilderness preservation in the United States was indirect. Early American settlers, concerned for their safety and comfort, fought to transform wild land into fenced fields and family farms. Once they successfully subdued nature, nostalgia and appreciation for untamed land emerged. In the early 1800s transcendentalists such as Henry David Thoreau regarded wilderness as the protector of spiritual truths; a half-century later conservationists promoted the wise and efficient use of its precious resources. The idea of preserving wild land in perpetuity took hold only in the mid-twentieth century, when development, tourism, and technology threatened to destroy the nation's last large tracts of undisturbed land. By that time wilderness was seen as a way to maintain a portion of the country's ecologic integrity while simultaneously providing the American people with a roadless, recreational retreat.⁵

Although debates over the value of wild land lingered long after the Wilderness Act passed, the law mandated that public land agencies immediately begin managing for the preservation of wilderness character.⁶ Federal employees evaluated wilderness areas on both the quality of their natural resources and the visitor experiences they afforded. This focus on ecology and experience came from the Wilderness Act itself. First, it described wilderness as "untrammeled," undeveloped, and unimpaired. Congress considered land wild when the "imprint of man's work [was] substantially unnoticeable" and the integrity of its resources was still intact. Second, the Wilderness Act protected places that offered "outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation."⁷ In other words, people were to visit rather than inhabit wild land.⁸

The recreational component of wilderness immediately interested public land managers and social scientists. The purpose of the Wilderness Act was, in part, to preserve opportunities for personal freedom and inspirational recreation. Yet managers knew relatively little about the way people experienced wild land.⁹ To ensure that they adequately protected wilderness, government agencies needed to understand why people visited it, as well as the factors that influenced the nature and quality of their trips.¹⁰ Over the past fifty years, these types of questions have driven the research on wilderness recreation.

Social scientists initially focused on visitors' motivations, treating wilderness expeditions as isolated events for which the public had defined goals and desires. They believed that the degree to which objectives and outcomes aligned directly corresponded to a visitor's overall satisfaction with his or her trip. People who embarked on wilderness excursions sought specific experiences, and their happiness was contingent on their expectations being met.¹¹ Researchers gathered this information through quantitative techniques, such as questionnaires. These surveys gave government agencies clear management directives. If the opportunities in a particular wilderness failed to meet the public's needs (for solitude, quiet, freedom, and so forth), managers could adjust their policies and practices. This motive-driven method provided valuable information about recreational experiences. Yet it left little room for the evolving wilderness ethos of which Tweed and Stephenson speak.

In the early 1990s social scientists began exploring an alternative approach, one that viewed experiences as emergent rather than fixed. Objectives and outcomes were no longer inextricably linked, and attaining a specific goal was not the only factor affecting satisfaction. By interviewing individuals at the end of their excursions, researchers discovered that people's expectations developed and evolved in unforeseen ways both during and after their outdoor activities. Confronting an unanticipated challenge, for instance, could enhance rather than detract from an outing. The act of overcoming obstacles—bad weather, crowded campsites, injuries—often contributed to one's overall enjoyment. Like studies that use oral history, this interview method treated the construction of memory as vitally important. The tales people told in the aftermath of their trips

were as significant as the experiences themselves. In their research on Juniper Prairie Wilderness in Florida's Ocala National Forest, Michael Patterson and his associates argued that wilderness recreationists were seeking "stories which [would] ultimately enrich their lives."¹² This meaning-based model reframed the relationship between wilderness users and public land. It also sparked interest among wilderness managers in collecting narratives, including oral histories.

The oral history project conducted in SEKI expanded on the concept of emergent experiences by focusing on people's long-term associations with wilderness. Whereas researchers had typically treated backcountry outings as isolated events and short, recreational retreats, SEKI's study analyzed the place relationships that develop from ongoing, continued contact with wild land. Though it focused specifically on wilderness experiences, the long-term emphasis means SEKI's project has life history as well as topical components. Many of its key insights emerge as narrators reflect back over decades of backcountry experience.

The parks, with their cadre of longtime wilderness enthusiasts, provided an ideal location for this type of inquiry. Oral history, with its focus on in-depth, personal accounts of the past, proved a promising approach. Ultimately the tales that narrators told illustrate the close connections between people's previous encounters with wilderness, the broader social context, and the way they process their present excursions. In so doing their narratives challenge both the motivational and the experiential models so commonly used in recreation management. They suggest that wilderness experiences are not individual events but rather part of a larger pattern—pieced together through storytelling—that constitutes a component of one's identity.

Tweed and Stephenson both describe their initial adventures in the backcountry of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. These stories establish a starting point from which to measure the maturation process of their wilderness ethos. They also highlight the relationship between personal wilderness experiences and the culture within which they occur. For example, Tweed took his first backpacking trip after reading Colin Fletcher's 1964 classic *The Thousand-Mile Summer*.¹³ "We were going out to see wilderness . . . nature . . . unoccupied places . . . to be independent, self-reliant . . . free," he says. "This was the sixties, after all . . . We were chasing clichés." Tweed's search was part of a larger movement developing in politics, music, and literature at the time. In the mid-1960s half of the population of the United States was under twenty-five. Young Americans questioned the country's values, rejected its institutions, and created a counterculture that often viewed nature as an escape from modern civilization. Wilderness provided people like Tweed with a "pristine" landscape for self-exploration. In other words, his perspective was a byproduct of both his age and the social change that was taking place beyond the parks' boundaries.¹⁴

Stephenson also depicts his early expectations and experiences of wilderness as uninformed and undeveloped. He began backpacking with his family in the



From the summit of Mount Tyndall, the stark beauty of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks' granitic landscape overwhelms many visitors. Mount Tyndall is one of several fourteen-thousand-foot peaks in the southern Sierra and serves as a popular weekend destination for adventurous hikers. Photo by Alison Steiner

mid-1960s and participated in the "opening wave of . . . baby boomer interest [in backcountry travel]."¹⁵ By the mid-1970s he was heading off with high school friends on complicated cross-country routes. He and his companions set out to "have fun" and "to challenge [them]selves." Wilderness provided them with opportunities for self-discovery and self-reliance, as it had for Thoreau and the transcendentalists two hundred years earlier. To Stephenson, their motivations and behavior represented an unsophisticated vision, one focused on adventure rather than contemplation. However, their approach to wilderness recreation was common at the time.

The two men's stories about the past stand in stark contrast to their reports of the present. As their relationships with the parks' wilderness deepened, their understanding and attitude toward its resources changed in interesting ways. The purpose of Tweed's trips, for instance, shifted when he took a position with the National Park Service. His new job as a ranger naturalist brought with it a professional responsibility to explore and explain the parks. "The simpler of my goals was . . . to understand it all, to see it all. And I pretty well walked it all eventually," he explains. By the early 1970s Americans' interest in wilderness had given way to a broader concern about the environment as a whole. Growing ecological

awareness encouraged people to view humans as vulnerable and wilderness as fragile.¹⁶ Tweed acknowledges that this broad development impacted his personal perspective. The idea that all life on earth was interconnected fueled his desire to "understand it all." Whereas independence, self-reliance, and freedom motivated him early on, a need for in-depth knowledge and consequent understanding of SEKI prompted his later forays into the wild. In effect he shifted toward a more reciprocal position, placing greater value on relationship—in this case with the land itself.

Stephenson's attitude toward wilderness recreation changed over time as well. During his late twenties and early thirties he saw his outings as opportunities to escape the structure of scientific society. Wilderness trips liberated him from the expectations of a community consumed with data, graphs, and tables. On the brink of a mental breakdown in the late 1980s, Stephenson headed for the hills. "Part of what rejuvenated me," he recalls, "was look[ing] at the ground and see[ing] all these foxtail pine needles scattered haphazardly. There was no structure to it." As a scientist, Stephenson tapped into a different cultural construction of wilderness, one that framed wild nature in opposition to tools, technology, and scientific inquiry.¹⁷ His comments also reflect a growing perception in the 1970s and 1980s that wilderness had therapeutic value and could help improve mental stability.¹⁸ Like Tweed, his motivations for wilderness travel morphed as he matured. He too placed greater emphasis on receiving the land's messages rather than inscribing his own actions onto it.

The evolution that Tweed and Stephenson explain illustrates the ways in which outside factors—age, employment, and culture—impact people's experience of wilderness. That evolution challenges the idea that an individual's interactions with wild land occur in isolation, a premise common to previous research on outdoor recreation. The reasons they went on wilderness excursions, as well as how they understood those adventures, were closely tied to the broader context of their lives. Tweed emphasizes this by matching his changing perspectives on wilderness travel with the life phases—teenager, student, park manager—during which they occurred. Only in retirement does he find himself enjoying wild land in the way Howard Zahniser intended. "I'm finally having a contemplative wilderness experience," he admits. "It took me forty years—my wilderness experience has evolved a great deal."¹⁹

Interviews with long-term wilderness enthusiasts expose a constantly evolving ethos and also show how experience and identity become inextricably linked over time. This relationship is intensified through the act of storytelling, itself an exploratory medium, making oral history a particularly effective means through which to explore this phenomenon. How narrators reconstruct their pasts reveals who they are, who they want to be, and how they see their experiences as contributing to these characteristics.²⁰ In the case of SEKI's oral history project, Tweed and Stephenson use their extensive exposure to wilderness, as

well as their professional backgrounds in its management, as evidence of their expertise in wild land recreation.

Tweed and Stephenson describe their early adventures in SEKI's backcountry in a way that positions them as wilderness specialists. Tweed, for example, discloses how long he has been visiting the southern Sierra: "I began backpacking in this park forty years ago." Quantifying his relationship with the parks helps him establish himself as an authority on the subject of backcountry travel. He further emphasizes this by posing a rhetorical question: "[That] sounds like a long time ago, doesn't it?" Throughout the interview Tweed returns to this type of language to highlight his deep connection to the parks. "I first hit the backcountry as a teenage user, at the very end of the old era, the unregulated era," he recalls. "I was able to see . . . a long and incremental transition from one era to another." This remark points out changes in park visitation and management and places Tweed within their midst. He understands his own history as intimately intertwined with that of the landscape and uses this connection to craft an identity as an enlightened wilderness user.

Both narrators imagine their wilderness identity through temporal metaphors. While Tweed emphasizes the passage of time to establish his authority, Stephenson does so by reflecting on his early actions and attitudes. Recounting his first independent trip into the parks, he says, "My buddies got the idea to push rocks off [a ridge] and listen to them crash. I did participate. That wasn't a very sophisticated vision of wilderness." He repeats this critique, and the reflective tone, when asked what kind of experience he and his friends sought on their trips into SEKI. "We wanted to be gnarly," he answers. "That's not very sophisticated, being gnarly." Stephenson's ability to pass judgment on himself implies an evolution in his wilderness ethos. These critical comments about his past position him as an expert, although still an evolving one, in the present.

The way Tweed and Stephenson talk about trends in visitor behavior reaffirms their authority. They insist that one of the most significant changes in wilderness recreation is the increasingly goal-oriented outlook of the younger generation. Stephenson illustrates this shift by recounting a series of interactions that occurred on a recent wilderness trip. He met multiple individuals more focused on accomplishments—climbing Mt. Whitney, completing the John Muir Trail—than on contemplation, an attitude he calls "the antithesis of wilderness." Stephenson uses these stories to separate himself from the new goal-driven genre of hiker. By claiming that these individuals are "missing out on what wilderness is all about," he implies that his understanding of and attitude toward wild land is more complete and appropriate than theirs.

Tweed tackles this same issue more directly, once again using time to establish his expertise. Like Stephenson, he sees the rise in goal-oriented travel and "aerobic wilderness experiences" as a substantial shift in backcountry use. However, Tweed rejects this type of visitor behavior. "It wasn't my change," he asserts. "By the time aerobic wilderness use became the standard, I was too

old." According to Tweed, his age alienates him from a younger generation that values wilderness differently. After spending more than four decades exploring the southern Sierra, he associates himself with activists such as David Brower, Howard Zahniser, and Wallace Stegner, not with hikers seeking the satisfaction of extreme sports and competition. In other words, the evolution of Tweed's wilderness ethos directly influences how he sees himself.

Tweed's and Stephenson's stories illustrate the ever-evolving nature of wilderness experiences. They also highlight how social and cultural changes beyond an area's boundaries can impact one's perspective on place. Their accounts expose an evolution in their wilderness ethos as well as an identity that is intimately tied to the landscape. Over the years their thirst for risk and adventure gave way to a desire for contemplation, leaving them with a strong spiritual attachment to the southern Sierra. As their relationship with SEKI grew and deepened, they learned to listen for its messages, to value its agency as well as their own. Their decades of experience yielded wilderness fluency.

Time and time again Tweed's and Stephenson's expectations proved flexible rather than fixed, shifting rather than static, much like oral history itself. Unlike other research methods, oral history allows interviewees to show how seemingly isolated events connect to create coherent life narratives. The stories that emerge reveal how place relationships develop and, in so doing, challenge the way park managers currently regulate wild land. Whereas Tweed and Stephenson articulate defined visions of appropriate wilderness behavior, their tales illustrate the fluctuating nature of visitors' needs. They also suggest that wilderness can serve a purpose beyond recreation, that it is a "peopled" landscape inhabited by human stories. Rigidly managed wilderness cannot accommodate these ever-changing expectations and values. Thus agencies should adopt a more fluid approach to public land management, one that encourages the kind of growth and evolution that fosters long-term relationships with place and that allows people to map moments of their lives onto the mountains.

Notes

1. The interviews conducted for this project were between one and two hours long. Of the twenty-three people interviewed, thirteen were current or retired employees of the National Park Service, two were commercial horse packers, two were private stock users, and six were mountaineers or hikers.
2. The recordings and transcriptions of all oral histories associated with this project are currently stored at the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute in Missoula, Montana.
3. For more information on narrative, storytelling, and environmental history see William Cronon, "A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative," *Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (1992): 1347-76.
4. Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 222.
5. Nash provides the most comprehensive analysis of American attitudes toward wilderness in his book *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Other works that address early American perceptions of wilderness, the passage of the Wilderness Act, and the removal of Native Americans from wilderness areas include Alan Taylor, "Wasty Ways: Stories of American

Settlement," *Environmental History* 3, no. 3 (1998): 291-310; Mark W. T. Harvey, *A Symbol of Wilderness: Echo Park and the American Conservation Movement* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994); Paul S. Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2002); James Morton Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness: American Environmental Politics since 1964* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012).

6. See William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, edited by William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1995), 69-90; Michael P. Nelson and J. Baird Callicott, eds., *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); Michael P. Nelson and J. Baird Callicott, eds., *The Wilderness Debate Rages On: Continuing the Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008).
7. Wilderness Act, Public Law 88-577 (16 U.S.C. 1121 [note], 1131-36), 88th Congress, second session, September 3, 1964.
8. For information on the forced removal of Native Americans from wilderness areas, see Mark David Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); Louis S. Warren, *The Hunter's Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth-Century America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997).
9. D. N. Cole and D. R. Williams, "Wilderness Visitor Experiences: A Review of 50 Years of Research," in *Wilderness Visitor Experiences: Progress in Research and Management*, compiled by D. N. Cole, RMRS-P-66 (Fort Collins, CO: US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station, 2012), 3.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 4-5; Michael E. Patterson, Alan E. Watson, Daniel R. Williams, and Joseph R. Roggenbuck, "Hermeneutic Approach," *Journal of Leisure Research* 30, no. 4 (1998): 425-27.
12. Patterson et al., "Hermeneutic Approach," 449.
13. Colin Fletcher also wrote *The Complete Walker*, which was first published in 1968. The book has sold more than 500,000 copies and has been credited with starting the modern backpacking industry. Dennis Hevesi, "Colin Fletcher, 85, a Trailblazer of Modern Backpacking, Dies," *New York Times*, June 19, 2007.
14. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 249-54; Andrew G. Kirk, *Counterculture Green: The Whole Earth Catalog and American Environmentalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 13-17.
15. In the late 1960s and early 1970s interest in wilderness travel dramatically increased. In *Wilderness and the American Mind* (316-19), Nash claims that visits to wilderness areas grew 12 percent annually during this period, doubling within a decade. He attributes this change in visitation to a revolution in ideas, equipment, transportation, and information.
16. Roderick Frazier Nash, *American Environmentalism: Readings in Conservation History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), 187-254; Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 254-60.
17. The "untrammelled" quality is one component of the wilderness that public land agencies currently manage. In this context an area is untrammelled if it lacks human manipulation. Scientific research and natural resource management within a wilderness area (e.g., exotic species removal, wildlife reintroductions) often diminish its untrammelled character. Stephenson illustrates an appreciation for this quality of wilderness when he contrasts his work as a scientist with his experiences in SEKI's backcountry. Peter B. Landres, *Keeping It Wild: An Interagency Strategy to Monitor Trends in Wilderness Character across the National Wilderness Preservation System* (Fort Collins, CO: US Dept. of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station, 2008). For a discussion of the tension between technological advances and wilderness preservation, see Kirk, *Counterculture Green*, 13-42.
18. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 265-68.
19. J. J. Brooks and D. R. Williams, "Continued Wilderness Participation: Experience and Identity as Long-Term and Relational Phenomena," in Cole, *Wilderness Visitor Experiences*, 23-25, 28-30; R. G. Dvorak and W. T. Borrie, "Changing Relationships

with Wilderness: A New Focus for Research and Stewardship." *International Journal of Wilderness* 13, no. 3 (2007): 12-15.

20. In his essay "Wisdom Sits in Places," Keith Basso argues that "places possess a marked capacity for triggering acts of self-reflection, inspiring thoughts about who one presently is, or memories of who one used to be, or musing on who one might become." Keith H. Basso, "Wisdom Sits in Places: Notes on a Western Apache Landscape," in *Senses of Place*, edited by Steven Feld and Keith H. Basso (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1996), 53-90.