

Meeting the Challenge of Wild Land Recreation Management: Demographic Shifts and Social Inequality*

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Americans are visiting the national parks, forests, wilderness, and recreation areas (hereinafter wild lands) in record numbers. For instance, 238.6 million people visited the national parks in 1981; that number is projected to reach 291.3 million visitors by the year 2000 (NPS, 1999). Similarly, recreation use of the U.S. Forest Service land is increasing. In 1950, there were 137,000 vehicles per day on Forest Service roads, by 1996 that number had increased to 1.71 million vehicles. It is projected that road usage will increase by another 64% by 2045 (Chamberlain, 1999; see also Fedkiw, 1996). In addition, the Bureau of Land Management reported 71.97 million visitors to its sites in 1997 (BLM, 1999). Together the federal land management agencies oversee about 632.7 million acres of land. Of this, the Bureau of Land Management oversees 270 million acres, the U.S. Forest Service manages 191 million acres, the Fish and Wildlife Service another 91 million acres and the National Park Service the remaining 80.7 million acres (NPS, 1998; 1997a). Hence, the managers of these public lands have to figure out how to balance the growing demand for recreation with management practices that will maintain the integrity of the natural resources. This paper focuses on the traditional definitions and assumptions about wild lands, demographic shifts and the changes required to accommodate the recreation needs of the population in the new millennium. This issue is extremely important to managers of the most fragile (and in some cases the most popular) ecosystems—national parks, forests and wilderness areas.

Historical Context

As interest in public lands recreation increases, more people are becoming concerned about the demographic profile of the user groups and unequal access to recreational opportunities. In addition, people are raising questions about how the traditional definitions of wilderness and other wild land areas influence management and issues of cultural and social diversity. To understand why some people are comfortable using wild land areas and others are alienated from them, we need to understand how the social con-

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struction of these entities converges with race relations issues to exacerbate social inequalities.

For much of the 19th and early 20th century, the environmental discourse presented wilderness as a pristine, endangered place unspoiled by civilization and untouched by human hands. It was a place where people could escape the urban ills and transcend their earthly concerns. Wilderness was an antidote to the worst human instincts, therefore, it was a refuge to which people could turn (Nash, 1982). However, as Cronon (1995) argues, far from being the only place on earth that stands apart from humanity, wilderness is a human creation. Wilderness is a social construction of a particular human culture at a unique moment in time. It is a creation of the very civilization seeking to escape the urban-industrial complex they created.

Wilderness was not always viewed positively. Until the mid nineteenth century, wilderness was seen as savage, barren, desolate, a wasteland where people were banished to wrestle with evil. However, by the 1860s, Thoreau, Muir and others were writing about the virtues of the wilderness in glowing terms (Cronon, 1995; Nash, 1982). Soon places like Niagara Falls, the Adirondacks, the Catskills, the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, and Yosemite became "must see" stops on the affluent traveler's itinerary. The creation of Yellowstone and other national parks hastened the transformation of wilderness areas from desolate wasteland to repositories of natural wonders.

Three major factors accounted for the changing perceptions of wilderness, viz., (a) Transcendentalism, (b) Romanticism and (c) frontierism. These ideas converged to construct an image of wilderness that is potent and persistent. As Romantics and Transcendentalists reframed wilderness in a positive light, they imbued it with some of the deepest, idealized, core cultural values that endowed it with sacredness. Transcendentalists believed that natural objects reflected universal truths, and wilderness was the place where such truths were most evident. Two aspects of Romanticism—the sublime and primitivism—are of significance too. The sublime refers to the belief that the supernatural was near at hand in the wilderness. It highlighted a person's insignificance and mortality. Sublime landscapes evoked strong emotions—fear, excitement, awe, and a sense of wonder because such landscapes were sacred; one worshiped them but did not linger long in their presence. In the works of Muir, Thoreau and other Romantics, wilderness was transformed from a satanic abode to a sacred temple (Cronon, 1995; Nash, 1982).

Primitivism, is related to both Romanticism and frontierism. European Americans found primitivism attractive because it advocated that the best cure for the ills of the modern, industrial world was a return to simple, primitive living. As the 19th century drew to a close, Turner wrote about primitivism in his book on the frontier. Frontierism, is rooted in both American and European thought. Turner argued that European immigrants, in moving to the wilds, shed the trappings of civilization; rediscovered their independence, vigor and primitive drives; reinvented democratic institutions; and displayed a creativity that was the source of democracy and national

character. Turner saw wilderness as central to the construction of the American national identity—a place for experiencing what it meant to be American. Frontier ideology was rooted in the notion of “free” (appropriated) land and “free” (slave) labor for European immigrants. The passing of the frontier meant the passing of the American identity built around “taming” free, wild land, indigenous peoples and slaves. Many looked back at this change with regret and nostalgia. Thus concern for the vanishing frontier grew into a desire to preserve wilderness. As the argument goes, because the frontier was so vital to the development of the national character, it was crucial to preserve the last remaining stands of wilderness as a reminder of the past and to ensure the continued existence of remnants of the frontier. Not surprisingly, the movement to establish national parks and wilderness began gaining momentum at about the same time the lament over the vanishing frontier reached its crescendo. Protecting the remaining frontier was akin to protecting the nation’s myth of origin (Turner, 1893; Cronon, 1995).

Frontier ideology also promoted the wilderness as the last bastion of rugged, male individualism. It also expressed ambivalence and hostility towards industrialization. In the wilderness men could be alert, energetic and masterful; they could be free from the civilization that sapped their energy and threatened his masculinity (Roosevelt & Grinnell, 1893). Those espousing these views were primarily white males from middle and upper class backgrounds. In effect, frontier nostalgia emerged as an effective way to frame anti-industrial and nativist views. Consequently, shortly after the Civil War, increasing numbers of wealthy Americans began seeking out the wilderness. They built large country estates in the Adirondacks and on islands off the New England Coast, camps in the mountains, luxury hotels close to spectacular vistas, cattle ranches on the Plains, sportsmen’s clubs and fenced game parks. They organized hunting and fishing trips and led expeditions into the wilderness. They built roads, rail lines and trails to increase accessibility to these areas. As wilderness became the choice vacation spot for wealthy, urban tourists, it was transformed into a recreational ground that should not be the site of productive labor or permanent, subsistence living. One visited the wilderness (accompanied by many servants and all the trappings of civilization they could transport) to consume, not to produce (Cronon, 1995; Nash, 1982).

The movement to establish national parks and wilderness areas also escalated as the last of the Indian wars drew to a close. When Native Americans inhabited wilderness areas, those areas were thought of as evil, satanic—the dwelling places of heathens, devils and wild beasts. However, soon after the Native Americans were massacred or forced onto reservations, national parks and wilderness areas were established on “empty,” “pristine,” land “untouched by human hands” that were formerly Indian lands. The parks were intended to preserve “virgin forests.” Once the Native Americans were removed, wealthy white Americans traveled to remote remnants of the frontier to recreate rather than work, worship nature rather than subdue it, preserve nature rather than use it for subsistence, and travel in peace rather than

fight over the land. Under these conditions, wilderness was no longer a brutal and dangerous place; it was a place for quiet contemplation and the renewal of self (Cronon, 1995; Nash, 1982). Thus, leading preservationists like Muir (1901), tried to allay the fears of visitors by telling them that wild land areas were free of Indians. Muir writes, "The Indians are dead now...Arrows, bullets, scalping-knives, need no longer be feared; and all the wilderness is peacefully open" (p. 14-15). He also wrote, "When an excursion into the woods is proposed, all sorts of dangers are imagined,—snakes, bears, Indians. Yet it is far safer to wander in God's woods than to travel on black highways or to stay at home...As to Indians, most of them are dead or civilized into useless oblivion" (p. 28).

The wilderness was also a place where whites could lapse into temporary "savagery" and primitivism, and revert back to "civilized" beings as they pleased. Whites were, on the one hand, fearful of and repulsed by savagery, and on the other, fascinated by it. To maintain the above construction of wilderness, policies and laws were developed that defined land uses pre-dating the national park or wilderness designation as either illegal or inappropriate. Mechanisms were also developed to enforce the new land uses (Cronon, 1995).

The Contemporary Picture

Thus, for much of their history the national parks and wilderness areas have been used primarily by and managed by and for middle class, able-bodied white users (see for example, NPS, 1997). Today such users, influenced by Romantic/Transcendentalist ideals, still conceive of the wilderness as empty, virgin lands, untouched by human hands where they can retreat to escape urban problems and people. Most of these users don't question the assumptions behind these definitions, or relate their values and behavior to those of the early park advocates and users. In addition, wild land managers perpetuate the above construction of wilderness through their policies and their historical accounts and interpretation of the areas they manage.

White users and wild land managers often assume that park, forest and wilderness users will be white and that the wild land areas are exclusive white spaces. Thus many are uncomfortable when they encounter people of color in wild lands or hear discussions about diversifying the workforce of land management agencies or the range of wild land recreation users. This discomfort may manifest itself in hostility directed toward ethnic minority wild land users. Nonetheless, people of color have begun speaking more openly about their wild land experiences. For instance, many of the hundreds of people of color delegates at two recent national conferences on minorities, environment and wild land areas ("Justice for All: Racial Equity and Environmental Well-being" and "America's Parks, America's People: A Mosaic in Motion,") reported encountering racial hostility when they used wild land areas. Delegates recounted being stared at, stared down and eventually stared out of these areas. In addition, on sighting people of color on hiking trails

or at campsites, whites instinctively clutch their wallets or pack sacks. These actions make people of color users so uncomfortable they leave recreation sites early or refrain from using them. Furthermore, people of color report feeling lonely, afraid, and that these spaces are not for them when they used wild land areas.

Ergo the question arises, how viable is the above social construction of wilderness and can we continue to manage wild lands primarily for white, middle class, able-bodied users in the face of significant demographic changes in the country? Can wilderness and national parks maintain their integrity if they are managed for a wider range of users? Questions relating to demography are pertinent because the American population is aging and becoming more racially and culturally diverse, as a result, the traditional wild land user is likely to change or have different recreational needs in the 21st century (see NPS, 1997b). The U.S. population currently stands at 273.1 million, with whites comprising 74%, blacks 12.8, Latinos 11.5, Asians and Pacific Islanders 4.0, and Native Americans 0.9% of the population. The median age (which is currently 35.5 years) is increasing. Furthermore, 27.3% of the population is 50 years and older; 12.7% are 65 years and older. In general, whites are older than ethnic minorities. While the median age for whites is 36.6 years, it is 30.1 years for blacks, 27.7 for Native Americans, 31.7 for Asians and Pacific Islanders, and 26.5 for Latinos. It should also be noted that women tend to be older than men. While males 50 years and over comprise 25.1, and those 65 and over constitute 10.7% of the male population, their female counterparts make up 29.4 and 14.5% of the female population (Census, 1999).

Though ethnic minorities constitute more than one-fourth of the population, very low percentages are currently employed or have any input in the federal land management agencies that oversee public lands. In addition, while interpretative exhibits in wild land areas celebrate European American experiences, conquests, exploration and heritage, the same is not true for people of color experiences. Though wild land areas are filled with place names, trails, plaques, artifacts, and exhibits commemorating the contributions of pioneers, explorers and early environmental activists, the histories of people of color are often ignored, diminished and/or distorted. For instance, one will see plaques in places like Crater Lake, Oregon which credits the "discovery" of the site to a white male who was taken there by an Indian guide. The Indian guide and tribe that used the site long before it was "discovered" are not given full credit for its discovery. They are relegated to the role of hapless sidekicks whose knowledge and use of these resources are downplayed at the expense of the lost, curious or adventuresome white males they guide and introduce to these resources. Since the term discovery seems to be reserved for the first European to see, visit, use, or exploit a resource, then the Native American knowledge of resources is undermined, so are their many contributions to resource conservation. Of course, this framing is consistent with the social construction of wilderness that sees it as empty, virginal, untrammled, and untouched. If wild land management agencies

develop interpretive materials recognizing that Native Americans and Chicanos in the Southwest lived on and used much of the wild lands for everyday activities and religious observances, and that it was only after bloody conquests and forced relocations that these lands were converted to national treasures, it would undermine the myth that these areas are virgin territories that were not significantly shaped by human activities. Similarly, one can travel to the Virgin Islands National Park and visit St. John a former slave colony and see or hear very little in the park interpretation that discusses the use of slave labor to transform the landscape. Instead the relationship of blacks to the park is often problematized as one in which traditional recreational and subsistence activities run afoul of park rules. For example blacks are perceived as a problem to park managers when they collect mangoes, guineps and other fruits that would otherwise fall and rot on the ground, crabs from the Crabdominium section of the park or fish in the waters surrounding the park.

In addition, images (or the lack thereof) of people of color in wild land areas are highly problematic. The federal land management agencies rarely use images of people of color in their books, publicity materials, media stories, video and film footage, or slide presentations. Of course, this further reinforces the perception that these areas are exclusive white recreation haunts. This is particularly true of the Bureau of Land Management and the Fish and Wildlife Service; the Forest Service and Park Service are slightly better than the aforementioned agencies. Furthermore, it is worth analyzing the images of people of color that are used by these agencies. Though one can find pictures of large numbers of whites camping, hiking, fishing, swimming, mountain climbing, and other forms of extractive and non-extractive recreation pursuits in wild land areas, such images of people of color are not usually shown. On the rare occasions when people of color are pictured, the images usually depict one or a few individuals, or a solitary person of color in the company of whites. The most common image is that of small children of color being instructed by an adult white ranger or administrator. These are non-threatening images—one does not see images of large groups of black or Latino men using these areas. Land management agency personnel argue that they don't show images of people of color because they don't have many in their archives. However, even when opportunities arise to obtain such documentation, the agencies allow them to slip away. For instance, at both the aforementioned conferences, hundreds of people of color hiked in the Rocky Mountain National Park and in various park service sites in the San Francisco area (including Muir Woods). However, when asked why the National Park Service photographers were not documenting these activities in San Francisco, uncomfortable and embarrassed personnel mumbled that they had not thought about it. Thus, even when people of color do recreate in these areas, they remain invisible.

Implications

This paper contends that wild lands can be managed for a more diverse audience without compromising the value of the resources being managed.

As was the case at the Mosaic conference, when discussions of increasing the presence of minorities in wild land areas arise, wild land managers often caution that increasing the number of people in wild land areas could result in these areas exceeding their carrying capacity and becoming rapidly degraded. In addition, concerns are often expressed about rising crime, noise, litter, crowding, etc. Wild land managers and supporters of the status quo should be careful not to associate wild land degradation with the presence of color in these areas. Managers should be conscious about how and when they invoke the notion of carrying capacity and what are the implications of their arguments. If managers believe that the areas they manage have fixed carrying capacities depending on the uses to which they are put, then managers need to think more carefully about how they define carrying capacity and which groups/uses are included with the "safe" limits and which ones are excluded. Managers who cringe at the thought of large numbers of people of color using wild lands and who invoke carrying capacity arguments rationalize their exclusion, often assume that their current user base will continue to have unrestricted access to resources while it is the new or previously-excluded user groups that will face restrictions or continued exclusion. Managers need to examine who have been the primary beneficiaries of these resources over the past century? Who are the people who have been responsible for the most degradation, crime, noise, litter, depreciation of wild land resources? Ironically, it is the very people who have had unfettered access to these resources who are most likely to be guilty of degrading and depreciating the resources, violating park and forest policies, committing criminal acts (including homicides, hate crimes, rape, robberies, theft) in wild land areas. While white wild land recreationers continue to clutch their wallets when they encounter minority users, as recent killings and other horrendous crimes in Yosemite, Shenandoah and other wild land areas suggest, white recreationers should probably start worrying more about non-minority wild land users. In addition, one only has to visit Angeles or San Bernadino National Forest and see the overflowing garbage containers, or try to fall asleep in the Yosemite campsites at nights when drunken youths howl and scream late into the night, or try to use the female washroom in the mornings and early night only to wait in line for up to an hour while women tax the park's power grid with the blow dryers and other electrical beauty aids, or read the numerous reminders posted in wild land areas across the country alerting users to guard against theft, to realize that in the absence of large numbers of people of color in these areas, there is considerable crime, violence, degradation, depreciation, overcrowding, and gross over-consumption of resources. Consequently, the fear that people of color will introduce these problems to the wild lands is simply another myth that does not stand up under careful scrutiny. It is also a myth that current users should not be constrained in any way by park management decisions. Discussions about diversifying the users of wild lands should examine both current and future users and be willing to make changes so that both groups can be accommodated. The cost of carrying capacity decisions should not be borne only by people of color users or other potential new users.

Managing wild lands primarily for the able-bodied white middle-class user is a questionable practice that will run its course sooner or later. As the above discussion shows, the country is aging and the minority population is growing. The baby boomers and their children who grew up visiting and using wild lands are unlikely to stop doing so when they get older or are incapacitated in any way. These users will demand changes to accommodate their needs. Increasingly, they will challenge wild land managers when they can't park or service their recreational vehicles and mobile homes; maneuver their wheel chairs along the paths; or find interpretive materials, exhibits and trails for the hearing or visually-impaired. Couples are accustomed to jogging with their children in strollers will also want wild lands to accommodate these uses also. In addition, people of color, already becoming vocal, will increase their call for more cultural diversity in wild land areas. As tax payers who support the public lands, they continue to seek access to these resources. This will include demands that the land management agencies see people of color as an integral part of the environment and treat exhibits, interpretive materials, etc., with this in mind. Land management agencies should resist the temptation to ignore or distort people of color histories and experiences in the environment. Managers should follow the lead of the Park Service and enter into discussions with communities of color, minority activists, scholars, and environmental professionals about interpreting sites, increasing employment opportunities and the number of minority wild land users, identifying culturally significant sites, research opportunities, etc. America's wild lands are tremendous recreation resources and these should be enjoyed and supported by as many people in the population as possible. The 21st century should be one in which a broad range of people have opportunities to experience, share, cherish, and become stewards of these resources.

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