

TERRESTRIAL ECOSYSTEM MONITORING SCOPING WORKSHOP
OVERVIEW SESSION: Wilderness Science

Tuesday, April 26, 2005 4:20 pm

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I appreciate the opportunity to spend a few minutes with you at the outset of this scoping session. You will be framing the key questions necessary to establish a long term monitoring program for these exceptional Arctic wild lands. We have realized that collaboration at the earliest stages is essential in these matters and really appreciate Diane's leadership in this regard.

Bear with me as I will by necessity switch gears from what is primarily a reductionist, technical discussion of sustainable and useful sampling strategies to one of heritage values and other park purposes, social-balancing of these competing values and decision-making through science.

As you know these 19.1 million acres you are considering, contain the only Arctic lands within the National Park System and some of the wildest landscapes on earth.

As background, only about 4.5% of the entire American landscape is designated for protection as wilderness. That is about the same proportion of the country that is covered in asphalt and concrete today. The vast majority of the 650 some units in the National Wilderness Preservation System are less than 10,000 acres in size and significantly altered or developed for recreation with the prospects of restoration (either natural or human-designed) diminishing by the decade as human perturbations multiply.

The 7.2 million acre Gates of the Arctic Wilderness and connected 5.7 million acre Noatak Wilderness comprises nearly 29% of the entire NPS wilderness acreage. It is the largest designated wilderness on earth. There is also the 190,000 acre Kobuk Valley Wilderness as well as the fact that most of the remaining acreage of these 5 park areas has been formally studied and determined eligible for wilderness designation. It follows by NPS policy that those suitable acres are to be managed such that wilderness character is not seriously diminished or wilderness character impaired.

It may be useful to remember that each area in this high latitude complex has unique resources, unique human-associations and unique establishing language that must be considered in formulating research, monitoring and inventory programs.

An alignment of primary unit management goals, like wilderness, with the means and methods to accomplish scientific goals will occur in the later steps of this I &

M process. But at the outset it is important to remember a guiding principle for this workshop.....that the contemplated monitoring program must be “management-relevant”.

Wilderness is a complex and multi-faceted issue.....a somewhat controversial social construct embodied in a seminal law...and an issue involving a lot of ink-slinging in the academic and popular press in the last decade or so. But we need not be confused by this provocative but unessential “philosophical torturing” of a widely supported concept in public lands management in America. The American public strongly supports the preservation of wilderness, even if the exact meaning is illusive.

Suffice it so say that in the US, designated wilderness is both an ideal and a place.

Today we also recognize and understand like never before, our wounding of the natural world in ways unimagined in 1964 when the idea of preserving the last bits of continental wildness, became the law of the land. We now know unequivocally that the major driver of change in species composition, landscape structure, and ecological processes.... is the human relentless transformation of the landscape.

NPS wilderness stewardship is a supplemental and over-arching mandate that can be fairly paraphrased from the law as follows.....*such areas shall be administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such a manner that will leave them unimpaired for use and enjoyment as wilderness...and agencies shall administer the area for such other purposes for which it may have been established as also to preserve its wilderness character.*

It is also clear that by NPS policy, that we are to support, even encourage appropriate scientific activities in wilderness, and use this valuable and infinitely variable tool, to improve our chances of success in this wilderness stewardship experiment.

Much of the concern of managers has little to do with whether scientific inquiry is appropriate in these places...that is usually evident on its face.... but rather with the specific methods and means employed to accomplish the tasks necessary to obtain that critical information.

In general, most mechanized or motorized uses and installations are prohibited in wilderness except to meet the minimum requirements for the administration of the area. Of course, the Alaska Lands Act has a modifying effect on some of these prohibitions but most hold true in a non-emergency, and require a thorough analysis usually in conjunction with other compliance processes. For Gates of the Arctic we call this the Minimum Requirement-Minimum tool Analysis, and have been using one form of it or another, for nearly 10 years.

These evaluations are not made any easier in that the NPS has not yet clearly defined that Character of Wilderness that is to remain forever unimpaired.....and as of this year, we now have a service wide wilderness character performance goal to annually report to in order to measure our success in doing so.

So I will borrow from the eloquent US Fish and Wildlife Service draft Wilderness policies of 2001 to help explain this idea...*wilderness character is “a primary criterion for judging the appropriateness of potential agency actions, public uses, and technologies in wilderness. Hence, we have an affirmative trust, a legal mandate to preserve it. To do so we need a sense of how the tangible characteristics of a landscape and the intangible meanings humans find in it converge to shape wilderness character. We need to know how our actions may enhance or diminish this elusive but definitive quality of wilderness”.*

As you meet this week, know that managers are highly enthused about this incredible opportunity to significantly increase our chances for success in creating a more certain future for these places. But we ask that you also consider the potential benefits and impacts of your proposals on subsistence cultures, wild land recreationalists, the dreams of people from around the world who may never be able to visit, as well as the generations of Americans yet unborn. I also ask you to consider the self-organized, self-willed existence value of wild landscapes not only for what can be measured and valuable baselines but also for the immeasurable and intangible qualities they symbolize.

This will not be easy. There are very few models of success in this endeavor. Consciously giving in to bio-centric humility in order to preserve wildness goes directly against the grain of our tool-making dominion and economic system that is firmly based upon the manipulation and alteration of nearly everything.

Wildness is not a fungible commodity. In other words, it cannot be replaced by other goods and services in the public lands sector or anywhere else. It can rarely be restored and is constantly being erodedLike Hope or Freedom, Wildness calls for a state of mind about elemental nature... the physical reality of wild nature can be severely diminished but never completely destroyed...it is possible that given enough time even the ancient landscapes now covered by asphalt and buildings could once again be considered wild.

Wildness is an important symbol of willful restraint and humility and requires that we set the highest ethical standards for the relationship we have with this land especially as stewards of the public trust.

It seems very clear to me that the essence of a mountain lion or giant sequoia cannot be captured in any amount of data. However, the wild nature of either can be easily diminished or destroyed, as well as saved, in the course of measurement and study. Not all that is mystery can be or should be dissected and rationalized. Conflicting states of ignorance and knowledge is a unique condition of humanity and I do not think that the best answer is always that we need to get more data. We should more readily embrace mystery and revel in it like the ancients. Just because we *can* do something, doesn't mean that we *should*.

That said, we all expect the profound alteration of "natural conditions" that we have experienced in our lifetimes to accelerate in the coming decades. Unimpaired and natural and/or healthy will still be the NPS standards but the components of the systems may be substantially different than we know today. The work that you are engaged in will be essential for future managers wrestling with sorting out anthropogenic from natural perturbations in order to decide what manipulations or management responses, if any, should be employed for success. But in order to respect "Wildness", we should let nature roll the dice as often as possible.

Do No Harm to "wildness", a vital sign of the whole in its own right, while we grapple intelligently with maintaining "naturalness", should be our stewardship credo in attempting to understand and preserve these places far into the future.

Thank you for listening.

