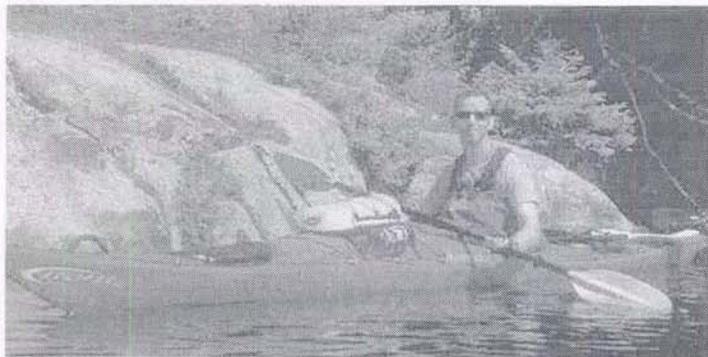


Understanding the Cultural, Existence, and Bequest Values of Wilderness

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Introduction

A deeper understanding of public values regarding the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) is of interest to researchers and managers. Wilderness values were defined in the National Survey on Recreation and the Environment (NSRE) (Cordell, Betz, and Green 2002; Cordell, Tarrant, and Green 2003a; Cordell, Tarrant, and Green 2003b) and it is conducted periodically by the U.S. Forest Service in part to track public attitudes toward the natural environment and public lands (Cordell et al. 2003a). The NSRE has provided a rich quantitative examination of wilderness value trends since 1995 using a module of wilderness value questions. Eighteen separate wilderness value questions have been developed and used. This article focuses on three values in particular: (1) cultural, (2) existence, and (3) bequest values.

Cultural value refers to the importance of wilderness as a source of symbols affecting human culture. The development of American heritage can be linked to wilderness and nature (e.g., Native Americans, pilgrims, pioneers, cowboys). An appreciation of national origins is important for an individual's

sense of self-identity and is aided by wilderness symbols (Hammond 1985). Present-day culture is also evolving through wilderness. The phenomenon of wilderness activities reshaping culture is represented by the popularity of wilderness recreation. In addition, many basic cultural traditions shape our society and are of high value. A parent teaching a child to fish or how to make a campfire is a culturally rich experience. Wilderness is a means to pass cultural and family traditions between generations. Cultural value was measured in the NSRE by an individual's response to the following statement: Wilderness is important because nature and wildlands are important symbols of American culture.

Existence value is the satisfaction felt by an individual just knowing that wildlands exist (Cordell et al. 2003a). An individual may express existence value for the resource without having visited the wilderness in the past or have future intentions to visit. Originating from economic concepts, existence value was first described as the amount one would be willing to pay to preserve wilderness, regardless of visitation (Blomquist and Whitehead 1995). The current definition has been expanded to include an altruistic desire to preserve the wilderness for the good of humanity and the spiritual well-being that may result from wilderness existence. Finally, it was conceptualized that intrinsic meaning could be expressed as part of the existence value of a resource. Existence value was measured in the NSRE using the following statement: It is important just knowing that wilderness exists.

Bequest value encompasses elements of both cultural and existence values in that it is the value derived from being able to hand down natural resources to future generations so they can also experience wilderness values (Mountford and Kepler 1999; Rolston 1985). Bequest value was conceptual-

ized as having an element of stewardship or responsibility for the resource. Bequest value was measured in the NSRE by asking how important it was to the individual knowing that future generations will have wilderness areas.

Exploratory Study

In an attempt to better understand these three wilderness values, qualitative in-depth interviews (Rubin and Rubin 1995; Taylor and Bogdan 1998) were conducted to explore the original wording of the NSRE questions. Each participant was read the introduction to the wilderness module used on the NSRE and the value statements. Interviewees were asked to elaborate on what they understood the value to mean. Interviews were conducted in the spring of 2004 and ran approximately 30 to 60 minutes in length. Fifteen interviews were conducted. This exploratory research used a purposive sampling method through posting calls for participants on the Internet, in newsletters of volunteer organizations, and at local libraries. The current study attempted to pull a diverse sample that was not dependent on recreation participation.

Because the NSRE wilderness modules specifically address federal wilderness values, the respondents' understanding of context was examined. Each participant was read the following paragraph, similar to one from the NSRE survey, providing an overview of the NWPS:

The purpose of this interview is to help us understand how American citizens value wilderness, and the benefits people receive from these areas. When we talk about wilderness we mean federal land that the Wilderness Act of 1964 allowed Congress to preserve as part of the NWPS. These lands cannot then be used for purposes such as timber harvesting, developing ski resorts,

or building highways. To date, Congress has added over 660 wilderness areas to the NWPS to protect wildlife, scenery, water, and recreation opportunities, and to keep these areas wild and natural.

Although participants were instructed to answer the interview questions with the NWPS in mind, references to designated wilderness were rare. Frequent references to activities not allowed in federal wilderness areas, such as driving automobiles, suggested a lack of understanding of the NWPS. However, the results may still accurately measure wilderness values. Respondents may value all types of wilderness and other protected or otherwise undeveloped areas in the same ways.

When analyzing data concerning cultural, existence, and bequest values the following three themes emerged: preservation of wilderness, modern society's connection to wilderness, and off-site inspirational use of wilderness. Interviewees used these themes to provide context for how social values were realized from wilderness. Thus, the themes provide context for understanding the values and support their existence.

Preservation of Wilderness

Although participants were not explicitly asked questions regarding the amount of wilderness in the United States, all expressed opinions on the matter. The range of responses to this issue bore most directly on existence and bequest values. Some, such as Mike, a 51-year-old business consultant, lamenting a quickly diminishing wilderness resource, felt uncomfortable endorsing only an existence value.

We have to work hard to keep existing wilderness areas and to add new wilderness areas. It's not enough to know that they're there.

Others, such as Ted, a 58-year-old attorney, while recognizing potential threats to the quality of wilderness, saw no urgency regarding the question of quantity.

Notwithstanding my perception that human beings are just voracious animals that consume everything in sight like army ants, I still think that America's wilderness is simply so vast that I don't think that it's ever going to be expended. ... In other words, I just don't see even America at its most aggressive ever really exhausting wilderness as a resource.

Responding negatively or positively to the amount of designated wilderness had an impact on how respondents viewed their responsibility toward future generations. Participants that sensed peril to wilderness resources were more likely to refer to intrinsic wilderness values and view their bequest as not just a gift, but also as a responsibility. For example, Derek, a 22-year-old student, expressed the following:

It should be something that preserves it, as I preserved it for them. They should preserve it for their children.

On the other hand, Jennifer, a 39-year-old real estate agent, who remarked that wilderness is not in peril because nothing "terribly stupid is going to happen anytime soon," saw the bequest simply as an opportunity for future generations to enjoy the same recreational experiences as she has:

My kids and grandkids should have the opportunity to see these things and not lose them forever. It's just a great experience that I would want to have continued.

When they felt that wilderness resources were threatened, respondents spoke of an ongoing, bequeathed responsibility, as well as the intrinsic worth of wilderness. When immediate

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threats were not perceived the respondents referred to enhanced recreational opportunities for their children and grandchildren. Both viewpoints stated that preserving wilderness for future generations was extremely important.

Modern Society's Connection to Wilderness

The concern that contemporary society has lost touch with wilderness surfaced in reference to all three values and was expressed in two different ways. Several respondents indicated that society is no longer connected to its biophysical roots. Jim, a 38-year-old minister, spoke of this severance from the natural world:

I took my son down south [to wilderness] so he could see how things are. That everything ain't mainstream, nothing but cars. I think that's what our kids are missing. Missing that connection with nature itself. . . . It was the first time he'd ever seen a real horse. He said, "Dad, look at that big ol' dog!" "That ain't no dog, boy!"

Derek agreed:

The whole frontiersman ideal was pivotal . . . and even in the early 20th century that sort of adventurous frontier spirit persisted. But recently, as we've moved away from wilderness, I think we've lost touch with what it really means. . . . I guess we don't really have a picture of what the wilderness is any-

more because we're not in regular contact with it. We don't know how to deal with it as we did 100 or 200 years ago. I think the image has changed.

The loss of cultural significance was more important to the majority of respondents than the diminishing knowledge of the natural world. Concern for a societal disconnection to wilderness, coupled with the ability of each interviewee to name cultural symbols derived from wilderness, revealed the personal importance of wilderness as a source of cultural symbols.

Off-site Inspirational Use of Wilderness

The off-site use of wilderness as a source of inspiration was common to all of the respondents. Many used this idea to respond to the existence value statement. All respondents expressed that it is important to simply know that wilderness exists, whether or not they actually ever visit it. Several explanations were given. First, an intrinsic value of natural systems and organisms was recognized by some. Second, the off-site use of natural areas as sources of inspiration, visualization, or objects of meditation was important to many. Finally, the statement was often interpreted to encompass option value, as with Steve, a 34-year-old retail store manager:

It's very important to know that it's there. It's great to

know that that could be your outlet or your place to look forward to going to. It's a preserved option.

Using wilderness as a source of inspiration or an object of meditation was the value most often expressed in response to the existence value statement. As Ted stated:

It provides an opportunity for inspiration that's rare enough. I mean, I'm guilty of being a couch potato, but I think it's a way to simply remind people that there's more to life than MTV and the Super Bowl.

Barbara explained that if you put your head in there [wilderness], you're more peaceful.

Derek even described the meditative experience he was having *during* the interview:

For a second there I thought of being miles away from everything else and being at peace and all that other stuff we use nature for.

All 15 respondents referred to such off-site use at various points in the interview. Many interpreted the existence value statement by referring to such use. Regardless of whether this was applied to existence value or not, however, the majority of respondents reported a powerful off-site inspirational component of wilderness.

Cultural Value

When read the statement "Wilderness is important because nature and wildlands are important symbols of American culture," six participants' initial responses were negative or ambivalent. However, respondents readily provided symbols from nature and wildlands relating to American traits during the interviews. Initial negativity appeared to be based on the

perceived society-nature disconnect previously discussed. Respondents interpreted the cultural value statement as referring to the value that society as a whole places on wilderness, not their own personal valuation.

Existence Value

For nine of the 15 participants, existence value was interpreted as meaning that wilderness can provide spiritual or personal inspiration without having to visit the area. Because existence value encompasses a variety of off-site use values, the interpreted meaning comports with the researcher-intended meaning of existence value as the satisfaction one feels that a wilderness exists regardless of whether one visits the area. Respondents did not refer to other components of the theoretical underpinnings of existence value (intrinsic worth and altruism). This statement was interpreted as intended. However, respondents' interpretation was narrower in scope than the theoretical definition of the construct.

Bequest Value

Most participants spoke of bequest value as a gift carrying responsibility. Interviewees indicated that future development options should not be exercised and that future use should be consistent with current value systems. Thus, participants made it clear that the bequest of wilderness was of the holistic wilderness and not simply of undeveloped land for future use. The bequest of wilderness was seen as the bequest of cultural ideas to future generations by interviewees who expressed discontent concerning societal disconnect with nature. Although all respondents regarded ecosystem benefits of wilderness as important in other questions, such benefits were not referred in relation to the bequest question. The reason given by most

participants to preserve wilderness for future generations was regarding recreational opportunities and the opportunity for spiritual inspiration.

Conclusion

The interview data indicated that the initial responses to the NSRE questions differed little from the intended meaning. Overall, the results of this project suggest that the wilderness-value questions used on the NSRE are understood by the public and are valid indicators of the underlying constructs they were intended to represent. However, minor modifications may improve validity of the NSRE instrument. Future use of the cultural value question or similar questions should include modified wording to direct the respondent to consider personal values. Existence value was often interpreted as having a component of option value. In addition, the existence value statement was most often interpreted as relating to spiritual or meditative values, which were only one component of its multidimensional definition. Finally, recreation and other direct-use values were the most frequently cited reasons for preserving wilderness for future generations.

Respondents expressed that wilderness had intrinsic worth and directly linked the value of wilderness to society as a source of inspiration, means of understanding human relations to nature, and a cultural symbol. Respondents noted a concern that contemporary society has lost touch with wilderness. This disconnect resulted in the loss of an important cultural symbol and a diminishing knowledge of human biophysical roots. Respondents perceived the importance of preserving wilderness for future generations and that future generations had an ongoing, bequeathed responsibility to preserve it. This sentiment was best expressed by Jennifer: "My kids and grandkids should have the opportunity

to see these things and not lose them forever." In general, the salience of wilderness value and respondents' perception of the current state of wilderness was best expressed through a quotation from Mike "We have to work hard to keep existing wilderness areas and to add new wilderness areas. It's not enough to know that they're there." **IJW**

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