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Where man is not<sup>1</sup>: Grappling with a Wilderness System Full of Human Stories

The preservation of wilderness areas in the United States stems from an idealistic notion of wilderness as a place where humans are not. Wilderness purists hold “wilderness as an essential reality largely independent of human presence and control: wilderness areas of the Earth are the homelands of nonhumans” (Crist 2004, 518). However, this notion of pure wilderness disqualifies most, if not all, of the land in the United States as true wilderness because of the far reaching history of human impacts on the landscapes and ecosystems (Maskit 2008, 462). This belief in wilderness purity pervades the management and interpretation of our national wilderness areas. In many wildernesses, human cultural and historical artifacts are destroyed in order to create and maintain the illusion of untouched landscapes. American wildernesses emphasize natural and nonhuman elements at the expense and erasure of human history and culture. This dualism negates the presence and value of human impacts in wilderness areas. In order to have a useful and accurate definition of wilderness, we must acknowledge the human histories within our wilderness areas alongside the geological and ecological elements which captivate our national imagination and provide sanctuary for nonhuman life. I argue that wilderness areas in the United States should reject the notions of pure wilderness and embrace the interplay between human culture and wild nature. Wilderness areas in the United States can retain their wildness without losing their cultural and historical significance.

The definition of wilderness according to the Wilderness Act of 1964 states: “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is

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<sup>1</sup>“Where man is not nature is barren,” from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* by William Blake

hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (88<sup>th</sup> Congress 1964, 121). Additionally, a wilderness may contain “historical value” as well as other specific aspects as a component of its worth (88<sup>th</sup> Congress 1964, 121). Because many areas, especially on the East Coast, were rejected as wilderness because they were not adequately “untrammelled” by humans (Cronon 2003, 637), Congress passed laws containing further specifications for wilderness designation. Both the Eastern Wilderness Act of 1974 and the Endangered Wilderness Act of 1978 broadened the definition of wilderness for purposes of designation (Dant 2008, 239). These later acts acknowledge that land doesn’t need to be pristinely “untrammelled” for it to be designated as wilderness. They assure that the 1964 definition doesn’t exclude lands with human history or threats of encroaching development (Dant 2008, 239). While these amendments focus on the designation of wilderness, I argue that management of wilderness areas should also discard pure dualities between people and nature within their interpretations. I define a designated wilderness area in the United States as the “homeland of nonhumans” where ecosystems thrive apart from human disruption and also as a manifestation of human history and culture. Wildernesses, pristine as they may appear, should be viewed through the lenses of the historical, social, political, and natural conditions that created them. When wilderness management destroys and erases human history in order to highlight the land’s “untrammelled” character, this inaccurately represents the landscape. In the spirit of truthfulness, wilderness management has an obligation to acknowledge, mark, and interpret the human contributions to wilderness areas.

Whether wilderness is valued for its natural resources, opportunities for recreation and solitude, symbolic necessity for national character, inherent wildness, or a myriad other reasons (Nelson 1998), it’s evident by the existence of a Wilderness Act that Americans value

wilderness. Indeed, as evidenced by the National Register of Historic Places, Americans also value history and heritage. Preservation, both environmental and historical, indicates contemporary value. We preserve historical structures and landscapes because we value their importance to our current identities. The Wilderness Act is a legal recognition and institutionalization of our collective value of wildness and “naturalness” (Woods 1998, 134) found in undeveloped, roadless, and “primeval” landscapes (88<sup>th</sup> Congress 1964, 121). These qualities are what we value and why we protect landscapes that we fear might become unnatural or tamed. Even if we disagree on why wilderness is valuable or which lands should be considered wilderness, for decades people in the United States have loved and fiercely protected wilderness ideals and wild places within our national boundaries and beyond. Because we value wilderness, we should continue to ensure that it exists.

Although a core value of wilderness lies in its relationship to the wild, even more fundamental to wilderness and wilderness management is its relationship to humans (Turner 1996, 204-205). These wilderness landscapes have been and continue to be preserved because they are important to humans and human history. The Wilderness Act and all of the subsequent legislation that created and defined wilderness in the United States are thoroughly the products and achievements of human beings. The existence of wilderness areas in the United States depends on the humans who wrote laws and made careers out of defining the human relationship to wilderness. In order for a piece of land to be wilderness, there are rules, regulations, and exceptions for how this land can and cannot be used by human beings. In William Cronon’s article “The Trouble with Wilderness, or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” he discusses the religious and Euro-American history that has set the linguistic, conceptual, and cultural conditions of the wilderness movement in the United States. Cronon argues that wilderness is

“quite profoundly a human creation- indeed the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history” (Cronon 1995, 471). Not only is the legal infrastructure of wilderness in the United States explicitly crafted, managed, and imagined by humans, but the concept of wilderness in the first place is a product of western civilization and historical narrative. This construction presents a paradox where wilderness is valued and managed in order to preserve its identity as land apart from human control. By broadening the definition of wilderness to include human elements, we can alleviate this paradox. Legally, historically, and linguistically, wilderness areas created and preserved by the Wilderness Act are valued, bound, and managed by American citizens and society.

Further, the human contribution to wilderness in the United States is a remarkably valuable component of wilderness. This is evident by the inclusion of “historical value” into the definition of wilderness from the Wilderness Act. One example of how human history and wilderness values collide is in the Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness Area in central Idaho, the largest contiguous wilderness area in the Lower 48. On the US Forest Service description of this wilderness area, it states:

“Numerous artifacts are evidence that humans have long been a component of the Wilderness. They are the artifacts of the Shoshone and Nez Perce Indian occupations, journals of early fur trappers and missionaries, and remnants of early miner and homestead settlements. The historic and prehistoric heritage of the area is a valuable Wilderness component.” (Salmon-Challis National Forest - Special Places, para 3).

Note that this wilderness area is named after Idaho Senator Frank Church, the floor sponsor of the Wilderness Act and a longstanding key figure in the legislation of wilderness in the 1960s and 1970s (Dant 2008, 239). This example illustrates two human historical elements that are fundamental to how we value wilderness. First, the human history of both the Native American tribes and the Euro-American settlers who inhabited that land historically is officially

acknowledged and celebrated. Secondly, naming the wilderness after Church celebrates his dedication to wilderness protection. While the historical significance in this specific wilderness is fairly locally bound, across the country we have wilderness areas named after John Muir, Ansel Adams, Gaylord Nelson, and others. By naming our wilderness areas after the fundamental figures of the environmental movements who loved them, we associate our wildernesses with their literary, artistic, and legal legacies. Thus wilderness is partially a monument to the American environmental movement in addition to being a celebration of our natural landscape heritage. Human history, of both the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and before, is a crucial component to many wilderness landscapes in the United States. This history is essential and valuable to our wilderness narratives.

One might wonder why we need so *many* wilderness areas to reflect our natural and human history, arguing that just a few would be sufficient to grasp the significance of both our historical and ecological heritage. I reject this claim and respond in two ways. First, the percentage of land in the United States dedicated to wilderness preservation is minimal. Designated wilderness only counts for a fraction of our national lands, which illustrates that there are not really that many wilderness areas in the first place. Secondly, central to my argument is the idea that wilderness and local history go hand in hand. One wouldn't be able to appreciate the history, ecology, or aesthetics of all wilderness areas across the United States just by visiting one or two. The histories and stories embedded in wilderness areas tend to encompass both local and national scales. Both of these historical scales are valuable and should be included in wilderness interpretation. Additionally, the variety of landscapes from deserts to glaciers to mountains to marshes encompassed and protected by wilderness designation would not be sufficiently appreciated nor protected by limiting the number of wilderness areas to only a few.

Because the Wilderness Act specifically requires that evidence of humans in wilderness must be “substantially unnoticeable” (88<sup>th</sup> Congress 1964, 121) one might argue that visible human history interrupts the pristine, “untrammeled” quality that wilderness areas seek to construct. The Point Reyes Wilderness Area is an example of how “the history of its human habitation and use has been downplayed or overlooked” in order to match the expectation of pure wilderness (Watt 2002, 56). Another example is the Gaylord Nelson Wilderness Area along the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore in Wisconsin. Here, the presence of once cultivated farmland, orchards, and roads long prevented this area from being designated wilderness. Once designated, some of these artifacts were destroyed, overlooked, and ignored by wilderness management in the process of wilderness designation (Cronon 2003, 636).

Instead of threatening the wild integrity of wilderness areas, I argue that visible human history and accurate interpretations of previous human use in wilderness areas actually enhances and highlights the natural qualities we seek in wilderness. In a landscape such as the Apostle Islands, which were once inhabited and worked by humans, the forces of entropy and regeneration are in the process of “smoothing” (Maskit 2008, 476) the land of its legacy of human cultivation. This process of dynamic ecosystem change and adaptation would be lost to visitors without the knowledge and interpretation of the island’s human history. Quite the contrary of destroying or diminishing wilderness, visible human history “enhances and deepens it by adding complexity to the story of rewilding” (Cronon 2003, 641). Human artifacts help tell the story of the land and how nature is able to adapt around human uses. To destroy human artifacts, as wilderness managers have in Point Reyes, Gaylord Nelson, and others, is to rob visitors of the historical and ecological environmental truth in favor of an illusion.

To conclude, I have argued that in order to fully appreciate wilderness areas in the United States, we must acknowledge, celebrate, and mark the human achievements and history within them. Since we value wilderness and naturalness in the United States, as evidenced by our legislative codes, we should protect our natural areas. However, the belief that wilderness areas in the United States are conceptually or historically separate from human history is false. In order to fully grasp and communicate the historical, natural, and political narratives we preserve in our wilderness areas, wilderness managers must consider and celebrate human history. I have considered the claim that we only need a few wildernesses to reap their benefits ecologically and historically. I reject this claim on the grounds that we don't really have that many wildernesses in the first place and that limiting the scope of wilderness cannot sufficiently protect or celebrate the breadth of aesthetic, ecological, and historical landscapes in the United States. I have also considered the claim that visible human history undermines wilderness and rejected this claim by arguing that visible human history can actually enhance the narrative of wilderness. To ignore the human contributions and histories of our wilderness areas would be to discredit and erase a fundamental and framing piece of our wilderness heritage.

[ I acknowledge that in both wilderness and historical preservation, one central problem is deciding exactly what to preserve. Whose history should we save and which wildernesses should we designate? How should we decide and who should be deciding? These questions merit further inquiry, particularly involving the moral dilemmas raised by historic preservation.]

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