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# Why Primitive Experiences in Wilderness?

BY BILL BORRIE

## Introduction

As defined in the Wilderness Act (PL 88-577), wilderness managers and policy makers must protect and provide “outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined experience.” The draft report on the “National Framework on Monitoring Selected Conditions Related to

Wilderness Character” interprets this as a call for “a complex and subtle set of relationships between the land, its management, and the meanings people associate with wilderness” (Landres 2004, in this issue). However, the fundamental question is what sort of social relationships are to be validated and encouraged. In defining the nature of primitive experiences in wilderness, we should be informed by its intellectual origins and underlying philosophical assumptions.

Perhaps, some contentious strands of thought

permeate the call for primitive experiences. Wilderness is a sanctuary from modern, technological society. It is a place to reflect, to rejuvenate, and to rediscover ourselves free from the demands and distractions of where we live and work. Wilderness is a contrast and a reminder of how things once were. Two particular eras and lifestyles of American history are also valorized: (1) the simple, close-to-nature lifestyle of indigenous peoples—the “noble savages”; and (2) the virtuous character traits of early European settlers—the “virile pioneers” (Henberg 1994).



**Figure 1—Backpacker entering Buckskin Gulch in the Paria Canyon–Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness; managed by the Bureau of Land management (AZ and UT). Photo by Peter Druschke.**

The opening sentence of the Wilderness Act is sometimes overlooked, and yet it offers a foundation for the consideration of primitiveness. The Statement of Policy begins:

Sec. 2. (a) In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.

Note the emphasis on an “increasing population,” on “expanding settlement,” and on “growing mechanization.” This indicates a deliberate setting apart of wilderness from the forces of change that are associated with modern, technological society. It is a statement concerning not just ecological components of a wilderness resource, but also very much the social and cultural components. I believe it acknowledges people’s place in nature, and calls for a definition of appropriate practices, institutions, and attitudes toward nature. Wilderness is symbolic of restraint and reserve, suggesting the importance of lightening the burden of humanity on nature and upon the experience of nature. Choosing to leave behind the trappings and conveniences of modern, technological society is a fostering of primitive experiences. However, this observation should not be interpreted as a call to *save nature from people*. That seemingly innocuous stance opens up problematic questions of: From whom are we protecting nature? For whom? And, whose interests are being served in so doing? These are questions of social justice, equity, power, and fairness and are not easily dealt with herein.

## Intellectual Origins

The origin of the notion of primitiveness can partly be found in the early wilderness writings of Teddy Roosevelt, Aldo

Leopold, and Bob Marshall. I offer a few illustrative quotes that indicate the vaunted status of the “virile pioneer” and the “noble savage.” Teddy Roosevelt, for instance, suggested in 1897 that

the untrodden American wilderness resembles both in game and physical characters the forests, the mountains, and the steppes of the Old World as it was at the beginning of our own era. . . . At the time when we first became a nation, nine tenths of the territory now included within the limits of the United States was wilderness. It was during the stirring and troubled years immediately preceding the outbreak of the Revolution that the most adventurous hunters, the vanguard of the hardy army of *pioneer* settlers [emphasis added], first crossed the Alleghanies, and roamed far and wide through the lonely, danger-haunted forests which filled the No-Man’s land lying between the Tennessee and the Ohio. (Roosevelt 1998, pp. 333–335)

In addition to valorizing the pioneers and their rustic way of life, Roosevelt also drops the names of Davy Crockett (“honest, fearless”), Sam Houston (“mighty,” “restless, reckless, and hardy”), Daniel Boone (“the archetype”), and Kit Carson (“daring”). They are members of a “distinctive class, with a peculiar and important position in American life” (p. 341). These heroes “show the qualities of hardihood, self-reliance, and resolution needed for effectively grappling with his wild surroundings” (p. 348). Roosevelt celebrates not only the pioneering lifestyle, but also the character traits that are fostered and reinforced in primitive, frontierlike experiences.

Aldo Leopold similarly writes that public wilderness areas are essentially a means for allowing

the more *virile* and *primitive* forms of outdoor recreation to survive the receding economic fact of *pioneering*. . . . There is little question that many of the attributes most distinctive of America and Americans are the impress of Wilderness and the life that accompanied it. If we have any such things as an American culture (and I think we have), its distinguishing marks are a certain vigorous individualism combined with ability to organize, a certain intellectual curiosity bent to practical ends, a lack of subservience to stiff social forms, and an intolerance of drones, all of which are the distinctive characteristics of successful *pioneers* [emphases added]. (Leopold 1925, p. 401).

Bob Marshall, in 1930, linked the experience of primitive environments with early Native Americans. He suggested that the dominant attributes of a wilderness area are as follows:

First, that it requires anyone who exists in it to depend exclusively on his own effort for survival; and second, that it preserves nearly as possible the *primitive* environment [emphasis added]. This means that all roads, power transportation and settlements are barred. But trails and temporary shelters, which were common long before the advent of the white race, are entirely permissible. When Columbus effected his immortal debarkation, he touched upon a wilderness which embraced virtually a hemisphere. . . . “The land and all that it bore they treated with consideration; not attempting to improve it, they never desecrated it.” Consequently, over billions of acres the aboriginal wanderers still spun out their peripatetic careers, the wild animals still

browsed in unmolested meadows and the forests still grew and moldered and grew again precisely as they had done for undeterminable centuries. (Marshall 1998, pp. 85–86).

Putting aside the anthropological difficulties of Marshall’s views of the presence and practices of American Indians on the North American continent, this is entirely indicative of Native Americans as enlightened cultural role models. Their environmental identities, attitudes, and behaviors are seen to be examples of appropriate cultural relationships with nature. However, that model of the “noble savage” or “green primitive” is problematic.

## Problematic Ideals

Indeed, the notions of the “ecologically noble savage,” and the “virile pioneer” are both difficult. Both clearly make a distinction (as does the Wilderness Act) between a genuine, traditional culture and a spurious, modern culture (Vivanco 2003). Whereas the modern is seen as shallow, superficial, and very utilitarian, the traditional is meaning-laden, harmonious, and spiritually engaged. It suggests that particular human cultures are more virtuous than others, and that those cultures have insight and environmental wisdom, or even a clearer view toward ecological sustainability.

The notion of the “green primitive” or “ecologically noble savage” idolizes and sets apart indigenous cultures. In doing so, it can suggest purity, simplicity, and closer connection to nature due to their ability to avoid the “stain” of modern, technological society. It locates indigenous cultures outside the dominant track of history, separate from economic systems of trade and exchange, and almost on the “other” side of the human and nature divide (not quite human). It suggests an unchanging culture that is undermined

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by the adoption of technology and by engagement (however cautious) with politics, legal negotiation, and economic success (Vivanco 2003).

The pioneering lifestyle, though more myth than reality in its time, might also be difficult to argue for as an ideal. It could be seen as endorsing a hunting and gathering, mobile ethos in clear contrast to an agrarian vision (secure title, permanent habitation, and “improvement” of land). I wonder if the attraction of the pioneer model is its rejection of urban servitude and/or rural peasantry. Although not exactly celebrating poverty, is it the attraction of the pioneer lifestyle a reaction to the stalled economic status of rural inhabitants, and the perceived lack of ability to develop sustainable

and harmonious relationships to nature? Is the pioneering lifestyle valorizing distant landscapes, open horizons, and sublime mountain landscapes to the nearby, less iconic landscapes? Although rightfully celebrating distant landscapes, are we also ignoring the less than admirable state of our relationship to nearby nature? When cast in light of these questions, the celebration of a pioneering lifestyle becomes troublesome.

## Conclusion

The search for indicators for the wilderness value of primitive experiences is a consideration of appropriate social and cultural relations with nature. In doing so, we need to be wary of the worldviews we would be endorsing.

Those worldviews may not be as politically appropriate and benign as when they were first suggested. 

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we should be monitoring in this “outstanding opportunities” quality of wilderness, and the differences between monitoring for opportunities versus experiences.

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