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Narrative of the Wild: An Autoethnographic Exploration of Protected Areas Within the United States of America

by

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Thesis

Submitted to the Department of Communication

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in partial fulfillment of the requirements

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## Abstract

As conditions for the global environment continue to degrade and the climate crisis deepens, wilderness and protected areas (PAs) serve as a bulwark for sustainability goals. As much of the protections and strengths of PAs stem from the public's opinion of them, this research seeks to further understand the communicative underpinnings of PAs. Utilizing autoethnography and applying it to a rhetorical framework, this study explores the constitutive qualities narrative in conjunction with the wilderness can possess. The results offer suggestions for future communication scholars and advocates to employ while discussing and communicating about the wilderness.

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## **Introduction**

The United States National Park System (NPS) has been widely called a jewel in the crown of America's legacy. From far spanning vistas that reach into the clouds, underwater troves of aquatic life, caves with tunnels sprawling ever onward beneath the earth, to monuments of human's ingenuity and determination long since passed, the National Park System (NPS) stands as a beacon for learning, exploration, growth and a glimpse at the world as it once was, perhaps even shedding light on what it may be again soon. Kroner et al. (2019) noted that following the establishment of Yellowstone and Yosemite as protected areas (Pas) the United States is the home of modern conservation and remains a global leader.

It is no surprise then as a country with such large swaths of primeval land and sea, that scientists and scholars alike flock, much like the various park's migratory species, to study and garner what they may from the NPS. While this would seem the dominion of biologists, ecologists, and geologists, communication scholars have found a distinct presence in the study of wild spaces, both nationally and globally (Anderson, Lime, & Wang, 1998; Gramman et al., 1998; Hughes, Curtis, & Weiler, 2009). This research comes at an invaluable time. Social pressure and human-based threats are mounting dramatically for protected lands worldwide.

On an internal level, parks are facing increasing visitation levels. An estimated 8 billion people visited protected areas around the world according to models by Balmford et al.'s (2015) study, 80% of which occurred in the United States and Europe. This increase in visitation pushes park management to study, understand, and mitigate their impacts upon the experience for the visitor (Manning & Lime, 2000, p. 13). Friemund and Manning (2004) depicted the problems of even defining quality standards because the act of defining is influenced by a host of perspectives spanning "legal and administrative mandates, agency policy, historic precedent,

expert judgement, interest group politics, and public opinion, especially that derived from outdoor recreation visitors” (p. 559). As park budgets for construction and maintenance decline in the United States, simultaneously paired with a growing mentality that resists destroying park land for parking and other facilities, these factors force park managers to find difficult solutions to ever growing and difficult problems (Hof & Lime, 1997).

Externally protected lands have seen critical losses globally. PAs have had significant setbacks in the form of “PADDD” events. The three D’s in PADDD stand for downgrade, meaning the lowering of restrictions of actions taken inside a PA; downsize, representing the shrinking of lands protected; and degazettement, which is the complete removal of protections an area receives (Tesfawa et al., 2018). Kroner et al. (2019) posited that while hundreds of PADDD events have occurred in the U.S. since the 19th century, there has been a dramatic rollback in protections in recent years. They noted the swaths of land removed from Bears Ears and Grand Staircase–Escalante National Monuments, for example, was the largest downsize in a PA in U.S. history. The study further portended that the United States is not alone in rolling back protections. Amazonian countries also have seen a large increase in PADDD events as well, similarly many of which happening within the past couple decades. Finally, they note that PADDD events have had large impacts on every human inhabited continent on the planet, throwing into question the permanence and ultimate protections of our world’s PAs.

These issues while dramatically different, similarly offer a unique place for environmental communication to operate and be studied. Internally, PAs are incredibly unique entities. They often must juxtapose themselves between functioning as a rich, unique experience to billions of visitors while simultaneously preserving pieces of a wild and natural world that is both fragile and inherently untamable. The ebb and flow of these two dynamic forces constantly

impact each other. Environmental communication is a critical tool for the managers of these PAs to attempt to find a harmonious relationship in an otherwise discordant one. Manning and Lime (2000) noted, “Substantial research and management attention have focused on information and education programs as a recreation management practice” (p. 32). They further displayed ways in which this information is delivered and demonstrated how it can vary greatly and with varying effects, from pamphlets, videos, to Rangers in the backcountry (p. 37). Whether it is protecting fragile soils from hikers, preventing the habituation of complex species by campers, or safeguarding water purity from backpackers, direct and indirect communication shows to be an effective management practice.

Environmental communication can also be vital externally by introducing and/or reinforcing the importance of PAs to the public. Public pressure is shown to be quite successful protecting PAs in recent years. As Katy Enders (2017) from *The Guardian* reported, when former U.S. congressman Jason Chaffetz attempted to privatize 3.3 million acres of public land in 2017, it was quickly withdrawn due to pressure from conservationists and sportspeople alike. Similarly, President Bolsonaro of Brazil met international pressure after a summer of record Amazonian forest fires which were largely caused by humans, resulting in his announcement to send the Brazilian military to combat the burning (Reeves, 2019). Public action can be effective when it comes to protecting PAs, but the motivations behind each response vary greatly, and this can be attributed with changing narratives of various social groups. There is a wealth of studies that articulate the importance of voice and narratives when facing ecological conflicts such as these (Cox, 2006; Kelley, Cooley & Klinger, 2014; Pezullo, 2001). The ways in which people talk about these areas and events display a complex, interwoven, and even antithetical web of narratives. Marafiotte and Plec (2006) articulated this complexity well: “the natural world may be



described as a resource for human consumption or a setting for outdoor entertainment, and, at the same time, as a site or living system that is, or should be, untouched by humans” (p. 50).

In an area where public sentiment provides a crucial role of protection both inside and out, studying and understanding the narratives that drive people about PAs is incredibly beneficial. While there is a burgeoning of studies around environmental communication, narratives, and voice, there is far less that utilizes autoethnography and first-hand experiences when studying the expansive world of protected areas. This study adds a critical voice to the environmental communication conversation.

## Literature Review

The following literature review will delve into the overarching concept of environmental communication and how it portends to place, examine specific methods protected area managers use to communicate with their visitors and the public, and discuss the presence of narratives and voice within both environmental communication and protected area management organizations.

Within the realm of environmental science, Groffman et al. (2010) noted that the dissemination of information between experts, policy makers and the general public is critically important. They noted,

Societal interest in environmental issues is high and participation in international efforts to address these issues has increased. However, it is difficult to provide relevant scientific information in a coherent way that resonates with the general public, environmental managers, and policy makers. (p. 290)

They argued that it will require new ways to display data as well as communicate to potentially resolve these issues. Whether it is discussing the climate crisis, wilderness degradation, or any other environmental problem the world currently faces, study in environmental communication offers new ways to help bridge the gap between scientists, engage the public, and inspire action.

The study of environmental communication is incredibly broad. Born from the analysis of conflicts over natural resources in the 19th century, it blossomed into an expansive field ranging from tourism, human health, social justice, media, and industry (Burgess & Harrison, 1998; Cox, 2006; McGaurr, 2015; Pezullo, 2001). This plurality can make defining environmental communication difficult, and could change based on the situation. Robert Cox (2006) in his work *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere* noted this and therefore defines environmental communication as symbolic action that functions in two fundamental ways. First, environmental communication functions pragmatically, meaning “it

educates, alerts, persuades, mobilizes, and helps us to solve environmental problems” (p. 12).

Second, environmental communication functions constitutively, meaning it provides a lens with which to view the environment, subtly shaping perceptions through representations of nature.

With these two defined functions it will be easier to analyze how communication plays a pivotal role in its connection with the public and the environment.

Within environmental communication, the importance of place- and location-based scholarship receives notable attention (Cantrill, 1998; Carbaugh & Cerulli, 2013; Dickenson, 2011). Place is particularly poignant because it often serves as the backdrop to various environmental issues and studies regardless of whether it is the primary focus. A host of disputes are rooted in very specific geographic locations and much like the historic sites of memorialized battlefields, the place and outcome of environmental conflicts carry significant importance. Some of the United States’ more famous protected areas, for example, were born of such strife. Modernly, the study of place and communicating with the public reaches directly into the field of natural resource management and demonstrates a rich complexity as well as a need for further study (Cantrill, 1998).

Beyond specific battles over localities and the production of protected areas, place can serve to start entire movements. The origin of the environmental justice movement has been attributed to Warren County, North Carolina (Pezullo, 2001). Pezullo (2001) further portended Warren County not only provides a valuable origin story but continues to offer an important location of conflict for environmental justice. Place is pivotal in these studies because they are themselves tools of communication and inherently rhetorical. Endres and Sendra-Cook (2011) described specific places as an intersplicing of physical features, symbolic meanings, personal

memories, and visual elements creating a dynamic and constantly shifting communication object worthy of study.

Carbaugh and Cerulli (2013) built upon this idea; they articulated place as providing a grounded sense of reality that is easily understood and conveyable when so many concepts around the environment are lofty, or hard to grasp. They argued that environmental communication is inherently rooted in place and the specific individuals and communities dwelling there. They noted the concept of place encompasses homes, neighborhoods, and specific features that are unique to specific places. The study further portended that through study, utilizing all senses, of these localities and discursive qualities therein, that environmental communication provides answers to difficulties the world has when addressing the environment. Cantrill (2012) summed up the potential for this type of place-based focus:

the range of social or economic conditions that drive cascades of unsustainable behavior are, more often than not, abetted by a lack of ecological literacy and investment in the decision making process. Thus, the key to fostering true place-based sustainability initiatives is found in getting citizens to focus on issues that matter most in their particular region and facilitating the discovery of new ways to look at and assess current and anticipated conditions. (p. 17)

Understanding the intersection of place, environment and communication can also give a critical and much needed voice to indigenous peoples around the world. Place-based thinking can be a major aspect of indigenous culture and goes beyond material importance, it is a way to relate to one another (Coulthard, 2010). Indigenous perspectives are crucial to the understanding and protection of the environment. According to an article published by the United Nations (2019), after years in the margins, indigenous groups are given a voice equivalent to that of other

governments when discussing solutions to climate change which is already providing numerous benefits. It further noted that their proximity to and reliance on fragile ecosystems endows them with many of the solutions humanity needs to address the climate crisis. When visiting many protected areas, it is clear the narratives and place-based meanings attached to them go far deeper and stretch back far longer than the modern western perspective. If there is any attempt to achieve an equilibrium of natural processes as well as environmental and social justice, a shift in focus and discursive practices is vital. Whether it is fighting for environmental justice for the indigenous peoples of the world, working to understand their methods to defend and protect lands from human destruction, or learning solutions to the climate crisis ahead, finding ways to give voice and better listen to the original scholars of place, indigenous people of the world, is vital.

Information regarding the environment's impact on humans, and human's impact on the environment is delivered constantly. Facing the uncertainty of the global environment, and growing unsustainability of human behaviors, focus on environmental communication is of the utmost importance. With the stakes as high as they are, new methodologies and studies must rise to meet these needs. A strong focus on the impact of place within environmental communication will allow scholars to begin to find positive ways to understand humanity's place on this planet.

Protected areas make up a massive part of the planet's surface, almost a sixth of the earth's land combined with 7 percent of its seas (United Nations Environment World Conservation Monitoring Centre [UNEP-WCMC], International Union for Conservation of Nature [IUCN] & National Geographic Society [NGS], 2018). They further argued,

Conservation of biodiversity in protected and conserved areas provides the foundation for achieving the whole suite of Sustainable Development Goals. In particular, the ecosystem services of the world's protected areas underpin global needs to address climate change; protect water sources and food production systems; alleviate disaster risk; and maintain health, well-being and the livelihoods of millions of people. Progress is only possible if these systems are well connected and integrated into the wider landscapes and seascapes, if they are governed equitably and managed effectively, and if they stem the loss of biodiversity. (p. iv)

The governance and management of these protected areas as listed above does not come easily nor is it by any means a small undertaking. The annual budget of the United States National Park System alone is around 3.5 billion dollars (National Park Service, 2020). Dilsaver (2016) noted their duties to include educating the public about America's history, showcasing and protecting the ecosystems under their care and offering scores of varying recreational opportunities to the millions of annual visitors. He later observes that while providing those services they must simultaneously face environmental challenges that are "widespread, complex, accelerating and volatile. These include biodiversity loss, climate change, groundwater removal, invasive species, overdevelopment, and air, noise, and light pollution" (p. 446). Compound this problem with the previously mentioned constrained budget and an always growing number of visitors it is clear that protected area managers (PAMs) everywhere need scholarly study as thorough as their services and diversified as their challenges.

This tightrope PAMs must walk is not an easy one. Hof and Lime (1997) noted that one of the largest challenges PAMs face is addressing an ever-growing glut of visitors annually, the appropriate way in which these visitors should use the land, and mitigating the impacts they have

on the parks themselves. They continued that PAMs turn to a host of various planning frameworks to attempt to measure and then address these problems. Within the greater frameworks utilized by PAMs, communication works as an important intermediary between the public, the parks and their managers. This section will explore some of the various areas that communication proves to be invaluable toward the function of protected areas.

One of the many challenges that PAMs face on a day to day basis is the handling of visitor behaviors. Ham et al. (2009) stated, that as visitors have increased so too have “a special subset of individuals who engage in behaviors that are at odds with management objectives. Yet many of their most problematic behaviors are the product of naiveté or misconception rather than malicious intent” (p. v). Some of the various behaviors that are focused upon include, littering, feeding wildlife, and walking dogs off leash (Ham, Weiler, Hughes & Brown, 2008). Anderson et al. (1998) described the strategies in which PAMs work to influence these behaviors by splitting them into two major subcategories, direct and indirect. While these terms are broad and can vary, Gramann, Christensen, and Vander Stoep (1998) defined the direct strategy as “strict enforcement of rules and regulations governing visitor actions...This power encompasses such overt measures as surveillance, issuance of citations, rationing...physical closure of areas, and activity zoning” (p. 253). These more intrusive approaches can be quite helpful in limiting problematic behaviors, however, it can also be less effective, desirable, or efficient than indirect methodologies (Hughes, Curtis & Weiler, 2009, p. 3).

Anderson et al. (1998) described indirect methodologies as strategies that “strive to inform visitors about an area or particular site within an area and then try to influence or persuade visitors to behave in a specific way” (p. 14). Gramman et al. (1998) furthered that indirect strategies attempt to push visitors to make voluntary changes to their behavior, without

the threat of repercussions. Some examples of indirect methods include the use of signs (Brown, Ham, & Hughes, 2010), brochures (Hughes et al., 2009), and in-person conversations to educate and or persuade visitors (Kidd et al., 2015).

Hughes et al. (2009) observed that one of the advantages of these types of methodologies is that they are less invasive and generally more welcomed by the public. They further noted that they can also instill a sense of understanding of the problem at hand into the visitor, allowing for greater acceptance when stronger more stringent rules are established down the road (p. 4). This isn't to say indirect methodologies are a panacea for the qualms of Park managers. Some indirect methods like bulletin boards can have little impact on individuals whose behavior and beliefs toward an outdoor activity are already ingrained (Borrie & Harding, 2002, p. 9). It also relies heavily on the ability to effectively disseminate information. Handing out brochures that reach less than half of visitors (Lucas, 1981, p. 12) and putting up signs that go unseen by half of hikers (Kidd et al., 2015, p. 60) will have a very small impact upon their behaviors. Lucas (1981) found in their study that the efficacy of information campaigns requires representations of varied information that appeals to the desires of different guests and is delivered to a large number of visitors (p. 12).

While it is important to note some of the drawbacks of these indirect methods, they still demonstrate a valuable tool in changing problematic behavior. Many of the flaws with it as a strategy point toward a need for further and more rigorous study, rather than dismissal of its ability. Borrie and Harding (2002) argued, "There is clearly a need to continue research into both how best to communicate with recreation visitors, and how visitors make decisions concerning appropriate behavior" (p. 9). It is critically important for PAMs to have a good understanding of their target audience. PAMs can easily fall into the trap of projecting beliefs onto visitors without



fully understanding their perspective, and because they are such a specialized group of people, with unique and specific paradigms, this projection is often wrong (Ham et al., 2009). According to Brown et al. (2010), one of the most critical steps toward influencing visitor's actions is to understand their beliefs toward various behaviors (p. 895).

Communication clearly plays a substantial role within the management practices of protected areas. Extensive study is done to evaluate the belief systems of visitors, as well as the best communication techniques to utilize in order to influence their behavior. And while there is a swelling amount of research, there is an insatiable need for both more and diverse kinds. A substantial amount of the research points toward a need for a deeper understanding of visitors on a specific and localized level. Often times these communication campaigns require a complexity of information and aim to tackle difficult problems. These factors require a diverse field of communication research, looking at the issues from different perspectives.

## Method

This paper will utilize the autoethnographic method to explore and investigate the United States of America's Protected Areas. After two years, 33 states, 40 national parks, around 24 thousand miles of American roads with countless state parks, national forests, and Bureau of Land Management lands in between, I have accumulated a sprawling and expansive amount of data. The ebb and flow of experience and observation garnered during this time will be best displayed by utilizing this method. Ellis, Adams, and Bochner (2011) succinctly described autoethnography as

seek[ing] to produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience. They accomplish this by first discerning patterns of cultural experience evidenced by field notes, interviews, and/or artifacts, and then describing these patterns using facets of storytelling (e.g., character and plot development), showing and telling, and alterations of authorial voice. (p. 227)

Autoethnography makes the author one of the objects of study, allowing for the researcher and the reader to be as important as the research itself (Bochner, 2012). Ellis et al. (2011) furthered that autoethnography works by “producing meaningful, accessible, and evocative research grounded in personal experience” (p. 274). This is critically important to this particular piece of research for these protected areas linked across the country are not sterile places to be observed clinically. They are imbued with tremendous awe and contain complex, rich, and often divisive history. To remove the author from the data of these completely unique places removes one of their most important features: their profound and visceral impact on the individual.

Autoethnography has already been employed in other environmental categories. Manolas (2013) used autoethnography to explore various elements of experiences that build an

environmentalist. Dewan (2017) utilized autoethnography to explore the diet of vegetarianism and veganism. Two particular studies within environmental autoethnography, however, serve as good markers for the positioning of this research.

Cashore (2019) explored a protected area for a month utilizing autoethnography. A reason they pursued this method was due to its reflexivity; they further asserted,

I understood that I would need a method that allowed...maximal openness to a relationship with the place—a relationship I did not (and might never) fully understand. I would need a method that allowed me to return not as an interrogator but as a seeker of I-didn't-know-what, not as analyst of the place but as a participant in it. (p. 33)

They utilized autoethnography to explore an individual protected area and the psychological impact of that singular experience. This research will share striking similarities, with some significant differences with my own. Instead of an immersion into a singular location, my project will be immersed in areas more spread apart, and where their focus was upon ecopsychology, this study will be geared toward the communicative theories that are drawn from this experience and how they constitutively impact perceptions.

One key reason autoethnography serves as a valuable tool in the study of protected areas is its positioning between place and narrative. Autoethnography shows the potential to seamlessly weave itself between specific locations, observing these areas in incredibly intimate and personal ways and then sewing itself into a larger tapestry of the planet's interconnected protected places. The previously mentioned United Nations report advocated for the “connection and integration” of wild spaces to larger outside areas (UNEP-WCMC, IUCN, and NGS, 2018, p. 42). Studies in both place and narrative have demonstrated the power individual frameworks have in conjunction with environmental behaviors and policies. It is for this reason that

communication scholars have an obligation to similarly connect and integrate these parks together on a metaphorical and cognitive level. To that end, autoethnography serves as an invaluable vehicle.

The second study that helps direct this autoethnography comes from Kelly, Cooley, and Klinger (2014). Narratives have the unique ability to convey data in an easily digestible way. Rigorous scientific data regarding the environment is constantly getting updated and delivered. But as previously noted, this information is often lost between the researchers and the general public. Narrative shows to have a profound ability to communicate grand, large scale issues and refocus them into a smaller more localized perspective. Kelly et al. (2014) noted this power in their examination of how narrative was used to generate local action in the face of a global environmental issue. They discussed how using narratives to deliver complex information allows for the concept of global ocean acidification to be confined, and empowers local responses that do not rely on the international community. Their research examined the work of other scholars and detailed specific functions of environmental data and autoethnography when paired and broke them into three major subcategories: time with cost, increased salience of large-scale data, and its discernable quality. Their study argued narrative has the ability to make timely action toward the environment more desirable by displaying the benefits concurrent with the action rather than far off, as many long-term strategies would ultimately do. They further contended narrative has the ability to take global, abstract, and disconnected data and make it localized, ultimately improving its legitimacy and salience. And finally, they proffered that narrative is the most digestible way to communicate scientific information and should be pursued in greater depth. They summed up this potential arguing

that other, as yet untold, narratives hold similar potential for strengthening the feedback between environmental data and policy as they pertain to other environmental problems, and we hypothesize that such narratives are a prerequisite for local or regional action to curb environmental degradation. (p. 597)

The following research will build upon the work of these two studies to further explore how PAs in conjunction with narrative can shift the lens that views wild spaces, and as this study explores the constitutive nature of protected areas, it will borrow aspects of both to further understand the communicative potential of protected areas.

## **Research**

As a scholar of communication and an advocate for the environment, it was the objective of this research to enter into these spaces with eyes wide open to understand how they communicated and their impact upon the self. It was in some ways an attempt to return to a time when, as a small boy, I would visit a forest to learn, and in a similar fashion, these lessons and observations were intentionally unplanned. A vital aspect of this research was the immersion of the self in PAs and the sensational and emotional repercussions of such acts. PAs are powerful communicative beings, but that communication has no finite locus. PAMs can guide and shape the messages they provide and add ones of their own but much of the communication from PAs come from the places themselves. A sign that stands before the Grand Canyon can inform, persuade, and advocate, but it is a candle before the sun compared to the raw communicative power of the Canyon itself and should be treated as such. Therefore, to guide this research freely and broadly through this exploration I utilized the following research question:

RQ: How did the nationwide visitation of protected areas constitutively communicate, impact and ultimately help form my perception of the “wild” and place within it?

## **Autoethnographic Exploration**

Hello, if you are reading this, then I would like to meet you. But let's not meet here.

Where we are right now won't do at all if we are to get off on the right foot. Let's take a step away from our offices, coffee shops, classrooms, and libraries. I would like to take you to a very special place dear to my heart, but to go there, I will need to take you back in time. The year is 1996.

Across the street from a boy's home were two schools. Between those schools lay a forest. In that forest grew a boy who spent the better moments of his developing life looking at the sunlight play amongst the branches, watching insects crawl beneath the foliage, hearing the call of birds sift through the canopy like waves on a beach. This forest served as his teacher, and he was a voracious student. Returning every day, to swing amongst the trees overhanging a pond, rummage in the dirt of the forest floor in summer, and cross the frozen waters in the winter. This little boy would learn about the beginnings of life and growth from jellied frog spawn and the tail whipped tadpoles they birthed. He would learn of death and mortality from a caterpillar spewing a liquid in its last moments while he crouched panicked unable to save it. The most powerful lesson it would teach, however, would come years later.

He would be ending his seventh-grade year. The forest and pond of his childhood stayed vigilant, but his visits became less frequent, the lessons there more spaced apart. He would wake one morning to the beep beep beeping of heavy machinery backing up over and over again. He would step out onto his front porch, and in the pond where he had spent years playing and growing, there was nothing but an angry sore, a drained muddy pit. Machines as tall as the surrounding trees rolled around the bed of the pond. Fish that had spent their lives hiding from the sky flopped next to and under the treads of these behemoths. Chainsaws began to rev and tear

into the trees he spent his childhood living beneath. In the span of a month, they would clear that section of the forest, it would become manicured grass, the pond would get a fountain, and a boy would learn his last lesson from the trees that had once been his school. On this porch, at this moment, I would like to meet you. For it was in this moment that I would learn the fragility of the environment I had taken for granted for so long. I would learn how quickly a thing that had lived for half a century could be destroyed and removed in the span of a month.

Beyond childhood, parks and other protected land remained a prominent part of my life. Between hiking sections of the Appalachian Trail, visiting Mammoth Caves with my father, or simply floating down the Rifle River with my friends, natural sites quickly became a foundational feature of my perspective of the world. As I entered college, I learned valuable lessons about advocacy and the power of an individual's voice and perspective to raise an issue. This new lens empowered me to seek out positive change in the world. As I neared completion of my graduate coursework, I made preparations to return to my roots, apply the lessons I learned to deeply study and in turn educate and advocate for and about wild spaces of the world.

My name is Isaac. I have spent the last two years of my life exploring and investigating some of the United State's most treasured pieces of wilderness. Through my journey I have learned much about my place in the greater ecosystem of this planet, and been humbled by the individuals who have worked so hard to establish and protect this country's wild spaces. Traveling the country is a lot like drawing a picture: some people may do it better than others, but there is no right or wrong way, and in the end, it's the trying that matters. When my partner and I got started, the trying was all we really had going for us. I had spent my entire life living in Michigan and had little experience exploring to the magnitude we had in mind.



We bought a camper, we called it home, and it was. We spent two months living and working out of it before finally taking it onto the open road. We'll get into the details of that later on. Halfway through our journey we sold our camper, and suddenly our home got much smaller. From there we lived in the back of our Toyota 4Runner. Her name was Brianne of Carth (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* Our camper and 4Runner.

Through our time of traveling, we have visited many of the different wild spaces the United States has to offer. I have driven amongst the passes of the Smokies and explored the history of Mammoth Caves. I swam inside a sunken city turned graveyard off the coast of Miami and watched manatees snort their displeasure in the everglades. I saw Bison wandering and

miniature foxes playing on the Channel Islands of California. I've dodged charging big horned sheep and been approached by a mountain goat in Montana. I've seen wild horses in the North and dipped my foot into the Rio Grande in the South. I saw trees as old as the Roman empire to the West, lobsters the size of large cats to the East, and sled down dunes as big as mountains in the middle.

By the end of our journey, we visited 33 states, 40 different national parks, and more state parks, national forests, and public lands than I can count. These places and experiences will stand in my memory forever. They were all unique and had such defining qualities that I could not duplicate any of them anywhere else.

I speak of fond memories and gorgeous locations, but let me be clear, transitioning from living a normal life in an apartment to a tiny 18-foot box was hell. We had no idea what we were doing. For one thing, our vehicle had a low tow limit, so the only way we could pull something of a decent size required us to buy a hybrid style camper with canvas sides in the bedrooms. In Michigan, on the eve of winter, in 35-degree weather, basically living in a tent while working a full time job was maddening. Mud everywhere, the ground swallowed our shoes, brutal and frigid rain showers would rock our camper. Due to the extreme temperature difference between the inside and outside, water accumulated and dripped down like a fog catcher in a Chilean desert. Throughout the night I would wake up to ice cold water droplets splattering onto my face, by morning the blankets I was using to fend off the frigid evenings would be drenched. I decided to be proactive about it and build a fort out of blankets and pressure rods to insulate. This resulted in keeping the heat in, but we quickly learned it the produced mold everywhere. We spent two months cold, wet, and surrounded by a black-tinged fungus that grew back even after bleaching and made us both have congestion and wheeze in the nights. In that time, I had also

managed to completely clog our sewage tank, and locked myself out of the camper resulting in me scrambling in the mud to crawl through a storage side hatch about a foot wide and push up from underneath the couch. By the time we had attached the camper to our vehicle and left Michigan for the winter, we were practically fleeing.

Once on the road we were still far from being in the clear. For anyone considering testing the strength and durability of a relationship, I highly recommend putting themselves through the ordeal of months on end sharing a little tin box with limited showers and no personal space. I'm still quite surprised VH1 hasn't come out with some reality dating show featuring a similar premise. Mix in the aspect that neither of us had any idea what we were doing and we were in for one heck of a bumpy relational ride. We fought over the smallest things, where we were sleeping, what we were eating and whose turn it was to do the dishes.

When traveling the country on a budget, suddenly finding places to sleep becomes an incredibly important and sometimes dangerous task. It was a new and scary feeling to be exhausted and ready for sleep, and have no idea where we were staying for the night. There were times where we would have to drive hours out of our way to find a rest stop or a friendly parking lot, and when exhaustion kicks in this can become a pretty hazardous and emotionally straining process. On more than one occasion we drove hours just to find the spot we thought welcomed campers in fact didn't, and would have to turn around and look elsewhere. It was never my partners fault on these occasions, but to the exhausted and overwhelmed mind, blame and resentment bursts out regardless and more arguments would ensue. On other occasions we would park places that seemed unsafe out of desperation and sleep as quickly and lightly as we could, every passing headlight or unfamiliar sound would jolt me awake and made my heart race.

Slowly but surely, however, we did manage to get the hang of things. And as we stopped by some parks in the Midwest and around the Appalachian Mountains, we were able to enjoy more and more of our experiences. By the time we reached the southern tip of Florida we were enamored with our visits to various protected lands. So much of our experience reminded me of a hands-on museum. It was fascinating watching some parks use visuals along trails to educate and others to recreate scenes of the wild inside of their visitor centers. Almost every National Park offered educational and instructional programs daily to the public. We were able to go stomping through the everglades guided by a ranger and spend a magical evening at another park looking through telescopes larger than canons while they described the various constellations we were viewing in the heavens above. After spending a month exploring Florida, we shot up the panhandle and headed west. We sat in a hot spring that touched the Rio Grande while a roadrunner bobbed and stalked the trails like one of its ancestral dinosaurs behind us. We explored the inner caves of Carlsbad Caverns and imagined the cities of mythical creatures that could have lived and built such marvelous towering structures. We learned a desert can be as rich with life as a jungle among friendly waving Saguaro and saw plants straight out of a Dr. Seuss book at Joshua Tree National Park. Each successive park as magical as the last. But all good things must come to an end eventually.

The Grand Canyon. Poster boy for the National Park System. Inspiration of numerous songs. The only National Park that I am aware of that sells a death book that actually lists off all of the visitors who have died, and how, while visiting. A park so impressive the state of Arizona literally nicknamed itself “The Grand Canyon State.” I mean hell, it even has Grand in the name. Needless to say, my anticipation to visit the storied cliff edges of this deadly park was palpable. I envisioned descending the dusty trails same as thousands before me and venturing from rim to

rim, accompanied by my trusty burro, all the while spitting excessively and quoting Clint Eastwood movies. Grandiose, awe-inspiring, momentous, cathartic. These were the type of words I was planning on attributing to my visit. In reality, the words shitshow, unmitigated disaster, terrifying, and vomity would be much more apropos. So, for those who seek out schadenfreude, come with me. For those who don't, the next couple pages may be uncomfortable.

We were northbound, leaving the red dust encrusted gem of Sedona. As we got closer, signs for Grand Canyon helicopter rides, jeep tours and other adventures only money can buy served as a reliable signifier that we were getting closer. We arrived on a bright and sunny morning to a line of cars outside the entrance. We had been to a good number of popular parks, so this did little to phase us. We were, at that particular junction, a week without bathing and were about as ripe as bananas intended for bread. We immediately sought out the coin operated public showers the Grand Canyon so graciously offered. Upon arriving to the shower house, it gave us the first clue to what we were about to be getting ourselves into.

You can tell a lot about a park by their amenities and how they offer them. A park that is lightly visited will have shower houses with maybe two stalls, or often as not, no showers at all. The same goes for washers and dryers. It is a true rarity to be at a park that offers laundry services to their visitors. The squat brick block of a building we entered was fully loaded with over 10 washers and dryers and 16 showers. There was only about 3 feet between the island of machines and the wall, so people doing laundry or getting coins or simply moving from point A to point B would have to shimmy repeatedly between one another to get by. If that was not enough, since this building was also the main bath house, people were constantly streaming in and out of the bathrooms in varying stages of undress, while a trio of weathered park staff

aggressively circulated between malfunctioning coin operated machines, loud complaints from half naked patrons and their office. All this was taking place in the space that was about the size of my living room. The antisocial introvert in me did some quick mental arithmetic of the odds my partner would stay in a relationship with me if I went another week without showering, took a deep breath and dove into this human gyre of strange smells and frustrated sounds. Thirty minutes and eight high pitched “Occupied!”s later I was back in my car, and headed to the Grand Canyon.

After this anxiety inducing experience, I will be honest I thought myself in the clear. I figured that the minor fiasco at the washhouse was mainly due to the bottleneck type of structure and not an extension of what the Grand Canyon would be like. I was wrong. First of all, I would like to take a moment to reflect on the laws and general etiquette when it comes to driving a car. Think about concepts like right of way, of when to stop and when to go. Contemplate about what it’s like to think of the driver behind you as you apply pressure to the brakes. Now take all of that and throw it over the 6,000-foot-deep ravine that is the Grand Canyon. As soon as an elk is spotted nibbling on a branch by the side of the road, all hell breaks loose. Cars backed up for hundreds of feet, cars driving in the wrong lane of the road. It is straight out of a Mad Max movie the moment a fuzzy horned cleft footed Rocky Mountain elk shows its face. They actually had to post a ranger to direct traffic next to one to stop cars from completely shutting down the road. It took somewhere in the ballpark of half an hour to make it a couple of miles.

Eventually, we did make it to the rim. Or at least close enough to park. Even at this point my optimistic naivete was winning through. I figured, sure, it’s busy, but the Grand Canyon is huge, doubtless once I get to the actual rim people will have dispersed enough between the various trails and sites that it will make little difference to me. So cute past Isaac was. We get to

the primary edge of the Grand Canyon, where the host of the shops and some of the primary trails are attached to, and I kid you not, it was straight out of a Disney World advertisement. People lined up everywhere. You would have been hard pressed to get a photo of the canyon that did not contain a heavily sun screened human in it. To walk the sidewalk, I would have to slip and weave between groups of heavily breathing sweaty bodies, sometimes pushed to a complete standstill and surrounded on all sides. If you have ever gotten off of a subway in a major city, or an airplane where you're seated in the back, think of that but in 90-degree weather with an incredible albeit slightly obstructed view. The shops had people waiting out the door; there were at least 15 people queued up for an ice cream cone alone. We wandered to a few of the shops, poked our heads in, tried to absorb some of the historical data behind the Grand Canyon, before the surging foot track would push us out. After about 20 minutes in line, we did manage to talk with a ranger who recommended a trail for us to hopefully escape the cacophony of humans around and about.

At this point we headed to what we thought would be the trailhead but took a wrong path and went an extra mile out of the way. This trail had no views whatsoever beyond scrub brush and small thorny trees that looked like they had begrudgingly accepted the fact that it was never going to rain. Honestly, this may have been the best part of our time inside of the Grand Canyon. It was the first time we were walking on a path alone, and although we literally saw nothing more impressive than a tumbleweed, at least in that moment it was our tumbleweed. While this brief respite was appreciated, it did do the disservice of lulling us into believing the rest of the trail would be like it. Once it pooped us out onto the actual trail, we saw that there was a bus stop with 20 people waiting. The trailhead was crowded with those milling around, so we dove straight in. We have found with past busy national parks, there is a direct correlation between

how much one must exercise to reach a location and the number of people that go to said location. Thus, with similar apprehensions as Dante we finally descended into the Grand Canyon itself (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2.* The Grand Canyon.

The beginning of the hike was fun, it was busy and we were constantly passing and getting passed by hikers, but the view of the Grand Canyon is undeniable. It truly is the stuff of legends, and tests the parameters of my comprehension to this day. It was as if an artist wanted to create an abstract painting of time. Layer upon layer, winding this way and that disconnected and disjointed and yet coming together to be one indescribable monolith that stretches endlessly in every direction. We began to see less and less people as we were hiking, we were still passing



and getting passed every couple of minutes but at least it was no longer lockstep, and after twenty or so minutes it was clearing up. We thought we had finally made it. We picked up our pace and enthusiastically went around the corner of a switchback just to see a person wearing national park staff attire walking with a purpose straight at us.

There is a certain befuddlement that hiking in 90-degree weather will impose upon the brain, so even as the individual was holding up their hands and speaking directly to me, I kept walking a couple of paces. Finally their persistent “sir”s kicked in. I stopped, and they said to me,

“I’m sorry sir, but do you mind waiting here for a few minutes. The gentleman over there isn’t feeling well.”

We’ve reached a significant moment in the hellscape that was my Grand Canyon experience, so let me take a moment to explain an interesting aspect of how canyons work. For most hike in hike out trails you will take in life (which are trails where you hike one way in and at the end turn around and hike the same way out), particularly if you are in mountainous territory, the first half of your hike is either the hardest or at least neutral part of your hike. Now I am making generalizations, but through my life of hiking, I have found this to hold mostly true. This acts as a good deterrent to people who might otherwise go further than they are able. For example, if I were to try to hike to the top of Mount Rainier right now, my-out-of shape body will communicate to me after a couple of miles that I am silly, and that I must turn around immediately, and I will get to have a nice leisurely walk downhill to freedom. Canyons on the other hand do not work like that, particularly the Grand Canyon. They lure you in with the gentle downhill walk that seems pleasant and easy. The view will hold your attention and distract from any concern for the rapidly rising temperatures (the temperature difference between the top and

bottom of the canyon is around 20 degrees and can often be above 100 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer). You will have spent an hour ooh and aweing and the next thing you know you are 3 miles and thousands of feet below where the car is, in close to 100-degree temperatures. We were getting awfully close to that 3-mile marker. That being said, let us return to the scene.

My partner and I each lean sideways to look past the National Park ranger and see a 250-pound man draped over a woman a third his size taking tiny quarter steps at a time. Now that we were paused the ranger promptly turned around and walked the 20 paces back to him. They have stopped and he is leaning on the wall of the cliff. He suddenly hunches over and begins making dry heaving sounds. My partner and I immediately avert our eyes and try looking at each other instead. We attempt at small talk about the view, about garments we are wearing and anything else we can do to attempt to distract from the splatting on stone sounds, the groaning, blaspheming, and heaving happening some feet away. This goes on for a full five unbelievably uncomfortable minutes, while we try to distance ourselves slowly and inoffensively. Finally, he stands back up, the ranger signals for us to proceed and we move past in our best attempts at casual.

We make it about a quarter of a mile further when the trail takes a dramatic dip downhill. The view opens up, it is stunning. I wish I could say I was consumed in the moment and taken with the scenery, but I was a little distracted. This little jut of trail was teaming with some of the most miserable human beings I have ever seen. I would have thought some battle had occurred less than a mile away. There were people covered in the reddish brown dirt and dust that covered the ground from head to toe. It looked like it had been baked into their clothing. They marched with a resolute determination to get out alive.

As we were sitting on a rock catching our breaths, a man came gasping from around the corner, lied down on his stomach, face pressed into the earth, and started moaning, dust forming clouds with each of his nasal exhalations. The muscles in his legs were all spasming dramatically. We asked if he was okay or needed water, and he just groaned and shook us off with one hand. Meanwhile another man was vomiting over the side of a cliff which must have earned him some kind of distance record. That was the furthest into the Grand Canyon I ever went. And I do believe that me sitting on the edge of a rock, overlooking all of that splendor, with a man vomiting on one side of me, and a man seizing in the dirt on the other, is a good way to sum up my experience at Grand Canyon National Park.

Please do not misunderstand me, that day at the Grand Canyon was rough, but the visit overall formed an incredible memory. Right outside of the park is a National Forest where my partner and I spent an absolutely enchanted evening. We parked on a little piece of land and set up our chairs and tables for dinner. After dinner we sat in the back of our car also known as our bedroom also known as our living room also known as our dining room when we heard the squeak honk of an elk call so loud, we both jumped. And while we sat there, three elk grazed feet from us for over half an hour (see Figure 3).



*Figure 3.* Bighorn Elk grazing in the forest of the Grand Canyon.

That time holding hands with the person I love watching these huge beautiful animals that could not have been closer if I was at a zoo, made the whole trip. It's those little things, those unexpected treats in the most unlikely of places that formed some of my favorite memories.

Our journey was obviously dictated by the various protected areas we wanted to visit. But we quickly learned that strict schedules for the enduring trip such as ours when the weather is capricious at best and downright spiteful at worst meant we had to be flexible and often change plans. The parks we planned on visiting served as a valuable heading. They were the destination, however, there were just as many things to explore along the way. Often those hijinks would occur in and around the small little communities around the parks. The towns that attach

themselves to protected areas are such interesting creatures. They cling to the edges of demarcated parkland like barnacles to a ship, and many have a similar feel. Aging buildings that try and fail to look as old as the surrounding geography and with far less grace. The people who work the shops give the impression that they see a thousand faces a day, but live in a town where everyone knows each other's name. The grocery store/supply store/hardware store/oh thank God there's just a store store upcharge to such an extent that I usually enter wondering where one is supposed to make the customary oblations to even shop there. And the selection invariably involves two types of canned soup, a type of cracker, a baked bean, and an aggressive selection of canned meat. There will undoubtedly be a depressing amount of fresh vegetables that each demonstrate a subtle shifting degree of wilt but will usually have an obscure wildcard vegetable that makes you go "huh, why this?" The truly quintessential park adjacent town will only contain a gas station, a general store and a diner. They will all be connected, and if you're lucky, you can order your breakfast, pay for your gas and check out your groceries after only talking to the one ornery cashier.

I speak disparagingly of these places, but honestly, they served as an oasis for me. Far removed from civilization, they sustained me before my dive into nature. And while the thought of buying a banana for two dollars hurts my heart to this day, these places would also surprise me with random treats. Getting to eat at a diner that served vegan breakfast outside of Yosemite, drinking a martini at a fine cocktail bar on a dusty road adjacent to Great Basin National Park, and finding a combination fruit market and zoo near Biscayne. These experiences often formed a critical part of the memories I gained from a park. And for many, myself included, these are the types of places we are seeking. We visit these remote protected areas to escape the mainstream, to get out of the bustling cities and feel disconnected. There is a real beauty to having limited

options at a grocery store, or only one restaurant in 50 square miles, to have your dinner based on what you can instead of what you choose.

While some of these locales were small and humble, others were nothing short of booming. The city of Moab was wild, nestled between two gorgeous National parks it was brimming with adventure opportunities and delicious food. It demonstrated to me how powerful these beautiful natural sites can be for building a community. The reciprocity between preserved and protected wild areas and the outside local inhabitants was inspiring.

Pristine mountains jutting out from beneath the earth. Lush Valleys untouched and spanning the horizon. Animals of every type crossing our paths. This became our routine, these protected pieces of wild were our day to day ventures and rarely did they not take our breath away.

I remember waking up before sunrise, wandering through a forested hillside to a tiered set of hot springs looking out over a burbling river. We spent the whole morning shifting from spring to spring trying to find the right temperature, like goldilocks we found one just as the sun kissed the top of the tree line. I remember seeing Mount Rainier (see Figure 4) fill its earthen lungs and blow out a massive breath. The crisp exhalation condensed into a cloud all around us as we drove higher and higher. Slopes covered in blooming wildflowers and melting glaciers shedding their winter coats into waterfalls.



*Figure 4.* Mount Rainier at sunset.

I remember hiking to the top of a cliff edge jutting out over the Pacific ocean. The sun beginning to dip toward the horizon. Near the top stood a bison, flowers in its hair, grazing. As the sun began to set, it sat down, and we paid homage to its fading light together. The clouds turned from a brilliant orange to a bloody red, and as they became a brooding purple, the bison stood up and continued to graze, I said goodbye and took my leave (see Figure 5).



*Figure 5. American Bison at sunset.*

I remember stumbling upon a meadow, nestled beneath the peak of a mountain. Two alpine lakes, covered in clover and humming with life (see Figure 6). I swam to a rock out in the middle, the cold mountain water shocking my skin when first they met.





*Figure 6.* Alpine Lake.

I remember snorkeling in a bay full of brightly colored sea slugs (see Figure 7). An octopus trying and failing to camouflage while a harbor seal hugged kelp and watched on curiously. Shuttered oil platforms transformed into reefs in the distance.



*Figure 7. The bay at sunset.*

These memories, two years of visiting wild spaces, living in them and being a part of them, formed an integral part of my identity. I became attached to the parks, possessive and defensive. And slowly, the positive feelings and memories turned sour. I noticed myself becoming consumed with negative emotions when I watched people committing what I considered damaging behaviors while at the parks.

While climbing a trail at Mount Rainier National Park, I couldn't stop focusing on a visitor who was hand feeding a pika. In one of the most beautiful places, I have ever been and all I could think about was my anger towards this person. The same thing occurred while at Delicate Arch in Utah. The sun was setting on this logic defying structure jutting into the sun, and I spent the whole time cursing in my head, consumed with negativity. Watching people walk off trail,

littering, using drones in areas where they shouldn't, harassing animals, and marking trees. More often than not these moments would stand out more distinctly than the gorgeous wilderness I had come to visit.

Eventually I would try to understand why these behaviors bothered me so much. Why was I giving so much of my energy towards people I had no power over. Visiting wild spaces en masse gave scope to how big the wild truly is, sprawling it can be, and endless it can feel. But it also showed how isolated, shrinking, and damaged it is as well.

I can't forget walking inside of dilapidated and warped government buildings torn by new winds and bleached by an old sun. Sidewalk surrounded by yellow tape, entire slabs of cement pulled and buckled out of the Earth.

I can't forget going down the Florida Keys and seeing mounds of debris as high as buildings every few miles. Campers strewn sideways laying in lapping water like a forgotten childhood memory. Deer no higher than my knee wandering ruined homes like foragers in a dystopian world.

I can't forget driving along a mountainside covered in the charred bodies of mammoth trees. The dead fruitlessly dyed the color orange. Homes with signs blessing firefighters, shrines honoring what little they could. Stumps still smoldering as I enter Yosemite.

I can't forget heading toward a mountain, seeing black smoke and thinking it was a factory. The mountain on fire, burning like the head of a match.

I can't forget seeing a rescue truck slowly backing up. A dolphin laying in the bed, convulsing and seizing as domoic acid methodically ate at its brain. It was dead before even getting inside.

All of these experiences add up, and they tore at me. The juxtaposition of the beauty and wonder mixed with just how imperiled these places seemed, raged inside of me. I felt powerless to help them, and I would use the simple rules the national parks offered to channel my frustration. To paint a face on all of the environmental problems we were barreling towards. But more than anything else I think I was applying blame to these rulebreakers to cover my own guilt.

In an age where a climate crisis is becoming ever more certain, the blame of it feels like it lands more and more with myself. It becomes so easy to analyze individual behaviors and attach them to the destruction I saw around me first hand. To read the statistics of what is causing the crisis and seeing myself reflected in the data. Actions as simple as driving, eating, and going to the grocery store suddenly seem monumentally consequential. Beyond even the climate crisis it becomes too easy to see actions directly impact other protected areas. As I drove our SUV cross country to see Lassen Volcanic National Park, the government opens up Alaska's Arctic wildlife refuge for oil drilling. As my family enjoys burgers at a cafe in Yosemite, Brazil strips protections of the Amazon Rainforest for more cattle grazing land. As I bought products covered in extra packaging while on Catalina Island, steps are taken to allow logging in Tongass National Forest. I purchase groceries covered in plastic while volunteering for a nonprofit that pumps it out of the stomachs of seals. And while it is inspiring to work to be better, it feels like a band aide to a sliced artery. I feel like I'm back at the Grand Canyon, and the pristine wilderness I had waited so long to see had been destroyed by myself and all of those around me. I feel like I'm next to a tree, chainsaw in my hand and I see a child across the street, standing still alone on his porch watching me.

There are many things that terrify me about the future. They will not leave me any time soon. They visit me throughout my day, when I'm taking a shower for too long, I worry about water consumption. When I eat heavily processed foods, I worry about my carbon footprint and when I think to take a vacation, I worry about the jet fuel I might use. In moments like these I try to be better, but sometimes I just have to take a deep breath and remember my visit to Monterey Bay. We visited the aquarium there in early April. Monterey is located on the coast of California, along the historic one highway. The one is a road unlike any other I have ever driven. Along it you will see giant stones turned to rookeries by swarming birds placed off the coast as if by giants. You will pass by harems of elephant seals numbering in the thousands all squawking like monkeys, and grey whale babies who love to play in the shallows while their mothers watch from deeper waters. You will drive past entire mountains that suddenly became covered in flowers, turning bright orange and purple. It is along this magical drive that we come to the town of Monterey and learned the history of those now protected waters.

Visiting the aquarium here has been on my partners wish list for much of her life, and so shortly after arriving we purchase tickets and get in line. We walked in and were immediately met with what looked more like an industrial site than an aquarium. The first exhibit offered a display showing what looked like old timey sardine cans and great machines that I can only assume had a purpose in the process of canning. We were in fact standing in the remains of one of the old primary canning factories. The exhibit proceeded to describe the Monterey Bay as it once was: teeming with life, full of opportunities. They described the fisherfolk who lived there seizing upon the riches the seas offered. They pulled incredible amounts of fish out of the oceans, and with those spoils built a thriving community right there on Monterey. But as the story so often goes, after more and more prosperity, suddenly one year the yields of fish dropped

dramatically, and the year after that they were all but gone. And as fast as the town had expanded, it had removed almost all of the remaining sardines left in the bay and collapsed.

After the initial historical exposition, the aquarium opens up, and we had our pick of a whole host of different amphibious exhibits. We wandered past a herd of children mesmerized by a scuba diver feeding the fish, while a docent described the various species feasting. We sped past the penguin exhibit while my partner gave them dirty looks. She used to work at a zoo when she was younger and got bullied by the penguins during feeding time. After seeing an aquatic menagerie behind glass, the museum ushers you toward an auditorium, where they further discussed the animals of Monterey and the surrounding waters.

Protections were eventually placed upon the Bay, fishing was prohibited and life bounced back, and dramatically. While standing on the balcony of the aquarium I could see seals sunbathing on the beach. Birds fishing in the waters. It was a beautiful moment in our trip, it offered a critical time for pause and reflection. Here I was standing in one of the major canning factories abandoned by an unsustainable past generation that had been transformed into a tool of science, education, and advocacy for future generations. It communicated a warning to me, of what self destructive behaviors can do to communities and to nature. It demonstrated the power of reincarnation: how quickly life can return when it is encouraged and protected. They discussed how over the past couple hundred years grey whales, elephant seals and brown pelicans were all but extinct, but through dedicated work, all of the species have survived and are now rebounding. To be able to pass harems of thousands of seals, see baby grey whales playing and pelicans flying first hand while driving to and from this aquarium filled me with so much hope for what can still be saved, and what can still be accomplished.

## Results

Returning to the previously posed research question:

RQ: How did my nationwide visitation of protected areas constitutively communicate, impact and ultimately help form my perception of the “wild” and place within it.

First, the dynamic of how power and state of being communicated within these various protected areas stood starkly in the forefront. When visiting the wilds of the United States of America, you will run into a whole host of different forms of power holders over these spaces. We visited national parks, state parks, national forests, national lakeshores, national monuments, Bureau of Land Management sites, Navajo Tribal Parks, and private property. The communicative features of each of these different power holders could be dramatically different. For example, seeing the slogan of the National Forest system as “Land of Many Uses” and observing sections that were logged communicated a mixed message of private enterprise and land conservation. I took a tour within Mammoth Caves National Park and a tourist asked the guide if the cave crickets were good for fishing; the guide responded “not these crickets, these are federal crickets.” It communicated to me an austere purity the NPS applied to the land they were in charge of. This purity seemed confused however, for as they were protecting individual species they also built intensive infrastructure like Wi-Fi towers and substantial food marts in Yosemite, demonstrating their oxymoronic need to provide rich engrossing human experience while simultaneously protecting the land. When visiting a Navajo Tribal Park, minimal buildings were established on the land, and areas of exploration were either guided or prohibited. There was a very clear route the visitors were able to take in and out. It communicated to me the importance of the area to the power holders and potentially a lack of trust for tourists visiting.

The variations of influence over areas was intriguing, for they often directly affected the overall communicative feel of each location. After the completion of this research, I believe these parks wield tremendous educational and communicative power. As visitation steadily grows and the popularity for wild spaces continues to rise, this power will only strengthen. The physical and emotional features of protected areas around the country contain immense raw power to move and inspire. The individuals who manage them are capable of using that renewable resource to educate, advocate and influence.

On a personal level my visitation to these protected areas created an altered perspective of what things like “wild” and “protected” means. The extreme variation PA to PA quaked my expectations upon arrival. Some national parks were busier than cities, some completely empty mountainsides were adjacent to major metropolitan areas. The relationship and definition of what “wild” communicated to me suddenly went into flux, and with it went my place within the wild. It was terrifying and liberating all at once. I would travel to remote locations and still feel connected to some piece of human impact, which was defeating, but at the same time I would find pockets of profound natural beauty intermingling with intensely human constructs. In those moments the lines of nature and human would become blurred and impressed upon me a hope for a future where these meanings are not communicated as antithesis, but whole and singular.

This study has produced several implications that are worthy of further review. As discussed earlier, environmental communication functions in two distinctive ways, pragmatically and constitutively. The focus of this research was upon the ways in which PAs in conjunction with narrative impact individual’s perceptions in a constitutive way. Therefore, the following section will explore various implications that are rooted in the constitutive forming of communication methods in tandem with wild spaces. The implications are broken down into



three major subcategories: implications rooted in the direct practice of communication, rhetorical theory, and communication-based advocacy.

Through this research several key implications for the understanding of communication can be withdrawn. Narrative is an important and valuable resource when communicating about protected areas. Dahlstrom (2014) examined the work and thoughts of several scholars discussing science communication and narrative and summarized: “Narratives are easier to process and generate more attention and engagement than traditional logical-scientific communication. Narratives already represent the format with which most nonexperts receive their information about science and narratives are intrinsically persuasive” (p. 13617) As pressures and challenges build for protected areas around the world, education and influence strategies have been integral in their function and management. It is the assertion of this study that narrative is a promising and functional way to build upon those strategies. Narrative, particularly through autoethnography demonstrated a compelling ability to disseminate, persuade and advocate for and about protected areas.

More specifically this research showed how it can uniquely communicate in the following ways. It allows data to be grounded and embodied. The closer the researcher can approximate the challenges of protected areas to lived experiences the better the reader can embody that threat. It allows for a more relatable and digestible communication of time. Many challenges revolving around protected areas and the environment span large sequences of time that are often hard to compartmentalize. Narrative makes this process easier to follow. Finally it has the potential to link geographic areas that are thousands of miles apart. To achieve the U.N.’s goal of interconnecting protected areas globally narrative is positioned to best link ones that are otherwise separate.

There can be a critical disconnect from the problems protected areas face and those who have a profound impact upon them. There is no lack of thorough data that can guide and persuade, it is the vehicle and dissemination of this information that needs further study. Embodiment is a critical aspect this paper explores to add to this conversation. The better the reader is able to approximate the problems of protected areas the better they can take those problems seriously. Spoel et al. (2009) explored the use of apocalyptic narrative to communicate about climate change. They argued one of the three fundamental components to building public engagement required that “technical details must be reinterpreted within a framework of cultural rationality that engenders a sense of social significance and personal caring” (p. 77)

Autoethnography has demonstrated a compelling ability to allow for the embodiment of various experiences, and thusly pave the way for the connection to technical information. It allows people living in New York City to envelope themselves in the struggles of those facing wildfires in California. Those same individuals in California can then grasp the challenges of hurricane-buffed Floridians. It is through the layering of in depth evocative and descriptive language that complex data can be understood and embraced. This research explored aspects of embodiment, depicting some of the most prominent issues plaguing PAs to this day. For example, outside research has used multiple methods to measure and understand visitor’s standards of crowding including photographs of crowds at parks as well as written descriptions of crowding (Manning & Freimund, 2004). This autoethnography explored the problem on a deeper level, describing more than the face value of bumping into people on a trail, and delved into the emotional toll and catharsis of human interaction while at a park. This type of exploration could have a large impact upon the ways parks seek to further measure and understand visitor’s perception of crowding and ultimately how crowding alters perceptions of the wild.

This research explored how narrative can function to communicate the passage of time. As one visits various protected areas, it becomes clear how prominent time can be in the function of these areas. As I watched the sun set and change the color of thousands of layers of sedimentary rock piled upon one another at Petrified Forest National Park or read about the slow build and quick collapse of the volcano that became Crater Lake, time stood a monolith behind them. And while some protected areas function as a visual aid to the passage of time, many concepts that revolve around time and protected areas are hard to express and communicate. Topics like urban sprawl, dwindling animal populations, and rising global temperatures are subtle, incremental and often hard to discern. This autoethnography explored the communication of time, depicting the forest that quickly receded to grass due to human intervention, and the demise and rebound of wild populations. Many of the communicative strategies used to persuade action on the environment revolve around time. For example, the date 2050 has become a mainstream talking point, referring to the end all of a myriad of environmental problems, from climate catastrophe to plastic accumulation in the oceans. As time serves as such a distinct and prominent augury within the environmental sciences, it is upon communication scholars to further explore and understand ways to communicate environmental data in conjunction with time. I visited many different wild spaces, and I would observe time play out in a thousand different ways. Watching cicadas hatch and crawl upward in a day after laying dormant for years. Seeing the delicate tendrils of weathered stone spanning a horizon that took millions of years to grow. Standing beneath the deluge of a waterfall gifted by the changing of a season. Time in the wild is a nimble and capricious creature. Communication about the wild should follow suit.

Finally, this research explores the concept of interconnecting wild spaces. This issue is layered and multifaceted. On face value wild spaces are attempting to become physically interconnected. For example, Hannah (2008) noted that to allow species to migrate as the climate continues to heat up, PAs that were previously protected islands on otherwise unprotected land are attempting to stitch themselves together to allow safe passage for various species. On a metaphorical level, environmental rhetoricians are exploring the ways in which we discuss wild spaces, and that ultimately everything is a wild space. This research delved into knitting together the country's protected areas through narrative on both a literal and metaphorical level. By linking these wilds and discussing similarities in features and struggles, it tested how narrative can help communicate the need for PA interconnectedness. While discussing the feelings of wildness, it delved more into the rhetorical meaning of these spaces, and the definitions that I as an environmentalist placed upon them.

As environmental pressures facing humanity and the world continues to grow, and the event horizon of irreversible climate induced problems edges nearer, it is incredibly important to explore new communication techniques revolving around the environment. Protected areas around the world serve as a bastion for a slew of sustainability goals, and thus similarly require attention from communication scholars to find new ways to discuss inform and advocate for. Cramer and Foss (2009) presented a communication framework using the writings of Jean Baudrillard to shift communication practices around the environment. Their work argued for environmental communication to be effective, we believe there needs to be a fundamental shift in the human-nature relationship. These messages, in other words, need to enact or at least suggest the possibilities of a relationship that is mutually enhancing to both humans and the natural world. Our purpose in this essay is to explore how certain

communication practices may foster-or be the outcome of-a different earth-human relationship that is mutually beneficial and more successful in achieving the kinds of changes that are desired and necessary for the environment (p. 298).

Cramer and Foss (2009) articulated, “In this world, reality is envisioned as a series of collisions, juxtapositions, opportunities, and coincidences under the ‘control’ of forces of destiny and chance” (p. 299) Their framework consists of three primary tenets: intersubjectivity, seduction, and sorcery. They applied this framework to explore the works of two highly influential environmental advocates to further explore the efficacy of their communication strategies and ultimately influence future messages. Due to the strong correlation in both type of advocacy and content of the subjects they analyzed, this framework will be well suited toward the study of my own research.

Cramer and Foss’s (2009) first tenet, intersubjectivity, questions the notions that humans are separate from nature and in control of it. They further present an alternative perspective in which nature has its own agency, and while humanity communicates from its subjective cultural position, so too does nature. They contended that rather than from a place of power and superiority humanity and nature were a part of one another, and communication is an earthen behavior that humanity participates in. This type of intersubjectivity becomes visible in the beginning of the autoethnography, as the boy visits the forest, and he envisions it not as an object for manipulation but rather as a teacher, a being who he attempts to learn and grow from. At the moment when the forest is cut down, it implied a relational loss, rather than that of an object.

The second tenet within their framework is seduction. They describe seduction as an exciting and enticing way to draw people in. They heavily stressed the importance of the here and now. They noted, “Seduction does not come with commitments that extend into the future or

that draw on the past; it is playful and enticing in its own, present moment. It takes an instantaneous and often unexplainable chemistry and uses that to make the present moment a fully engaged, vital, and exciting one” (p. 307) Within this research, seduction emerges during the descriptions of my own problematic behaviors and their consequences on PAs. Many actions that are committed by people have long term negative effects upon the environment, but these can be difficult to witness and seem abstract in their manifestation. By applying seduction and linking these behaviors to deregulated protected areas, it allows for the emergence of immediate consequence.

The final tenet within their framework is sorcery. They argued that the sorcerer does not worry about following the rules of rationality and instead focuses on spontaneity and fragmentation. It worries less about control and management and more about cooperation with nature, and obscuring the potential with the actual. They contended it “values forms of language that contain collisions, juxtapositions, and connections because they enact the sorcerer’s magic or ability to put together the unconscious and conscious worlds in the seamless oneness or whole that is the true nature of the universe” (p. 309), and “It is the insistence that the creative and poetic has its own power that most clearly distinguishes the fatal strategy of sorcery from traditional scientific arguments” (p. 311). This tenet plays throughout the autoethnography but significantly emerges close to the end of the narrative section in which I juxtapose the good memories with ones I’d rather forget. It mixes time that spans decades and space that stretches across the country to display a complex and difficult layer of emotions with the backdrop of beautiful and traumatic events.

After applying this theory to the research, two key implications arise from the findings. The concept of misinformation within environmental communication and the function of time as

a communicative tool. It is critical that communication scholars find new ways to reshape conversations around the environment and the wild. However, in an era of stark politicization and misinformation revolving around the environment, we must enter into these conversations wearily and with open eyes. Narrative has the potential to be sensational; in fact, it often actively seeks to be, but, this could have negative effects upon the perceptions of truth. Within the realm of communication, it is particularly important that we deeply contemplate our role as scholars. In an era of anecdotal denial of truths and politicization of facts, is it our role to remain passive, removed arbiters of information, or to aggressively tell our truths in new compelling ways that are imbued with raw emotional tones?

The second implication raised from the application of this theory delves into how we communicate the present in connection with the environment. As discussed earlier, time is a critical component of communicating environmental data. Much of the forecasts and requirements advocating for and about environmental change are based upon future dates. The tenet of seduction throws into question the importance of this tool. Perhaps the projection of deadlines are less important and should receive less focus, rather a greater focus upon what is and can be done now. So much of the conversation around the climate crisis is rooted in the date 2050. But as focus upon future doom is heavily discussed, does it detract from the current crisis already at hand? For example, do we as a society need to hear about rampant forest fires decades from now when Australia's PAs burn yesterday. It explores the rhetorical nuances between *chronos* and *kairos* within environmental communication. By alighting upon seduction and pulling perspectives toward the here and now, it implies an importance for immediate action. Miller (1992) noted, "Kairos is often translated as 'the right time': one waits for a specific moment, and success depends on discerning it. But one might also ask 'right for what?' 'Success

at what?’” (p. 312) Following this concept of *kairos*, seduction could push the reader to ask what is now the right time for, what can be done now to further protect wild spaces? It is upon rhetors to further test the viability of concepts like *kairos* and seduction within

This research demonstrates the tremendous power these protected areas have for communicating and advocating for and about topics revolving around the environment. An implication of this study demonstrates a potential next step for protected areas, particularly those with a strong educational intermediary between nature and those who manage it like national and state parks. That step would move toward a greater advocacy of behavioral change, and move beyond the limitations of site-specific problems like littering and walking off trail. As Spurlock (2009) noted, “Until and unless NPS discourses redefine conservation civics as an explicit call for regulation of public and private practices that are inherently unsustainable, most visitors will remain blissfully ignorant of the multiple “tipping points” looming in our immediate future.” It is in the self-interest of these parks to have a populace educated in environmental literacy and no longer convenient nor acceptable to pretend these areas will survive unscathed by the future culling problematic behaviors will commit. While this is the responsibility of the parks, it is just as important for communication scholars to explore and expand the ways in which these powerful beacons of public interest and inspiration can be used to educate and communicate in new ways. PAs offer profound ways to communicate. They are a hands-on museum, and a visual aid second to none. They can teach us about time immemorial and the power of earthly forces. It is upon us as communication scholars to find ways to utilize these immense rhetorical and wild objects to shift the narrative around our environment.

The second implication revolves around the power of wild spaces and their impact upon the development of childhood value systems. Whether it is perceived through a rhetorical lens or



that of behavioral belief systems, utilizing wild spaces to educate and instill a young populace to have a connection with nature is an exciting and relatively new concept. Richardson et al. (2017) observed “that natural space, particularly in the form of private gardens, contributes to better social, emotional and behavioral outcomes for 4-6 year old children in urban Scotland” (p. 735). The narrative section within this piece explores how a strong upbringing in wild spaces impacts perceptions later in life and builds upon that notion. This is further backed up by Stevenson, Peterson, Bondell, Mertig, and Moore (2013) whose study portended, “Achieving EL (Environmental Literacy) through K–12 education is a critical step to creating a public equipped to meet and solve environmental challenges... Time outdoors is one of the only factors that significantly impacts Knowledge, Affect, and Behavior” (p. 9) As I visited some of the more prominent national parks across the country, it became clear that field trips by students was a common enough aspect but as Stevenson et al. (2013) argued, “School-wide EE (environmental education) programs will fail to achieve EL gains unless these programs include tangible changes to curricula in classrooms” (p. 9). This research implicates the power PAs have to constitutively impact young students. It also raises questions revolving around the type of experience within these wild spaces. The study has demonstrated a wide swath of different types of PAs, does the variation of place impact the constitutive nature of the visit? How would the lessons differ when visiting a crowded Grand Canyon National Park versus atop an empty vista at Big Bend National Park? How can these different wild spaces communicate various lessons?

## Conclusion

There are a couple limitations that should be articulated when regarding my study. While autoethnography can be an effective tool for the exploration and communication of deep, complex experiences it comes at some costs. For this research to continue to grow and be successful, it is important to explore some of these key weaknesses. The most significant limitations that deserve attention are my environmental roots and my demographic.

This experience of exploring protected areas across the country had a critical impact upon the way I viewed wild spaces. But it is important to recognize the beginning of this autoethnography, which detailed my early experiences with nature and the foundational bedrock of environmentalism it bestowed. I think it undeniable that there are levels of bias that should be considered. It is important to acknowledge that individuals without my background may have a very different reaction to these spaces and glean different messages from them.

Demographically speaking as a White male raised in the United States I am a part of a specific population, and my White western perspective is far from representing all. While visiting various national parks, it becomes clear how significant these places were for individuals before Western Colonization. Almost every visitor center would have an exhibit depicting the indigenous people who had first called these places home. This country's protected areas are tightly interwoven into our history, and like U.S. history they carry with them dark and twisted memories that need to be brought into the light and properly addressed. PAs also represent a significant part of our country today, and similarly reflect significant modern racial and cultural challenges. These are narratives that are desperately needed to further advocate for and protect wild spaces. They are also narratives that I, as a White man, have no place telling. As Stewart (2008) stated, "Outdoor environmental education experiences offer a significant opportunity to

engage both physically with a landscape and cognitively with those who have played a role in shaping a place. Not paying attention to the history of a place is an ‘exercise of power’ by omission” (p. 88). When considering aspects of narrative in conjunction with protected areas, it is critical for voices to be in this conversation beyond my demographic, and we as scholars must seek them out and raise them up.

More research exploring protected areas of the world is vital. Hopefully, this autoethnography inspires future scholars to further examine characteristics of PAs that have been neglected in the past. The following will explore several different avenues for study to embark: pairing data with parks, focusing on international protected areas, and exploring different perspectives toward protected areas.

Utilizing autoethnography to display data about the environment has been shown to be effective. Following this study, I believe utilizing narrative to weave data with singular problems facing numerous PAs across the country would be worthy of study. For example, by focusing on the intersection of narrative PAs and crowding while pairing it with strong data, I believe compelling communication-based discoveries could be made. This could similarly be used for concepts like the advancement of invasive species, forest fires, and park etiquette.

This study exclusively examined the protected areas of the United States. As one of the functions of this research was to explore how to interconnect parks, PAs around the world will similarly need further analysis. I am sure different countries and different cultures have variations within their park systems and unique struggles that are worthy of study and deep exploration. As environmental problems continue to bleed across borders and the climate crisis worsens, finding ways to look at our PAs and ultimately the world as a single interconnected unit will be paramount.

In my travels I found many of the protected areas were largely White-dominated spaces. Some PAs even had overt racist or problematic messages delivered via guide or educational video. An analysis from individuals who were not a part of my demographic could offer a compelling narrative of the dynamics within PAs. In order to agitate the mainstream that is largely tied to and enforced within PAs, I believe scholarship geared toward these stories would be helpful.

As the first European settlers waded through the shallows of what would become Jamestown and Plymouth they were met by an expansive ocean of wilderness. Over the next 400 years that ocean evaporated into small and scattered islands and great bodies of human infrastructure rose up to take its place. This study portends deeply embedded perceptions can have a profound impact upon the environment. Stankey (1989) reviewed the historical western ideologies of the wild and concluded,

As the antonym of civilization, wilderness retains an image for many people as a place of fear and foreboding and as an active challenge to civilization's survival. Perhaps deeply scored on the genetic code of humans are the fears of our ancestors as they huddled around the fire, listening to the sounds of the night around them, ever mindful of their precarious status and vulnerability. Today, it is civilization and society that surround the wilderness, its survival dependent upon our capacity to recognize the values it possesses and our willingness to ensure its preservation (p. 24)

As we stand upon the precipice of our own design, looking out over a myriad of environmental disasters waiting to swallow us from below, understanding and attempting to further shift the constitutive nature of these wild spaces is vital.

This study reviewed the literature rooted in environmental communication and protected areas to better interpret their function and requirements within the field. By utilizing autoethnography, it sought to build upon the connection of narrative and scientific communication in order to better equip PAMs, scholars and advocates alike. The research produced implications for the style with which narrative can be used to communicate about PAs and future areas to expound. As the short story of human existence is written upon the earth, it is important to realize that there will be no deus ex machina to save us from environmental catastrophe, but with some creativity and exceptional determination we may have the ability to write a happy ending.

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It's been almost 15 years since that little boy watched part of his forest get torn down. I returned home one weekend after being away for a year, and in the space where I used to learn the lessons of the woods, stood two new buildings. A sign in front of them declared a new expansion on the school's educational program. They had begun a forest school. The buildings were surrounded by fallen logs to sit on, trees to play beneath. I would walk my dog and see children the same age as I was, playing amongst the branches, yelling, exploring, creating worlds that only nature can provide.

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