

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

Society and Conservation Faculty Publications

Society and Conservation

12-2023

Exploring Underserved Communities' Perspectives on Wilderness Character in Everglades National Park

Elena R. Thomas

University of Montana, Missoula

Jaclyn F. Rushing

USDA Forest Service

William L. Rice

University of Montana, Missoula

Jennifer M. Thomsen

University of Montana, Missoula

Christopher A. Armatas

USDA Forest Service

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/soccon_pubs

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

Thomas, Elena R.; Rushing, Jaclyn F.; Rice, William L.; Thomsen, Jennifer M.; and Armatas, Christopher A., "Exploring Underserved Communities' Perspectives on Wilderness Character in Everglades National Park" (2023). *Society and Conservation Faculty Publications*. 39.

https://scholarworks.umt.edu/soccon_pubs/39

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Society and Conservation at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in Society and Conservation Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

Exploring Underserved Communities' Perspectives on Wilderness Character in Everglades National Park

by ELENA R. THOMAS, JACLYN F. RUSHING, WILLIAM L. RICE, JENNIFER M. THOMSEN, and CHRISTOPHER A. ARMATAS



Elena R. Thomas



Jaclyn F. Rushing



William L. Rice



Jennifer M. Thomsen



Christopher A.
Armatas

ABSTRACT Issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion are becoming increasingly important to park and protected area managers. Recently, several Executive Orders have established policies and priorities for steering public lands to better serve the diversity of the US public. Certain groups, compared to the US population at large, are underrepresented as visitors to parks and protected areas in the US, including BIPOC communities (Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color), women, people with disabilities, veterans, people with lower socioeconomic status, and the elderly. This disparity in visitation may be even more pronounced in federally designated wilderness areas. We present a qualitative study focused on the relationships of traditionally underserved groups with Everglades National Park, specifically focusing on perceptions of wilderness character in the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness. Findings illuminate both perceived benefits of wilderness, including positive mental health, ecosystem services, and a connection to unique aspects of wilderness character in the Everglades, as well as conflicted feelings about wilderness as a place that underemphasizes historic interactions of underrepresented communities with the landscape. We discuss management implications, particularly ways to focus protected area efforts to broaden the relevancy of wilderness lands and better serve diverse populations within local communities.

Keywords: wilderness character; diversity; everglades; underserved populations.

Wilderness preservation provides critical benefits to humankind. The wilderness construct, however, as codified in the United States (US) context by the Wilderness Act of 1964, is underpinned by a colonial paradigm of nature and civilization (DeLuca and Demo 2001; Thomas et al. 2022). While the concept of wilderness leisure and recreation is largely owed to east Asian and Middle Eastern cultures (Nash 2014), our present conceptualization of wilderness is the product of western colonialism, a force largely dominated by white, male, Christian ideals (Stankey 1989). As such, the policies and management documents that direct wilderness stewardship derive from foundational policy containing “baked-in” inequities (Hays 2019). This may also be true for the Wilderness Act of 1964 (Powell 2016)—which, among other purposes, provides a definition of wilderness, describes the purpose of wilderness, and created the National Wilderness Preservation System in the US. For instance, Powell’s (2016) history of the wilderness movement points to an intention to construct a wilderness designation that would limit accessibility to the majority of Americans (what William Vogt referenced in 1943 as the “Venture beach and Coney Island crowd” which was increasingly visiting national parks). As written by US Forest Service staff Manly Thompson in 1928, “Question: What makes the wilderness wild? Answer: Exclusion of the hoi polloi. Question: How can we exclude said hoi polloi? Answer: Keep the wilderness inaccessible” (p. 2). Bob Marshall appears to concede to Thompson’s primary argument (that proposals for a wilderness designation were being designed to exclude the majority) in his essay “The Wilderness as a Minority Right” (1928).

Further, the suggestion that the wilderness concept is the product of western colonialism is partly supported by the lack of demographic diversity (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, and religion) of participants involved in creating and formalizing the wilderness concept. For instance, the American conservation movement, which overlaps with the wilderness movement, has been described as a vision of middle class, white men (Taylor 1997; 2002). It is worth noting that the centering of a white-male vision of conservation is largely due to the lack of cultural attention to BIPOC-led environmental movements, which have historically been neglected by dominant American news and media sources (Finney 2014). For example, in her book *Black Faces, White Spaces*, Carolyn Finney emphasizes how national magazines such as *Outside* are one way in which "the dominant environmental narrative in the United States is transmitted to the public" (2014, p. 78). From 1991 to 2001, Finney identified 4,602 pictures in *Outside* that contained people, 103 of which included African Americans – most of whom were famous male athletes in urban settings and "primarily in advertisements" (2014, p.78). Nonetheless, the wilderness movement, as formalized in the act, was largely ethnocentric; consider that the 87th US Congress, which served between 1961 and 1963 in the lead-up to the passage of the Wilderness Act, was 92% Christian, 98% White, and 97% male (Congressional Research Service 2012).

Thus, a common understanding of the wilderness construct, generally implemented by US federal land management agencies focused on preserving "wilderness character,"

is likely influenced by a narrow view resulting from the prominence of a colonial lens. Wilderness character, as adopted by federal land management agencies, is defined in the Keeping It Wild framework (Landres et al. 2008) as consisting of five qualities: (1) untrammelled, (2) natural, (3) undeveloped, (4) solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation, and (5) unique values of a given wilderness area. These five qualities of wilderness character are derived from Section 2(c) of the 1964 Wilderness Act, and Landres et al. (2008) broadly define wilderness character as:

The combination of biophysical, experiential, and symbolic ideals that distinguishes wilderness from other lands. These ideals combine to form a complex and subtle set of relationships among the land, its management, its users, and the meanings people associate with wilderness. (p. 6)

However, given that our understanding of wilderness character and its ideals is informed by colonial influence, there is much to learn about wilderness character from decolonized perspectives. Indeed, Landres et al. (2008) appear to allude to the potential revision of our understanding of wilderness character when noting that "wilderness character is more than these four qualities" (p. 8) and additional "aspects of wilderness character could be added to this interagency strategy as research develops" (p. 8).

Considering the colonial nature of the wilderness construct as we know it and the lack of research that seeks to amplify marginalized voices on wilderness character (Thomas et al. 2022; Thomsen et al. 2023), this

study is centered around Everglades National Park's (EVER) coastal, urban-proximate, and unique Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness (MSD), and aims to expand our understanding of wilderness character by exploring the following research question: What relationship do local underserved communities have with MSD and what are their perceptions of wilderness character? Approximately 1.3 million acres or 86% of EVER is designated wilderness and is the largest subtropical wilderness in the US and the largest wilderness area east of the Rocky Mountains (National Parks and Recreation Act 1978). EVER and MSD are also in close proximity (about 75 miles, 120 kilometers) to the Miami metropolitan area, boasting nearly 3 million people (with 72% identifying as Hispanic/Latino). Additionally, this study contributes toward addressing other recently defined research gaps in wilderness visitor use management (VUM) by examining an urban proximate and coastal wilderness area, both of which are lacking in the greater wilderness VUM literature (Rice et al. 2021).

Importantly, the purpose of this study is not to compare or contrast the wilderness perspectives of underserved communities to the perspectives of the majority of wilderness users. Such an approach would simply reaffirm the power of this majority. As noted by Park et al. (2022), the trend of research in the leisure sciences that explores marginalized groups' use patterns as they relate to another group "is problematic and limiting to the experience" (p. 3) of the marginalized group whereby their experiences may be viewed as simply ancillary to the majority. Instead, this study seeks to focus on the underserved com-

munities' perspectives. Reference is made to the policy and management documents that guide wilderness stewardship nationally and locally, but otherwise framing underserved, marginalized perspectives in comparison to wilderness use as a whole is curbed wherever possible. We understand that this may limit the ability to connect this research with much of the existing literature. We also acknowledge that "underserved" and "majority" are blanket terms to describe groups of people who are intersectional and not monolithic. Previous research on constraints to recreation found that intersecting identities such as age, gender, race, class, and place of residence interact, and can influence recreation preferences and barriers (Shores et al. 2007). Through a multiple-hierarchy stratification analysis, Shores and colleagues (2007) found that the most constrained people were women of color, especially when combined with low socioeconomic status and being elderly. Young White men were significantly less constrained than other identity combinations (Shores et al. 2007). From an intersectional perspective, we highlight that the dominant or majority wilderness user is similar to the demographic who composed and signed the 1964 Wilderness Act – primarily White, wealthy, hetero, cisgender, and able-bodied.

Methods

Data Collection

To address our research aims, 23 in-depth semistructured interviews were conducted from March to August 2022. This study utilized a hermeneutic approach and is guided by the assumption that rich understanding can be obtained by exploring how participants construct meaning and make sense of their lived experiences, with an emphasis on the situational and cultural context of those experiences (Patterson and Williams 2002).

The study sample was obtained using a mixture of purposive and snowball sampling methods, to obtain a diverse range of perspectives and backgrounds among participants, as well as sufficient representation of a variety of underserved communities living in South Florida (Parker and Geddes 2019). Outdoor affinity organizations, or shared identity groups with common interests in the outdoors, were originally targeted to recruit participants who may have had a previous relationship with the park or an interest in visiting. Interviewees were then asked to suggest other groups or individuals who belonged to a local underserved population; thus, while some interviewees had a great deal of familiarity visiting MSD and knowledge of the area, several interviewees had not visited before or had very limited experience. Participants were recruited through an email request or through social media (Instagram, Facebook) direct messages, and all interviews were conducted via Zoom. In total, nine interviewees identified as Latine, four as African American, four as multiethnic, one as Asian, three as Caucasian,

and two did not disclose their ethnicity. Twelve interviewees identified as women, nine as men, and two did not disclose their gender. Three members of our sample identified themselves as living with a disability, one identified as belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community, and two were veterans. Ages of the participants varied, ranging from 22 to 72 years of age. Due to significant time constraints, we were unsuccessful in our attempts to interview members of South Florida Native American Tribes. While numerous attempts were made to connect with tribal members, we were unable to develop the relationships needed to collaborate on this research (Kovach 2021).

In total, the average interview length was 45.5 minutes. A semistructured interview guide consisting of approximately seven questions and probes was utilized by the interviewer to provide comparable results across participants, allow for unique insights, and encourage freedom of response (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). Questions focused on the importance of EVER to study participants' lives, and perceptions of MSD. Participants were also prompted to respond to direct language from the Wilderness Act of 1964 referencing wilderness character, to explore general attitudes and relevance of the wilderness concept. For example, participants were asked what the statement – "an area of wilderness has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation" – meant to them. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim; pseudonyms were used in place of participant names for confidentiality purposes.

Analysis

A qualitative data analysis program (NVivo) was used to systematically code and organize the data. The coding process consisted of reading each transcript multiple times in its entirety and initially analyzing it for major emergent elements of each participant's interview (idiographic analysis) (Patterson and Williams 2002). Similar overarching themes across cases were identified, coded, and assigned into categories that spanned across individuals (nomothetic analysis) (Patterson and Williams 2002). Through this analytical process known as the "hermeneutic circle," the individual elements of each interview are continuously and simultaneously compared to the whole phenomenon being studied, and in turn, the whole is compared to its parts, leading to a richer understanding (Gadamer 1989). To encourage consensus, multiple authors reviewed transcripts to develop codes and discuss themes that emerged in the process (Bartley and Brooks 2021).

The hermeneutic paradigm assumes that researchers cannot compartmentalize their prior knowledge and preconceptions when interpreting study participants' lived experiences. In fact, the interviewers' prior knowledge and experience plays an active role in understanding and organizing emergent themes from each interview (Gadamer 1989). Thus, it is important to acknowledge that our positionality as White members of higher education and land management institutions may have affected our interpretation of the information that participants shared. Additionally, as an English-speaking, middle class, able-bodied, and cisgender woman, the lead author and interviewer approached this work from an undoubtedly privileged and outsider perspective that may have influenced how participants were recruited, how they perceived the research, and what they were willing to discuss.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Ethnicity
<i>Jasmina</i>	32	Woman	Multiethnic
<i>Sarah</i>	30	Woman	African American
<i>Danny</i>	42	Man	Multiethnic
<i>Daniel</i>	*	*	*
<i>Sally</i>	27	Woman	Latine
<i>Shannon</i>	30	Woman	Latine
<i>Natasha</i>	*	*	*
<i>Valerie</i>	34	Woman	Latine
<i>Jamie</i>	22	Woman	Latine
<i>Naima</i>	29	Woman	Latine
<i>Dayton</i>	23	Man	Latine
<i>Brittany</i>	65	Woman	Caucasian
<i>Gwen</i>	*	Woman	Caucasian
<i>Thomas</i>	38	Man	Multiethnic
<i>Jon</i>	29	Man	Asian
<i>Davy</i>	29	Man	Latine
<i>Steve</i>	31	Man	Latine
<i>Manny</i>	30	Man	Multiethnic
<i>Ami</i>	35	Woman	African American
<i>Gabe</i>	36	Man	African American
<i>Audrey</i>	29	Woman	Latine
<i>Alana</i>	72	Woman	Caucasian
<i>Cameron</i>	24	Man	African-American

*The participant did not disclose this information.

Table 1 – List of pseudonyms.

Results

The following results are reported thematically, first focusing on the relationship between local communities and MSD and then highlighting participants' valuation of MSD with regards to each wilderness character quality.

Toward an Inclusive Relationship with Wilderness: The Everglades Ecosystem

Participants had an intimate and wholistic relationship with MSD where they considered themselves as a part of the Everglades ecosystem regardless of how close they resided to MSD. Historically, the Everglades ecosystem stretched from Lake Okeechobee, across southern Florida, to Florida Bay and the Gulf of Mexico (~3,840,000 acres). Participants tended to think of the scope of the Everglades in its historical range – as a wild system that transcends the boundaries of MSD, even reaching into urban environments such as Miami. Interconnectedness was a key theme that is reflected in participants' wholistic view of people and nature, and 'what constitutes the Everglades.'

Many interviewees discussed their connection to the Everglades ecosystem with an understanding of reciprocity between humans and nonhuman nature. Sarah talked about her connection with the Everglades: "You may not interact with it every day, but it interacts with you every day, from your tap water to your shower to your garden and watering your flowers." Danny expanded this perspective, reflecting on how "the River of Grass" is a part of systems that extend beyond South Florida. "It's all connected, right?... It never just stops at Florida Bay...it never starts right outside my window. It starts further north."

The connections that participants discussed transcend from wilderness into urban environments. When asked about her relationship to EVER, Ami shared how the Everglades ecosystem is still present in Miami.

Miami to me is just one bit behind Everglades that we just put roads on top of...when I think about my relationship with the Everglades...it's more so just about land in general. I understand that this is a land that has been built on top of and this land, because of its ecosystems, is always fighting through.

Further, interviewees felt that humans were a part of the Everglades system. Cameron considered himself and greater South Florida as part of the system and subject to its reciprocity.

I [appreciate] the ecosystem of the Everglades as it relates to Miami as a city. This water, literally half of the woods that led up to it made Miami...you may look at it as something that is separate, but...I got that understanding that, "oh, I'm actively a part of this environment, whether I see it or not"...actions that we make in the city affect the Everglades.... As much as we're hurting the environment, it'll come back to hurt us as a city.

Since participants tended to conceive of the Everglades more holistically, some felt that the boundaries around EVER and MSD were “arbitrary” but necessary to protect the system. Sally said,

The park is a hard line, and I think for years we thought that the peri-urban boundary, that agricultural buffer zone around the park, was also going to be a hard line, and it clearly isn't because our county commissioners continue to move that line further and further and closer to the park.... There is an actual federal line that they have no authority over, and that is the actual park...the park is a weird geometric shape...it's so arbitrary and that's not how natural systems function.

Sally emphasized that although the park boundaries are arbitrary and unnatural, “in some ways...it's the last stand for South Florida as it used to be.”

Perceptions of Wilderness Character

Naturalness

When asked specifically about their perceptions of the wilderness character qualities of MSD, interviewees discussed the quality of naturalness in nuanced ways. Many participants felt that natural qualities of the ecosystem, such as the presence of endemic wildlife, contributed to their sense of wonder and deep emotional connections to MSD. As Thomas explained, “You see all kinds of turtles and pods of dolphins and sharks everywhere...and then at nighttime...you see everything. There's no lights or pollution...it's beautiful.” Dayton also discussed how meaningful these intimate nature experiences are in building an ongoing relationship to the park, saying, “The sense of wonder never leaves you... I could go back to the Everglades a hundred times...and every time I'll still be amazed.”

Participants felt that the wilderness designation helped to protect the unique and valuable ecosystem services of the Everglades. Davy perceived EVER's wilderness designation as being “incredibly important [in protecting] the structure of the park...that is thousands of years old,” stressing the ecological importance of MSD's natural environment to “not just people in Miami Dade County, but also the wildlife in the area.” Jamie considered the quality of naturalness as being particularly apparent in MSD, reflecting that because EVER receives less visitor use than parks such as Yosemite and is more “inaccessible by virtue of how it is,” referring to the amount of water in the park, “it's a much more intact ecosystem.”

Many respondents talked at length about the ecological value of the natural Everglades ecosystem in relation to their lives as South Florida residents. Particularly, the role of the Everglades in providing drinking water for Miami and other urban centers in the area was paramount to many such as Naima, who described it as “a huge critical factor here that needs to be preserved... it's a necessity for us.” In addition, the preservation of “unspoiled Florida” and the biodiversity of plant and animal species found within MSD “for future generations to enjoy” was seen as highly important to both Dayton and Jon, respectively. Jon stated, “The more time we spend learning

about [the Everglades ecosystem], the more we'll realize we can't exist without it."

Thinking about the system more holistically (i.e., including areas outside of the wilderness boundary), participants acknowledged and expressed concern about how human actions outside MSD degrade the naturalness of the wilderness within. Alana discussed the potent effects of sea-level rise and saltwater intrusion to the unique coastal ecosystem of the Everglades, saying, "Anything that's on the coast...will be impacted... climate change is a cascading effect and South Florida will feel it more than many places on the planet." Additionally, Daniel described the harmful effects of phosphorus pollution from nearby agricultural operations on the Everglades ecosystem, saying, "If it gets too much...it'll just die." On the other hand, Danny felt that the agricultural areas bordering the park act as "buffers" to rising development "going east to west" from the coastal cities of Miami and Ft. Lauderdale, saying, "Eventually we're just going to continue to infringe upon the Everglades."

Untrammeled

Despite concerns for human impacts on the ecosystem, participants regarded the "untrammeled" quality of wilderness as inapplicable to the present-day Everglades ecosystem. Several participants reflected on the prevalence of both historical and current anthropogenic impacts in MSD and emphasized the need to manage these impacts going forward. Broadly, interviewees such as Jamie described how "all the corners of the planet have been influenced by humans.... If there's things that can be done to mitigate any negative

impacts that humans have caused in terms of management practices, then those should be taken." Many respondents mentioned more specific resource issues within the park that are currently being managed, such as preventing the spread of invasive species such as Burmese pythons and Brazilian pepper. Valerie acknowledged their presence in MSD as contrary to the language in the Wilderness Act "about humans not remaining there," saying "the species do remain that humans have brought over for all kinds of different reasons.... I think we can support invasive removals where we can."

Additionally, Daniel referred to the historical diversion canals built inside and outside the park as "one great plumbing program," one that interrupts the natural sheet flow and seasonal processes of the Everglades wetland ecosystem. Alana further elaborated on the importance of water flow into the Everglades and the role of the Army Corps of Engineers in managing and regulating it from Lake Okeechobee north of the park (and thus tram-meling), saying,

The fact that we're at the bottom of the watershed really means that that which creates the Everglades ecosystem is impacted by the quality and quantity, timing and distribution of the water that gets there.... We're not a mountaintop park where we can control what goes on. We have to deal with what's flooding into us.

According to Sally, preserving the Everglades ecosystem in an untrammeled state is almost impossible. She described it as a "dynamic system" that should be continually



Figure 1 - A trail sign along the Nine Mile Pond Canoe Trail in the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness. Minimal signage exists throughout the wilderness area. (Photo Credit: Will Rice)

managed and restored in the face of climate change and saltwater intrusion, suggesting that park managers could “upregulate some of these nature-based solutions...processes that the Everglades...already provides.... What are these strategies we can be taking to retain that original ecological character of the park?” Sarah reiterated this perspective, saying that “because of the era that we live in and what the Everglades has gone through, I don’t think it’ll ever get to where it was...[but] we can also acknowledge that we can still conserve what we have and make it better.... How can we mitigate any less damage from happening?”

Undeveloped

Participants reflected on the importance of limited-to-no development within MSD, related to mitigating encroaching development outside of the park. Brittany talked about MSD’s undeveloped quality as an important reason she chooses to visit, saying, “Florida is surrounded by civilization. This area is not. That’s why it’s special, because it’s you and the wildlife. It’s not you fishing and looking at a bunch of condos.” Gabe discussed how important the preservation of undeveloped areas such as MSD is in resisting urban sprawl “because how many preserved lands do we still have when everybody wants their own plot and developers really don’t care?”

However, some participants also discussed the need to provide the public with infrastructure to access MSD. Audrey described some development in wilderness, such as the building of visitor facilities and trails, as a “revenue-generating source for maintaining the space.... People need to be able to go and...interact with it for them to care...caring is in an important part of conserva-

tion." Both Jon and Steve, two interviewees with physical disabilities, reiterated this point in their interviews. "From the disability point of view, you do need some modifications for that area to be accessible...there should be a point of balance," Steve explained.

Solitude

When asked about their experiences in MSD and the role of EVER in their lives, respondents brought up certain dimensions of solitude, such as natural quiet and distance from society and technology, as beneficial for mental health and wellness. Participants living in the urban centers around the park perceived MSD's difference in environment and lack of cell service as a highly valuable "opportunity to get away from the hustle and bustle of Miami-Dade." Danny described the mental health benefits that MSD provides to him as a veteran, saying,

I could sit there and safely say that when I'm immersed in that environment, it has been a better therapeutic activity than sitting in four white walls at the veteran's hospital.... When it comes to my mental health, I'd rather be surrounded by cypress trees, knee deep in water.

Interestingly, when prompted about the value of solitude – using language from the Wilderness Act – in their MSD experiences, interviewees interpreted the term as "being alone" and expressed varying perspectives. The interviewees who explicitly described opportunities for solitude in MSD as important were either Caucasian or experienced outdoor recreationists familiar with the park, such as Brittany who said, "I don't think they need

any more people there. The less, the better. We go to get away from people." However, many Latine and African American respondents seemed to possess a more complex relationship with this wilderness quality. Sally explained that feelings toward solitude might not be "the same for all groups," and "for a lot of folks from other backgrounds and different identities where they've historically been mistreated in those environments" being alone in the park can be "really scary." For example, Cameron expressed a general discomfort of recreating in MSD by himself, saying, "I think it definitely was...the most quiet-ness that I've ever had.... That was one of my fears going into the park...'Oh, I'm really out here alone'...I don't know exactly why." Shannon described being alone in the park as a "sensory deprivation tank of sorts," saying she both appreciates it and is "scared of it...there's comfort in the chaos of every day" – referring to her life in urban Miami. Additionally, Jon, who is paraplegic, discussed how his valuation of solitude has changed after he became disabled, saying that it "used to be [important], not so much anymore...I can't really be alone...it's a pretty tall order nowadays."

Other Qualities of Wilderness Character

Very "few participants reflected on the unconfined quality of wilderness character; however, they did reflect on "other features of value." Interviewees brought up several aspects of wilderness that extend beyond the qualities laid out in the Wilderness Act. Namely, participants expanded on the quality of naturalness by reflecting on how MSD's unique ecosystem inspired deep emotional connections to place. Further, participants



Figure 2 - A ranger-led slough slog (a unique form of outdoor recreation in South Florida) through the present-day Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness, 1965. (Everglades National Park Archives)

complicated the undeveloped quality by discussing how EVER's unique cultural history illuminates the colonialist legacy of the Wilderness Act, and how this legacy resonated with them as members of marginalized communities.

Uniqueness

Related to the natural wilderness character quality, many interviewees considered MSD to be unique compared to other US national parks and wilderness areas. Naima expressed a sense of pride about its singularity, saying, "This is the only ecosystem in the United States like it. You're not going to find this in California, you're not going to find this in Montana." On the other hand, some respondents felt that the differences in terrain and recreational opportunities deterred visitors from interacting with EVER and MSD in the same manner you would with other popular US national parks, such as Yosemite. As Jasmina said, "The landscape is totally different...the swamps and estuaries...it's an acquired taste for some people that didn't grow up in Florida." Sally emphasized the effect these differences may have on visitation, saying that EVER is "not the most forgotten national park, but it's also not the most popular."



Figure 3 - Two women hold signs during an Organized Migrants in Community Action protest against expanding EVER to include the agricultural area known as the Hole-in-the-Donut, 1975. (National Park Service)

Colonialist Legacy

Related to the undeveloped wilderness character quality, when responding to sections of the Wilderness Act that mention the lack of human habitation, many of our study's African American and Latine respondents identified that this aspect of the act does not consider the historical use of the Everglades, the communities living in the area before it became a national park and wilderness area, and tribal sovereignty. Gabe describes the language of the act as failing to acknowledge a fraught colonialist legacy, saying,

When I think of man and land, I think of enslaved people and forced labor...but it's packaged and presented as a very rosy perspective. If you think back to a Native perspective, those people were massacred for living the way that they lived because people wanted to come and expand.... We had to remove the peoples that live in harmony with this location.

Jamie acknowledged that Indigenous groups in the area such as the Miccosukee Tribe "have been living [in MSD] and managing this land for thousands of years...they have a right to exist on

it...the Wilderness Act doesn't take that into account." Finally, both Danny and Sally discussed the preexisting agricultural community in the area of the park known as the "Hole-in-the-Donut," a historical "stronghold for Black farmers and other minoritized group farmers," and cited their eviction from the park by the National Park Service as another example of historical exclusion that the Wilderness Act fails to recognize. "That's kind of just the reality of the western approach to protected areas...there's a lot of kicking people out...that can have legacy repercussions," Sally explained.

Discussion

The primary premise of this paper is that an underrepresentation of voices contributing to the wilderness construct (e.g., development of the Wilderness Act, subsequent research) has likely resulted in a narrow view of what wilderness means. Thus, we set out to learn about local under-served communities' relationship with MSD and their perceptions of wilderness character. This discussion highlights, at least in part, a wilderness concept through the voices of underrepresented communities and how this concept relates to the existing dialogue around the inclusivity, or lack thereof, within the wilderness construct and resulting narratives. Based on the reflections of our participants, we provide additional suggestions for how such a view of wilderness could help US federal land managers and planners approach wilderness stewardship in a more culturally relevant and inclusive way.

Wilderness, Its Colonialist Legacy, and a Need for More Nuanced Discussion

The perspectives explored in this study highlight several benefits that can be derived from MSD, including the ability to experience a sense of wonder, unplug and escape from society, distress, and an appreciation of its role in preserving a biologically diverse and unique ecosystem. These benefits of wilderness, and perhaps nature more generally, are well documented in past research (e.g., Bittner 2013; Cole and Hall 2010; Hall and Cole 2011; Hall et al., 2010; Lang and Borrie 2021; Meyer and Borrie 2013), which suggests that particular positive perceptions of wilderness span different communities, identities, and lived experiences. While many documented benefits of wilderness may be widely embraced, the social overlay of wilderness may also conjure traumatic and negative sentiments. Historical trauma associations with wilderness and the colonial projects are also documented in past research, and include collective memories of beatings, lynchings, and cruel working conditions that occurred in these spaces (e.g., Corliss 2019; Denevan 2011; Dietsch et al. 2021; Johnson and Bowker 2004; Moreton-Robinson 2015).

The perspectives that emerged through this study around wilderness character captured, at least in part, a view that the wilderness concept, formalized through the act, represents a colonialist legacy in the US. More specifically, wilderness was thought to smooth over historical traumas and atrocities that exist within US history, which were replaced with a "very rosy perspective" about a place where human habitation was forcibly removed or retained when it represented an idealized past relationship between people and the land. Literature outlining

forced removal has largely focused on Indigenous communities (e.g., Buhay 2022; DeLuca and Demo 2001; Deur and James Jr. 2020), and stories of other communities forcibly removed from wilderness are understudied. For example, African/Black Americans inhabited, subsisted on, and stewarded areas now designated as wilderness in Congaree (Davis 2015) and Everglades National Parks (NPS 2020). In both cases, Black Americans have a deep relationship to place linked, in part, to subsistence that was deeply degraded or destroyed by the areas' wilderness designation (Davis 2015).

Increasingly, the wilderness community is reckoning with its colonialist legacy, and specifically the issue of whether it facilitates or impedes the human-nature relationships of people who have long been interacting with the landscape, such as Indigenous Peoples and African/Black Americans (Davis 2015; NPS 2020). These positions are often presented to be mutually exclusive. That is, wilderness is sometimes framed, on one hand, as a "dangerous" idea that perpetuates a myth that humans are apart from nature and, more sinisterly, was used to justify the forced removal of Indigenous peoples from lands they had occupied for thousands of years (Buhay 2022). In response to the type of wilderness critique leveled by Buhay (2022), a common refrain is that the wilderness construct has been misinterpreted. For instance, Kaye and others (2022) suggest that an "unfortunate misunderstanding has been that the wilderness idea somehow erases Indigenous people from the landscape" (p. 58) – arguing that the wilderness idea mostly intended to protect

places from more modern human development and activities, such as the building of roads and destructive logging, mining, and agricultural practices rapidly occurring after WWII. Further, and more fundamentally, Kaye et al. (2022) argue that wilderness values are not conflicting with Indigenous values but are instead intersecting. We suggest that most discussions around the colonial legacy of the wilderness construct include valid claims, whether they critique or defend the wilderness idea, and therefore these discussions are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, it seems many of the critiques and defenses of wilderness are, simultaneously, credible.

we highlight the value in more nuanced discussion that does not frame wilderness as good or bad, in a mutually exclusive way, but instead aims to create learning opportunities around how the full suite of American people perceive wilderness

For instance, there is merit to the suggestion that the wilderness concept was largely about protecting landscapes from, primarily, a dominant White, Christian culture that, throughout the 1800s and 1900s, was efficiently and quickly "conquering" predominantly undeveloped landscapes (Stankey 1989). Additionally, it has been pointed out that early wilderness thinkers such as Bob Marshall did recognize the long-existing Indigenous human-nature relationships (Kaye et al. 2022).

And similarly, Facemire (2022) explained that early discussions around (and drafts of) the Wilderness Act considered some of the complexity of US federal government relations with Indigenous communities. However, for a variety of reasons, it is challenging to disentangle the wilderness construct from the colonial institutions from which it emerged. In the end, the Wilderness Act did not explicitly acknowledge Indigenous human-nature relationships (Cole and Yung 2010) and the ethnocentric movement involved in the crafting and passage of the act was homogenous, at least demographically. Further, the broader public lands system in the US, including wilderness, is a mechanism of the US federal government that subjected minoritized populations to forced removal (Moreton-Robinson 2015). Contemporarily, as reflected in the "land back movement," the public lands system is an impediment to self-determination, an important and ultimate goal of many Indigenous communities. Also, as demonstrated in this study, wilderness lands provide and protect many benefits that are important to and valued by a diverse range of people and populations. In summary, wilderness is imbued with a colonialist legacy, and at the same time, is beneficial to a diverse range of Americans.

Therefore, we highlight the value in more nuanced discussion that does not frame wilderness as good or bad in a mutually exclusive way but instead aims to create learning opportunities around how the full suite of American people perceive wilderness. As Luloff and colleagues (2014) write, "Current thinking [in conservation social science] has been dominated by those who offer extreme positions, often posed in terms of black and white – the tyranny of OR condition. What are needed are efforts that seek to strike a balance between extremes. Such work will lead to the possibility of an AND scenario" (p. ix).

Implications of an Inclusively Defined Wilderness Concept for Relevance

In recent years, there have been efforts to increase relevance, diversity, and inclusion in federal public lands through executive orders (e.g., EO 13985 Advancing Racial Equity and Support for Underserved Communities through the Federal Government). The National Park Service in particular has sought to promote relevance, diversity, and inclusion throughout its system through federal hiring, employee support, interpretation, community outreach, and partnerships (Office of RDI 2021). This study highlights that most wilderness character values (particularly naturalness, undeveloped, and dimensions of solitude) are relevant to the members of underserved communities. Underserved community members noted that opportunities to engage in wilderness were arbitrarily limited in their views of wilderness stewardship (or, the role people play in wilderness) – where stewardship is portrayed as hard physical labor and prioritizes an "untrammelled" nature over healing and conservation of the ecosystem through intervention. Interviewees thought of the EVER ecosystem historically and wholistically – beyond the bounds of MSD – and valued the past (and present) Everglades ecosystem that they live in and rely on. Based on the findings presented herein, we consider two dimensions of wilderness management, volunteer stewardship and intervention actions, that are worth consideration to expand more diverse participation in wilderness stewardship.

Wilderness Volunteer Stewardship

It is possible that the above quote from Gabe (i.e., “When I think of man and land, I think of enslaved people and forced labor”) is relevant within the context of volunteerism and stewardship of wilderness lands. Increasingly, wilderness stewardship is being embraced, whereby the federal government partners with nongovernmental entities and people to address a variety of issues facing wilderness units. A common partnership in this context is the recruitment of volunteers or modestly paid workers to complete trail work. While some may view this activity as a way to experience nature and provide a service to the wilderness community, previous research has found that some others are hesitant to engage in this activity given the traumatic history of forced labor in the US (Dietsch et al. 2021).

In the context of increasing wilderness relevance, it is important to understand that relevance can be both positive (e.g., connection to place and/or activity based on fond childhood memories) and negative (e.g., connection to historic traumas such as slavery). This knowledge of potentially disparate reactions to stewardship volunteer opportunities could highlight a barrier to diversifying participation in volunteer programs. For wilderness managers, there may be value in explicitly acknowledging the colonial legacy in volunteer recruitment materials, and/or highlighting different stewardship opportunities for historically marginalized communities. Wilderness has a plethora of qualities such as conserving biodiversity and history that were extremely important and relevant to the participants in this research. Perhaps offering

other stewardship opportunities that advance stewardship and personal growth goals such as citizen science projects could be explored (Hung 2003). To be clear, we are not suggesting that trail work partnerships are bad or in need of being discarded but instead highlight that reactions to the idea of volunteering on wilderness lands may be perceived differently by different people.

Interventions in Wilderness

Intervention is a dimension of the wilderness concept that may be reframed, at least in part, based on the study's findings. The conundrum about whether to intervene in ecological processes is thoroughly discussed in the wilderness literature (e.g., Facemire 2022; Cole and Yung 2010), and we do not unpack the discussion here. However, we draw attention to the reactions that participants had to the idea of intervention, with a tendency to regard untrammelled as less important than retaining or improving naturalness. It is possible that this perspective is simply the result of the participants' limited engagement with the wilderness concept (as defined in the act). A lack of awareness about the concept of untrammelled was found in previous research and was partly how Davidson and Hall (2013) explained the finding that visitors to wilderness generally tend toward the intervention side of the debate. Another reason why the respondents in this study seemed to prioritize intervention was the location of MSD as a downstream unit from other watercourses and heavy human development. Nonetheless, there is a possibility that underserved communities, who may not be influenced by the dominant wilderness concept or the long historical debate in the

wilderness community, do not necessarily perceive a conundrum and consider untrammelled to be perhaps less important than maintaining natural qualities.


This potential reframing, based upon the perceptions of underserved communities within the context of a single wilderness area, is not implying that the untrammelled element of the dominant wilderness concept should be discarded. Instead, with regard to wilderness stewardship (e.g., decision-making around threats facing wilderness, monitoring), knowledge that some underserved communities consider untrammelled landscapes to be potentially less important can be considered; this is a significant consideration if wilderness character is not viewed as some objective state on the ground but rather as a subjective view of our human interactions and relationships with a landscape designated as wilderness (Cronon 1996).

Conclusion

This study aimed to expand our understanding of wilderness character by exploring underserved communities' relationships with wilderness and perspectives on wilderness character in MSD. Several key findings emerged. First, interviewees described a reciprocal relationship with the Everglades that included several benefits derived from MSD that transcend wilderness boundaries. Second, participants expressed positive perceptions of wilderness character that spanned communities, identities, and lived experiences. Third, these positive perceptions were not mutually exclusive of discussion around the colonial legacy of the wilderness construct; therefore, we highlight the value in more nuanced discussion that aims to create opportunities around how the full suite of American people perceive wilderness. Fourth, it is important for wilderness managers to consider the value in explicitly acknowledging the colonialist legacy in volunteer recruitment materials and stewardship opportunities and consider providing more diverse stewardship opportunities that may be more attractive to underserved communities. Lastly, from the perspectives of these interviewees, the wilderness character quality of untrammelled may be less important than retaining naturalness – historic ecosystem structure and function; therefore, intervention as a management action can be viewed in diverse ways and allow for more interpretations within the act.

Our findings contribute to a defined research gap in wilderness visitor use management literature by examining an urban proximate and coastal wilderness area; however, there are limitations. First, the fact that we were unable to include the perspectives of the Seminole and Miccosukee Tribes in South Florida in our findings is a significant limitation of this research. This was largely due to significant time constraints in producing this research and the inability of the study team to properly engage tribal members in a collaborative research process. Second, it was sometimes difficult for interviewees to distinguish between their perceptions toward EVER versus MSD, indicating a more entwined relationship between wilderness and protected areas.

Since the previous research on this topic is limited and we elected to refrain from comparisons between experiences, this study was exploratory and serves to lay groundwork for further

research efforts. Future research should focus on specific groups and populations to gain more depth; quantitative surveys could also be conducted across a larger population to gain more generalizable themes and trends. Additionally, future research can be conducted at different types of wilderness sites based on proximity to urban populations, geographic location, and other unique qualities to assess similarities and differences across the National Wilderness Preservation System. We hope this study serves as a catalyst for future research and management efforts to build and strengthen relations with affinity groups, which may help further connect underrepresented groups to wilderness areas across the system. 

ELENA R. THOMAS is a recently graduated master's student at the University of Montana and is currently a Wilderness and Wild & Scenic Rivers resource assistant with the Northern Regional Office, USDA Forest Service; email: elena.thomas@usda.gov.

JACLYN FOX RUSHING is a social scientist with the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, USDA Forest Service; email: Jaclyn.rushing@usda.gov.

WILLIAM L. RICE is assistant professor of outdoor recreation and wildland management at the University of Montana in the Parks, Tourism, and Recreation Management program; email: william.rice@umontana.edu.

JENNIFER M. THOMSEN is an associate professor at the University of Montana in the Parks, Tourism, and Recreation Management program; email: jennifer.thomsen@umontana.edu.

CHRISTOPHER A. ARMATAS is a research social scientist with the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, USDA Forest Service; email: christopher.armatas@usda.gov.

References

- Bartley, K. A., and J. J. Brooks. 2021. Fusion of horizons: Realizing a meaningful understanding in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*: 14687941211065164.
- Bittner, A. J. 2013. Day hikers' pre-hike self-reported reasons for, and post-hike effects of hiking in the Arizona wilderness. Prescott College.
- Buhay, C. 2022, November 7. Wilderness is a dangerous idea. Here's why. Backpacker. <https://www.backpacker.com/stories/essays/wilderness-is-a-dangerous-idea-heres-why/>.
- Cole, D. N., and T. E. Hall. 2010. Experiencing the restorative components of wilderness environments: Does congestion interfere and does length of exposure matter? *Environment and Behavior* 42(6): 806–823. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916509347248>.
- Cole, D. N., and L. Yung. 2010. *Beyond Naturalness: Rethinking Park and Wilderness Stewardship in an Era of Rapid Change*. Washington, D.C.: Island Press. <https://islandpress.org/books/beyond-naturalness>.
- Congressional Research Service. 2012. Representatives and senators: Trends in member characteristics since 1945. 7–5700.
- Corliss, J. 2019. *White Wilderness: Race, Capitalism, and Alternative Knowledges of Natural Space*. PhD diss, DePaul University.
- Cronon, W. 1996. The trouble with wilderness: Or, getting back to the wrong nature. *Environmental History* 1(1): 7–28. <https://doi.org/3985059>.
- Davidson, A., and T. E. Hall. 2013. Should wilderness be natural or wild? Bridger Wilderness visitors' attitudes about management and disturbance. *International Journal of Wilderness* 19(2): 17–21, 47.
- Davis, J. 2015. *A tale of two landscapes: Examining alienation and non-visitation among local African American fishers at Congaree National Park*. PhD diss., University of South Carolina, Columbia, SC.
- DeLuca, K. M., and A. T. Demo. 2001. Imagining nature and erasing class and race: Carleton Watkins, John Muir, and the construction of wilderness. *Environmental History* 6(4): 541–560.
- Denevan, W. M. 2011. The "Pristine Myth" revisited. *Geographical Review* 101(4): 577.
- Deur, D., and J. James Jr. 2020. Cultivating the imagined wilderness: Contested Native American plant-gathering traditions in America's national parks. In *Plants, People, and Places: The Roles of Ethnobotany and Ethoecology in Indigenous Peoples' Land Rights in Canada and Beyond*, ed. (pp. 220–237).
- Dietsch, A. M., E. Jazi, M. F. Floyd, D. Ross-Winslow, and N. R. Sexton. 2021. Trauma and transgression in nature-based leisure. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living* 3: 735024.
- Exec. Order No. 13985, 86 Fed. Reg. 7009 (January 20, 2021).
- Facemire, C. 2022. *Parceling the wild: Stewardship and conservation in the 21st Century National Wilderness Preservation System*. Arizona State University.
- Finney, C. 2014. *Black Faces, White Spaces: Reimagining the Relationship of African Americans to the Great Outdoors*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press Books.
- Gadamer, H. G. 1989 *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. New York: Crossroad.
- Hall, T. E., D. N. Cole, and D. Cole. 2011. Immediate conscious experience in wilderness: A phenomenological investigation. In *Proceedings of the Conference of Wilderness Visitor Experiences: Progress in Research and Management* (pp. 37–49). Missoula, MT: US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station.
- Hall, T. E., E. Seekamp, and D. Cole. 2010. Do recreation motivations and wilderness involvement relate to support for wilderness management? A segmentation analysis. *Leisure Sciences* 32(2): 109–124. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01490400903547096>.
- Hays, C. M. 2019. The "park" as racial practice: Constructing whiteness on safari in Tanzania. *Environmental Values* 28(2): 141–170. <https://doi.org/10.3197/096327119X15515267418502>.

- Hung, K. 2003. Achieving Cultural Diversity in Wilderness Recreation: A Study of the Chinese in Vancouver.
- Johnson, C. Y., and J. M. Bowker. 2004. African-American wildland memories. *Environmental Ethics* 26(1): 57–75. <https://doi.org/10.5840/enviroethics200426141>.
- Kaye, R. W., P. Napiryuk, and B. Demientieff. 2022. Wilderness and traditional Indigenous beliefs: Conflicting or intersecting perspectives on the human–nature relationship? *International Journal of Wilderness* 28(2): 56–67.
- Kovach, M. 2021. *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*. Ontario: University of Toronto Press.
- Kvale, S., and S. Brinkmann. 2009. *Interviews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Landres, P., C. Barns, J. G. Dennis, T. Devine, P. Geissler, C. S. McCasland, L. Merigliano, J. Seastrand, and R. Swain. 2008. Keeping it wild: An interagency strategy to monitor trends in wilderness character across the National Wilderness Preservation System. USDA Forest Service – Gen. Tech. Report RMRS-GTR. US Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station. <https://doi.org/10.2737/RMRS-GTR-212>.
- Lang, T. C., and W. T. Borrie. 2021. Wilderness solitude in the 21st century: A release from digital connectivity. *International Journal of Wilderness* 27(3): 28–42.
- Luloff, A. E., J. C. Bridger, and G. L. Theodori. 2014. Preface: AND not OR. In *Understanding Society and Natural Resources*, ed. M. J. Manfredi, J. J. Vaske, A. Rechkemmer, and E. A. Duke (pp. vii–x). Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8959-2>.
- Marshall, R. 1928. The wilderness as a minority right. *Service Bulletin* 12(35): 5–6.
- Meyer, A. M., and W. T. Borrie. 2013. Engendering wilderness: Body, belonging, and refuge. *Journal of Leisure Research* 45(3): 295–323. <https://doi.org/10.18666/jlr-2013-v45-i3-3153>.
- Moreton-Robinson, A. 2015. *The White Possessive: Property, Power, and Indigenous Sovereignty*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Nash, R. 2014. *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 5th ed. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- National Parks and Recreation Act. Public Law 95-625 1978.
- National Park Service. 2020. African Americans in the Everglades. Retrieved June 27, 2023, from <https://www.nps.gov/ever/learn/historyculture/african-americans-in-the-everglades.htm>.
- Park, S., C. T. Mahlobo, and J. Oliver Peets. 2022. Flourishing through traveling while Black: Unfiltered voices of Black travelers. *Tourism Management* 91: 104514. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.TOURMAN.2022.104514>.
- Parker, C., S. Scott, and A. Geddes. 2019. *Snowball sampling*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Research Methods Foundations.
- Patterson, M. E., and D. R. Williams. 2002. *Collecting and Analyzing Qualitative Data: Hermeneutic Principles, Methods and Case Examples*. Advances in Tourism Applications series, volume 9. Champaign, IL: Sagamore Publishing, Inc.
- Powell, M. A. 2016. Dead of its own too-much. In *Vanishing America: Species Extinction, Racial Peril, and the Origins of Conservation* (pp. 158–185). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rice, W. L., C. A. Armatas, J. M. Thomsen, and J. R. Rushing. 2021. Distribution of visitor use management research in US wilderness from 2000 to 2020: A scoping review. *International Journal of Wilderness* 27(3): 46–61.
- Shores, K. A., D. Scott, and M. F. Floyd. 2007. Constraints to outdoor recreation: A multiple hierarchy stratification perspective. *Leisure Sciences* 29(3): 227–246.
- Stankey, G. H. 1989. Beyond the campfire's light: Historical roots of the wilderness concept. *Natural Resources Journal* 29(9).
- Taylor, D. E. 1997. American environmentalism: The role of race, class and gender in shaping activism 1820–1995. *Race, Gender & Class* 5(1): 16–62.
- Taylor, D. E. 2002. Race, class, gender, and American environmentalism. Gen. Tech. Report PNW-GTR-534. https://www.fs.usda.gov/pnw/pubs/pnw_gtr534.pdf.
- Thomas, E. R., W. L. Rice, J. R. Rushing, J. M. Thomsen, and C. A. Armatas. 2022. Constraints to wilderness recreation: A scoping review of existing research. *International Journal of Wilderness* 28(2): 18–35.

- Thomsen, J. M., W. L. Rice, J. F. Rushing, and C. A. Armatas. 2023. US wilderness in the 21st century: A scoping review of wilderness visitor use management research from 2000 to 2020. *Journal of Leisure Research*: 1-23.
- Thompson, M. 1928. A call from the wilds. *Service Bulletin* 12(20): 2-3.