

Wilderness:

What Are the Opportunities?

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It has been said that the 100 Years War was never settled; it was simply forgotten in the press of other more important events. As a subject of controversy, wilderness may be following somewhat the same course. After a brief period in the early 60s when it held center stage among conservation issues, wilderness faded into the background, overshadowed in the early 70s by a world view of resource use and a whole galaxy of associated ecological problems. At the moment, the conservation issues of energy and food, and the economic problems of worldwide inflation are fully occupying our post impeachment attention. So what I have to say is at least three or four steps out of phase with the spotlight of public discussion.

Nonetheless many questions about wilderness need to be settled before it can make its best contribution to mankind in the years ahead. Of course, there are those who are more interested in the wilderness needs of deer, bear, flowers, and trees; but in an urban context, it seems inappropriate to discuss anything except the needs of people. Because man is pre-eminently a searching, learning and adapting animal, I hope that if we search our experience with wilderness we can learn

what has happened and deduce more about what may happen, so that we can better adapt our expectations and actions to future realities. Hopefully we can make the benefits of wilderness truly available to all members of our urban society, especially to young people.

Looking Ahead

In focusing on the future contribution of wilderness to mankind it is tempting to look ahead 5 or 10 decades. Such a free flowing and expansive vision always seems statesmanlike, because one can rise above the petty annoyances of today and describe some triumph of the common good. Such a stance is not only noble, it is also safe. Listeners are willing to believe that almost anything can happen in the fullness of time, so even the wildest flight of fancy seems plausible. Furthermore, your forecasts may be safely forgotten long before that distant day dawns.

I'd like to be less prudent and think with you about the near future, for no matter where we are going in the long run, we must get there from here. Most of the decisions about wilderness that we will be called to make will be in the near- and mid-term. Others will be asked to take care of the things that must be done several decades from now. There is little point in trying to second guess their problems and solutions.

Because cultural preferences change rather more slowly than the likes and dislikes of individuals, it is almost certain that the immediate future will be about like the immediate past. Thus we can expect that most wilderness users will continue to visit in small family groups or with a few close friends. They will generally come from an urban area where they have succeeded in getting a better education than most, and will have incomes rather higher than average. In addition, most of them will have been introduced to the wilderness when they were young, frequently by their parents. Consequently, most visitors will have been specially

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educated by experience and precept to think that a wilderness is a good place to be.¹

Aside from the obvious pleasure of a challenging jaunt in a beautiful landscape, these users will probably benefit most by getting to know each other better. Frequently, interpersonal relations will be so strengthened that the family or group is better able to stand the strains of city life. Similarly, the most important wilderness values to the public probably center on improving the mental and physical health of enough people to increase measurably our chances of social survival.

Of course, there will always be those romantically inclined visitors who see in wilderness life most of the innocent qualities found in the Garden of Eden before the expulsion. Some scientists will also come to study natural plant and animal communities that they hope will be benchmarks to show how similar communities or individuals elsewhere have changed. Also grunt and sweat enthusiasts will come primarily to build a new record of peaks climbed, miles walked or cliffs scaled. And a great many citybound folks won't come at all, but will take a good deal of satisfaction from knowing that some piece of nature is still preserved out there where they could find it if they ever wanted to get away.

These are some of the major wilderness values we now realize, and a close look suggests that in many instances the essential element of wilderness is more a state of mind than it is a place. In the past most public policy conflicts have revolved around wilderness as a piece of real estate, and this situation is likely to continue. At least in the near term, controversy will swirl over how much wilderness we need, where it should be located, how defined, and what controls over human use are desirable.

In a bit longer run, however, it is likely that increasing resource scarcity will lead us to want a better job of identifying wilderness values, and of sorting out those that have a real survival value for society from those that are merely pleasant personal luxuries.

A Backsight

It is safe to say that in the past it was necessary to develop arguments for or against wilderness with an eye for their political impact, rather than for increasing social efficiency. For instance, when the original proposal was made to set aside and specially protect wilderness areas in the national forests, it was fairly easy for the Forest Service to accept the idea. Back in the 1930s the pressure for products, minerals, or amenity from Forest Service land was not very great, and the proposed areas were so remote as to be virtually inaccessible for any other use. Under prevailing conditions, there was little to lose economically, and everything to gain politically, from setting up a procedure whereby the Chief or the Secretary could keep these natural areas undisturbed.

By the 1960s, however, the situation was changing. Improvements in transportation, logging, and prospecting techniques were bringing hitherto inaccessible resources within easier reach. In addition, to accommodate the vast increase in outdoor recreation, development of wild land was needed for car camping, motor vehicle use, ski resorts, and the like. All in all, there was a palpable increase in the competition for wild

land and it seemed a good time to confirm wilderness as a legitimate use. Furthermore, although the Forest Service had long had special wilderness regulations, nothing had been done about other federal lands that might be eligible. It appeared that congressional action could furnish more and better protection by joining all qualified federal areas into a wilderness system.

Although this time there were alternative uses for the land that would have to be foregone at some obvious cost, the decision to set up a wilderness system was still relatively painless. No one seriously thought that the new system would cause such a scarcity that lumber or mineral prices would go up measurably, or that there would be any significant increase in unemployment. Instead of focusing on economic hardship, some of the hottest arguments revolved around the motives and capabilities of the foresters. Some rather harsh things were said about how professionals were being captured by those special interests that wanted to develop wild land, and also about the inability of foresters to make multiple-use plans that gave proper weight to non-market values.

This de-emphasis of bread and butter issues in the face of strenuous industry objections, would probably not have been possible had Americans not been told in the 50s and 60s that they were the first truly "affluent society." We sincerely believed that whenever needed our industrial economy could produce just about anything we wanted.

Resources seemed to be getting more and more interchangeable so that when one was in short supply, another more plentiful could be substituted. Experience with forest products over the years bore this out as plentiful species and sizes were generally substituted for scarce ones. Also, substitution and changed lifestyles had kept the consumption of wood about constant since the turn of the century, while the population and economy had grown by leaps and bounds. This gave a presumption that wood was becoming much less important. For all these reasons it was possible to think that setting aside more forest land for wilderness rather than products, would have a cost so near zero that an affluent society could ignore it. Again, there seemed to be little to lose and much to gain by creating a whole new wilderness system.

There is little to suggest that these past decisions have been wrong or that any significant change is warranted. During the 10 years allotted by Congress for agency wild land studies, the Forest Service has completed review of its primitive and wild areas and has a series of wilderness proposals before the Congress. The agency has also responded to insistent demand and is in the process of reviewing the "de facto" wilderness areas and preparing recommendations for parts to include in the system. The National Park Service and other federal agencies have moved much more slowly so that their wild land reviews are far from complete.

A Stringent Society?

How much more wilderness area is likely to be set aside may depend a good deal on the timing of propos-

¹HENDEE, J. C.; CATTON, W. R., JR.; MARLOW, L. D. and BROCKMAN, C. Wilderness Users in the Pacific Northwest—Their Characteristics, Values, and Management Preferences. U.S.D.A. Forest Service Research Paper—PNW-61. 1968.

als, because it now appears that the background against which such land-use decisions are made is changing rapidly, as the period of uninhibited affluence that the developed nations of the world have enjoyed draws to a close. In common with all other industrial societies, the United States economy depends on a tremendous throughput of raw materials. Recently, the cumulative strain on world resource supplies has begun to show in the form of rapidly rising prices, especially for petroleum. We are moving into a time of effective scarcity when the "affluent society" may turn into a "stringent society."

If this should happen the dictionary suggests that resource decisions will be characterized by "strictness, severity, rigor, tightness, lack of ease or of plenty." The role of wilderness in such a society is likely to be different from what it was in the past.

In the near- and mid-term, the days of abundant energy, defined effectively as cheap energy, seem over for the United States and the world at large. Although there is still plenty of the raw stuff underground, our capacity to organize its extraction, processing and transportation across international boundaries has deteriorated. At the moment, we are not dealing with a physical shortage amenable to a quick technological "fix," but with an organizational failure that will be harder to overcome. However, the immediate reason for scarcity makes little difference, because it seems clear that soon the total demand of the world's industrial economies would have been greater than available petroleum resources anyway. Some radical new social innovations are needed and are likely to come into being to economize on conventional energy resources and to find new ones. Meanwhile the rising cost of energy will lead to a new set of resource priorities, and a new lifestyle will begin to emerge that may affect the use of wilderness.

The "stringent society" will analyze more carefully than in the past the forces that generate New York City at one extreme of a land-use spectrum, and the Bob Marshall Wilderness at the other. Recent events have made it clear to all that urban folk are totally dependent on a productive hinterland and on an efficient transportation system for a smooth flow of the food, fiber, minerals, fresh water, and clean air that make their life possible. Although our industrial society needs only a few people working in rural areas, many of them must be highly skilled and all must have at hand tremendous amounts of energy in such varied forms as the tractors, trucks, buildings, fertilizers and pesticides that make the land produce. In between, the processors and distributors take over, and when all goes well rural and city people seldom discuss production. Although products generally flow into the city, there is a counter flow of people into the country when they seek such services as outdoor recreation. Each year city people leave their homes by the millions and search out a vacation spot in the open countryside.

Positive Approach Needed

All told, keeping this complex exchange of goods and supplies going between the city and the country, takes a lot of energy of all kinds, and we are likely to try and rationalize its use toward more economy in the future. In fact, the higher gasoline prices and the uncertainties of "stagflation" were enough this summer to trigger the first tiny signs of change. Recreation is

perhaps one of the least painful economies to make, so many people took cheaper vacations. Visits to the more distant forests and parks of the West were down drastically, but almost normal near population centers in the East. It seems likely that when the tally is complete, it will show that this year more people stayed near or at home than have done so for many years.

If this trend toward less recreational travel should continue, it might relieve the pressure on our more remote wilderness areas so that rationing or control of access will not be needed to maintain a quality environment. On the other hand, this gain could be offset by overloading those wilderness areas that are near population centers, like some of those in California or New York. If this should happen, it might make more social sense in the long run to save travel energy by using nearby wilderness areas much more intensively as back-country hiking areas. Selected areas could be developed to stand the heavier wear and tear that a primitive recreation reserve gets from hikers and trail riders.

The use and development of eastern areas like the White Mountain National Forest show that sensitive management can provide a high quality back-country experience for a very large number of people. It is true that parties meet rather frequently, but it seems likely that in spite of this, users still realize most of the public benefits normally associated with wilderness areas. Certainly people come back year after year as satisfied hikers. The net social gain from turning some nearby wilderness into primitive area for disbursed recreation might be very great. If luxury transportation has to be reduced, this relaxation of wilderness development standards has a lot to recommend it, as part of a program to locate resource activities as close as possible to consumers.

While we are thinking of desirable changes, the shape of the near future could be greatly improved if more people could have a rational and rewarding experience with rural America. This is most likely to happen if we devise a positive program to meld out-of-doors into urban lifestyles. One spin-off might be that a significant number of people would be led to a wilderness visit. Although this would help society realize the full value of its wilderness system, increased use might destroy the very areas we set out to cherish. This could be avoided if it is true that wilderness is as much a state of mind as it is a splendid piece of real estate. We could probably create a wilderness mentality by the skillful use of a very wide variety of outdoor environments. Then although appreciation would be widespread, only the few who need wilderness most would need to visit designated areas.

A "Green World" Program

What I suggest is a program of graded experiences with nature, beginning with youngsters in neighborhood parks and playgrounds, and over time leading on to longer and more challenging contacts farther from home and more suited to advancing age and maturity. Many we would hope would eventually become competent and knowledgeable wilderness users. One major objective of this scheme would be to provide at least some access to nature for practically all children, especially those who now grow up immersed in a man-made urban environment.

Now that city populations are largely breeding their own replacements, rather than depending on rural recruits, it is possible for most urban youngsters to grow up without any direct contact with the land or those who work its farms, forests and mines. This lack of experience can lead to dangerous misunderstandings in these days of "one man one vote." A "green world program" could promote recreation, education, and work that would help improve rural-urban understanding and appreciation.

Many elements of a program of outdoor involvement are already in place and functioning; it only remains to knit them together and to enlarge or add where needed to develop an integrated program of advancement. Most urban and suburban areas already have neighborhood parks and playgrounds. Some good programs to use them already exist, and their experience can be used to mount an effort that guides youngsters to a useful contact with nature close to their homes.

The logical next step might be to day camps where learning is fun and healthy but the needed facility is outside the immediate neighborhood. With some extra travel, longer contact with more rural environments is possible in summer camps, such as those operated by organizations like the Fresh Air Fund, Good Will, Boy Scouts and a host of private camp operators. Many of these camps have pioneered good outdoor programs, but their efforts are much too small to take care of all those who can benefit, especially if the first part of the program feeds younger kids into the system. Long-term camps in rural and forest areas would be the most useful stepping off places for programs of conservation work and for extended trips in primitive areas where outdoor skills and understanding develop quickly. Eventually, young people would be ready and eager to tackle our most challenging wilderness areas and fully appreciate them.

Ideally, an integrated approach to the "green world" along these lines could be cooperatively man-

aged by cities, towns, counties, states, and federal agencies as well as private organizations. Any reasonable expansion will require federal financing; perhaps royalties from the off-shore oil that fuels our cities could be used to help city youngsters grow up with nature. If carefully planned and executed, a program like this might benefit a very large segment of our young population at a point in their lives when they learn easily and are readily stimulated to interests that can carry over into later life.

Start Cooperation Now

Cooperation should start now with the land use planning necessary to make sure that ample playgrounds, parks, forests and farm lands are reserved where they are needed, in and near urban areas. Only preceptive land-use planning will keep such valuable open spaces available where they can be co-opted into the kind of education, recreation and work programs we probably will need. We will have an easier time making these farms and forests available if we try to keep them as functioning parts of a hard working landscape, rather than trying to preserve them as museum pieces.

Forests that are actively managed for the full array of possible values are better classrooms than a single purpose area. Similarly, the greatest educational impact comes from a working farm rather than a show place. It will avail us little to have city kids think that the rural landscape that supports them looks like a "gentleman's farm" or like Central Park.

With proper land-use planning and intelligent management of our rural lands, many areas can be found to fit into a program of graded experiences that carry children smoothly along from the local park to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area or to Mount McKinley. It seems to me that in the more stringent days that lie ahead our urban society will need some such purposeful attempt to tie rural land and wilderness areas into a system that fully serves the needs of city people. ■

