Wilderness, Tourism Development, and Sustainability: Wilderness Attitudes and Place Ethics

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Abstract—Wilderness areas are considered to represent one of the last vestiges of the past, untouched by the modern world. In many respects, however, this is no longer true: wilderness areas have been explored, converted into administrative units and, in some cases, promoted as products or as sites of production and consumption. This is most clearly in evidence in connection with forestry and the world’s largest and fastest growing industry, tourism. This paper examines attitudes toward wilderness areas and the conflicts arising in the relations between forestry, nature conservation, and tourism in the Koilliskaira (Saariselkä) region of Finnish Lapland.

Wilderness is a strong and powerful word. For most people it conjures up distinct images, the content of which is dependent on the cultural environment in which those persons are living and their personal history and experiences. The word covers many meanings, so it is quite understandable that different objectives and values, often mutually contradictory ones, are connected with the use of wilderness. Both conceptually and as an arena for social action, wildernesses can be said to represent a combination of highly diverse elements that would be impossible to discuss exhaustively here. The aim of this paper is rather to outline the essential dimensions of the concept and to discuss our attitudes toward wilderness and its use. The concept of wilderness is perceived here above all as a value-bound, ethically loaded one, a locus for the examination of values. The notions held by the latter can be approached from an “experiential” perspective by examining the feelings aroused by a wilderness. Thus, we are dealing with wildernesses in a subjective sense, so that the memories and feelings of individuals combine with their concrete observations to create the experience of a wilderness. According to Tuan (1974: 112), it is impossible to define wilderness in an

definitions tend to vary with time and from one person and culture to another at the same point in time (Burks 1994; Linkola 1985; Nash 1967; Short 1991). An attempt has, nevertheless, been made in law and in connection with various agreements to establish an “objective”—uncontested—concept of wilderness.

The Finnish Wilderness Committee, for example, defined the basic characteristics of wilderness areas as follows (Erämaakomitean mietintö 1988: 23):

1. A wilderness area should comprise a minimum of 15,000 ha and usually be more than 10 km in width.
2. The area should be ecologically as diverse as possible...and all human action should be adjusted to nature so as not to spoil the wilderness character of the area.
3. The area should as a rule have no roads.
4. The landscape should be in a natural state condition and unspoiled. Any structures connected with human activity should merge with the natural landscape.

On the basis of these characteristics and the Finnish Wilderness Law, enacted in 1991, 12 designated wilderness areas were established in Northern Finland to safeguard their wilderness characteristics and to provide for the preservation of local cultural features (Sami culture), the pursuit of natural sources of livelihood, and diversified utilization of the natural environment. In the latter sense, the Law allows small-scale forestry to be practiced, for example, and also reindeer herding, which is characteristic of Sami culture.

In the United States, the minimum size for an official wilderness area, as described in the Wilderness Act of 1964, is 2,020 ha, and their basic characteristics are that they should be in a natural state, have no roads, and contain a natural fauna. Wilderness is a place “…where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (Public Law 1964). The corresponding minimum size in Australia is 25,000 ha and in Sweden 50,000 ha (Erämaakomitean mietintö 1988).

These definitions emphasize the spatial and visual features of wilderness areas, which are outlined, delimited, and listed on the basis of their concrete, observable properties. In this way wilderness areas are defined objectively, as scientifically demonstrable units that can be “weighed and measured” (Keat 1997).

But how does the objective definition of wilderness correspond to the understanding of individual people? The notions held by the latter can be approached from an “experiential” perspective by examining the feelings aroused by a wilderness. Thus, we are dealing with wildernesses in a subjective sense, so that the memories and feelings of individuals combine with their concrete observations to create the experience of a wilderness. According to Tuan (1974: 112), it is impossible to define wilderness in an
objective manner, but rather it receives its definition by way of being a state of mind (Hallikainen 1993; Karjalainen 1995). Unlike the case of an objective definition, we are now operating (consciously) within the sphere of human values, which are difficult to measure.

In a subjective sense, wilderness does not exist without a subject, an observer, who experiences it. On the other hand, wildernesses and wilderness experiences can be said to be conceptualized through human feelings and meaning relations shaped by more extensive cultural and socio-historical processes. In this case, we are dealing with wildernesses in a cultural sense, in which we set out to describe and introduce wilderness and examine the types of meaning and value structures that are associated with it. In a cultural sense, wilderness is textual in nature, for example, it can be read, interpreted, and connected with other texts and their meaning structures quite differently by different cultures and social groups.

The very term wilderness can be interpreted through its cultural and historical framework. According to Nash (1967: 1-2), this Anglo-American term is composed of two root words, “wild” and “deor.” In etymological terms, the word means a place that is inhabited by wild beasts and that is beyond the sphere of human control. Short (1991: 6), however, maintains that it may be derived from the Old English words “waeld” or “weald” denoting a forest. Since in the Central European farming tradition the forest was regarded as a place inhabited by beasts and evil spirits (Sepänmaa 1986: 121), the etymological meaning of the word wilderness can be delimited by this route, too, as applying to a place or an area beyond human action and culture. Unlike its Anglo-American equivalent, however, the Finnish compound word “erämaa,” used in the legislation referred to above, for example, receives historically its meaning through hunting and fishing culture (Hallikainen 1993; Lehtinen 1990, 1991). The first part of the compound, “erä,” is an ancient Finnish word that apparently denoted a distinct area subjected to some degree of “administration” that was important for the hunting and trapping rights of distant wilderness regions. Thus, the Finnish Wilderness Law still assigns some role to the local culture and economy in the preservation of wilderness areas.

In this sense, the Anglo-American wilderness concept has emerged more or less by conquering the wilderness—as an opposite to culture, while the traditional Finnish “erämaa” has been defined by living in and with it. But, this traditional idea of wilderness is presently contested by modernization and globalization of Finnish society. Thus in practice, the relations between the objective, subjective, and cultural definitions of wilderness, to be discussed in more detail, are by no means free of problems in any cultural context or time, and it must be stated straight away that despite the attempts to produce a definition that is free from all preconceived values, even the objectively defined concept of wilderness still reflects the subjective and cultural values and attitudes that we entertain with respect to wilderness and its use.

Attitudes Toward Wilderness

Juhani Pietarinen (1987) distinguishes four basic attitudes of man toward the forest environment, utilism, humanism, mysticism and primitivism (biocentrism), which will be applied below to the concept of wilderness (table 1). The most common of these is utilism, denoting, according to Pietarinen (1987: 323), “purely conceived notions of utility.” The approach underlines the unrestricted right of man to exploit the natural environment, and maintains that any excessive exploitation can be compensated for through ever-advancing technological innovations. Humanism, in turn, maintains that the natural environment should promote human development in a variety of ways, not only as a source of raw materials, but also as a means toward attaining ethical, aesthetic, and mental equilibrium. Mysticism perceives man as part of a more extensive entity formed by nature, and searches for an experiential unity between man, the natural, and the divine. The fourth basic attitude, primitivism, or biocentrism, represents an approach in terms of values that clearly recognize and insist on the inherent worth of the natural environment, maintaining that man has no special rights to exploit nature and that human well-being should not rest on a foundation that causes damage to nature (Vilkka 1995).

How are the above wilderness concepts, attitudes, and related ways of utilizing nature reflected in our relations to

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wilderness? This will be discussed with respect to use of a region that comprises the wilderness of Koilliskaira, the present-day Urho Kekkonen National Park and the Saariselkä tourism area, a region that will also be referred to simply as Saariselkä, and the contradictions associated with this exploitation.

Case Study: Koilliskaira—the Last Wilderness in Europe?

Forestry and Nature Conservation

Koilliskaira and the Saariselkä tourism region are located in North-Eastern Lapland (fig. 1), and were effectively introduced to the general public in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s through conservation debate, and novelist Kullervo Kemppinen, whose books “Lumikuru” (The Snow Gully), 1958, and “Poropolku kutsuu” (The Call of the Reindeer Path), 1962, painted a sublime picture of the wilderness character of Saariselkä and its special features (Saarinen 1998). The region consequently became known as the “hikers' paradise,” and the effect of these books was seen directly in the numbers of tourists. While the average annual increase of visitors in the 1950’s was under 40 percent, in the year following the publication of the book “Lumikuru,” the number of hikers doubled, and this vigorous expansion continued into the 1960’s (Saastamoinen 1982).

At the same time, however, the increased timber needs of the wood-processing industries in the north forced the Forest Service to plan fellings in the Saariselkä region, for which purpose a dense network of forest roads were planned. In response to this, the Finnish Tourist Association; the hiking and skiing organization, Suomen Latu; and the Finnish Nature Conservation Association made an initiative in 1961 that the Saariselkä should be protected from all fellings and that it should be preserved as a roadless tract of wilderness. Later, in 1967, the Finnish Nature Conservation Association proposed that the whole of Koilliskaira should be preserved in this way, comprising an uninterrupted area of some 5,000 km². Other corresponding proposals and demands were made, but it was decades before these led to any concrete results, despite the lively discussions that centered around issues of forestry, conservation, and tourism (Saarinen 1996a). The resulting publicity in media raised Koilliskaira to a position of national significance as one of the last extensive wilderness areas in Europe (Häyrinen 1979, 1989). Following this long period of dispute, the area was finally protected in 1980 under the name of the Urho Kekkonen National Park (2,550 km²), the law to this effect coming into force in 1983.

The creation of a National Park failed to halt the polemic over the economic exploitation of the Saariselkä, however. A previous example of this is the disagreement that emerged over the costs of protecting the last old virgin forests in Finland in 1995. It was claimed in one major study that much more profit could be obtained from felling the forests of Saariselkä region than could be made from nature conservation and tourism (Pohjois-Suomen ja Pohjois-Karjalan… 1995). It was calculated in the study that the total yield per hectare from the economic exploitation of the old forests for which protection orders were pending would be three times greater than that achieved through tourism and conservation, and that the employment effects of exploitation would likewise exceed those of the latter policy three-fold.

Whatever the situation in the calculations and reality may be, the above events, such as the history of the establishment of the National Park and the debate over the costs of conservation, were both characterized by the fact that tourism and nature conservation were linked closely together to form one alternative policy. It would seem in the light of this example that a certain synergy exists between use of the natural environment for tourism and its protection, so that no significant contradiction was perceived between nature conservation and the development of tourism, at least at the initial stage, perhaps even the reverse (Borg 1992; Budowski 1977; Saastamoinen and Kajala 1995). In the case of Saariselkä, it was believed that the promotion of tourism could save the region from the threat of fellings.

The plans that were made for the economic use of the Saariselkä region represent the traditional, utilitarian approach to wilderness, in which the natural environment is regarded as a source of numerous raw materials, whether it be squirrel pelts or timber for pulp production. Arguments of this kind are supported by objectivizing the wilderness only in terms of cubic meters of timber, jobs, and sums of money, for example, it is not regarded as possessing a value in itself. The utilitarian viewpoint as a whole is characterized by an attempt to break loose from the bondage of human values and keep to objective “facts.”

In connection with the establishment of a National Park, tourism and nature conservation can be regarded as representing mainly a humanistic attitude toward the wilderness, and as far as hiking is concerned, also a mystic relation to nature, for the motives for this often involve experiencing the natural environment as sacred and seeking unity with it (Kemppinen 1958; Thoreau 1955). Indeed, the basic humanistic approach holds that man should make use of technology to ensure that nature can be used more fully as a means of promoting the edifying objectives of humanism. This is what National Parks are in a sense all about; the provision of overnight huts, log walkways, campfire sites, and bridges, for example, may be seen as an attempt to give almost everyone a chance to reach and explore an “untouched”

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Figure 1—Saariselkä region: the case study area.
natural environment. Stretches of wilderness offer aesthetic, ethical, and educational experiences at both the individual level and at that of humanity as a whole (Martin and Inglis 1983) and thus play both a subjective and a cultural role. Humanism does not attempt to break loose from the human values attached to wilderness but rather makes a conscious effort to emphasize the instrumental character of the “non-material” values attached to them.

Tourism also has a reverse side, however, in addition to the humanistic one. There is no great ideological difference between an institutionalized tourist industry and any other form of industry, in that the former is devoted to exploiting the natural environment under the same terms of a market economy, and often to the maximal possible extent (Harvey 1996; Relph 1976; Shaw and Williams 1994). It is at this point, of course, that nature conservation has to opt out of the tourist industry and the “touristization” of wilderness. But as far as conservation issues and their relations to forestry are concerned, tourism often offers a basis for arguments that have been difficult to formulate on nature conservation grounds alone, providing an opportunity to point out the economic benefits of conservation in the form of jobs and income. For example, the aforementioned estimated economic benefits of forestry in the Saariselkä region were based on a time period of 25 years. After that period of heavy exploitation, forestry would not provide significant real income for the next 150 to 170 years. Conservation, accompanied by nature-based tourism, would provide benefits over this entire period. In the long run, conservation and tourism would be more profitable in terms of income and jobs (Power 1996a,b; Saarinen 1996a).

As noted earlier, tourism has its dark side too, and there has been much criticism in the last few years of the utilitarian picture of nature projected by tourism in Finnish Lapland. Attempts have been made to steer tourism practices in an environmentally more sustainable direction. Internationally, the tourist industry has reacted to this in part by introducing nature tourism and ecotourism, for example, and these are currently the fastest growing fields of tourism as a whole, representing as they do both utilitarian and also humanistic underlying attitudes (Cater 1994). Nature conservation occupies a prominent position in ecotourism in particular (Boo 1990). In the last few years, the tourist trade as a whole has aimed at complying with the notions of sustainable development, at least in principle (Hunter and Green 1995; Nash 1996).

Nature Conservation and Tourism

As the ecological effects of tourism and the amount of related information that is available have increased, nature conservationists have been progressively more outspoken in their stand against it. Criticism has been focused at mass tourism in particular, though it is also increasingly being brought to bear on small-scale nature excursions and ecotourism, despite the beneficial effects that may be connected with these. In the end, tourism and its many forms are considered to represent a process that is constantly demanding and conquering new, unspoiled areas for its own use, and “wilderness tourism” is becoming more popular in Western societies (Butler 1991; Eagles 1995: 29). An uncompromising stance toward the protection of nature and wilderness areas represents a basic biocentric attitude grounded in the notion of the natural environment as a value in its own right. In principle, this view approves the status of man as a part of nature, but in practice it maintains that man in the end exploits the environment to satisfy his own needs, either utilitarian or humanistic (Vilkka 1995). The biocentric view is that there should be natural areas where no trace of human activity can be seen (even with the help of locks and chains where necessary), a view defended by the wilderness protection enthusiasts.

Although tourism in Saariselkä today and the attraction of the region are largely an outcome of the founding of the National Park, there are many questions surrounding tourism, its sustainability and development, and its consequences. In addition, tourism is undergoing continuous change and development, which is another factor giving rise to contradictions with other forms of land use, and even problems within the tourism industry itself.

Tourism has expanded rapidly in Saariselkä up until the last few years in terms of both the number of visitors and the construction of an infrastructure of tourist services. Where the accommodation capacity of the area in 1960 was some 200 beds, with slightly over 1,000 accommodation days, the figures had increased to some 6,500 and almost 200,000, respectively, by 1995 (Saarinen 1997; Saastamoinen 1972). The most recent general plan for the region allows for a further increase in capacity to some 20,000 beds (Saariselän yleiskaava… 1993), which will undoubtedly mean major changes in both the physical environment and the images and motives associated with tourism and wilderness recreation in Saariselkä.

From the point of view of the tourists themselves, there will be a question about the meanings that they currently attach to Saariselkä as a destination and the way in which any increase in accommodation capacity and the related development that occurs will change these meaning structures. The development of tourism in the region has already converted some of the local nature-based attraction factors into touristic products, such as downhill skiing and snowmobile safaris. Has this progress influenced the basic motives for tourists coming to Saariselkä?

In objective terms, Saariselkä can no longer be regarded as a wilderness, of course, but the results of a survey conducted there in 1994-1995 (n = 1,276) suggest that the most important motives for Finnish tourists going there are the natural landscapes and stretches of wilderness, and an opportunity to enjoy peace and quiet (Saarinen 1996b). This image is also underlined and exploited in the marketing of the area (Saarinen 1997, 1998). At the image level, such as subjectively and culturally, Saariselkä would thus still seem to stand out as a place that allows the visitor to come face to face with wilderness and gain experiences of it.

All of the arguments and decisions connected with development of tourism and nature conservation nevertheless rest almost entirely on the objective concept of a wilderness, and this entails ethical problems in larger scale. An attempt has been made to protect the natural environment and the wilderness character of Saariselkä in places where these have been in line with prevailing notions of what constitutes a valuable natural environment. At the same time, this has in a sense offered a right and justification for treating all places outside these protected areas as one likes, without any ethical pangs of conscience over the resulting impoverishment...
or disappearance of species, or damage to the landscape (Shephard 1977). Thus, the development of tourism in the Saariselkä outside the boundaries of the established National Park has been, and is, guided mainly by the regulatory mechanisms of the market economy such as competition between resorts and the availability of capital, and not by ethical questions connected with the preservation of the natural and cultural landscape. In addition to the approximately 14,000 extra beds planned for the tourism region at Saariselkä, services in the area may in the near future include sports and motor sports areas, gold panning, husky and reindeer sled routes, and increased numbers of hiking, skiing, and snowmobile routes (Saariselän liikunta- ja virkistyspalvelut... 1995).

These planned functions will have a strong effect on the larger region, on nature, and on local communities. They will affect the National Park, too. They are even to some extent inconsistent with the existing tourist services available at the region; and most of all, from the point of view of the tourism industry, they conflict with the basic motives that bring tourists to Saariselkä year after year, often several times a year. This raises the question of whether Saariselkä still maintain its image as “the last wilderness in Europe," which was created by media and conservation debate in the 1960’s and 1970’s, and which is still used in tourism advertising. In any case, who can be expected to visit the place if it loses its subjective and cultural character of wilderness? If the landscape changes in a manner that disturbs the tourists, it ceases to be wilderness even in their imaginations, and they lose the opportunity to experience peace and quiet there. One can hardly expect the present tourists to continue patronizing it. Thus, the protection of wilderness character of the Saariselkä is not only an ecological issue, but also a question of social and economic sustainability of the tourism industry itself.

Conclusions

It is presumably impossible to demonstrate “objectively” beyond dispute which concept of wilderness or attitude toward wilderness is more correct than the others when discussing our notions of such areas and their use—each has advantages, justifications, and drawbacks of its own. Although the various viewpoints and attitudes help us to organize our thoughts and possibly to identify the factors and objections lying behind our own notions of wilderness and those of others, they do not as such offer any solution to the contradictions connected with the use of wilderness. It is not enough to perceive that actors possess different concepts, or that they basically have a utilitarian or biocentric attitude, for example, and thus to assume, albeit justifiably, that their values are contradictory ones. These concepts and perspectives become practical tools only when we focus our attention on a given place (wilderness) and the related social and cultural framework, for by doing so we will be able to emphasize contextuality and the ethical viewpoints related to that place.

As we shift the focus of the investigation from a general, abstract level to a concrete geographical place, we can be said to be moving from “nowhere” to “somewhere,” as Sack (1992) puts it. This paper did not discuss the relationship between nonlocal and local wilderness concepts, attitudes, and uses. That doesn’t mean that it wouldn’t be important: whether it is a matter of the future of wilderness areas or of old virgin forests in Finland (and elsewhere, I believe), the discussion should focus on somewhere, on existing social and cultural systems. Consideration of the effects of decisions on local social systems and people provides an opportunity to anticipate their magnitude at the level of communities, families, and individuals as well, and thus to target possible compensation measures of conservation in a more just and sustainable manner. The western notion of wilderness as a place where man is only a visitor should not be taken for granted as the only legitimate wilderness definition in areas inhabited by indigenous peoples such as the Sami (Faulstich 1994; Mohawk 1992). In the end, the successful protection of wilderness areas is not so much a question of ecological model solutions and their correct application, as of measures by which protection can be provided in a manner that is sustainable culturally, socially, and with respect to the local community. This social sustainability can be seen as binding on tourism in particular, as it often exploits the natural environment setting out mainly from nonlocal values and from utilitarian viewpoints, thus marginalizing the rights of the local people to their land and culture.

References


