

The Role of Wildlands in Sustaining Communities and Economies and Vice Versa

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Abstract—This paper is about wildlands—beyond legislated Wilderness areas. It's also about communities of people, their economies, knowledge, foresight, and courage to sustain the wild character of landscapes in a region, and the human cultures associated with them. Our premise is simple: wildlands do not all have to be developed to serve human well-being. It has a corollary: human communities and economies must be reasonably healthy and prosperous to sustain wildlands in an untrammled (unmanipulated) condition.

Let's start with some definitions. First, what are wildlands? A universally accepted definition of wildlands does not exist, but most people would agree that wildlands are places where the imprint of man is not dominant, for example, they are not shopping malls, suburban residences, farms, or developed recreation sites. They are relatively undeveloped landscapes that might include classified Wilderness areas, nature reserves, lands that do not have permanent roads suitable for vehicular access (trails and paths might be present), and areas where the evidence of human use or manipulation is visually and ecologically subordinate to the natural landscape. Wildlands are often referred to as backcountry or primitive areas and are generally the remnants of vast landscapes that were once entirely wild but have now been transformed by human action. These wildlands might be lands that were once lightly homesteaded, previously under slash and burn agriculture, perhaps had some timber harvested over low-standard roads, or were grazed by domestic livestock but have reverted to wildland condition as time passed. Please note that our definition of wildlands does not mean that these landscapes do not have people living in them or using them in some ways, only that human presence is not visually or ecologically dominant.

Wildlands in most of the world are often preserved in some form of public or State ownership such as National Forests, National Parks, wildlife refuges or sanctuaries, or crown lands. Some privately held lands in some countries do

contribute to the wildland estate or might potentially be converted to wildland conditions through management techniques such as road obliteration and reforestation. Such lands, however, must be permitted to regain their wildness over time, a process not easily accomplished once the human signature is written with such permanent features as paved roads and hardened facilities.

Wildland preservation, conservation, and protection tend to be products of an affluent society, one that is able and willing to recognize the long-term contribution such landscapes make to societal well-being. In some cases, State-declared wildlands are born and retained through tumultuous debate and conflict between competing economic and social interests. Other wildlands arrive at their status because they were vast, remote, awe-inspiring, or economically inaccessible to the flow of economic growth. In these cases, the resources of the "front-country" were sufficient to meet the country's needs for the moment, thus retaining wildland remnants as a storehouse of future options. Until this past century in most countries, these wildlands were intended to be developed for economic gain but people just hadn't gotten around to it yet.

Wildlands in the Western United States

Such was the case with the wildlands of the American West, and in particular, the Northern Rockies. The Rocky Mountains had only American Indian residents when the Lewis and Clark Expedition journeyed west through the region in 1805 and traversed back in 1806 (Ambrose 1996). All lands were essentially wildlands under our definition, home to numerous tribes and cultures. By the mid-1800's, mountain men, fur trappers, and trading companies had established a scant presence in the region. A few missionaries, priests, and settlers followed. Then, in just 40 short years, by 1890, historians considered the western frontier to have closed (Turner 1920). Between prospectors, post-Civil War immigrants, cattlemen, and homesteaders, the region had been discovered and was producing commodities. It was being developed and converted from wildlands into settled lands. Stagecoaches were being replaced by roads and railroads. Towns and cities were growing. Mines were producing gold, silver, copper, and coal, and lumber companies were on the move from the Lake States region, across the country to the Pacific Northwest. In our mythology, the giant logger Paul Bunyan and his blue ox, Babe, were heading for the ocean, cutting all the forests in their path.

In: Watson, Alan E.; Aplet, Greg H.; Hende, John C., comps. 1998. Personal, societal, and ecological values of wilderness: Sixth World Wilderness Congress proceedings on research, management, and allocation, volume I; 1997 October; Bangalore, India. Proc. RMRS-P-4. Ogden, UT: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station.

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Slowly the wildlands of the United States were largely tamed. The once-great herds of bison, numbering in the millions up to 1860, were shot to near extinction by 1880. The Indians were sent to reservations and forced to change their way of life. The great, silver-tipped grizzly bear and timber wolf were shot, trapped, and poisoned into submission by the early 1900's. The beaver was nearly trapped out of existence, and eagles were shot while soaring above the large bands of domestic sheep. Meanwhile the prairie sod became grain fields and the valley bottoms became ranches. Eventually the wild waters of the mighty Columbia and Missouri Rivers were dammed for commerce, irrigation, flood control, and hydropower, at great cost to the native diversity of fish and wildlife associated with the once wild waters.

Thus was the way of the wilderness in the Northern Rockies, a story that had played out decades and centuries before in other parts of the nation and the world. But it was a story that had not even started in other places, such as Amazonia, and it would not be finished here in the Northern Rockies.

Preserving Wildness

Representing the most primitive portion of wildlands, "wilderness" is a word whose original meaning is "place of the wild beast." In its historical context, wilderness was a wild place, a savage place, frightening and mysterious. It was a place beyond the safety of the village, fictionalized by reporters and novelists who portrayed it at best as uncivilized and at worst—evil.

But, while this mainstream view of wilderness prevailed in the American West, there existed in a few people the notion that wilderness and wildlands might not be all that evil or uncivilized, and that they could have value for reasons other than economic development. To early American writers such as George Perkins Marsh, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and John Muir, natural landscapes were important as contrasts to developed lands. Such places were vital to the human spirit and possessed an intrinsic value. Other authors, poets, photographers, and artists began to write about wildlands and preserve their images. The romanticism over wildness grew and so did the call for conservation and preservation of the favored mountains and scenic valleys.

In the 1870's, the United States began reserving special places as state and National Parks, then later as National Forests and wildlife refuges. By 1897, the U.S. Congress articulated its concern for the great western forests by passing the Organic Administration Act to set management direction for the newly declared forest reserves. Several Presidents continued to establish forest reserves in the Northern Rockies during the next 10 years. By 1905, the ties of the Department of Interior were transferred to the Department of Agriculture. The mission of the new agency initially was largely a custodial one, protecting the forests from fire, ensuring favorable conditions of water flow, controlling the cutting of timber, and managing domestic livestock grazing. By 1916, the National Park Service was formed, with a mission to attract tourists to the nation's scenic wonders and to protect these places from undesired developments.

As settlement continued in the West, and towns and cities grew, the need for forest products increased—principally wood, minerals, livestock forage, water, and recreation. Roads and railroads penetrated the virgin valleys and mountain ranges. The Forest Service and National Park Service both encouraged these developments, as well as strove to maintain the essential wildland character of the landscapes under their jurisdiction. But the drive toward development in the early 1900's brought forth new and stronger voices for protection of the wilds. In the Forest Service, Arthur Carhart, Aldo Leopold, and Robert Marshall became advocates for managing some land areas without roads or facilities to perpetuate amenity values such as backcountry recreation, scenery, and preservation of natural conditions. In 1924, the first National Forest Wilderness, the Gila in New Mexico, was administratively designated through the insistence of Aldo Leopold. In 1935, The Wilderness Society came into existence to advance the national cause of creating and preserving wild places. They joined voices with the Sierra Club, frequently skirmishing with commodity interests over the future of particular tracts of public land. Battles were fought with timber, mining, water development, grazing, road, and development interests. With a passionate and eloquent voice, these visionary men raised the consciousness of a growing cadre of agency professionals and citizens to the value of wild places for watershed protection, wildlife habitat, ecological wholeness, outdoor cathedrals, and personal rejuvenation.

Robert Marshall, the first Forest Service Chief of Recreation, actively pursued his Wilderness, Wild, and Recreation Area agenda by establishing the "U" regulations in 1939. Under these regulations, many remote, superlative wild areas of the National Forest System were classified, including the "flagship" of today's National Wilderness Preservation System, the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex of Montana.

As management and development of the National Forests intensified after World War II to meet growing human needs, so also did disputes escalate over the disappearing roadless regions. By the mid-1950's, The Wilderness Society, and its energetic director Howard Zahniser, were calling for a National Wilderness Act to create a permanent system of classified Wilderness Areas that would end the tiring battles once and for all.

Thus it was that in 1956, Senator Hubert Humphrey introduced the first Wilderness Bill in the U.S. Congress. Nine years later, after 64 versions of the Bill had been debated, 18 hearings held, and 6,000 pages of testimony taken, the Bill became law in 1964. With its passage, over 9 million acres of National Forest lands became instant Wilderness, to be "preserved and protected in their natural condition." Some wildlands now had the protection of a uniquely American Law. Wilderness had come a long way from the early concepts of darkness and mystery to a treasured collage of serenity and natural function.

But the Wilderness Act did not resolve all the debates over wildlands. The Act directed that all National Forest lands administratively classified as "primitive" should be reviewed within 10 years and recommendations made to the President of the United States on which of them should be submitted to Congress for Wilderness classification. The Secretary of the Interior was also to review every roadless

area over 5,000 acres within units of the National Park System and recommend their suitability for Wilderness designation by the Congress.

As the 10 years for the Secretary of Agriculture to complete the review of National Forest Primitive Areas drawing to a close, there arose a public call for a review of all National Forest lands in tracts larger than 5,000 acres to determine their suitability for Wilderness designation. Termed the Roadless Area Review and Evaluation (RARE) process, all areas were rated using the Wilderness Attribute Rating (WAR) scale, which identified attributes such as natural integrity, remoteness, and manageable boundaries. Not satisfied with the outcome of that process, wildland advocates called for a second review, termed RARE II. Obviously, the proponents of wild places were growing in number and influence, as was the resolve of their opponents.

The Future of the West to be Decided

One by one, individual States began to take an active role in resolving wildland classification issues in the National Forests within their borders. Statewide Wilderness Bills were submitted by legislators, and new Wildernesses were established by Congress in the 1970's and 1980's. Montana and Idaho, however, have not yet been able to reach agreement on which of the remaining 8 million acres of roadless National Forest lands should be so classified. With an increase in Wilderness classification activity in the National Parks, wildlife refuges, and other public lands, the Nation's Wilderness Preservation System now totals 104 million acres. Some observers have suggested that this Wilderness system is now beyond the wildest dreams of the early advocates of wild places, but it is likely that more lands will be added before the System is complete.

The Northern Region of the U.S. Forest Service contains 25 million acres in Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, and northwestern South Dakota. Five million of these acres are designated Wilderness (20 percent of the entire area of National Forests and National Grasslands in the region), and 8 million more are still roadless (another 32 percent in wildland character for a grand total of 52 percent of the region) (fig. 1). These wildlands form a majestic estate and largely shape the character of the Northern Rockies. Their beauty is breathtaking, from wide plains and grasslands to deep mountain valleys and river systems topped by towering peaks. They are home to world-class wildlife populations—grizzly bears, wolves, moose, elk, deer, mountain sheep, mountain goats, wild fish, and hundreds of other native species—that find sanctuary in remote corners, some accessible to only a few visitors annually. These wildlands are also the headwaters of two of the Nation's most significant river systems, the Columbia and the Missouri, both still largely intact in ecologic structure and function on the National Forests and National Grasslands.

As places sought out for primitive recreation, times of solitude, and challenge, the wildlands of the Northern Rockies provide experiences that last a lifetime. Within Montana and Idaho, 1,100 licensed outfitters and 4,000 guides provide services to guests from around the world who desire to see the West they've dreamed about since childhood. These activities generate substantial economic return as

well as maintain a valued way of life in the West: 730 of the outfitters work on National Forests, returning \$600,000 in fees to the U.S. Treasury for the privilege of operating on public lands. Outfitting has a direct payroll of over \$30 million while contributing over \$200 million to the economies of Idaho and Montana. This contribution is one-eighth of the total tourism expenditure per year, according to studies done by the University of Montana and the University of Idaho. Resorts, guest ranches, campgrounds, marinas, motels, restaurants, and the communities surrounding the wildlands of the Northern Rockies directly benefit from these visitors willing to spend millions seeking simply to rest their eyes on a wildland landscape.

But these values of wildlands are still not fully recognized by the citizenry at large. Perhaps no other issue tests the common knowledge of the western economy than the bumper sticker that says "Wilderness—Land of No Use." It is emblematic of the historic utilitarian view that many in the American West still hold, that resources only have economic value when developed or used. If it is not used, it is assumed to be no good to society or its value is assumed to be somewhere in the future when it can be used. Under this logic, minerals must be dug up to produce copper wire or gold jewelry, rangelands must be grazed to produce beef or mutton, timber must be cut to build homes and feed computer printers, or oil and gas must be stockpiled for future supplies.

People have tended to value only those land uses measured in economic terms. Even wild elk and wild fish can be measured in "use values" in terms of expenditures by hunters and anglers, which are rather significant in the Northern Rockies (table 1). But what is the economic value of something that is not used? What is a grizzly bear worth? More difficult yet, what is the value of Wilderness or of the habitat of the grizzly bear?

An Economic Basis for Decisions

But views of the value of wildlands is expanding. The wildland backdrop to towns that were once dependent on resource development has now become a magnet for migration. Witness what has happened over and over to villages that began as mining prospects, lumber towns, railroad crossings, cattle shipping stations, forts, or river ports. When the original cause for settlement gave out, played out, or the economics changed, the wildland character remained. Migrants seeking relief from crowded places, affluent citizens seeking to live amidst beauty or wildness, and entrepreneurs speculating on future growth are rediscovering these places for a new set of values. Even long-time residents, seemingly relegated to a ghost-town destiny, have shaken themselves, developed a new theme for their community, and breathed life back into it. But without the wildlands beyond the towns' boundaries, there would have been a void that could not have been filled with foreground attractions alone.

Such is the story of well-known American towns: Aspen, Vail, and Telluride in Colorado; Moab in Utah; Leavenworth and Winthrop in Washington; Wallace in Idaho; and many towns in Montana—all are rapidly growing communities

surrounded by wildlands. It is for the wildlands that most of these new migrants come (Power 1991). Once experienced, the hooks of the wildlands are swallowed deep. Populations of western Montana counties have soared over the last 10 years, and new residents who build their homes with a wildland view are willing to pay dearly for the privilege. The fastest growing counties are those containing the largest percentage of National Forest wildlands (Rudzitis and Johansen 1989a,b).

Although some wildland-associated communities remain heavily dependent on resource industries, it is doubtful that future emphasis on commodity extraction will be as heavy as it was in the past. Unfortunately, an immediate tendency is to assume that the next thing to do is expand the recreation and tourism roles of public lands to replace their historic commodity roles. However, a complete transition

from resource extraction to tourism, while in part reflecting a diversification of values, misses what has really happened in the West.

Communities that possess a favorable business climate are those that are able to protect or build their cultural, social and environmental qualities to make the community a pleasant place to live and do business (Rasker 1994). In many instances, the most economically productive and sustainable role of public wildlands is not in resource extraction or tourism emphasis alone, but rather in protecting the wild landscape, the wildlife, the wild rivers and streams, the wild experiences, and the wild scenery while sustaining compatible levels of diverse human uses and developments—all those things that collectively enhance the social, environmental, and economic quality of life for local residents.

The Northern Region (Region-1) of the USDA Forest Service

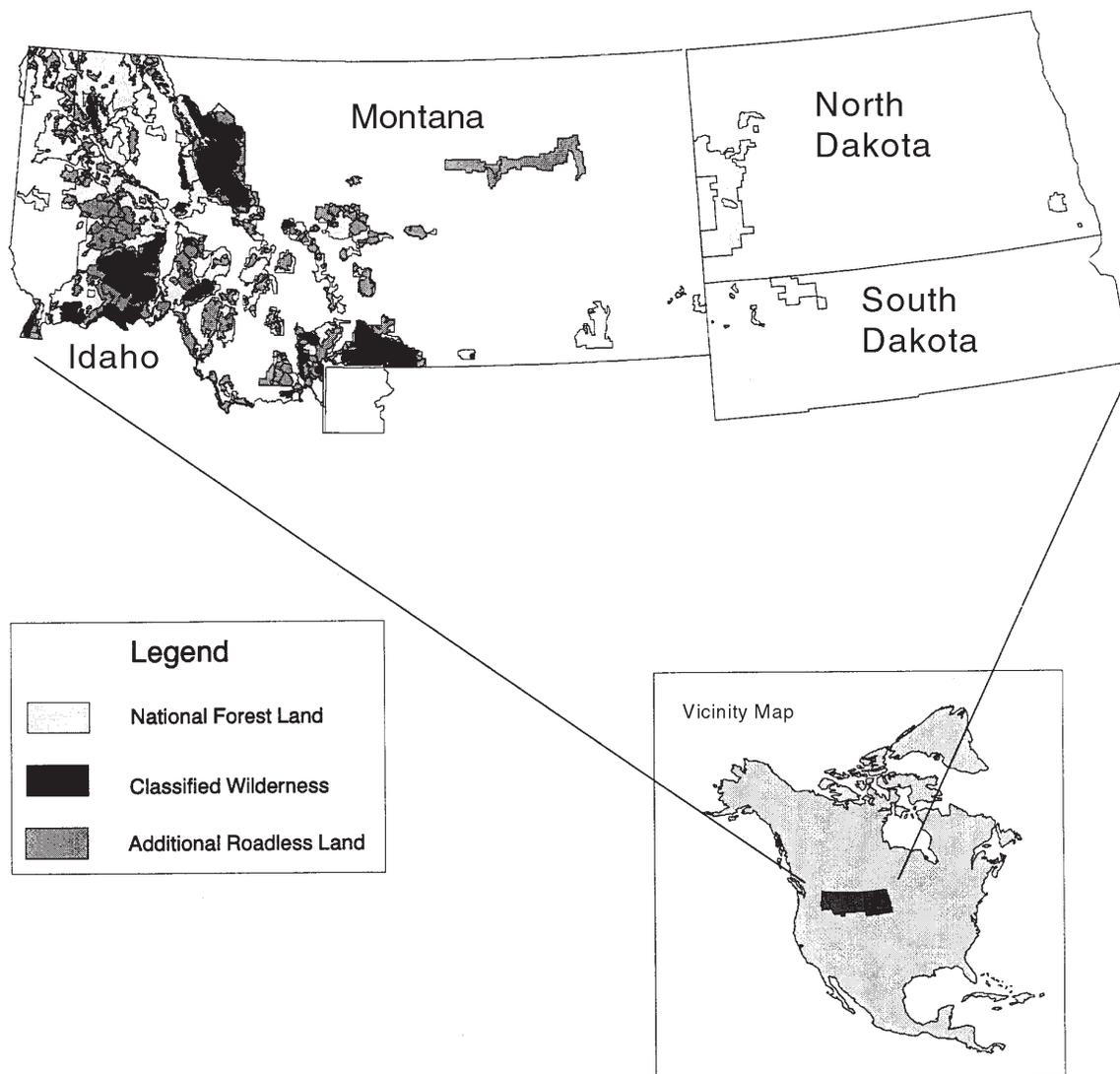


Figure 1—National Forest lands within the Northern Region of the United States Department of Agriculture, Forest Service. Also shows Wilderness Areas designated by Congress and remaining unroaded lands in the Region.

Table 1—Expenditures for hunting, fishing and nonconsumptive uses of wildlife in the Northern Rocky Mountains, U.S.A. (These values are 10 years old and probably conservative for present values.)

Expenditures for nonconsumptive wildlife recreation (viewing), 1985	
Montana	\$43,992,000
Idaho	\$43,212,000
North Dakota	\$16,384,000
Total	\$103,588,000
Source: 1985 USFWS National Survey	
Expenditures for sport fishing, 1988	
Montana	\$193,609,766
Idaho	\$169,853,733
North Dakota	\$97,525,479
Total	\$460,988,978
Source: 1988 Sport Fishing Institute	
Expenditures for hunting, 1985	
Montana	\$45,082,000
Idaho	\$68,168,000
North Dakota	\$25,658,000
Total	\$138,908,000
Source: 1985 USFWS National Survey	

A recent survey of the Yellowstone region (Johnson and Rasker 1995) revealed that traditional reasons for locating business, such as availability of raw materials, the local tax structure, and availability of labor and capital, all ranked comparatively low in peoples' decisions to move to (or stay in) the area. In fact, 66 percent felt they "would be more profitable in an urban setting," but when asked, "all things considered, would you choose to locate a business here again," 86 percent said yes. The most important reasons cited were, in order, "quality environment," "a good place to raise a family," and "scenic beauty." When the responses of "old-timers" were compared to "newcomers," it was revealed that existing business owners felt even stronger about the importance of quality of life variables than recent newcomers. The implication is that the social, cultural, and environmental amenities of a community are even more important to business retention than they are for attracting new businesses. The study concluded that an important role for public policy is to understand the effect amenities have on business owners, and if amenities are a significant determinant of peoples' decisions to stay in the community, then the role of the government should be to protect, and even enhance, the attributes the community finds attractive.

In a similar study, the Sierra Business Council of Truckee, California, released its report on community development and land-use planning in the Sierra Nevada (Sierra Business Council 1997). An interesting aspect of the report is the business community's statements that: (1) long-term economic health of the Sierra Nevada is closely tied to environmental health and (2) current plans do not provide sufficient certainty about long-term environmental health. The report notes that service, technology, and light manufacturing businesses will grow and flourish in the Sierra

Nevada only if the quality of life, expressed to a large degree by environmental health and historic resources, is protected.

Of 15 specific findings and actions identified for each, two are noteworthy: (1) most counties in the Sierra Nevada are taking insufficient steps to safeguard their most critical economic assets—the beauty and rural character of the Sierra's natural environment and (2) rural sprawl is beginning to compromise the economic productivity and functioning of natural systems in the Sierra. If not addressed, the problems will undermine the future of natural resource industries, tourism, and the health of natural systems that sustain all life in the Sierra.

In preparing the report, the authors randomly surveyed 1,000 voters in the Sierra Nevada. Eighty-two percent felt that there is a need to protect wildlife habitat and ecosystems to maintain the health of the natural environment for people. Seventy-six percent believe that maintaining environmental health and the quality of life is one of the most significant things that can be done to attract new businesses to the Sierra Nevada. This completes the vice versa point from our title: economic and community well-being are important to protecting wildlands, which are important to economic and community well-being.

So, what are some of the specific attributes of wildlands that attract people? From the recreation perspective, it is the diversity of available opportunities, from primitive to rural settings. Wildlands offer the hardy the challenge to enter places that offer opportunities for solitude in often spectacular scenery. Non-Wilderness backcountry is available in places for motorized travel in both summer and winter. Hunting, fishing, berry picking, wildlife observation, cross-country skiing, and photography are important to many. Snowmobiling has become "white gold" to several Northern Rockies communities, generating millions of dollars during winter months.

Studies by Rudzitis and Johanson (1989a,b) illustrate how not using resources can play a considerable economic role. They found that counties adjacent to federally designated Wilderness areas grew, on average, twice as fast as metropolitan areas. In order to test the importance of amenities in people's decision to migrate to areas with high environmental quality, Rudzitis and Johanson conducted a random survey of over 11,000 migrants and residents in 15 Wilderness counties in the West. They found that economic considerations were important location variables for only 23 percent of migrants, while 85 percent of established residents felt that it was important to "keep the environment in its natural state." The authors concluded that "amenities and quality-of-life factors are increasingly important to peoples' decisions about moving," and that "newcomers appear to want more access for recreational use of Wilderness, preservation of established Wilderness, and designation of additional Wilderness in the same area." Almost 75 percent of migrants surveyed felt that life was less stressful since they had moved; 91 percent found it more enjoyable; and 89 percent felt happier and healthier since their move.

Citizens of these communities are more willing today to contribute resources to maintain wildland status for lands they value. In Missoula, Montana, the community recently raised \$3 million to acquire land known as Mt. Jumbo to preserve the scenic backdrop to the east of the city. The

area is also an important winter range for deer and elk, which are visible from many points in the city. Most residents also agreed to restrict their access to walk and recreate on the land during critical winter and spring seasons to avoid undue stress on the animals.

Another example is the proposed federal purchase of privately held mineral development rights in the New World Mining District, which is located in the Gallatin National Forest, north of Yellowstone National Park. Rather than permit the development of a gold mine that would have diminished the wildland character of the region, President Clinton authorized \$65 million to purchase the mineral interest—a proxy value of the wildlands that could have been affected by mining. Similar courses of action have been followed in many places when owners of private inholdings within designated Wilderness have sought access. Public pressure has resulted in land exchange or purchase in order to preserve the Wilderness or wildland character.

Another desired characteristic of wildlands is the retention of natural diversity in the biotic community. A landscape unaffected by exotic invaders (weeds and pest species), with native botanical and zoological species present, is most likely to retain its natural ecological functions. Agencies, landowners, and individuals actively work in concert to protect or restore such habitats. In the long run, there is full expectation that economic value will follow.

Future Wildland Stewardship _____

Equally important in making wildlands available to people's use is the management commitment to sustain the characteristics that give wildlands their vitality. If the degree of wildness that defines their character is lost, their value and appeal are diminished. Roadless lands, for example, that await some ultimate legislative designation, remain in limbo for long periods of time. During such periods, these lands are under considerable contention and pressure for development and commodity production. This tension erodes a community's will to jointly resolve issues. With development, short-term economic gains might be possible, but they could also lead to potential long-term losses. On the other hand, it is arguable that some commodity outputs are possible from non-Wilderness lands if done with wise interdisciplinary counsel, followed by restoration of natural processes.

Decisions to keep lands wild require foresight and courage. Such decisions frequently go against the grain of "progress." They appear to promote commonly heard expressions such as "land of no use," "reserved for only the few," and "wasted resources." But today we look back at the early champions of wildness and salute what they accomplished by their dedication and tenacity. We look at the communities that have not sacrificed much of their environmental capital for economic capacity and find them best positioned for success in a changing world. Both the economic and environmental benefits of those decisions to protect wildness and diversity based on its enduring values grow more significant with each passing decade. Both are almost beyond quantification since they include the highly subjective values people hold dear. How indeed can society measure the "soul" of a place?

Wildland concepts require illumination to people. The value of land developed is immediate and obvious; the value of lands left wild and undeveloped is harder to see, but no less real. In order for people to continue to value wildlands, a broad-based educational effort is imperative. Such programs range from utilization of national media to the involvement of local interest groups with wildlands at their back door. Even those inner city residents from major metropolitan centers who may never set foot in a Wilderness can be captured by the knowledge of their existence. Those who are privileged to visit wild places must do so with knowledge of their own effects, ever seeking to use them wisely. To damage them may result in the loss of both their environmental and economic value.

Perhaps the most difficult conditions for sustaining the preservation or conservation of wildlands exist when many of the local or regional citizens are struggling to fulfill the most basic personal needs. Can people see the future value of a higher order need, such as recreational enjoyment, when they are hungry, poorly housed, poorly educated, in ill health, or with sagging spirits? One of the authors once heard a forester in India explain after a passionate speech on the value of a conservation ethic, "Don't you see? Here, conservation comes after breakfast!" One must empathize with such a statement. In theory and in practice, those who benefit from wildland designations on a broad scale should help bear the costs. There is a role for governments at several levels, recognizing that amenity values and quality of life will last over the long run if not truncated for the immediate necessity of feeding its citizens.

In 1907, Gifford Pinchot, first Chief of the U.S. Forest Service, proclaimed, "National Forests exist today because the people want them. To make them accomplish the most good, the people themselves must make clear how they want them run." Wilderness and wildlands exist because an informed electorate pursues and values them. They will only remain as significant contributors to a way of life as long as people find them worthwhile. It is becoming clearer that the economic value of wildlands provides a strong companion to the long valued environmental justification.

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