

Perspectives on Wilderness in the Arctic

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The ability to see the cultural value of wilderness boils down, in the last analysis, to a question of intellectual humility.

Aldo Leopold, 1949

Abstract—In the American lexicon, the concept of wilderness has become formalized through the Wilderness Act of 1964, and thus it has been defined in legal terms as a land designation. Yet wilderness, just as beauty, remains in the eye of the beholder, and how individuals experience wilderness varies both within cultures, as well as between cultures. As pressures for resource extraction, tourism, and related commercial development spread northward into the Arctic, those living in the more intensively developed lower latitudes may perceive the Arctic as a last remaining portion of the Earth, where it is still possible to set aside large areas of land as wilderness. Indigenous peoples living in the Arctic, however, view the lands and waters that have sustained them and their cultures as their homelands. People living outside the Arctic may seek to protect Arctic areas as wilderness for the benefit of future generations who share their values. If the “wildness” of arctic lands is to be protected from destructive human pressures, it must be done within the context of the cultural perspectives of arctic-dwelling peoples.

Wilderness as a Concept

The concept of wilderness dwells in the mind’s eye. Therefore, unlike physical and biological components of the real environment, wilderness is not an entity of the land. We humans perceive land as wilderness based on those characteristics of the land that we associate with wilderness, stemming from our individual perspectives of wilderness. The concept of wilderness, however, like all products of human perspective, is unique to each individual. A commonality may exist in the perspectives that each of us holds toward the natural world as a result of similarity in our cultural origins, life experiences, and the physical and biological characteristics of the portions of the world to which we have been exposed.

Since wilderness as a concept, like other human concepts, exists in the mind rather than in the land, it is not an absolute entity or value, and is subject to change with time as cultures change and experiences broaden. In North America, the wilderness concept had its origin largely from the perspective of wildness that European settlers, familiar with human-dominated landscapes, brought with them to the New World. This view of wilderness was melded by experiences the early immigrants gained during their subsequent settling into the new lands and through their opening and ultimate “taming of the Western Frontier.” Understandably, the wilderness concept changed markedly from the perception of wilderness shared by most European colonists upon their arrival in North America, to the view of wilderness held today by most Americans and Canadians, the majority of whom have become urban dwellers. In our hindsight, change and the passage of time appear nearly synonymous, whether one’s focus is the physical, biological, or human cultural aspects of the world, yet acknowledgement of the pervasiveness of change in our past seems lost when foresight is called for.

In the United States, the evolving concept of wilderness attained prominence in the American lexicon through the efforts of those who pioneered the emerging environmental philosophy and its advocacy of nature appreciation, such as Henry Thoreau, John Muir, and later, Aldo Leopold. Although Leopold played a dominant role in the development of an environmental philosophy within which wilderness and its values have become entrenched in Western thought, he underwent a personal evolution in his own thinking during his lifetime that both shaped and mirrored changes in the way society has come to view the environment (Flander 1974; Nash 1982).

Leopold’s contribution to the emerging environmental philosophy and the associated wilderness movement, however, distinguishes itself from the writings of other

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advocates for the environment through its primary foundation in science (Callicott 1987). Although Leopold's valuation of wilderness was based on an ecological understanding of nature and, therefore, was scientifically based, he also emphasized the aesthetic and historical-cultural bases for the appreciation of wilderness (Leopold 1953). For example, he stressed the importance of retaining traditional means of access into wilderness areas and of seeking primitive experiences within them (fig. 1). Leopold also strongly felt that the wilderness experience should include freedom to hear the sounds of nature without the competing sounds of mechanization, and it should take place in an environment largely free from dependence on technological society.

The wilderness concept reached its philosophical and political apex in American society with passage by the United States Congress of the Wilderness Act in 1964. Since its passage, the Wilderness Act has been the mechanism that has assured protection of extensive areas of public lands in the United States for their perceived wilderness values, protecting them for both present and future generations from the continuing pressures for development generated by an industrialized society. Although formalization of the definition of wilderness within the Wilderness Act has constrained evolution of the wilderness concept within American society, societal perspectives and concepts, nevertheless, remain subject to change as our culture evolves.

Effects of Globalization on Indigenous Culture in the Arctic

The accelerating rate of cultural change in the United States drives, and is driven by, cultural changes at the global level. The so-called globalization of world society is viewed by many, perhaps justifiably, as a means for exportation of the less desirable materialistic aspects and values of American society. Yet it has another face, deriving largely from the high rate of immigration that includes reciprocal influences from other world cultures on the dynamic evolution of American culture. From an arctic perspective, the balance of flow of cultural influences has been largely into the Arctic from the numerically and technologically dominant cultures to the south.

An accelerated push to explore and map new frontiers, associated with the search for new resources to exploit, characterized the Western world during the latter half of the past millennium. This drive for new lands and waters to claim and exploit ultimately reached into the Arctic, stimulated by advances in maritime navigation in the 15th and 16th centuries, discovery of the New World, and the era of empire building by major European nations. It reached a frenzied peak in the 18th and 19th centuries. The early polar explorers, driven by the spirit of adventure, as well as by



Figure 1—Modes of travel in wilderness areas have cultural roots (dog sleds, left), and their acceptance is based on past patterns of access. Seeking a balance between accepted primitive or historical modes of travel in wilderness areas and modern mechanized transport, exemplified by the contrast between horse and aircraft transport, right, presents a challenge for wilderness managers in today's world.

nationalistic pride and competition to lay claim to new lands for their countries, began the process of Western cultural dominance in the Arctic by assigning names to the geographical features they encountered there. The traditional place names used by the indigenous peoples of the Arctic within their homelands, who were without their own written languages and published maps, were ignored by arctic explorers who preferred to see themselves as pioneers in a hostile land unknown to the “civilized world.” Peoples of the Arctic, considered at the time to be in a primitive stage of development without prior conversion to Christianity, were viewed as outside of the dominant Western culture and, therefore, without entitlement or authority over the lands that they occupied. This view of arctic peoples prevailed during the era of empire expansion by European countries bordering the Arctic as they “discovered” and laid claim to all existing lands in the Arctic, with little consideration for the peoples that resided in them.

National policies and practices regarding indigenous peoples living in the Arctic have varied widely between countries and over time, including mutually beneficial trade, exploitation of the people and the resources they depended on, forceful subjugation, religious and cultural conversion, and benevolent paternalism. In all of these historic scenarios, however, lands in the Arctic were viewed as the national endowments of the countries that laid claim to them. These were “new lands” to be explored, mapped, and their features named consistent with the cultural language of the countries with dominion over them.

Recent accelerated globalization of the world economy has brought with it pressures for the melding of world cultures; the flow of these pressures being largely from developed industrialized societies, seeking to exploit new sources of resources and to expand markets for their consumer products, to the so-called undeveloped societies of the world. Unfortunately, this globalization of culture does not derive from intercultural understanding and an appreciation for the values inherent to individual cultures. The Arctic has been largely ignored in the past by industry in its search for needed resources because of its remoteness and extreme climate that have tended to make costs of resource development prohibitive. However, the availability of new technologies has increased the feasibility and lowered the costs of resource development in the Arctic, resulting in a new focus on the Arctic as a source of resources to serve the expanding demands of industry (fig. 2).

Following the collapse of commercial whaling in arctic waters by the end of the 19th century, most Arctic cultures remained peripheral to the primary influences of industrialized society until the Second World War, when the strategic military importance of the Arctic was recognized. Changes experienced by the peoples of the



Figure 2—Remote areas of the Arctic have now become targeted for energy and other mineral extraction, resulting in loss of values for sustainable harvest of wildlife by arctic residents, as well as for wilderness recreation. On the left, oil is being burned off in a well flow test during development of the Prudhoe Bay oil field, and on the right is the 1,000-km oil pipeline that bisects the Alaskan Arctic as it carries Prudhoe Bay oil to southern markets.

Arctic on the cultural, social, and economic fronts, amplified during the Second World War, have continued to accelerate as renewed pressures for resource extraction have expanded into the Arctic, along with the granting of increased political autonomy to indigenous peoples of the Arctic.

Striving for a Balance Between Sustaining Subsistence Resources and Wilderness Values While Allowing Extractive Industries

Undeveloped lands and waters of the Arctic continue to be valued by the peoples of the Arctic for their sustainable productivity for traditional harvest of subsistence resources. With increased autonomy over their homelands, Arctic peoples are also being encouraged, through prospects for monetary benefits and employment opportunities, to offer these lands for resource extraction to serve world industrial interests. Others who live outside of the Arctic see wilderness values in these lands. Uses of arctic lands for traditional subsistence purposes and wilderness recreation can be compatible, while serving both the interests of cultures indigenous to the Arctic and those from outside of the Arctic. Similarly, extractive resource development generated by pressures from outside the Arctic can serve the interests of arctic communities by providing increased economic self sufficiency, a source of funding for social services, and employment incomes needed by arctic residents to afford their increasingly Westernized life styles. A balance is needed, however, between protection of lands in the Arctic for their sustainable production of the subsistence resources on which peoples of the Arctic depend and identify with culturally, and dedication of lands for resource extraction and associated development that provides for their monetary economic needs.

Achieving an equitable balance between divergent and sometimes competing uses of lands in the Arctic presents major challenges for arctic residents, their regional governments, and the countries that have sovereignty over arctic lands. Providing for designated long-term uses of lands in the Arctic cannot be done without an understanding of their values and importance to residents of the Arctic, as well as those living outside of the Arctic. Whether lands are to be maintained, on the one hand for their productivity for subsistence and sport harvest of fish and wildlife resources, as well as for wilderness recreation, or on the other hand for extraction of nonrenewable resources such as oil, gas, and minerals, their effective management is only possible if an understanding exists of how these human activities may affect the unique ecosystem relationships and processes on these lands. Such an understanding must include an appreciation for the role of humans, both in the past and potentially the future, within these arctic ecosystems.

Indigenous peoples of the Arctic, through their subsistence harvests in the past, have been functional components at the top trophic level of arctic ecosystems, along with other predators such as the wolf and grizzly bear, and they presumably will continue to do so in the future (fig. 3). Humans in the past have also had a less direct effect on arctic systems through their activities, although usually with a light touch, by trampling vegetation and the soils as they camped and traveled over the land. These effects of human presence within arctic ecosystems can be viewed as natural if humans are considered components of these systems, just as trails in the landscape left by migrating caribou are natural. We humans, however, assign values to our actions in relation to their consequences; thus, we view our effects on the natural environment in terms of their possible effects on the productivity or aesthetic beauty of the land and waters to which we assign human values.

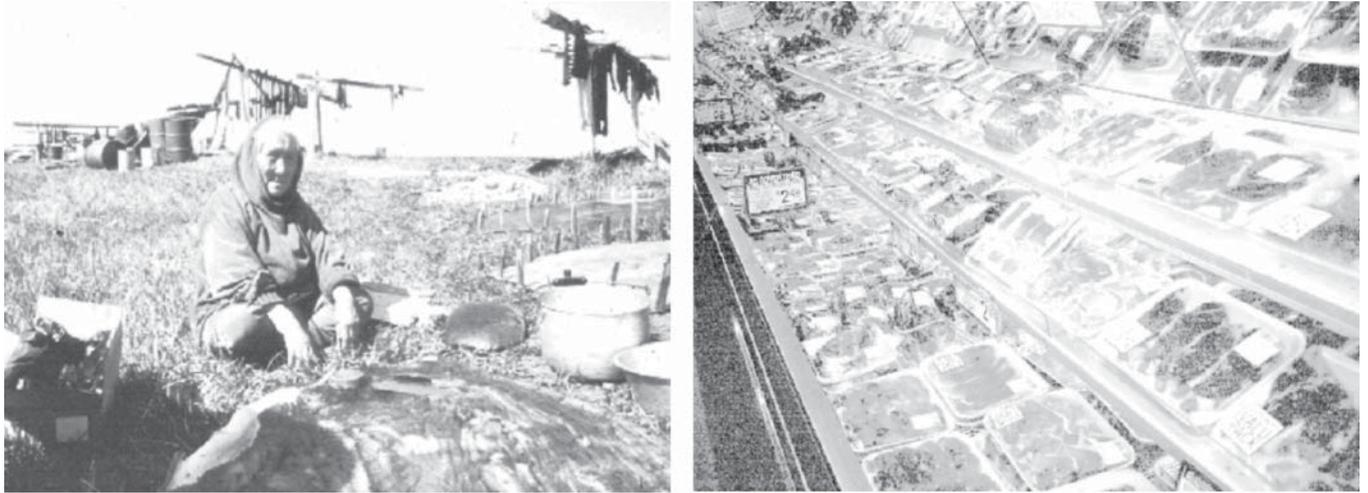


Figure 3—For many arctic residents, wilderness areas in their homelands are analogs of the supermarkets where most urban dwellers obtain their food. On the left, a Yupik Eskimo woman is processing subsistence food; on the right is a packaged meat counter in an urban supermarket. When people become removed from the sources of the food they consume, they lack interest in its origin and appreciation of the relative environmental costs of its production.

Conclusions

It should be evident that if we humans, whether as subsistence resource users, sport hunters, or wilderness seekers, wish to sustain the integrity, productivity, and unique wilderness qualities of arctic lands that we value, we must view ourselves as components of these arctic ecosystems and understand our role within them, thus justifying our presence within them but limiting the degree of our impact on them. Aldo Leopold (1949), in his essay *The Land Ethic*, stressed the importance of recognition of the ecological connection to the land that humans share with other organisms, when he wrote, “A land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it.”

The task for those who are charged with managing human use of lands in the Arctic for the sustainability of their productivity and continuity of uses, in appreciation of the values we have ascribed to them, is not simple (fig. 4). Arctic ecosystems, although often comprised of fewer plant and animal species than ecosystems at lower latitudes, nevertheless share in the complexity that is common to all ecosystems. An understanding of the complexity that underlies ecosystem function in the Arctic is far less advanced than is the case for ecosystems in more temperate regions to the south that have long been the focus of ecological investigations. It is clearly evident that effective management of human use of lands in the Arctic requires greater understanding of arctic systems than exists today. The need for increased focus of research on the dynamics of arctic ecosystems is particularly apparent, as pressures on arctic lands increase by residents of the Arctic who want to continue to use arctic resources as they have in the past, as well as from those who live outside of the Arctic but seek to develop and exploit its resources, or travel there to experience its remote wilderness values.

We do not need to abandon the Wilderness Act to protect the “wild” lands of the Arctic. Its legislation has served us well in the protection of, as yet “untrammelled,” lands within our own temperate landscapes, and it should continue to do so. But in the Arctic, where humans continue to live in their homelands as integral components of the natural systems present there, new terminology is needed for designation of protected areas if Arctic residents are to be supportive players in the selection and protection of lands we “southerners” view as wilderness.



Figure 4—Aldo Leopold (1949), writing in the 1930s, stressed the importance of solitude to those who would seek the wilderness experience (left), and cautioned that the sounds of mechanized transport obscured both the silence and the sound of nature, as well as the sense of remoteness that characterizes wilderness. On the right, a helicopter provided government-sanctioned access in 1976 to a Siberian Wilderness Area of the former Soviet Union.

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