

Origin of Political Conflict in Arctic Wilderness Areas

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Abstract—There are several important factors related to political conflict associated with arctic wilderness areas: scientific studies, economic interests, ethnic identities, geographic differences, and national histories. How groups with an interest in these wilderness areas inject their values into these factors stimulates political debate with each other and with stewarding agency officials. Analyzing the mixed currents of scientific, economic, ethnic, geographic, and historical values of user groups can help officials better appreciate the politics of managing wilderness areas. This work also points out three shared goals of the eight arctic nation-states for managing wilderness areas in the circumpolar region.

Introduction

As land areas designated by public policy to protect natural and cultural values, wilderness areas in the Circumpolar North are often the focus of political conflict. Eight nation-states have sovereign jurisdiction over the wilderness and wildernesslike portions of the arctic: Russia, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Denmark/Greenland, Iceland, Canada, and the United States. Each national government has enacted public policy to conserve natural areas and cultural traditions. There are many types of protected land categories, and they include strict nature reserves, national parks, wildlife refuges, and designated wilderness areas. It is also the case that some governments at the subnational level in the arctic have approved policy measures to protect public lands in their jurisdiction for wilderness values. For example, the governments of the State of Alaska in the United States and the Yukon Territory in Canada have set aside some of their public lands to protect them from economic development. This includes not allowing certain activities such as road building, mining, logging, or drilling for oil and gas deposits. The focus of this paper, however, is on efforts by some of the national governments of the arctic to protect wilderness values on a portion of their public lands. These values relate to governmental policy for preventing the eventual loss of most natural areas to more intensive forms of human use. They also involve policy for assisting indigenous people and other rural residents to continue customary hunting and gathering practices.

The approval process for wilderness management plans is a common forum for conflict. Approving and implementing these plans generate conflict among interest groups and between the stakeholder groups and public managers. This paper offers an explanation of the origin of political conflict for managing natural areas in the Circumpolar North. The analysis may also help explain the origin of political conflict in managing natural areas for other regions of the planet, such as Amazonia (Young 1992).

Conflict appears to originate from five factors in the arena of wilderness politics: (1) scientific studies, (2) economic interests, (3) ethnic identities, (4) regional geographies, and (5) national histories. These factors of wilderness politics divide the citizen body of each arctic nation-state into interest groups with opposed policy goals. This is especially true of democratic political systems, where citizens have the freedom to organize into groups and lobby government officials. A closer study of these factors may provide some ideas for how arctic wilderness managers can reduce the level of conflict, or at least offer a greater appreciation of the origin of political conflict.

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In: Watson, Alan E. ; Alessa, Lilian; Sproull, Janet, comps. 2002. Wilderness in the Circumpolar North: searching for compatibility in ecological, traditional, and ecotourism values; 2001 May 15-16; Anchorage, AK. Proceedings RMRS-P-26. Ogden, UT: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station.

Wilderness Politics

Politics involves power struggles and conflict between factions, with stronger groups tending to get more of what they want in public policy outcomes. These groups have more influence by virtue of the greater resources they can draw upon. Some resources include organizational skills, financial wealth, and the size of the group. Wilderness politics is also about the ability of some interest groups to control the discourse on policy issues about what wilderness means and how people should relate to it. Those with the power to shape the language and define the framework of the debate are most able to shape the policy process to their liking. This observation about the use of language suggests the power of ideas as a force able to shape human perceptions and social behavior. It is also possible to view politics in a positive way as an effort by organized groups to cooperate with each other to achieve certain goals of mutual interest. Politics can be about the desire of powerful groups to help underrepresented groups, such as minorities or even future generations, achieve certain goals.

The concept of wilderness includes two parts of a single and larger reality. One is a complex ecology of physical objects with forces that make dynamic changes in the natural system. The other is human perceptions and ways of assigning value and meaning to the natural world. Wilderness is a construct of culture, as well as a biophysical reality, and people get involved in the arena of wilderness politics to support their beliefs, values, and interests. What are these, why do they come into conflict, and how can answers to these questions help arctic wilderness managers to better appreciate the politics of wilderness? Political conflict originates in the spheres of scientific studies, economic interests, ethnic identities, geographic differences, and national histories. Each is discussed in a separate heading, but complex social relations make numerous overlaps among the five factors a usual state of affairs.

Scientific Studies

The increase of knowledge about the physical, biological, and social aspects of wilderness has been considerable over the past several decades (Hendee and others 1990). Since its inaugural issue in 1995, the *International Journal of Wilderness* has published the results of many wilderness studies. Although there is a constant increase of scientific information, disagreement over managing wilderness areas continues as a norm of political behavior. User groups continue to struggle with each other and to disagree with many policy choices made by wilderness managers. This is not a reason to decrease study of the many issues relevant for managing wilderness. It is rather a justification to redouble the effort to move policymaking onto a more rational level of discourse. This observation does not obviate the fact that findings of wilderness studies seldom provide answers to questions that all interested parties can agree on. Agreeing on facts, itself often a difficult thing to do, seldom leads to concord among actors on the values they want to inform arctic wilderness policy debates. If a study produces findings that support a given policy, those who oppose the policy will probably find ways to either ignore or deny the results.

Public agencies, charged with managing wilderness areas for their natural and cultural values, need various sorts of information to help them make better land use decisions. One important type of knowledge comes from the empirical studies of scientists working in a variety of academic disciplines. It is essential for the managers of arctic wilderness areas to better understand the dynamics of the physical and biological properties of ecosystems. This is important for gauging the impacts of human actions on the natural qualities of wilderness areas. For example, studies of lichen pasture conditions in Finnish Lapland show high levels of overgrazing by semidomesticated reindeer herds (Helle and others 1990). Too many reindeer are grazed on the same pastures for the entire year, and the lichen plants are unable to recover. This overuse occurs throughout much of the region, and includes public lands set aside by the Finnish Parliament in 1991 in the Finnish Act on Wilderness Reserves (17.1.1991/62). These scientific studies suggest a clear need to reduce the size of the reindeer herds, but the owners and managers of reindeer cooperatives in Finnish Lapland see this as a threat to their economic future.

In an odd reversal of the norm, scientific studies can also be used to support certain forms of economic activities if they can be shown to not disrupt the ecology of natural areas. For example, the 1991 Finnish Act on Wilderness Reserves requires agency managers to develop a program of natural forestry in wilderness areas. The Finnish Forest and Park Service has a test plot for gentle logging located near Ivalo, a town in Finnish Lapland near Lake Inari. Research has been conducted in other arctic forest areas to evaluate the impact of selective tree cutting techniques on bird populations (Jokimäki and Inkeräinen 1995). These findings can be employed by policy officials to decide if gentle logging is compatible with the natural workings of a forest ecosystem. Those with a more purist concept of wilderness may see logging for commerce as counter to the very idea of a natural area.

Another example of how scientific studies may contribute to political conflict relates to better ways for developing oil and gas deposits that have a small level of physical or visual impacts on a surrounding land area. As new techniques come on line, an energy company may be able to greatly reduce ecological and even the aesthetic impacts of oil and gas drilling in natural areas. Those resisting this type of future use of wilderness areas value the symbolism of having places free of any sort of oil drilling, even if scientific studies cannot identify any ecological harm. The politics of science suggests that the policy relevance of findings over the effects of human uses on the ecology of natural areas is burdened with competing values. The use of scientific findings shows that politics often eclipses analysis in the policy process, when competing views clash in the political arena.

Economic Interests

How people make a living and derive income, or build wealth and engage in self-supporting work, is the basis of much of human activities. People who live in remote northern communities are often tied to a direct use of natural resources to meet their economic needs. This is true for income-generating work, such as grazing reindeer or logging trees. Protecting the wild qualities of natural areas, however, requires the imposing of definite limits on expanded forms of economic activities. Another major form of economic activity is found in the subsistence practices of hunting and gathering. A large number of residents of northern rural areas live near public lands rich in fish, game, and other wild resources. Access to these lands and the right to harvest resources for personal use is a long-standing tradition in most arctic communities. The policy problem is how to allow the use of wilderness areas for subsistence and commercial purposes, but at the same time to not compromise their natural qualities.

One type of conflict between groups over economic interests is who gets to use wilderness areas in what ways and for what tangible benefits. The future of nature tourism in the arctic is a growing issue, given the attraction many people who live in temperate latitudes feel toward the north. An example is found in the municipality of Enontekiö, located in Finnish Lapland. As the manager of four wilderness areas in the region, the Finnish Forest and Park Service is in conflict with some local residents and the municipal government over managing nearby wilderness areas. The agency has established an office to promote nature tourism by advertising the wild virtues of the region, and also rents cabins and sells fishing and hunting permits. Some local people see doing the latter as a major threat to their customary rights to fish and game resources in the area (Ylitalo, personal communication). Some residents also fear that the Finnish Forest and Park Service, by capturing much of the revenue from nature tourism in the future, may deny local people the opportunity to increase their income (Ahopelto, personal communication).

As a word, "wilderness" is rich with meaning for people living in urban areas to the south, and the aura of unspoiled nature is a magnet for tourists. Of course, entrepreneurs are prohibited from placing infrastructure inside the legal boundaries of wilderness areas, but the building of hotels and restaurants to support an increase in tourists is possible on nearby lands. Some areas are easier to reach than others, given highways and airports, and infrastructure can be expanded. Business firms based outside the north, with large amounts of capital to invest, might out-compete local people in efforts to run small business ventures for nature tourists. Without a viable economic base, there is a bleak future for most arctic communities in remote areas (Young 1992).

The goal of public policy for nature tourism in and around wilderness areas should be to help northern residents develop ways to earn income that do not degrade ecosystems or rural traditions. The growth of a global economy, stimulated by rules of the World Trade Organization to promote freedom of commerce, may preempt arctic states from approving nature tourism policies that favor local business interests. The national governments of the arctic states might consider banning companies based outside the region from coming in and setting up nature tourism operations. They could also provide favorable loans and technical advice to assist residents and local governments in developing nature tourism in ways that protect the ecological integrity of the areas. This requires inventing new policymaking structures for use by agency managers and the people who live near the designated wilderness areas.

Ethnic Identity

The Circumpolar North is populated by diverse human cultures that were often deeply established in the region prior to the arrival of European explorers and settlers. The focus of an ethnic identity is on a group of people with common social values shared through their history, language, and customs. There are many ethnic groups in the north, including the Skolt Sami of Russia and the Inuit of Canada. The ethnic identity of arctic peoples is closely tied to how the members of a group perceive their relation to the land and the appropriate use of natural resources. Klein (1994) argues that the western idea of wilderness is foreign to how people with indigenous cultures perceive their natural surroundings. Catton (1997) uses the idea of inhabited wilderness to suggest that aboriginal peoples in Alaska are an integral part of the land base they live and work on as subsistence users, and this includes wilderness areas that have been designated by Federal legislation.

Conflict arises over how much access local people should have to wilderness lands and the uses in which they can engage. A bruising policy debate arose over the use of all-terrain vehicles in Anaktuvuk Pass, a mountain village of Nunamiut Eskimo in the central Brooks Range of Alaska (Catton 1997). To the residents of the village, these machines were the only practical means of gaining access to migrating caribou herds through mountain passes during the snow-free season. Managers of the Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve argued that operating these vehicles was not legal on wilderness lands. Most environmental groups sided with the agency's interpretation of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 (Public Law 96-487), and the conflict was only resolved by taking some acreage out of the National Wilderness Preservation System.

The future is unclear regarding the political impact of ethnic identity on policy decisions for managing arctic wilderness areas. As the forces of globalization increase in the present century, it may decrease the strength of ethnic identities. Some groups within the indigenous peoples in the Circumpolar North wish to gain more political control over making land use decisions where they live. For example, some members of the Sami Parliament in Finland question the authority of the Finnish Parliament to manage public lands in the region (Aikio 1997). The national government in general is opposed to the loss of sovereign control of its arctic region, but is willing to share political power in a more limited sense. There are other examples of emerging institutions controlled by ethnic groups that are prepared to take on a larger role in making land use decisions. A few include Home Rule in Greenland and the North Slope Borough in Alaska (Young 1992).

A proposed devolution of political power amounts to breaking apart the status quo system of nation-states by proposing new centers of policy control over land use decisions. It suggests the forming of smaller units of political society for local people to exercise more policy authority over managing the protected natural areas. Osherenko (1988) defines comanagement as a sharing of power by local people with policymakers and others who live outside their communities. She favors a greater devolution of political authority so that rural residents can exercise more control over their lives. It is through these evolving subnational institutions that ethnic minority groups can have more input into land use decisions for the areas in which they live and work. To the extent this protects the natural capabilities of land to produce subsistence resources, it aids in the continuation of their traditional cultures.

Regional Geography

The arctic as a circumpolar region cuts across the sovereign territory of several arctic nation-states. This division sets up a north-south dynamic of political conflict between the two regions of each country. This is true for all of the arctic states, except for Iceland. It is the only nation-state with sovereignty over a part of the arctic region that does not fit into the north-south category of the politics of geography. Iceland also has no ethnic divisions, given that its small citizen body has a shared culture. However, wilderness politics clearly exist in Iceland. One large issue now in focus is a continuing debate on whether to permit the building of large hydroelectric facilities as a spur to economic growth (Thórhallsdóttir, this proceedings). Going forward with these projects will have negative impacts on natural areas set aside by the national government to maintain their wild values, and the issue has generated a national debate. It may also be noted that the United States and Denmark are the only two nations with arctic lands that are not contiguous with the rest of their countries.

People who live and work adjacent to protected areas often see their use in terms apart from those who carry on their lives outside the region. Young (1992) refers to the core and periphery regions of the arctic states to describe a political dynamic, based on geography. Most of the national populations of the arctic states are in the southern part of the countries. This is also where the most intensive land use and modification of the natural world has taken place. In contrast, the northern periphery regions have few people and lots of open space, with land areas relatively unchanged by economic development activities. People living in the southern regions of the arctic states exercise most of the political and economic control in a given nation. As many lands in the north are owned and managed by national government agencies, the policymaking power for deciding uses of their natural resources lies mostly in the south. Finland is a member of the European Union, and future uses of lands in Finnish Lapland may be partly decided in this policymaking framework.

Local people living near arctic wilderness areas should be able to exercise a significant amount of control for shaping land use rules in these areas. They stand to gain or lose the most in terms of policy choices for a number of economic and cultural reasons. Young (1992) offers a theory of dependency and internal colonialism, based partly on power relations between the northern and southern regions of the arctic nation-states. He favors more control by people who reside in the Arctic region and live near the areas where land use issues arise. The devolution of policy authority over a land base may result in several outcomes. Some environmentalists are uneasy with allowing a large amount of authority for managing wilderness areas at the local level of control (Wuerthner 1999/2000). They fear this power might be used to erode the ecological integrity and wilderness character of natural areas. However, many people living in rural communities realize that a conserving and sustained use of wilderness is perhaps the best prescription for their long-term future.

Political conflict between northern and southern regions in arctic states will persist. In ironic ways, southern urban regions with a demand for raw materials, such as crude oil or natural gas, constitute a significant threat to the health of arctic ecosystems. A disrupting of the ecology of natural areas comes not only from people who use them for reindeer herding and other activities, but from industrial forces based outside the region. This includes air pollution transported from the southern latitudes with centers of industrial development to wilderness areas in the arctic region (Young 1992). Dealing with this problem requires negotiations on an international level of diplomacy and treaty-making. Another potential threat to arctic wilderness areas may be a demand for recreational use in the future. There is a need for more research to study the social carrying capacity to place limits on the number of nature tourism visits, or to change visitor behavior through wilderness education programs.

National History

The national history of an arctic country has an influence on the types of public policies that get approved for managing wilderness areas. Population growth, industrial development, demographics, and other factors help shape wilderness policy

decisions. The national populations of the eight arctic states are located mostly in their southern regions, with human settlement thinning toward the north. As a social movement, the values of environmentalism have made inroads into industrialized democracies with advanced economies. This includes the arctic states, with the Russian Federation also trying to move in the same direction. Inglehart (1989) notes the shift to postindustrial values by western European nations, including the Scandinavian countries. Rothman (1997) is less certain about the depth of such a paradigm shift in the United States, but he argues that Americans are in search of a quality of life that goes beyond a mentality of consumerism. This shift in social perceptions has an effect on national policymaking institutions in democratic countries. A heightened focus on the quality of life and amenity values puts more focus on policy goals for protecting arctic wilderness areas.

As noted earlier, there are eight arctic states in the Circumpolar North with established claims to sovereign jurisdiction. Each has its own land use history of expansion into the north, and this aspect of national history has shaped public attitudes toward the place of humans in the natural world. The land use history of a nation, in some respects, is the most comprehensive factor for explaining conflict over managing wilderness areas. In Russia for example, the progress of its national history has meant the adding of arctic lands and ethnic groups. As a sovereign in the nation-state system of the existing global order, and with numerous exceptions based on treaty regimes, each arctic country is free to craft its own land use policies for managing wilderness areas. Americans have a wilderness idea that in general does not apply very well to its arctic region. It comes out of its own unique national history of a frontier experience. This involved clearing aboriginal populations out of their homelands, usually by relocating them to other regions of the country. As a result, Americans living in the Continental United States tend to think of wilderness as a place where people only visit, but do not use its natural resources in any material sense. People living in rural Alaska near wilderness areas tend to see them more like arctic residents of Russia or Canada than most people who live elsewhere in the United States. The American concept of wilderness lacks a sense of meaning for Canadians, who identify it as a place people use for more than recreational pursuits (Grant 1998). Aboriginal peoples perceive wilderness in different terms than others who are not part of their ethnic groups (Klein 1994). As such, there is no intellectual consensus for defining and managing a circumpolar Arctic wilderness system with a uniform set of policy rules. However, there are some shared wilderness values between the eight arctic nation-states, and these will be explored briefly in the last section of this chapter.

An evolution of the national history of a given Arctic state can help to explain the origin of political conflict over wilderness values inside the country. This occurs as new meanings of nature evolve and there are shifts in values regarding the idea of wilderness. Nash (1982) argued that Americans in the 19th century saw wilderness as land to be tapped for the richness of resources such as ores, timber, grass, water, and wildlife. This view shifted in the 20th century to a national desire to set aside and preserve some areas in an unmodified natural condition on the public lands. It is hard to predict shifts in public attitudes and policy for managing United States wilderness areas in the arctic and elsewhere. Rothman (2000) argues that tourism in the American West leans more heavily on attracting visitors to national parks by constructing nearby theme parks, and that some youth would rather play computer games than interact with wild nature. His thesis suggests a growing interest in the many forms of virtual reality and possible shifts in the way Americans perceive nature, so that in the future protecting wilderness areas may lose political support.

As values toward nature evolve in the cultures of arctic nation-states, many user groups will continue the struggle to control policy debates over the future of wilderness areas. All of the Arctic states have urbanized populations, and as they move into a postindustrial era, shifts in economic affairs will change how people think about what wild nature means. For example, the traditional idea of wilderness in Finland is a place where people go to hunt, fish, and collect other renewable resources. Today, many Finns see wilderness in Finnish Lapland as places to get away from modern life and to enjoy a natural setting. The need to develop natural resources in northern Siberia and improve the standard of living in Russia may compromise the natural and cultural integrity of some of its wild lands.

Given the affluence of its oil operations in the North Sea, Norway may elect to place more of its arctic land base into wilderness areas.

Concluding Thoughts

This paper has explored five factors as tension points that ignite political conflict over managing arctic wilderness areas: (1) scientific findings, (2) economic interests, (3) ethnic identities, (4) geographic differences, and (5) national histories. The positions of interest groups with a stake in wilderness policy issues will be shaped by some or all these factors. These five elements employed to analyze the sources of political conflict over arctic wilderness areas do not work in isolation from one another. I have chosen to divide political conflict in the policy process into five categories to enhance the clarity of the origin of disputes. This helps to set out a typology of values and to provide a framework for analyzing Arctic wilderness politics, but it does not capture the complexity of the merging factors that spark the political conflict. One example of complex interactions between the five factors is the plan to develop the Northern Sea Route along the northern coastline of Siberia (Brigham 1991, 2001). This large-scale project would provide for the transit of cargo between Western Europe and the Asian Far East, and would facilitate the use of Siberian rivers to gain access to hinterland resources. Environmental groups in Russia and elsewhere are obviously concerned about the impact of this proposal on the natural and cultural features of the Siberian wilderness.

An evolution of wilderness values within these five categories of conflict-source factors continues to shape the politics of managing arctic wilderness areas. The addition of new scientific studies on natural areas will stimulate value shifts and political conflict. The evolution of a global economy and a heightened concern for protecting the cultural integrity of indigenous ethnic groups also suggest changes in managing arctic wilderness areas. As the 21st century deepens and there are challenges to the paradigm of the nation-state, a new politics of localism and regionalism may gain force. The rise of a postindustrial global society suggests the evolution of an environmental ethic with shared values for managing natural areas. However, predicting the future is uncertain, and the element of national history helps to explain why each Arctic state has its own ideas about wild nature and approaches to managing for those values.

What are some orienting values for managing arctic wilderness areas, regardless of the nation-state where they are situated? One place to begin is to inquire about the sort of values that promote an attitude of respect toward nature. There is a need to develop a discourse of politics for using natural areas in ways that protect ecosystems. Such a pattern has been the cultural basis of natural resource use by indigenous arctic peoples for thousands of years. A study of traditional ecological knowledge, as practiced by many circumpolar people in remote areas, is needed to articulate a unified wilderness idea for the Circumpolar North. Rural residents, in general, want to maintain the natural integrity of a land base so that it can produce wildlife and other resources to meet their economic and cultural needs. Knowing, caring for, and respecting arctic lands provide rewards that are sustainable over a long period of time.

Aboriginal groups and other residents of the high northern latitudes can teach southern people more respectful and sustainable ways for humans to live in the natural world. It involves the forming of a land ethic that uses the interest of nature without tapping into its capital stocks. It is the deploying of a postindustrial set of technologies to give humans a comfortable standard of living without eroding the quality of the natural environment. It is the evolution of a political discourse leading to new sets of policy for adjusting the long-term place of human beings on the planet. It is also about providing more local control for managing a class of problems that confronts any community when it sees itself as living in a bioregion (Gladden 1999). The outcome of a desired politics of arctic wilderness is an evolving discourse that teaches humans how to live with nature and to respect it through light and sustained use.

Viewed in a wider frame of ideas, arctic wilderness managers appear to support the goals of protecting the ecology and the character of wilderness areas. The first

goal involves managing wilderness areas so that ecosystems remain mostly unmodified and controlled by natural forces. This applies across a variety of types of wilderness areas, such as wildlife refuges and national parks, but especially for strict nature preserves. The second goal is perhaps more elusive, for it amounts to setting out ideas for defining the meaning of the character of wilderness. Wilderness is a cultural idea, as well as a biophysical reality. When people begin to discuss the meaning of wilderness it can produce many currents of political conflict. The understanding of wilderness has much to do with the values for which it is managed, and there is a great diversity of opinions on this question. A third general goal that wilderness managers can probably agree on is achieving social equity among the interest groups with a stake in using these areas. As stated earlier, residents living near wilderness areas, and especially aboriginal groups, should be considered for special uses of these areas. This policy orientation is one important way for traditional cultures in rural areas of the Circumpolar North to survive, and perhaps flourish, in the future.

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