The Socio-Cultural Value of New Zealand Wilderness

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Abstract—New Zealand’s wilderness resource has become iconic on both a national and international scale, and provides an important source of cultural identity for many Kiwis (a colloquial term for a New Zealander). Now, in the early 21st Century, however, social changes such as urbanization, globalization, increasing consumerism, and growing international tourism may be eroding the traditional values and practices that underpin New Zealand’s wilderness heritage. This paper explores the complex phenomenon of wilderness in contemporary New Zealand society. It addresses questions such as:

- What does wilderness mean?
- Why is it important to those who venture within it? and
- How is it being affected by social and environmental changes?

It is argued that the protection of wilderness is critical to New Zealand society for social and cultural (as well as ecological) reasons. Wilderness in New Zealand represents a historical affinity with the land and the natural environment and is viewed by many as a cultural icon. Wilderness provides important connections to a proud pioneering heritage. It represents a legacy and is interpreted as a gift to future generations. Protected area managers require a deeper understanding of the ideas and philosophies behind wilderness in order to maximise the personal, social, and environmental benefits wilderness can provide for society.

Keywords: wilderness protection, social values, cultural identity

Introduction

New Zealand’s wilderness is of great importance to the nation for a variety of social, cultural, political, ecological, and economic reasons. The wilderness landscape is recognized—nationally and internationally—as one of the country’s defining characteristics (Bell 1996; Bell and Lyall 2002; Clark 2004). It provides a setting in which New Zealanders can practice a variety of ‘traditional’ outdoor recreation activities such as tramping, hunting, fishing, and kayaking. (Tramping is a New Zealand term, used to describe the activity of extended walks or ‘hikes,’ generally with a back pack and on conservation land. The term also has cultural connotations, involving connections with the landscape. Tramping is known elsewhere as ‘hiking,’ ‘trekking,’ ‘walking,’ or ‘rambling.’) Wilderness is also habitat for a large number of rare and endemic species of flora and fauna, and has significant economic value because of the way it is used to promote New Zealand as an international tourist destination. Various studies have highlighted the economic and ecological value of New Zealand wilderness (e.g., Cessford and Thompson 2002; DOC 2005, 2006b; Molloy and Reedy 2000; Shultis 1997), but the social values have been neglected in academic research until now.

Recent international studies have emphasised the need for socio-cultural wilderness research (e.g., Patterson and others 1998; Watson and others 2004; Williams 2000, 2002a), and developments such as increasing international tourism and proposals to allow extractive activities in the wilderness resource have brought to light growing tensions over the meaning and use of wilderness in contemporary New Zealand society. As yet, however, no one has explored these issues in New Zealand through academic research. Little is known about the people who visit New Zealand wilderness, the values they hold for these places, and the potential effects of broader social changes on the country’s wilderness heritage. The current paper aims to address this research gap through a discussion of the socio-cultural meanings and values of New Zealand wilderness. It is based on data from a doctoral research project that explored the phenomenon of wilderness in New Zealand through the eyes of wilderness recreationists.

Existing Research

Over the past few decades, there have been some major changes in the theoretical and methodological approach to wilderness research. In broad terms, there has been a shift from behavioural approaches to wilderness toward more socio-cultural and human geographic research programs, adopting a variety of qualitative methods. Rather than assessing wilderness motives or visitor satisfaction levels (as was the focus of earlier wilderness studies), the socio-cultural approach emphasizes the multiple meanings and interpretations of wilderness. It focuses on the nature of the experience, and seeks to understand the meanings and values that different groups in society ascribe to wilderness. Examples of socio-cultural wilderness studies include, among

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others, Alessa and Watson (2002); Cronon (1995); Grant (1998); Low (2002); Schrepfer (2005); Watson and others (2004) and Williams (2000, 2002a, 2002b).

Findings from these studies have given strong support to the idea that what we understand and denote as wilderness is socially constructed. For example, Williams (2000, p. 78) noted: “it is impossible to talk about the meaning and value of wilderness without acknowledging to some degree the role of culture in giving meaning to things.” Strong links have also been identified between wilderness and national identity in many countries. Schuster and others (2005, p. 116) found that “Wilderness seems to be one path to the creation and continuation of American heritage, history, and national identity,” and Williams (2002a, p. 123) claimed that “Recreational use of wilderness and nature became a ritual for reproducing the frontier experience and what was taken to be American character.” Grant (1998, p. 39) concluded that the contemporary Southern Canadian understanding of wilderness is an “identity myth” that has developed because of a desire to protect and maintain their idealistic view of the arctic as a pristine wilderness. Schrepfer (2005, p. 8) wrote that protecting the American wilderness “preserves centuries of a multi-layered, cultural history of meanings imposed upon meanings, realities laid upon fantasies, and fantasies set against the force of very special places.” (See also Borrie and Roggenbuck 1995; Eriksen 1993; Low 2002).

The key message underlying these studies is that wilderness meanings are inextricably interlinked with the social and historical context in which they occur. They are “anchored in history, and culture, and not simply the inherent, enduring, tangible, and visible properties of nature” (Williams 2000, p. 78). An understanding of the way these meanings are created, negotiated, and contested is, therefore, seen as “necessary for the effective allocation and management of wilderness” (Williams 2000, p. 77). Without this knowledge, managers are likely to be “ill prepared to provide recreation opportunities to suit the diversity of cultural values, norms or lifestyles of the recreation clientele” (Williams and Carr 1993, p. 210) (see also Borrie and others 2002; Patterson and others 1998; Watson 2004; Watson and Williams 1995; Williams 2002a). The social and cultural meanings of New Zealand wilderness are the focus of this paper.

Background: New Zealand Wilderness

This research was conducted in an area of New Zealand wilderness. Over one third of New Zealand’s land mass is protected in parks and reserves, including six officially designated wilderness areas. Wilderness areas are a particular classification of public conservation land, which is afforded significantly high protection from human use and development. In addition to its significant ecological value, wilderness in New Zealand also has strong cultural connotations. The wilderness movement was central to the development of a new national identity that distinguished New Zealand from England, following independence in 1947 (England formally granted New Zealand the right to independence in 1931, but the New Zealand Parliament did not officially accept the offer until 1947) (Bell and Lyall 2002; Clark 2004; Lochhead 1994; Shultis 1997; Sinclair 1986). Wilderness formed the basis of this new identity in several ways. First, it distinguished New Zealand from England by providing a unique natural habitat for species that were found nowhere else in the world. Second, the wilderness landscapes enabled New Zealanders to showcase their outstanding natural heritage (in contrast to the cultural/built heritage of England). Third, wilderness embodied the pioneering ethic of adventure and exploration, which helped to define New Zealand settler society and to distinguish it from Europe. And finally, wilderness symbolised two of the fundamental values of early New Zealand society that were believed to be lacking in England: freedom and egalitarianism (see Barr 2001; Bell 1996; Devlin 1995; Molloy and Potton 2007; Shultis 1991).

Specific legislation that defined wilderness areas and recognized the value of wilderness was developed in New Zealand in the 1952 National Parks Act. This was based on the philosophies and ideas embodied in the United States wilderness movement. It lasted until the mid 1980s, when outdoor recreationists and conservationists began to lobby the government for a change in the legal definition of wilderness to better reflect the country’s unique social, political, geographical, and ecological situation. They desired a more ‘indigenous’ version of wilderness (Shultis 1997), which would “give future generations the same opportunities to pioneer” and to explore in wild nature (Barr 2001, p. 18). The lobbying was successful, and the legal definition of wilderness was refined and modified to create a much more exclusive and ‘purist’ concept than in other countries such as the United States or countries in Europe. (The Wilderness Policy 1985 provides the most comprehensive description of the legislative concept of wilderness in New Zealand. It was developed by a government-appointed group, following the 1981 New Zealand Wilderness Conference).

While permitted in wilderness areas in many similar Western countries, developments such as tracks, huts, bridges, sign, and motorised access are now strictly forbidden in New Zealand wilderness. (For cultural and historic reasons, aircraft access is allowed in particular sites in some Wilderness Areas in New Zealand during the popular hunting season). Because of this, many remote areas of New Zealand conservation land are managed as wilderness, but cannot be legally designated as wilderness because they do not meet all of the strict legal criteria. The current study uses the terms ‘wilderness,’ ‘wilderness setting,’ and ‘wilderness resource’ to describe New Zealand wilderness areas and adjacent lands offering qualities of a wilderness experience.

Threats to New Zealand’s wilderness heritage—Despite the cultural and heritage value of New Zealand wilderness, there are fears that social changes such as urbanization, globalization, increasing consumerism, and growing international tourism may be eroding many of the traditional values that underpin it. These values include freedom, egalitarianism, solitude, escape, self-sufficiency, and personal challenge. They were fundamental to the early New Zealand pioneering society, and remain highly regarded aspects of the traditional New Zealand wilderness experience. However, these values are not necessarily needed, or may no longer be compatible with, modern Western lifestyles.

New Zealand society is changing, and this is causing tensions to develop over the meaning, value, and importance of
wilderness. Over 85 percent of the New Zealand population now lives in urban areas (compared to less than 40 percent in the late 1800s), and fears have been expressed that Kiwis are gradually becoming disconnected from the country’s wild areas as they are “softened by the experience of urban living” (Statistics New Zealand 2009, p. 2). Increasing international tourism is also causing tensions in the wilderness arena. The number of international visitors to New Zealand doubled between 1993 and 2006, to reach almost 2.5 million in 2007 (Tourism New Zealand 2008). The majority of these visitors come to experience the country’s natural environment, but also bring their own values and ideas about how such places should be used. There are fears that this may eventually alter the way New Zealand wilderness is conceptualized and used (see Cessford and Dingwall 1997; Cloke and Perkins 1998; Coughlan 1997; Coughlan and Kearsley 1996; Kearsley and Higham 1997).

Another major concern is the recent Government plans to review existing legislation to facilitate mining for mineral deposits on conservation land. Although the proposals have generated significant controversy among the general public, the possibility that economic interests may outweigh any desire to protect New Zealand’s wilderness from development still remains. A recent quotation from the current Conservation Minister, Tim Groser, highlights this fact. He was reported in the popular press as saying “If you can extract wealth from that [conservation land], that’s what we should do” (Hotton 2009).

Methods

The methods employed in this research were designed to explore the experiences of New Zealand wilderness users. In order to combat some of the logistical difficulties associated with contacting this user group, clear geographic and temporal parameters were created. The fieldwork was undertaken in a specific area of New Zealand’s wilderness resource: Fiordland National Park in South West New Zealand (fig. 1), and research participants were limited to those accessing a defined ‘remote’ or ‘wilderness’ area of the Park during the summer of 2004/2005 (fig. 2). Fiordland National Park is considered New Zealand’s largest remaining expanse of ‘wilderness,’ and provides significant opportunities for wilderness recreation (DOC 1996). It covers an area of 1,260,200 hectares and forms part of the Te Wahi Pounamu World Heritage Area (DOC 2006a). The area is famous for its combination of rugged glaciated landforms, remote coastline, unique flora and fauna, abundant wildlife and extreme weather conditions (ibid.). The Park is also one of the country’s most popular international tourist destinations (Ministry of Tourism 2009).

The study used two different qualitative research methods, research diaries and semi-structured interviews, to gather data on respondents’ interpretations of the wilderness experience in the Park. Diaries were distributed to eligible participants before the start of their wilderness visits. They were asked to complete the diary on each day of their trip, recording details about where they went, what they saw, what they heard, how they felt, and anything that was important to them during that stage of their visit. A total of 67 completed diaries were returned. The sample included a variety of activity types, ages, and nationalities (63 per cent New Zealanders versus 37 per cent overseas visitors), although it was heavily dominated by males (85 per cent males compared to 15 per cent females). This is indicative of the particular sub-section of the New Zealand outdoor recreation population (see DOC 1996). Nineteen interviews were then conducted with those recreationists who had completed a diary and were still available for further engagement. Questions focused on major themes that arose as a result of the diary analysis. Due to the time lag between the diary completion and the interviews taking place, most of the international respondents were no longer in the country, and consequently all but one interview participant was from New Zealand. Both the diary and interview data sets were qualitatively analysed with the aid of NVivo software. Because the focus of this paper is the socio-cultural value of New Zealand wilderness, findings presented here are entirely from New Zealand respondents. Direct quotations (from the diaries and interviews) are in italics.

Research Findings

I think that wilderness is a big part of Kiwi identity, and we should protect it at all costs. It’s a huge part of Kiwi culture— the whole exploring, going on adventures, getting into the bush, fishing, boating, hunting and having to fend for yourself (F 134).

The above quotation encapsulates the feelings of New Zealand respondents about their country’s wilderness heritage. The theme of culture and identity permeated almost every discussion about wilderness, thus highlighting its socio-cultural value. The three major ways in which wilderness contributes to New Zealand culture and identity are discussed next.

A means of national distinction— New Zealand nature helps New Zealand people define who we are, what makes us similar to each other and distinct from other people (Clark 2004, p. 6).

Wilderness was commonly described as something that distinguished New Zealand from other countries. Respondents believed that the mere existence of such large expanses of wild land rendered the country unique on an international scale:

We need to make the most of our wilderness because, in a global sense, we are one of few countries that still have some areas that are relatively untouched, and we still have reasonably easy access to these areas... That’s what makes us quite different to many similar places overseas (D 007).

The unique natural environment that exists in New Zealand wilderness was also seen as a feature of national distinction. Supporting the concept of wilderness is a way for New Zealanders to protect the native biodiversity and thus part of their heritage.

I think that conserving these environments is important to New Zealanders for their identity. Because a large part of our identity is about the land and the amazing landscape that we live in— so preserving that is really important (N 202).
Figure 1—Fiordland National Park location.
Figure 2—Remote and wilderness areas in Fiordland National Park.
In addition, respondents placed huge value on the opportunities that they currently have to explore the country’s wilderness resource—to get away from urban society and everything associated with it (work, family ties, noise, man-made constructions); to feel what it was like to live as a pioneer, and to experience a wholly natural environment that is uniquely ‘Kiwi,’ in relative freedom and for very little cost.

Wilderness is really important to New Zealand society, because one of the points of difference about what it means to be a New Zealander is that we have this wild outdoors. It is something that is uniquely ours — uniquely New Zealand. I really value the opportunity to be in those wild lands, and I feel really proud that we still have places like that where we can have a wilderness experience (5067).

Connecting with the past—Wilderness was described as a way for New Zealanders to connect with their past, and to explore the country’s natural and historic heritage: “Wilderness shows us where we came from” (134). Respondents saw this as an important way of developing a sense of cultural identity — a way of ‘re-living’ and ‘taking part in’ a long history of association with the land and exploring. As explained by ‘J’:

When we visit these areas, we’re maintaining, or taking part in something that has been going on in this country for over a hundred years, and that’s very important to a lot of us, because in some small way, we’re part of that history (995).

They often enjoyed visiting areas of wilderness that contained a significant amount of human history — be it exploration, indigenous or early occupation or wildlife management. For example:

Fascinating to come across the odd scotch thistle — a reminder of the old days when people lived here. Hope these ‘relics of the past’ are not exterminated as they are of cultural value (Diary 62).

Several commented on the strong connections between wilderness and the country’s Maori (indigenous Polynesian people of New Zealand) and European history, and expressed great interest in exploring the tracks of early New Zealanders. It is likely that these connections with the past have helped them to develop such strong attachments to wilderness: “It’s part of who we are”; “I think it’s just that sense of history and everything that’s been before you” (194):

I think that we visit these places because of an affinity with the land — we just feel part of the place. The history of what’s gone on in that area is just phenomenal. And to feel a part of that; to go right back beyond that day when Europeans arrived in New Zealand, and to ask “why did we come to New Zealand?” is a really important part of wilderness in this country (995).

Interestingly, these historical associations with human use of wilderness appear to conflict with the more ‘traditional’ or ‘purist’ views of wilderness embodied in New Zealand wilderness legislation. This serves to highlight the complexity of the wilderness concept, and indicates that it may be important to preserve cultural links to the past where they already exist.

And I think that to really be able to appreciate and understand New Zealand and New Zealanders, you have to be able to appreciate the outdoors and this amazing wilderness that we’ve been blessed with (5067).

A cultural identity—An important aspect of New Zealand wilderness was that it enabled respondents to practice cultural traditions, to connect with the New Zealand landscape and to reinforce particular aspects of their identity. It was regarded as a cultural icon and a cultural practice, and one that represented an historical affinity with the land and the natural environment:

I think that wilderness trips are a cultural experience for New Zealanders… there’s definitely some sort of bonding with the land, and with each other. It’s great to get out there and to feel that you’re actually part of the place, because this is where you’re from (202).

Most New Zealand research participants had grown up in an environment where they were surrounded by the ‘Kiwi outdoors culture,’ and so they had been instilled with key wilderness values from a very young age. As far back as many of them could remember, they had been learning about New Zealand’s wilderness heritage, why it was important, and how they should behave within a wilderness setting:

My father used to look at the pioneering spirit of our forefathers and encourage that to come through in our education and our upbringing. We’d always be out in the middle of nowhere, fishing or whatever, just learning those values that I still hold today (512).

The values and practices learned on these family trips have been passed down through generations, and visiting wilderness has become a significant part of their lives. A number of respondents indicated that they were continuing this practice by passing on the same ideas and values to their children, and their children’s children. For them, wilderness is a way of taking part in a long-held, and highly valued tradition of escaping to and exploring and connecting with wild New Zealand nature and the New Zealand landscape. It is also a tradition that they feel very strongly about protecting:

I would really like it if these wilderness experiences were available to future generations. I think that it’s part of our heritage, and so it needs to be available for people in the future (007).

An important cultural dimension of New Zealand wilderness that became clear through this research was that it embodies many of the defining characteristics of New Zealand society and what it means to be a New Zealander: freedom, independence, egalitarianism, adventure, exploration, self sufficiency, an affinity with nature and the ability to withstand hardship—particularly with regard to surviving in the outdoors. Respondents felt that their desire to experience wilderness was part of the Kiwi ‘pioneering mentality’: “It’s kind of a pioneering feeling — where you’re out there in the elements and you’ve got to fend for yourself; and I really enjoy that about it” (258).
I think part of this wilderness thing is yearning that pioneering spirit to go and see something different, to take on a new challenge, and to discover something new (S 152).

Wilderness was also described as a symbol of the Kiwi socio-democratic ideology of equity and egalitarianism in terms of access to outdoor recreation opportunities.

And one of the things I like most about wilderness is that it attracts people from all walks of life. You can be so different, but you still have this one passion; this one thing in common, and that’s the wilderness. I just love the fact that it encompasses all spheres of society (B 196).

Another of the key attributes of the ‘new world’ is that the first settlers to New Zealand strove to embed in the national psyche. It reflects a commonly held belief in New Zealand that conservation areas were created for the “common man” to enjoy, so they could “be free of the old world class and tenure barriers which might prevent them from enjoying ready access to the wildest and most beautiful places in their new land” (Molloy and Potton 2007, p. 23). As explained by ‘R’:

The wilderness thing, it’s part of the Kiwi egalitarian lifestyle, and it was established by the English immigrants who came here back in the 1800s; they were often peasants who’d been down-trodden by the British class system, and the private ownership of natural resources. Whereas here it’s public ownership; everybody is allowed to go in, to get off their backsides and make the effort to develop the skills and fitness to do it. If you really do want to, then your average Kiwi, whatever their social status, should be able to go to these areas as long as they’re willing to put in the effort (R 230).

Wilderness can thus be regarded as a way for New Zealanders to maintain a sense of national identity and solidarity. It can provide a reaffirmation of “who we are,” and is a way to put into practice many of the attributes that Kiwis are traditionally believed to possess. Without such opportunities to practice cultural activities, this sense of collective national identity may gradually disappear.

Discussion and Conclusions

Our wild lands are fundamental to who we are. For many of us they are a major part of our identity, and their practical and spiritual significance influences our lives, our values, our interests and our culture.

(Spearpoint 2007, p. 33)

This paper has explored the socio-cultural value of New Zealand wilderness. It has shown that wilderness has much more than recreational or ecological value for many of the New Zealanders who visit it. For the respondents in this study, wilderness embodies many of the values that define what it means to be a New Zealander. Wilderness is about where they came from, how they came to be here, and the traditional Kiwi values instilled by the first European settlers. New Zealand wilderness participants are proud of their pioneering heritage, and one way in which they can demonstrate, protect, and maintain this heritage is through spending time in wilderness. An understanding of the cultural value of wilderness helps to explain why many of the New Zealanders in this study have developed such an attachment to wilderness, and why they feel so strongly about protecting it.

The findings presented here, however, only represent the views of a small sub-section of the New Zealand population. Current wilderness policy and legislation in New Zealand was developed to reflect the needs and desires of this group (wilderness users), and aims to protect and maintain the values they associate with it. The extent to which their views will continue to be the driving force for New Zealand wilderness policy will, however, depend on the economic and political pressure placed on wilderness managers by powerful lobby groups seeking improved access and alternative uses of conservation land. As the nation becomes increasingly urbanized and more culturally diverse, the number of people who support the protection of “traditional” wilderness in favour of economic development may also decline. Social changes such as urbanization, globalization, increasing consumerism, and growing international tourism have the potential to alter the way in which wilderness is conceptualized, valued, and used, and the traditional practices and activities that underpin the country’s wilderness heritage may eventually be lost forever. Traditional users of wilderness (albeit, few in number) are unlikely to accept that policies should be altered to reflect the changing needs of society, and will expect the ‘purist’ wilderness ethic they believe in to be protected and maintained. This places managers in a particularly difficult position, and one in which they will undoubtedly require a deeper understanding of the complex meanings, values, ideas, and philosophies behind wilderness. Their challenge will be to continue to protect and maintain New Zealand’s unique wilderness heritage, while also serving the economic, environmental, and social needs of wider society.

References


The content of this paper reflects the views of the authors, who are responsible for the facts and accuracy of the information presented herein.