

EDITORIAL PERSPECTIVES

New Relationships with Wilderness

BY YANG HE

I grew up in urban China, and to me wilderness was an enchanting yet elusive concept. Although I traveled extensively in China to remote locations, studied leisure and recreation management at Pennsylvania State University at the doctoral level, and taught recreation management at the University of Montana, backcountry camping is simply not a common practice among Chinese people and was not part of my relationship with nature. As a result, I did not know what to expect before my first wilderness trip in 2007. I recently visited the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in the north woods of Minnesota. This five-day wilderness canoe trip was my first time camping and cooking outside, my first time canoeing, my first time fishing, and my first time seeing many of the wildlife species I encountered.

There were so many memorable things about this wilderness experience: taking in the beauty of the serene lakes for days and nights, mostly without other visitors in sight; awaking to the fluttering and chorus of birds around the tent at 5:30 in the morning, with the sweet song of the white-throated sparrow as my favorite melody; watching a turtle bask in the sun on a log in the middle of a lake; seeing a beaver search for and chew on branches at dusk; witnessing an osprey catching a fish at noon with amazing speed and accuracy; and watching loons sail quietly on the water, then dive suddenly without a splash, or flap of their wings while calling loudly across the water. I even learned the meanings of the loon calls by reading a book on loons during my time in the wilderness, when it was so convenient to match the written descriptions to the real calls I heard each day from my island campsite.

Swimming in a natural lake was another thing I experienced for the first time in my life. It was wonderfully refreshing. Fishing, a big attraction of the Boundary Waters

for many visitors, was something I had mixed feelings about—I enjoyed learning how to cast and reel in the line, and I felt excitement when I caught my first fish, but I did not enjoy seeing the fish struggle on the hook. However, the many meals of fish soup, cooked over a small stove at the side of the lake, gave me a sense of pride. Learning and practicing low impact camping in the wilderness gave me a sense of accomplishment. I felt more comfortable and capable each day putting my knowledge of how to be a responsible visitor in the wilderness into practice. The only negative thing about the wilderness was the swarm of relentless mosquitoes who nearly loved this Chinese woman to death—well, as the wilderness is their home, I guess I will just have to learn how to be more “bug smart” next time.

If I had to name the most significant change in me as a result of this wilderness trip, it would have to be the new image I have of my five-year-old daughter, Hanna. In my mind I will always see her little figure—in her swimming suit with her life jacket on, carrying all her clothes and books in a full backpack, holding a small paddle in one hand and a fishing pole in another, walking eagerly and confidently in front of me over all the short and long portages we encountered. Certainly she is having a very different childhood than I had. Unlike me, she began early having a personal relationship with wilderness and, hopefully, she will strengthen that relationship and become an advocate for wilderness among the next generation.



Yang He in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness on her first wilderness visit. Photo courtesy of the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute.

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time to start the dialogue with the public on desired future conditions and the need for possible use controls so that actions can be taken when they are needed rather than waiting until irreversible visitor-caused impacts become established.

New technologies will continue to develop, but a rapid rate of change can hinder our ability to engage in full conversation about the potential gains and losses. The direct and short-term personal benefits are quickly described, but the broader and longer-term costs are harder to articulate, particularly when they involve values that are difficult to

capture in language or are dependent on those wilderness places on the map without trails. A central concept of wilderness is restraint and respect. It is hoped, with some restraint in how we engage in our urge to communicate, the basic human need for exploration and discovery will be respected and protected in wilderness so that others may continue to experience it in the future. **IJW**

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groups, will need to be offered this new understanding and its possible ramifications for wilderness and wildland stewardship. Author Charles Mann has done a wonderful job articulating a new historic perspective and understanding to the general reader with his recent book *1491*. As managers, we need to get past our comfort zone and face the real possibilities that some of the truths we've long held dear and inviolate are in fact wrong. This is not an easy thing to do, especially if an alternative is not available. I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Charles Mann at a George Wright Society conference, and I congratulated him on his accomplishment, saying that I had never read a book so engaging and compelling that left me with such a long-lasting headache and so many sleepless nights.

For researchers, the challenge will be to reanalyze existing information, aggregate and integrate data from across multiple scientific and sociocultural fields, and then synthesize these into a new, higher order of understanding to help inform the dia-

logue. Educators have a critical role, right now, in preparing students for wildland area management careers. New 21st-century managers need to bring solid scientific expertise, first-hand knowledge of wilderness experience, and highly effective interpersonal relationship skills to the job. Managing wilderness, ultimately, is about engaging people. People are not the problem—people are the solution. Help people get into the wilderness, and they will love it with sufficient depth to stand and fight for it, even if it means personal sacrifice. I believe, with apologies to Henry David Thoreau, that “in people is the preservation of wildness.” **IJW**

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Some of the articles in this issue were first gathered for presentation at the 2007 George Wright Society Biennial Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites. The session was entitled “Rethinking Protected Areas in a Changing World” and focused on some of the social and technological changes that affect the relationships people have with wilderness and other wildlands. That session and many of the articles in this issue were organized in cooperation with the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute and the University of Montana. Dr. Alan Watson and I served as coleaders in organizing that session and this issue. Working on pieces submitted by managers and scientists on wilderness issues has stimulated my thoughts and opened my eyes to various aspects of the future of wilderness in the United States and my understanding of anticipated changes associated with wilderness. **IJW**

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