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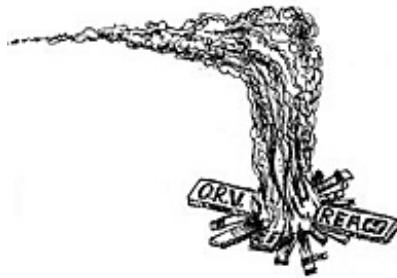


Issue No. 49

May 16, 2013

Around the Campfire

with Uncle Dave Foreman



The 1964 Wilderness Act's Four Definitions of Wilderness

In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.

The 1964 Wilderness Act Section 2(a)

In the last gathering around our old wilderness campfire, I delved into how *self-will* (freedom from Man's will) is the bedrock meaning of *wild* in *wilderness* and *wildlife* (wildeors). The civilized world's greatest welcoming of self-willed land came in the 1964 Wilderness Act in the United States.[\[1\]](#) This legislation was the end of eight years of long listening, coaxing, and rewrites in Congress and in public hearings across the nation. Hikers, horse-packers, canoeists, hunters, anglers, climbers, birders, Nature lovers, and biologists boosted it. The Wilderness Society's *Living Wilderness* magazine carefully followed the whole tussle—citizen and agency, industry and Senator, for and against.[\[2\]](#) The Wilderness Society's man in Washington, Howard Zahniser, wrote the first bill in 1956 and most of the later drafts. His literary skill gave the Act the uplifting words and phrases that rest so cozily in our minds for recall.

The Wilderness Act holds at least four definitions of Wilderness. I believe that all four are in keeping with the meaning and feeling of self-willed land. Although the Wilderness stewarding agencies have worked tirelessly since 1964 to make quantitative checklists out of these definitions, *feeling* whether or not a landscape is wilderness is more in keeping with how the Wilderness Act was written.

The First Definition

The first definition is found in the statement of purpose for the Wilderness Act in Section 2(a):

In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.

Here and throughout the wilderness struggle, the drive has been to keep land from development—from being “spoiled” as conservationists once said. Aldo Leopold, Benton MacKaye, Bob Marshall, and others who cobbled together the Wilderness Area Idea in the 1920s-1930s foremost wanted to shield the backcountry from cars and roads. The title of Paul Sutter's path-finding book shows this well: *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement*.^[3] The grand old man of conservation historians, Samuel Hays, writes, “[W]ilderness proposals are usually thought of not in terms of perpetuating some ‘original’ or ‘pristine’ condition but as efforts to ‘save’ wilderness areas from development.”^[4] Wilderness Areas, then, are lands walled off from industrial civilization's wrecking crew: “increasing population...expanding settlement...growing mechanization.” Hays wrote against the “wilderness deconstructionist” misunderstanding that the Wilderness Area Idea came out of a romantic/literary wish for a “pristine America.” Hays grounded his thinking in having been a grassroots booster of the 1983 Eastern Wilderness Areas Act and having read many newsletters, alerts, and pamphlets from wilderness clubs. Section 2(a) thus teaches wilderness defenders that first of all Wilderness Areas are a tool (the best tool) to keep lands and waters from being “developed”—or put under the will of Man.

The Second Definition

The second definition is the *ideal*:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. Section 2(c).

Written by Howard Zahniser, who, as a professional editor and writer, well understood picking the right word, this definition lines up with self-willed land in both of its two key phrases: “untrammelled” and “visitor who does not remain.”

Wilderness is where the works of man do not “dominate the landscape.”^[5] Zahniser then chose the little-known word “untrammelled” carefully, and not just because it slips off the tongue sweetly. Others earnestly chewed on Zahniser's ears to get him to switch to another word because they thought *untrammelled* was little known and would be read by many as *untrampled*. It is still often wrongly said as *untrampled*. Nonetheless, *untrammelled* stayed in the Act, thanks to Zahniser's knowledge and feeling for words. *Trammel* is a fish net and also a hobble for a horse. As a verb, *trammel* means to hinder the freedom of something.^[6] *Untrammelled*, then, means that the will of something is not hobbled; it is self-willed. Untrammelled land is the ground for evolution. In his writings about exploring unmapped and unknown Alaska from 1929 to 1939, Bob Marshall used *untrammelled* “repeatedly in reference to the Brooks Range,” writes Arctic National Wildlife Refuge wilderness specialist Roger Kaye.^[7] Polly Dyer, a Seattle wilderness leader still going strong in her nineties, knew the word from Bob Marshall and gave it to Zahniser as he began writing the Wilderness Act in the mid-1950s. *Untrammelled*, then, might be little known to most, but was well known to the in-crowd of wilderness folks. It was the word Zahniser wanted. Untrammelled land is land whose ecosystems are self-regulating. Moreover, as Jay Turner shows in his new book, *The Promise of Wilderness*, Zahniser liked *untrammelled* because it was a fuzzy, not sharp word.^[8] Thus, it lent itself more to feeling than to a checklist.

The last phrase in the untrammelled sentence also gives some folks heartburn: “where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” Men and women are only visitors or wayfarers in Wilderness Areas; we have no permanent settlements. Many kinds of Wilderness Area foes

bristle at this banning of dwelling. My friend, philosophy professor J. Baird Callicott, has a hissy fit over this “received idea of wilderness.”^[9] However, I believe this lack of long-lasting settlement is the key to wil-der-ness (will of the land). Where humans dwell long, we trammel or fetter the willfulness of the land around our living spots and outward by stamping down our will. How far? This hinges on the population size and technological might of the band.^[10]

Think of Wilderness Areas as wild neighborhoods and we *Homo sapiens* who go into them as mild, friendly wayfarers wandering through. We should follow the path of “minimum impact” to be good neighbors.^[11] We also should be good naturalists so we know who our neighbors are in the wild.^[12] Even if we hunt and fish and gather berries for subsistence, we are still wayfarers and not dwellers, notwithstanding how some think Alaskan natives “inhabit” Wilderness Areas.^[13]

Etymologically, ecologically, legally, these definitions for wilderness in section 2(c) agree: will of the land is at the heart of wilderness.



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The Third Definition

The third definition of Wilderness follows the second. It is the specific, *working* definition of Wilderness Areas under the Wilderness Act and sets out the entry criteria for candidate areas:

An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value. Section 2(c).

Although in keeping with self-willed land (“undeveloped,” “primeval character and influence,” “without permanent improvements or human habitation,” “natural conditions”), this is a practical definition acknowledging that even mostly self-willed land may not be pristine (“generally appears,” “affected primarily,” “substantially unnoticeable”). Indeed, the word *pristine* is not in the Wilderness Act. As with the word *untrammelled*, the entry criteria are thoughtfully fuzzy and thwart being put into a checklist, although the agencies have done their damndest to do so.

This down-to-Earth outlook about Wilderness answers the often-silly question, “What is natural?” It understands that *natural* is not a dot on a line against the dot of *unnatural*. Rather, it sees that land falls on a span from wholly yoked by Man’s will to altogether self-willed. Somewhere along the way land stops being mostly overlorded by Man; somewhere else, land comes more under the sway of evolutionary will. There is a wide gray swath in between, where Man and wild both throw weight. After the wild comes out on top, the land is self-willed. Because we ground apes have sundry and often scanty understandings of ecology as well as depths of wisdom, we may find the switchover to self-willed land at a bevy of spots on this unnatural-natural line. Yet, we still can rightly say, “This landscape is mostly natural.” Let us not fall into the woolly-headed trap of thinking that naturalness is all in our heads, even if we feel it more than quantify it. Wilderness *is* out there. A falling tree in a wood needs not a Man’s ear to be.

Nonetheless, it can be hard to see what is wild and what is not. Long ago Mencius, the Chinese philosopher, asked

To these things [logging and then browsing by goats and cattle] is owing the bare and stripped appearance of the mountain, and when people now see it, they think it was never finely wooded. But is this the nature of the mountain?

Geographer Clarence Glacken wrote, "Few statements have summed up more lucidly than has this question of Mencius the difficulties of distinguishing a natural from a cultural landscape."[\[14\]](#) Tough though it may be, an ecologically educated eye today is better able to see what is the nature of the mountain than can other eyes. Aldo Leopold warned, "One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds."[\[15\]](#) Indeed, an ecological education gives our feelings about naturalness bedrock on which to stand.

I think the best guide for knowing whether land is wild comes from University of Wisconsin geography professor emeritus Thomas Vale. He believes that land can be called "natural, or 'in a wilderness condition' if the fundamental characteristics of vegetation, wildlife, landform, soil, hydrology, and climate are those that result from natural, nonhuman processes, and if these conditions would exist whether or not humans are present."[\[16\]](#) This is no quantitative checklist, however, and it is far from being a pristine goal post.

Some kinds of wilderness scatters wrongly believe that conservationists see wilderness as pristine (an absolute word). Many anticconservationists and resourcists, so as to thwart setting aside Wilderness Areas, say that lands must be pristine to qualify as Wilderness Areas. Neither gospel is true. Working conservationists have always understood that Wilderness Areas are not always, and do not have to be, pristine. More than seventy years ago, Leopold said that for a wilderness system to be nationally representative, Wilderness Areas would have to vary in size and degree of wildness. Senator Frank Church of Idaho, who was the floor manager for the 1964 Wilderness Act, said, "This is one of the great promises of the Wilderness Act, that we can dedicate formerly abused areas where the primeval scene can be restored by natural forces, so that we can have a truly National Wilderness Preservation System."[\[17\]](#)

No land or water is now pristine—utterly free of Man's impact. This conservationists have known for at least seventy years, although wilderness bashers such as Michael Nelson, J. Baird Callicott, Charles Mann, Emma Marris, and Peter Kareiva each seem to think that it is a new insight that just went off like a light bulb in their head alone. By so thinking, they show how little they know or understand about the last one hundred years of defending wilderness. Oh, it is irksome to word-tangle with those who don't even know that they don't know what they are squabbling about.

If we read Section 2(c) of the law carefully, we will see that there are two definitions of wilderness twined about each other. One is a definition of one's experience in Wilderness Areas ("appears," "unnoticeable," "solitude," "a primitive and unconfined type of recreation," "educational, scenic, or historical value"). The other is an ecological definition ("undeveloped," "primeval character and influence," "forces of nature," "ecological," "scientific"). These ecological meanings in the Wilderness Act belie the time and again rap that the Act and the National Wilderness Preservation System made by it are only about scenery and recreation. Even some conservationists and scientists have scolded the Wilderness Act for an overwhelming tilt to recreation. We must understand that recreation is not the only end of the Act, although federal agencies have often managed Wilderness Areas as if it were and have mostly picked lands for Wilderness designation because of their non-motorized recreational draw.[\[18\]](#)

The two things we need to learn from Section 2(c) are that Wilderness Areas do not need to be pristine and that the ecological worth of Wilderness Areas is well acknowledged along with experiential values. Ecological protection and recovery are underlying goals of the Wilderness Act.

The Fourth Definition

This definition comes with a yardstick for caretaking land after it comes under the Wilderness Act:

Except as specifically provided for in this Act, and subject to existing private rights, there shall be no commercial enterprise[\[19\]](#) and no permanent road within any wilderness area designated by this Act and except as necessary to meet minimum requirements for

the administration of the area for the purposes of this Act (including measures required in emergencies involving the health and safety of persons within the area), there shall be no temporary road, no use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment or motorboats, no landing of aircraft, no other form of mechanical transport, and no structure or installation within any such area. Section 4(c).

Elsewhere, the Wilderness Act makes room for a handful of exceptions to the above prohibitions, such as firefighting, rescue, livestock grazing, and prospecting for minerals until 1984, all of which were political compromises that backers of the Wilderness Act had to swallow before Western members of Congress would go along with passage. Thus, the Wilderness Act is somewhat flawed and sometimes at odds with itself.

It is this fourth definition that has legal weight—not for how lands must be *before* being set aside under the Wilderness Act but how they must be cared for *after* being set aside under the Wilderness Act. If more folks understood this before-and-after cleavage, there would be far less muddled thinking about Wilderness Areas.

The use prohibitions try to keep the land untrammelled (self-willed). They are stronger than the entry criteria in Section 2(c). For one, the Wilderness Act does not say that *candidate* Wilderness Areas must be roadless and unlogged, but Section 4(c) holds that they must be kept as roadless *after* they are put in the National Wilderness Preservation System. In other words, earlier roads, if any, must be shut down and no further logging may be done after designation of a landscape as Wilderness. There are many once-roaded or earlier-logged wildlands now in the National Wilderness Preservation System—even some of the classic big Wilderness Areas in the West.^[20] This after-designation, stewardship definition lends itself to a checklist much more than do the other three definitions. Rightly so.

If what wilderness means and what the Wilderness Act says were carefully and truthfully worded in clashes, many misunderstandings about wilderness should melt away much as Bob Marshall's south-facing snowbank in June. However, muddying the meaning of wilderness is often not due to lack of knowledge, but is a witting dodge by anticonservationists and even agency resourcists.

The brawl over conservation is at heart about whether we can abide self-willed land.

Happy Trails,

Dave Foreman
Pasayten Wilderness, Washington



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Adapted from Chapter 1 of my forthcoming book, Conservation vs. Conservation.

[1] Public Law 88-577 (16 U.S.C. 1131-1136) 88th Congress, Second Session, September 3, 1964. Contained in Jay Watson, ed., *The Wilderness Act Handbook Third Edition (revised)* (The Wilderness Society, Washington, D.C. 1998)

[2] There is no conservation publication like *The Living Wilderness* today. *Wild Earth* came out of the *Living Wilderness* frame but could not grab enough readers to stay in business.

[3] Paul S. Sutter, *Driven Wild: How the Fight Against Automobiles Launched the Modern Wilderness Movement* (University of Wisconsin Press, Seattle, 2002).

[4] Samuel P. Hays, "The Trouble with Bill Cronon's Wilderness," *Environmental History*, Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1996, 30.

[5] This does not mean that there are no works of Man in the landscape, only that they do not go over the line to "dominate" it.

[6] T. F. Hoad, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, 1993), p. 501.

[7] Roger W. Kaye, "The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: An Exploration of the Meanings

Embodied in America's Last Great Wilderness," *Wild Earth* Vol. 9, No. 4, Winter 1999/2000, p. 97.

[8] James Morton Turner, *The Promise of Wilderness: American Environmental Politics Since 1964* (University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2012), 35-37. Turner does an outstanding job of showing why Zahniser wanted "untrammelled." *The Promise of Wilderness*, by the way, is the best study of the wilderness struggle since 1964. I highly recommend it.

[9] J. Baird Callicott, "A Critique of and an Alternative to the Wilderness Idea," *Wild Earth*, Winter 1994/95, 54. I deal with such worries and misunderstandings in my forthcoming book *True Wilderness*, as well as in earlier issues of *Around the Campfire*.

[10] World-renowned field biologist George Schaller once told me that when Amazonian tribes were armed only with blowguns and bows, monkeys could be found half a mile from villages. After the coming of the shotgun, monkeys were not found within five miles of settlements. Jim Tolisano, an ecologist who has worked for the United Nations in many far-off lands, has told me of like shifts in Papua New Guinea. Tropical ecologist John Terborgh tells me the same. See also Clare D. Fitzgibbon, Hezron Mogaka, and John H. Fanshawe, "Subsistence Hunting in Arabuko-Sokoke Forest, Kenya, and Its Effects on Mammal Populations," *Conservation Biology* October 1995, 1116-1126; Malcolm Hunter, Jr., "Benchmarks for Managing Ecosystems: Are Human Activities Natural?" *Conservation Biology* June 1996, 695-697; and Bruce Winterhalder and Flora Lu, "A Forager-Resource Population Ecology Model and Implications for Indigenous Conservation," *Conservation Biology* December 1997, 1354-1364.

[11] I show how being a good neighbor is the root for seeing others as good-in-themselves in Dave Foreman, "Five Feathers for the Cannot Club," in Peter H. Kahn, Jr., and Patricia H. Hasbach, eds. *The Rediscovery of the Wild* (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2013), 181-206.

[12] Dave Foreman, "Talking to Wild Things," in Thomas Lowe Fleischner, ed., *The Way of Natural History* (Trinity University Press, San Antonio, 2011), 101-102.

[13] Dave Foreman, "Inhabited Wilderness?" *Around the Campfire with Uncle Dave*, Issue 23, July 14, 2009.

[14] Clarence J. Glacken, "Changing Ideas of the Habitable World," in William L. Thomas, Jr., ed., *Man's Role In Changing The Face Of The Earth* (The University of Chicago Press, 1956), 70.

[15] Luna B. Leopold, ed., *Round River: From the Journals of Aldo Leopold* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1953), 165.

[16] Thomas R. Vale, "The Myth of the Humanized Landscape: An Example from Yosemite National Park," *Natural Areas Journal*, Vol. 18 (3), 1998, 232.

[17] Hearing Before The Subcommittee On Public Lands Of The Committee On Interior And Insular Affairs United States Senate On S. 316, February 21, 1973, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington: 1973, 49.

[18] It's true that Zahniser and other boosters of the Wilderness Act in their public arguments dwelt strongly on the experiential worth of wilderness—from the sublime to the hairy. Nonetheless, the ecological good of wilderness comes through sharply in the wording of the Act.

[19] This banning of commercial enterprise includes commercial timber cutting, but not guiding and outfitting.

[20] I go into this in depth in *Rewilding North America*. Dave Foreman, *Rewilding North America* (Island Press, Washington, DC, 2004), 192-197.



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