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Changing Relationships with Wilderness

A New Focus for Research and Stewardship

BY ROBERT G. DVORAK and WILLIAM T. BORRIE

Abstract: Wilderness managers strive to provide quality recreation experiences. Because of this commitment, a need exists to further incorporate experiential aspects into current planning and management frameworks. This article suggests a focus on relationships with wilderness, moving beyond the examination of single transactions with a setting toward a consideration of the dynamic engagements visitors accumulate with wilderness over time. Understanding these relationships relative to social and cultural change may allow managers to incorporate diverse meanings into management planning and provide better protection of wilderness character.

A New Focus for Experience Quality

Wilderness managers are charged with the challenging goals of both ensuring resource protection and of providing opportunities for quality wilderness recreation experiences.

Social scientists have worked to provide managers with information that can assist them in facilitating achievement of those wilderness experiences. Although multiple approaches (e.g., satisfaction, benefits-based, experience-based) have been developed to understand visitor motivations, meanings, and experience quality, we still struggle to address and integrate experiential concepts within current planning and management frameworks (such as Limits of Acceptable Change). Although setting attributes clearly influence the quality of the wilderness experience and are largely under management control, these attributes do not sum to the total of the wilderness experience. For example, symbolic values, self-reflection, and spiritual experiences are among other concepts recognized as important and appropriate components of the wilderness experience. As more importance is placed upon understanding these types of values and meanings, a need exists to move beyond strictly considering setting attributes in the integration of resource and experience values.



Robert G. Dvorak. Photo by Lisa Dvorak.



William T. Borrie.

Current approaches are limited in their ability to integrate both resource and experience values. This is partly because wilderness experiences occur across vast landscapes and are ongoing personal constructions that are complex and embedded within the overall experience paths of our lives. These experiences are not one-time transactions between the visitor and the setting (Borrie and Roggenbuck 2001), but dynamic engagements that fluctuate and accumulate over time. In addition, there are numerous cultural and social forces in our society, social institutions, and our lives. These changes can influence our interactions with wilderness and the meanings constructed through our experiences.

A better understanding of how these constructions occur across an individual's life course may provide scientists

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and managers with new ways to address and integrate quality experiences into planning frameworks. Therefore, we suggest a relationship approach as a new focus when investigating wilderness experiences over an individual's life course. By investigating the relationships individuals develop with specific wilderness areas over time, it may be possible to understand the different components of a relationship that may be changing and the role of management actions that facilitate, threaten, or strengthen these relationships.

Why Relationships?

Relationships between the public and public lands have become of increasing interest in recent years (Watson and Borrie 2003). Some research has been responding to the need to steward these relationships. Brooks, Wallace, and Williams (2006) suggested that the concept of a relationship can be used as a metaphor for understanding experience quality, and explored how people develop committed relationships with specific places. These relationships contribute to the well-being associated with positive experiences and even a tolerance for "bad" experiences. Therefore, they argue that a relationship-oriented framework may contribute to the understanding of emergent experiences and meanings associated with a specific place over time.

Psychology and marketing research also provide further support for a focus on wilderness relationships (Berry 1995), suggesting several key concepts that match a wilderness context. First, relationships exist over time (Fournier 1998). They are not seen as fixed, but as dynamic entities that ebb and flow over an individual's lifetime. Similarly, the interactions

and experiences visitors have with wilderness areas are more than single on-site transactions. Instead, they are an ongoing process that dynamically changes and influences future expectations and experiences.

Second, relationships are noted to involve at least two individuals or entities. These individuals are interdependent and part of a reciprocal exchange where changes in one cause changes in the other (Berscheid and Peplau 1983). This suggests that the relationships individuals develop are influenced by other entities and subject to a variety of cultural and social forces, such as institutional structures, personal values, social norms, and cultural stereotypes (Liljeblad and Borrie 2006). These forces influence the creation, maintenance, and negotiation of individual relationships over time. Participants in these exchanges may gain a certain level of trust and commitment to the partner involved in the relationship (Borrie et al. 2002). In the context of a wilderness relationship, managers responsible for administering wilderness areas act as relationship partners with visitors, developing expectations for future interactions with managers.

Third, relationships are purposive and have meaning in the larger context of our lives, adding significance and structure (Fournier 1998). Our interactions with others, and with wilderness, are purposeful efforts to define and represent our lifestyle and self-identity. Wilderness visitors accumulate experience with a



Figure 1—Ecological events such as the forest blowdown of 1999 in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness may have dramatic effects on individual relationships. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Forest Service.

place that is associated with a certain identity. That is, visitors develop loyalty to that area (or dependence on an area) because it begins to represent who they see themselves to be.

A relationship with wilderness, in part, represents a cultural and individual expression that defines who a person was, is, and hopes to be (Greider and Garkovich 1994). Wilderness represents symbolic environments that confer meaning onto us as individuals. Therefore, through experiences in wilderness and the construction of long-term meaning, people build ongoing relationships with wilderness areas.

Forces of Change

Framing wilderness experience quality in the context of an ongoing relationship represents a new direction for research and management and it is important to understand the external forces of change that influence that relationship. The forces that operate within our culture and individual lives can affect how we interact with wilderness areas, and three types of change (socio-demographic, environmental, and policy) might be seen as influencing relationships with wilderness areas. For

example, Stankey (2000) suggested that recreation use has historically diminished as age increases. With the average age of the U.S. population increasing, he asked what effect this change will have on wilderness use and the perceived importance of wilderness areas. Similarly, environmental changes, such as natural disturbances like wildfires and flooding, have a direct effect on the character of the wilderness landscape. They can fundamentally alter how visitors are able to interact with the landscape and how they construct the meaning of a place (see figure 1). And then, policy changes, such as the introduction of recreation user fees, have an effect on how visitors use and access wilderness. Watson (2000) suggested fees and the perception of commercialization are two of the greatest threats to the relationship people have with wilderness. Changes in these conditions change

video games, and computer simulation. Stankey (2000) suggests this generation, raised in a “virtual-reality” world, may have only minimal interest in and commitment to the use of wilderness. Over time, these intergenerational differences could have a dramatic effect on how wilderness recreation is characterized by large segments of the population.

Advances in technology have dramatically changed how we relate to wilderness areas. Whereas previous discussions have addressed the use of cell phones, GPS units, and other portable technology in wilderness settings (Freimund and Borrie 1997), other supposedly less obtrusive technologies have often been overlooked. Advances in lightweight gear (e.g., tents, stoves, canoes) have allowed visitors to travel farther and faster into wilderness areas. These advances have changed the accessibility of wilderness and the

it may be possible to understand where to focus future management and research efforts.

Future Management Implications

The use of a relationship framework has several implications for future wilderness experience stewardship. First, by understanding how visitors conceptualize their relationship with wilderness and the variety of cultural and social forces that influence these relationships, wilderness managers and researchers may be able to develop new indicators and standards to guide management. These relationship indicators and standards could be used to facilitate opportunities for quality wilderness experiences based on various concepts (e.g., experience use history, life stage, affinity for technology) of an individual’s relationship. For example, wilderness recreation opportunities could be assessed to determine how they provide experiences for families with young children or for individuals considered as “veterans” in that area. Although developing such indicators and standards may be challenging, the process represents an evolution in thinking about protected areas and an attempt to find new ways to address experience quality.

Second, a relationship framework integrates with the responsibility of managers to preserve wilderness resources and character for future generations, but also current generations “in the future.” By acknowledging that wilderness is an enduring resource with ongoing significance, a relationship framework posits the examination and understanding of management actions in the context of an individual’s lifetime. It moves from documenting visitor experiences as snapshots of the individual or consumer-oriented one-time transactions, to attempting to understand how

A relationship with wilderness, in part, represents a cultural and individual expression that defines who a person was, is, and hopes to be.

the landscape of these special places and how visitors characterize the meanings associated with these places. That is, visitors notice and react to the intent and method of wilderness management and what it connotes about the meanings endorsed for wilderness.

Forces of change act at larger regional and societal levels. As a large segment of our population moves toward retirement, changes in the amounts of leisure time may occur and have an effect on how often visitors utilize wilderness resources. Conversely, the current generation has been raised with cell phones,

perception of what is appropriate within a wilderness context.

Some of these forces of change are under direct management control (e.g., use density, resource condition, fees, and permits) and are already addressed in current wilderness management plans. Others, such as changing demographics and intergenerational differences, represent trends in use and user characteristics that are not influenced through management action. Information regarding these changing trends can be understood through the use of permit data, trend studies, and other public resources. By acknowledging these distinctions,

experience and forces of change affect relationships over time. This shift in focus provides managers with information as they make difficult, value-based decisions about what desired wilderness conditions should be and mean for future generations.

Finally, acknowledging changing relationships could provide more latitude in future decision making. It focuses greater attention on the temporal and dynamic aspects of the interactions individuals have with an area. It places greater emphasis on the examination of both current visitor trends and possible future changes that occur in the general population. Such foresight may allow managers to be more proactive in decision making, in contrast to a reactive reliance on satisfaction or singular outcome-based approaches to understanding visitor experiences.

The importance of understanding relationships with wilderness may seem obvious. However, the framing of wilderness experience quality in the context of an ongoing relationship represents a new direction for research and management. It recognizes that visitors invest their personal identity and lifestyle into the interactions they have with wilderness areas. Relationships shape their perceptions and how they attribute meanings across the wilderness landscape. By implementing stewardship actions based on a relationship framework, managers may be better equipped to respond to changing relationships over time and increase future protection of wilderness character and experience quality. **IJW**

Framing of wilderness experience quality in the context of an ongoing relationship represents a new direction for research and management.

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