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WILDERNESS AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT: EXPANDING CULTURAL RELEVANCE
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

BY

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Wilderness as a Social Movement: Expanding Cultural Relevance in the 21st Century

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This year is the 50th anniversary of two monumental pieces of legislation: the Wilderness Act and the Civil Rights Act. Though these two laws exist within different arenas of public affairs, both have had significant effects on American society.

The Wilderness Act was signed into law in 1964 with almost unanimous support, at a time when American society overwhelmingly supported its passage. Since 1964, wilderness has been criticized as an elitist ideal representing a small interest group in the United States. As our country becomes increasingly diverse, and public lands protection loses popular support, making wilderness more relevant to minority populations is vital.

This project examines the social constructs of wilderness in the United States in response to a changing demographic on our public lands. In this project, I aim to 1) evaluate current recreation trends of African Americans in the United States, 2) discuss criticisms of wilderness and how a focus on the social foundations of the wilderness movement can help to ameliorate those criticisms, and 3) propose changes to future wilderness education in order to increase relevance of the wilderness idea.

Research for this project focused on recreation trends, history of the wilderness movement, and modern wilderness criticisms and commentary. I collected interviews from nine individuals whose work involves the link between wilderness and society through management, education, outreach, and stewardship. Collectively, this project aims to suggest tools for wilderness education that will make wilderness, both in theory and in practice, accessible to a broader populace, hopefully increasing its relevance and assuring its existence into the future.

In 1964, the 88th United States Congress passed two of the most important pieces of legislation in U.S. history: the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Wilderness Act. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed these two widely supported bills just three months apart, signaling major victories for the civil rights and wilderness movements. In 2014, both of these acts celebrate their 50th anniversaries. They have each faced substantial challenge and achieved substantial progress in the last 50 years. An important part of studying history is remembering that events do not happen independently of one another, nor do they necessarily have distinct effects, yet a detailed examination of the social foundations and implications of these two Acts is lacking. This synthetic review compares the social landscape between equal rights and wilderness, between the public and the public's lands, as congruent entities on the social, economic, and ecological landscape of the United States.

The Wilderness and Civil Rights Acts emerged because of two distinct movements advocating for different issues but share many similarities. The movements behind both acts began around a half century earlier with the founding of the NAACP in 1909 and the Wilderness Society in 1935. Both acts endured long fights in Congress. A civil rights bill was proposed in every year between 1945 and 1957 with bills passed in 1957 and 1960 preceding the 1964 act; the Wilderness Act was first introduced in 1956 and underwent 65 rewrites before its passage in 1964. And despite these long fights, both eventually passed Congress with substantial support. The Civil Rights Act received over 70 percent of the vote in both houses; the Wilderness Act passed the Senate by over 85 percent and had only one dissenting vote in the House of Representatives.

Civil rights advocates continue to fight for African Americans and social justice, while wilderness advocates largely represent a white, upper middle class sector involved in environmentalism and public lands conservation. The civil rights movement cannot make a priority of wilderness designation and stewardship while it focuses on more pressing issues of equality. At the same time, wilderness advocates have difficulty understanding and sympathizing for a set of social challenges that are largely unknown to their constituents. Acceptance of these differences, however, could potentially unite two social justice movements that are rooted in concern for the quality of life for all groups of people in the United States.

Arguments of social justice and Jeffersonian values strongly support both the civil rights and wilderness movements. The separation between these two ideas is primarily an effect of American wilderness education. The role of the wilderness idea in America and the style in which the history of this idea is taught explains many of the modern perceptions of the wilderness movement. In the future, if the wilderness movement is portrayed not as an environmental cause but as a social one in the style of the early wilderness thinkers, wilderness will become more relevant to an increasingly diverse society. As the Civil Rights and Wilderness Acts both enter their second 50 years of existence, making the wilderness movement more relevant to minority populations will be crucial for the continued designation and relevance of American wilderness.

This paper evaluates current trends of African American use of designated wilderness areas and other public lands. It discusses the importance of making wilderness relevant to a diverse population by highlighting the early wilderness arguments of Aldo Leopold, Bob Marshall, and Benton MacKaye, stressing their social perspectives on wilderness preservation. Finally, it focuses on the future of wilderness in the United States with an emphasis on making the wilderness movement more relevant to an ever-diversifying population.

Modern Recreation Trends of African Americans

Minority groups' perceptions of wilderness may be partially in response to their connection with public lands. Minority groups are largely underrepresented in visceral experiences on U.S. public lands. In 2011, the National Park Service (NPS) published the second version of its "Ethnic and Racial Diversity of National Park System Visitors and Non-Visitors" report comparing "major racial and ethnic groups on their visitation behavior and on related attitudes and opinions about the National Park Service" (National Park Service 2011:1). An update to a similar study conducted in 2003, the report found that African Americans and Hispanics were the least likely demographic groups to have visited a national park during 2008 and 2009 (National Park Service 2011). This trend had not changed from the 2003 data, and African Americans comprised only 12 percent of national park visitors in 2008-2009 (National Park Service 2011).

The two NPS reports also evaluated reasons for not visiting national parks. The 2003 report measured these reasons in both an open and closed-ended style, finding through open-ended questions that well over a third of African Americans were most likely to give reasons of being too busy and parks being too far away, significantly more so than other groups surveyed (National Park Service 2003). Additionally, African Americans cited lack of knowledge about national parks and complaints about overall cost, trends reflected by results of the 2003 closed-ended survey and the 2011 report as well (National Park Service 2003, 2011).

In a study of wildland visitation in general, Johnson et al. (1997) produced similar results, finding that white visitation rates were about 1.65 times higher than rates for African Americans. Another study by Johnson et al. (2004) again found that African Americans were significantly less likely to have visited a Wilderness than whites were.

Given these data, it would be easy to generalize African Americans as non-users and focus on groups that actively use national parks, wilderness areas, and other wild lands. This solution poses two primary issues: 1) African Americans do recreate outdoors, and 2) by 2050, non-Hispanic whites will comprise less than 50% of the American population, making the current dominant constituency for wild lands a weaker collective voice concerning conservation issues (National Park Service 2011).

Studies have shown that African Americans show similar levels of concern for wilderness values and benefits as whites, but perhaps for different reasons. African Americans tend to show greater support for practical wilderness values rather than intrinsic ones. In other words, they recognize the importance of wilderness for the purposes it may serve rather than for its mere existence. This pattern is supported by Johnson et al. (2004) who found that African Americans were twice as likely as whites to respond positively to a “statement regarding wilderness as a habitat for plant and animal species for human health and medicine.” In contrast, African Americans were less likely to agree with a statement that “the flora and fauna protected by wilderness held intrinsic value” (Johnson et al. 2004). Furthermore, these 2004 findings were consistent with Johnson et al. (1997), who found that African Americans were less likely than whites or Native Americans to view enjoyment of nature as an important part of hunting.

The second danger of ignoring low minority representation in national parks and wilderness areas is that as minority populations continue to grow, the wilderness movement must evolve if it is to remain relevant. The lack of change apparent between the 2003 and 2011 NPS reports is telling, as is the presence of the “Raising Awareness” and “Turning Awareness into Visits” sections at the end of the 2011 report. Solutions to this issue of relevance will continue to become increasingly crucial, and one of the strongest tools to facilitate change will be better education.

Creating Relevance

An examination of three early wilderness thinkers: Aldo Leopold, Bob Marshall, and Benton MacKaye, provides a brief historical perspective on the roots of the wilderness movement as more than a tool for a larger environmental agenda. Though all three men recognized the ecological benefits of wilderness, their dominant arguments for wilderness preservation were profoundly social. These arguments are still relevant today and form the basis for teaching a social approach to the wilderness idea rather than a purely environmental one.

Aldo Leopold: Wilderness as an Ethical Obligation

Though Aldo Leopold was well acquainted with ecology and the potential environmental benefits of wilderness preservation, his earlier writings took on a tone of concern for minority rights and the importance of traditional forms of recreation. The rise of the automobile and the subsequent increases in motorized recreation and development prompted Leopold’s original wilderness thinking.

The push for improved access to protected areas through the building of roads and campgrounds increased dramatically during the interwar period in the United States. With this increase, however, Leopold saw the need for a stronger type of protection for the land as a natural resource and as a cultural one. This is not to say that Leopold was exclusionary; he advocated for easy access to wilderness areas for urban populations and was not opposed to subsistence uses by local communities (Sutter 2002). But he was careful to differentiate between democratic access and mechanized access, emphasizing

that building roads in “an undeveloped area changed its very nature” (Sutter 2002: 80). Thus, Leopold argued not just for a right to recreation, but to traditional forms thereof. This was his minority cause.

Leopold felt that the rapid development that was occurring threatened the abilities of people to recreate in traditional styles. “Mechanized recreation has already seized nine-tenths of the woods and mountains; a decent respect for minorities should dedicate the other tenth to wilderness” (Leopold 1949b: 194). He saw wilderness as a place to preserve “virile and primitive skills,” and saw the inherent conflict of competition with mechanized recreation (Leopold 1949b: 192). Leopold’s fascination with wilderness was one of curiosity and exploration, and wilderness protection was a means of offering opportunities for exploration and experience of wild places while avoiding their destruction (Sutter 2002).

There were of course critics to these arguments, primarily those who argued that the goal of wilderness was not to protect a disenfranchised minority but a threatened one—an elitist faction that wanted to limit public access to land. Leopold, however, was sincere. In “Conserving the Covered Wagon,” Leopold describes the adventure magazine, always telling of the great adventures of a man in the wilds of a far off place. Leopold recognized that development of motorized recreation in the United States was creating an imbalance in recreation opportunities between the upper and lower classes. “It is the opportunity, not the desire, on which the well-to-do are coming to have a monopoly...The American of moderate means can not go to Alaska, or Africa, or British Columbia. He must seek his big adventure in the nearby wilderness, or go without it” (Leopold 1925: 130). For Leopold, wilderness preservation was a way to protect the opportunity for adventurous recreation for the lower classes (Sutter 2002). Wilderness recreation was affordable and accessible to all.

Another common criticism of wilderness was that it would inherently support fewer people than a more developed area and was therefore undemocratic. “The basic error in such an argument is that it applies the philosophy of mass-production to what is intended to counteract mass-production” (Leopold 1949b: 193). Leopold understood the limitations of wilderness. Indeed, it was one of the things he liked about wilderness. By its very nature, it forced a change from normalcy. He argued, “recreation is valuable in

proportion...to the degree it differs from and contrasts with workaday life” (Leopold 1949b: 194).

Perhaps Leopold’s greatest contribution to the wilderness movement, however, was the idea of the Land Ethic. Drawing heavily on a 1931 lecture titled “The Conservation Ethic,” “The Land Ethic” focused on the extension of human interpersonal ethics to nature and the environment.

Wilderness critics often focus on the idea of wilderness as “pristine—remote from humanity and untouched by our common past” (Cronon 1996: 19). Leopold, in contrast, embraced the importance of historical interactions between humans and the environment. “The plant succession steered the course of history; the pioneer simply demonstrated, for good or ill, what successions inhered in the land” (Leopold 1949a: 207). In short, there was a historical relationship between humans and the land, but it was not yet an ethical one. Leopold recognized that land-use was still an economic field. Strengthening the ethical relationship between people and the environment was the obvious next step, and could help improve interpersonal relationships as well. “A land ethic changes the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of the land-community to plain member and citizen of it. It implies respect for his fellow-members, and also respect for the community as such” (Leopold 1949a: 204).

In short, preservation of land could strengthen communities, a benefit that is certainly still important in modern American society. Leopold’s incorporation of these ethical arguments, combined with his focus on minority rights framed his stance on wilderness as a social issue.

Bob Marshall: Wilderness as a Minority Right

Like Leopold, Bob Marshall focused intently on minority rights arguments for wilderness preservation. Wilderness was a means of escaping from “the strangling clutch of a mechanistic civilization” (Marshall 1951: 481), and like Leopold, Marshall saw wilderness not as a threat to access, but to mechanized recreation and commerce (Sutter 2002).

Marshall also felt similarly to Leopold about the ratio of recreation options. “When motorists also demand for their particular diversion the most insignificant wilderness

residue, it makes even a Midas appear philanthropic” (Marshall 1930: 147). Marshall argued tirelessly that, although wilderness was important to only a small fraction of society, it was critical that this group have opportunities for the recreation they desired (Sutter 2002). Well-versed in philosophy, Marshall was quick to employ the words of Mill, Voltaire, and Jefferson to support his arguments. He recognized that “democracies, which are founded on the principle that the will of the majority shall govern, have a tendency to ignore the prerogatives of minorities” (Marshall 1928: 5). In a society where the biggest group wins, it was easy for less-supported causes to be lost in the fray.

In addition to these minority rights arguments, Marshall focused heavily on the direct social benefits of wilderness. His attachment to American ideals and Theodore Roosevelt’s rugged individualism, prompted him to see “wilderness as a place where one might envision a different future” (Sutter 2002: 217). The wilderness idea gave Marshall hope for the inclusion of minorities, the integration of nature and culture, and a type of recreation that would serve as a respite from industrial, hard-working city life. In order to achieve these goals, it would be critical to engage a diverse constituency, but Marshall’s social arguments portrayed wilderness as a cause worthy of broad support.

Benton MacKaye: Wilderness as a Planning Tool

Less well-known than Leopold or Marshall, Benton MacKaye was no less important in the early wilderness movement. MacKaye approached wilderness from a regional planning perspective, rather than a scientific one, and his wilderness arguments make this background apparent.

Best known for his involvement in the creation of the Appalachian Trail, MacKaye’s wilderness ideas were grounded firmly in strategies of regional planning. He envisioned a system of wilderness dams and levees to contain the spread of urbanization (MacKaye 1928). First, wilderness could act as a dam, impeding the outward spread of urbanization by creating a physical barrier beyond which development would be prohibited. Second, MacKaye supported the use of “townless highways” as levees (MacKaye 1930). The townless highway idea uses limited access to prevent the spread of urbanization along the sides of roads. This system would create a network of wilderness areas that would provide “routes into, through, and around urban areas,” while limiting development through

inconvenience of access (Sutter 2002: 174). The modern interstate highway system is the best example of this strategy; it is common to travel long distances passing through undeveloped areas (open ways), with only occasional urban punctuation. “These open ways...mark the lines for developing the primeval environment, while the motor ways mark the lines for extending the metropolitan environment” (MacKaye 1928a: 179). MacKaye’s ultimate goal was to create a physical separation of the metropolitan and the wilderness, thus highlighting the importance of each.

In addition to creating this physical barrier, however, MacKaye also sought to create a psychological barrier, emphasizing the importance of wilderness recreation as a means of rejuvenation. Metropolitanism, Mackaye argued, “widens the breach between normal work and play by segmenting the worst elements in each. It divorces them into drubbing mechanized toil on the one hand and into a species of ‘lollipopedness’ on the other” (MacKaye 1927: 167). Wilderness would serve as a means of fulfilling recreation rather than a “lollipoped,” pre-determined set of activities designed only as a distraction from urban life. Like Leopold, MacKaye recognized the connection between people and place, arguing that a balanced landscape had to include aspects of “the urban, the rural, and the primeval” (Sutter 2002: 144). Under this regional planning design, criticisms that “wilderness came to reflect the very wilderness its devotees sought to escape” (Cronon 1996: 15) became less viable. Using MacKaye’s definition, wilderness was not a critique of the urban, as many wilderness critics argue, but rather a contrast; it took a balance of the two to create a stable environment and society.

MacKaye’s regional planning arguments escaped criticisms of elitism primarily because they avoided the subject altogether. Rather, they were an argument for better-designed landscapes, improvements that would affect all urban residents. Designated Wilderness Areas, in most cases, do not fulfill the role MacKaye envisioned, but these ideas could play a crucial role in future wilderness design, especially as urbanization continues to spread.

The Social Wilderness

The value of wilderness designation in the United States as a “significant social achievement” has been lost across the U.S. populace (DeLuca and Demo 2001). Both

supporters and critics of the wilderness movement often portray it simply as a part of the larger environmental movement. Supporters focus on the valuable biodiversity and ecosystem service values of these protected areas (e.g. Cole and Yung 2011), while critics point out the dangers of prioritizing land protection over basic human rights and equality (e.g. Cronon 1996, Limerick 2002). But the critics misinterpret the original goals of the wilderness movement, and the supporters miss an opportunity to make a stronger argument. As DeLuca and Demo (2001) point out, to focus solely on the environmental values of wilderness is to ignore the realization that “[preserving] wilderness as anything more than tattered relics...requires recognizing the social character of wilderness and the role of people in it.”

It is equally important, however, that people recognize their role in wilderness, and this is where creating relevance becomes so important. “People should always be conscious that they are part of the natural world” (Cronon 1996: 22), and “wilderness can teach profound feelings of humility and respect as we confront our fellow beings and the earth itself” (Cronon 1996: 23). By making wilderness relevant to a larger constituency and emphasizing the importance of building a relationship with wild lands, both the wilderness movement and the civil rights movement will benefit; an increase in positive perceptions of wildlands decreases the effect of race on visitation and recreation, creating a more diverse and unified culture of wilderness enjoyment and stewardship (Johnson et al. 1997).

Changes in wilderness perception and experience will also benefit the actual, ecological preservation, protection, and conservation ethic among larger groups of people. By 2030, 25 percent of the world’s protected areas will be within 9 miles of a city (Forbes 2008), and minorities already outnumber non-Hispanic whites in 22 of the 100 largest cities in the United States (White 2011). This means more people will have more access to public lands for their own enjoyment, providing ample opportunity for people to connect to their natural surroundings. These changing demographics combined with increasing urban proximity to protected areas further support the need for a better approach to wilderness education.

Looking Forward: The Next 50 Years

The Civil Rights Act will almost certainly celebrate a 100th anniversary; the fate of the Wilderness Act is less assured. Civil rights will endure because there is an accepted myth that is taught about its past and its future place in society; wilderness is does not have as strong of a mythical connection with American identity and currently faces a shrinking constituency and the recurring battle of conservation versus development. “To be truly meaningful, the work of conservation must be grounded not just in law statutes, but in the hearts, minds, and every day choices of diverse people” (Forbes 2008). If wilderness advocates want to celebrate a century of success, then their strategies need adjustment.

In order to increase relevance for a broader spectrum of the American population, wilderness advocates and educators should focus on three strategies. First, we need to address and alleviate the three primary constraints on wilderness use: time, proximity, and knowledge. Second, a more diverse support base will require acknowledgment and inclusion of different cultural perspectives and worldviews. Finally, we must create relevance of wilderness by fostering a relationship with the land through stewardship.

Addressing Constraints on Wilderness Use

The three strongest constraints on wilderness use are time, proximity, and knowledge. These issues have been present since the early days of the wilderness movement. At the 1926 National Conference on Outdoor Recreation, Aldo Leopold observed that “the man who can not afford to travel farther...must seek his wilderness near home or not at all” (Leopold 1926: 64). Today, numerous programs seek to offer urban minorities the opportunity to experience nature. Many of these programs serve as intermediates between urban and wilderness environments, however, understanding that the transition between the two is significant.

One such program is Eden Place Nature Center in Chicago, Illinois, where CEO and Founder Michael Howard hopes that youths, once connected to nature in an urban environment, will want to go see the “real thing” (Howard 2014). “What good is preserving the great outdoors,” Howard asks, “if only a small portion of the population gets to

experience it?” (Howard 2014). Eden Place seeks to address issues of proximity and access by bringing nature into the city rather than taking the city into nature.

Rue Mapp, founder of Outdoor Afro, similarly advocates for these types of “stepping stone” experiences (Mapp 2014). By making the outdoors “compelling and relevant,” to diverse populations, we can strengthen the level of support for future environmental causes (Mapp 2014).

Programs such as Eden Place and Outdoor Afro not only address issues of proximity and access, but provide valuable knowledge and information as well. Eden Place runs a Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program, local biodiversity projects, and programs that “capture the spirit of the neighborhood and cultivate strong community ties” (Eden Place Nature Center 2014). Outdoor Afro offers education through experience so that participants can have the knowledge and skills to participate in outdoor recreation independently.

Though neither of these programs directly addresses issues of wilderness preservation, they serve an important role of educating diverse populations about the significance of natural areas and providing access to opportunities to experience the natural world. The National Park Service has similarly recognized the necessity of these opportunities. Many parks have joined with local non-profits, schools, and environmental organizations to provide transportation opportunities to and from national parks (National Park Service 2011). The NPS is also working to place a stronger emphasis on the importance of education and incorporation of diverse cultural histories in its interpretation programs (National Park Service 2011).

The three constraints of wilderness use are not mutually exclusive. Thus, it is necessary to address all three collectively, increasing access, reducing distance, and providing the important knowledge base to safely and enjoyably experience wilderness. Addressing these three constraints alleviates some of the challenges of wilderness experience and eases the process of making wilderness relevant to all Americans.

Including Different Cultural Perspectives

One critical tool for increasing wilderness relevance is acknowledging the variety of American cultural backgrounds. Arguments that will appeal to one cultural or ethnic group

may not appeal to another group in the same way. Including these cultural perspectives necessitates an understanding what characteristics define groups.

The NPS found that African Americans and Hispanics were the two groups most likely to feel that “NPS units are not safe places to visit” (National Park Service 2011). Racial and cultural tensions have significantly greater effects on these minority populations, and addressing these tensions will be crucial for engaging these groups in future wilderness discussions. Candice Price, CEO of Urban American Productions, discusses some of these tensions and the power of nature as a healing force: “It’s where we came from. It’s who we are” (Price 2014). Price is an executive producer of Urban American Outdoors, “the first multicultural reality sports adventures show” (Urban American Outdoors 2014). Urban American Outdoors works hard to be all-inclusive and incorporate a variety of cultural perspectives (Price 2014).

Michael Howard looks at differences in perspective in a similar way. Geographic location and cultural background cause groups to worry about different challenges (Howard 2014). But if we address this location and background variation, groups generally have the same types of issues, concerns, and problems (Howard 2014). Recognizing these similarities can have a unifying effect, helping to bring diverse groups together.

Focusing on the social functions of wilderness can help to lessen the effect of cultural divides. Marshall and Leopold’s arguments of wilderness as a minority right will be more significant to a minority population than a plea for saving biodiversity. Social issues will always plague society; thus, framing wilderness as a social achievement rather than an environmental one will maintain its cultural importance, regardless of changing demographics.

Creating Relevance Through Stewardship

Addressing constraints on wilderness use and incorporating a variety of cultural perspectives will help diverse groups recognize the importance of wilderness. But this recognition alone is not enough. It is also necessary to foster a relationship with the wilderness resource through stewardship and active engagement. This engagement will

provide the lasting support of wilderness that will carry the wilderness movement through 50 more years and beyond.

“Physical labor in nature is one of the primary ways that humans come to know and connect with the natural world” (DeLuca and Demo 2001: 553). Working to improve any resource builds a sense of ownership and care. It is to this end that organizations such as the Student Conservation Association and Southern Appalachian Wilderness Stewards have focused their efforts.

Candice Price recognizes the importance of creating these stewardship opportunities, especially among minority populations. African Americans are often seen as consumers, rather than as a part of the management and design of resource management and outdoor recreation (Price 2014). “You can’t just fill a space,” she warns (Price 2014). Price would prefer to see young African Americans learn about the resources, enter management positions, and be in charge.

Elwood York, Washington Office Wilderness Program Leader for the U.S. Forest Service, tells a story about an Urban Conservation Corps group in California. When informed that their responsibilities for their 2-3 weeks in the wilderness included picking up trash, their leader, Bobby Vega, initially protested saying, “they always want the Mexicans to pick up trash. What are you going to teach my young men? They already know how to pick up trash” (York 2014). However, once they had done some work in trail maintenance, campsite inventory, air quality sampling, map making, and trash collecting, these youths developed a respect for and attachment to the resource. The same group volunteered to do similar work in the future, and even pestered other wilderness users to clean up after themselves. The development of the stewardship relationship, therefore, had profound effects for this group. They have gone on to become a certified 21st Century Youth Conservation Corps, the 13th in the State of California. They have also received a USFS Regional award in Civil Rights and the USFS Chief’s Award for Wilderness Stewardship. “That is civic engagement, connectivity and youth involvement” (York 2014).

Rue Mapp points out that one commonality between the Wilderness and Civil Rights Acts is that they “protect vulnerable populations” of resources and people, respectively (Mapp 2014). Stewardship can provide the link between these two movements by honoring the struggles of previous generations to protect the wilderness resource and to

gain the right to use that resource. It would be “almost criminal not to honor them by stewarding or taking care of the property they fought for the right just to visit. Honor with integrity, with stewardship, with education,” says York (2014). Through stewardship, a relationship forms that is larger than simple environmental protection or equality under the law. “If you are connected with nature,” says Rue Mapp, “it is a human right. That is part of your civil rights” (Mapp 2014). If a connection with nature is a civil right, then the wilderness movement cannot solely be a means of protecting a resource; it necessarily is something much larger, encompassing social arguments as well.

At the Second National Conference on Outdoor Recreation, Aldo Leopold said, “the best way to teach [people] how to play outdoors is to provide them some outdoors to play in” (1926: 2). But Leopold, Marshall, and MacKaye had something in common: that “play” had to serve a purpose; it had to be more than a distraction. Playing outdoors, under this definition, would necessarily mean forming a relationship with the resource. The necessity of stewardship is Leopold’s Land Ethic in practice: wilderness stewardship is simply an extension of the social arguments of civil rights to a respectful and fulfilling relationship with the land.

As both the Wilderness Act and the Civil Rights Act celebrate their 50th anniversary, it is necessary to evaluate the status of each important piece of legislation on the nation’s social conscience. The wilderness movement will face growing challenges as the population of the United States continues to diversify. If wilderness is to remain relevant to a changing America, it will be necessary for wilderness supporters to change their methods of advocacy. The social foundations of the wilderness movement do not receive the attention they deserve, but they will become increasingly important in the future if wilderness is to remain a viable option for conservation. By creating relevance to all cultural groups through addressing constraints on use, including varying worldviews, and fostering a relationship with the land through stewardship, the Wilderness Act will experience continued significance for years to come.

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