The Wilderness Act of 1964: Direct Action And Proposed Amendments

Introduction

The Wilderness Act of 1964 established that the United States, with increasing population, expanding settlement and growing mechanization, needed to preserve the enduring resource of “wilderness”. The four federal agencies: the Forest Service (FS), in the Department of Agriculture; the National Park Service (NPS); Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS); and Bureau of Land Management (BLM) within the Department of the Interior (DOI), manage these areas. I agree with the concept of keeping these lands in their “natural” state. There are many qualifying arguments to make about why these lands are valuable culturally, intrinsically, and economically. The question at hand is, what difficulties may arise with this definition? Should it ultimately be left alone, amended, or eradicated? The frequently quoted definition of “wilderness” in the Wilderness Act of 1964 is as follows.

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 untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.

The difficulties that arise are, what ethical, logical, and environmental options are sustainable for the “wilderness”? Is there a true wilderness that can uphold this definition in the United States still? When I read the Act, it does not define certain criteria. It leaves out different viewpoints about how the land should be dealt with. Throughout the essay I will showcase a starting point to different amendments. Callicott point out that, “the greatest value of the Wilderness Act of 1964 is ethical. It formally acknowledges a human commitment to humility, forbearance, and restraint.” I agree with Callicott that there was a lot of good that came out of this act. Seeing how we interpret the act when it was made is essential. I believe that the Act started and good faith of wanting to preserve the “natural wilderness” for all its glory and magnitude, but it needs to have amendments that apply to our current standards and ethics.

Difficulties with “Wilderness”

Within the text “untrammeled by man” is critical but not obvious. This is just a general description, but the problem is with how to manage it specifically. The definition does not state how to preserve the untrammeled areas. Better direction is found later in the Act:

Except as otherwise provided in this [Act], each agency administering any area designated as wilderness shall be responsible for preserving the wilderness character of the area and shall so administer such area for such other purposes for which it may have been established as also to preserve its wilderness character.

Explicit management direction is found in the beginning of the Act as well: shall be administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, and so as to provide for... the

preservation of their wilderness character.

Gordon Steinhoff goes into deep detail on the topic in his paper, Interpreting the Wilderness Act, of how this definition of “wilderness character” is included in the text but not specifically defined. Leaders in wilderness management interpret the Act as mandating preservation of only limited aspects of wilderness character, or they interpret the Act as presenting contradictory requirements. In their interpretations, wilderness character has been relegated to the role of an ideal that hopefully guides management but is not required in management. Managers are allowed and even encouraged to extensively manipulate wilderness for desired ends. This is when Steinhoff goes into his thesis, “I will argue for the contrary view: the Wilderness Act requires the preservation of wilderness character in all its richness, including natural conditions with unhindered natural processes. This is not merely an ideal. I will conclude by joining with others in urging stricter adherence to the Wilderness Act.” Like Callicott, Steinhoff is an advocate for taking humans out of the picture and letting nature run it’s course. Steinhoff states, “Among the experts there is a good agreement, then, that wilderness character consists of these properties: untrammeled, natural conditions, and outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation.”

Another difficulty that comes up with “wilderness” is that it is unclear of how to truly uphold this idea. When some think of wilderness it would be a region of land in which no permanent inhabitants, roads, power transportation and settlements are barred. When Callicott investigates the landscape of certain designated “wildlife areas” like, the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem, one can easily see that it is not 100% free of all these requirements. People use Yellowstone nation park as an observatory of the “natural” large animals coming up to your car. This is a different matter that I will touch on in the later section. Callicott describes the scenery with respect but also resents all forms of inhabitance within the park. This is where I differ, and it should be addressed in how we take direct action in the “wilderness”. The term wilderness implies that humans should have the least amount of impact as possible. This can be done with respect for the ecosystem by humankind. We will never be able to go back to the days when buffalo roamed in herds. But we should be allowed to roam a natural sanctuary while camping under the stars.

Direct Action

The response to Callicott from Reed F. Noss in, “Wilderness – Now More Than Ever: A Response to Callicott”, is a great place to start for this argument. I find myself agreeing more and more with Noss and less with Callicott on ideals of nature. Noss states, “Callicott’s claim that wilderness preservation is purely “defensive” only reflects the assaults wild areas face everywhere. Of course we are defensive. If we did not defend the last remaining wild areas, they would soon be gone.” This is a good viewpoint if you want something done. Noss is a large proponent, advocating for change. He shows that there are more effective alternative ways then taking up a defensive “should not” argument that Callicott takes up. I believe Noss describes it best with, “We play a role similar to that of the Beaver, prairie dog, Bison, woodpecker, or Gopher Tortoise, by providing habitats upon which many other species depend.” Ultimately humans can be helpful to the biodiversity but we in the end become to clever for our own good. The best thing that we can do is stop overpopulating these areas with tourist looking to get up close and personal with animals. If someone truly wants to see these majestic creatures in their natural habitat then make the damn sacrifice. We do not have the right to drive through their

home and feed them out of the window of a car.

What is natural?

In the early section I briefly asked a question about, “what is natural”? This is a question that has been brought up by Robert Elliot in “Faking Nature”. He tells a story about a hypothetical beach that has been mined and replaced with rutile. The replacement material looks exactly like the original but it’s not the original. I believe that the same case can be applied to designated “wilderness areas”. Just this last summer in 2019, yet another case about a large animal, this time a buffalo, attacking onlookers. People enjoy seeing these large animals at a close distance but often forget that they are indeed WILD. The case that I am trying to make is that we as humans have been hunter/gatherers for a long time. Up until recently we have taken “wildlife areas” and accustomed these animals to our presence. These animals know they will not be hurt while they are in these wildlife areas. Callicott describes it as the following, “Inside the Park I saw plenty of Bison. At range the evidence of Elk overpopulation was ubiquitous: aspen were absent, an Elk-eye-level browse line was on the Douglas-firs and White bark Pins, game trails traversed the slopes every 50 feet or so of elevation, the river banks were denuded and eroding, and everywhere I stepped, I stepped in Elk scat.” In comment to this we must look to a better option then having these facilities as a resort. A place where we are true visitors not co-existing with the animals. These animals are not living the true “natural” life, living off the handouts of tourists, it seems more like a zoo.

Proposed Amendments

After discussing the previous topics about how we are going to define the current state of “wilderness” and what we are going to do with these areas, the topic of how to formally incorporate this into our legislature is questioned. My proposal is to start with the idea that we stick to the original literature of the text. We need to leave the land alone from permeant human interactions. This means that we should not have asphalt roads running through the forest to get to the top of a mountain. Being able to explore the land at your own risk with the knowledge that you are truly a visitor in the “wilderness”. This is a tough realization for most going out into the wild and learning that they are not the top animal on the food chain. Tracking how these non-managed ecosystems evolve and letting nature run its course. Leopold once wrote, “public wilderness areas are essentially a means for allowing the more virile and primitive forms of outdoor recreation to survive.” In the end, sacrifice your preconceptions that the utmost breath-taking views comes from a car ride to the top of a mountain. I was once told that true gratification does not come from the largest ride at Valley Fair. It comes from the sacrifice of enduring the harsh reality of nature. Paddling through river’s and streams only to find out there is yet another portage that needs a canoe carried across. Hiking until your feet bleed and camping under the stars. These are experiences that truly give us an idea about our history and our future of these wilderness areas.

Notes:

1. “Wilderness Act” September 3, 1964
2. Gordon Steinhoff, Interpreting the Wilderness Act of 1964, 17 Mo. Envtl. L. & Pol'y Rev. 492 (2010)
3. J. Baird Callicott, “A critique of and an Alternative to the Wilderness Idea”

4. Reed F. Noss, Wilderness – “Now more Than Ever: A Response to Callicott”
5. Michael P. Nelson, “An amalgamation of Wilderness Preservation Arguments”
6. Robert Elliot, “Faking Nature”
7. Leopold, “Wilderness as a form of land use” (Madison Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991)