Personal and Social Meanings of Wilderness: Constructing and Contesting Places in a Global Village

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Abstract—This paper takes a social constructionist approach to examine the nature and dynamics of personal and social meanings of wilderness. The paper builds on geographic and social theory to discuss the ways in which conflicts over the meaning and value of wilderness are significant consequences of modernization and globalization. The process of modernization destabilizes and "thins-out" the meanings assigned to places and undermines older, more traditional meanings. While such social constructionist views of wilderness and nature are sometimes seen as undermining protectionist claims, this paper argues that understanding the way that meaning is socially negotiated and contested is necessary for effective allocation and management of wilderness.

A major theme to come out of the 5th World Wilderness Conference held in Tromsø, Norway, in 1993, was the important role social and cultural values play in shaping conceptions of nature and wilderness. One very successful session at the Tromsø conference, for example, explored "The Idea of the Wild." In that session, philosophers and historians examined the meaning of wilderness and wild in a historical and cultural context. In many ways the discussion generated by that session was emblematic of the whole conference. At the very least it precipitated deeper reflections among wilderness researchers regarding nature and the value of wilderness to society.

While this theme was examined primarily by historians and philosophers, the international nature of the delegation also bolstered a greater recognition on the part of United States wilderness researchers of the importance of culture in giving meaning to wilderness. Since the Tromsø conference there has been much more transnational discussion and interaction about wilderness. Thus, the inclusion of three sessions on the personal and social meanings of wilderness at the Sixth World Wilderness Congress in Bangalore is an effort to follow up on this theme. In particular, these sessions were organized to look at how the social or cultural construction of wilderness and nature impacts the management and administration of wilderness and other protected areas. In a sense, we need to pick up the gauntlet thrown down by the philosophers and historians and examine what some of their ideas mean for allocation, use, and management of wilderness—that is, to look at the implications of this philosophical and historical "rethinking" of nature and wilderness.

One consequence of this challenge has been to force American wilderness researchers and managers to step outside the wilderness and look at public values and personal meanings independent (but not exclusive) of recreational use and visitation. This perspective is already evident in the examination of new (or at least relatively ignored) questions for management. Examples that come to mind are questions of indigenous uses (collecting native materials), introduction and control of exotic species, reintroduction of native species, fire ecology and suppression, and so forth.

It also causes us to rethink the meaning and role of recreational use of wilderness within the context of modern society. For Americans, wilderness visitation has played a critical role as a ritual celebration of cultural heritage. Preservation of wilderness is, in part, advanced by passing on the meanings and values through these rituals. Without use and visitation, wilderness is reduced to an abstract "unlived" experience or idea. From this broader perspective, the focus on recreation use turns to how it functions to "reproduce" cultural concepts of nature and wild.

Another theme is to examine specific wildernesses as concrete places that individuals and groups have come to value, rather than as representative of some cultural category of place. In this context we might pose the question: What contribution does wilderness or protected area designation make to local sense of place or identity.

The Social Construction of Wilderness

Natural landscapes have always carried important and varied emotional, cultural, and symbolic meanings. The very idea of "landscape" refers to the symbolic environment constructed by human acts of assigning meaning to nature, space, or environment (Greider and Garkovich 1994). Throughout history, natural landscapes have represented places to live and extract a living; places to play and appreciate; places to define self, community, and nation; and places within which to contemplate one's spiritual and biological status in the world.

A constructionist approach—anchored in the sociology of knowledge, interpretive sociology, and much of what now passes as postmodern epistemology (Burr 1995)—addresses

the historical, cultural, and political processes by which humans seek out, create, evaluate, and contest specific place meanings. Within the context of nature and wilderness, social construction refers to social, cultural, and political processes by which groups of people create shared meanings and understandings of a place and how these shared meanings, in turn, structure social actions in, and with respect to, those places (Menning and Field 1997). The designation of wilderness landscapes in America is a case in point. The wilderness designation debate was subject to lengthy social and political negotiations that eventually resulted in a formal legal definition. This legal definition, complete with use and management prescriptions, now shapes the way these landscapes are used, experienced, and ultimately modified.

As part of a larger project of postmodern social critique, a social constructionist view of wilderness is sometimes seen as an intellectual attack on the concept of nature itself (Soulé 1995). Just looking at the titles of some recent books suggests as much. Nature has been "refashioned," has come to an untimely "end," or has simply "died." Opponents fear that if concepts such as nature, wilderness, and endangered species are regarded as socially constructed, their meanings are subject to varying and contestable interpretations. As Cronon (1996) notes, because the meaning and value of wilderness would seem "up for grabs," arguments supporting a social constructionist view of nature have the appearance of giving aid and comfort to those who would ravage nature. But to assert that "nature" is natural and therefore, its value beyond question, obscures us from recognizing that ideas, interpretations, and meanings have real consequences.

To this point, the constructionist or "sociocultural" perspective has been largely neglected in the United States as a basis for understanding wilderness use and meaning in favor of a goal-directed view (Williams and Patterson 1996). The goal-directed or opportunity approach employs a utilitarian language that enables wilderness meanings and values of the landscape to be defined and managed in ways analogous to other, competing land uses (such as, timber, water, grazing). Thus, much like consumer goods, wilderness is often described as collections of features or attributes that recreationists value, prefer, or seek.

Though wilderness research has clearly profited from this view in terms of site management, its limitations are increasingly recognized. What I have elsewhere criticized as the "commodity view" of outdoor recreation (Williams and others 1992), presumes that recreation places are theoretically interchangeable or substitutable, minimizes the role of socioeconomic and sociocultural (for example, class, gender, and race) forces for influencing opportunity structures and individual goal orientations, reduces environmental meanings to behavioral utilities, and generally ignores the symbolic environment and the social processes that create and contest environmental meanings.

The notion that landscapes, including wilderness, are socially produced suggests instead that their meaning is anchored in history and culture and not simply the objective, inherent, enduring, tangible, and visible properties of objects in nature. The point is not to deny the existence of a hard reality "out there," but to recognize that the meaning of that reality is continuously created and re-created through social interactions and practices.

It is impossible to talk about the meaning and value of wilderness without acknowledging to some degree the role of culture in giving meaning to things. For example, the frontier and pioneer history of the United States is critical for understanding the meaning and management of public forests, wilderness, and national parks. Early American settlers constructed a pristine landscape empty of civilization. They settled a vast, "unoccupied" continent that, from Anglo-European eyes, was initially seen as devoid of meaning apart from the instrumental uses that could be extracted from it. The specific meaning of any particular place was, in effect, very thin to start with. Landscapes were seen as mere "resources" that lacked any historical or cultural significance until Europeans occupied it. Slowly, the American landscape has taken on more and more cultural and symbolic meanings. Wilderness and the frontier began to symbolically represent American civilization (and the civilizing of the American landscape). Recreational use of wilderness and nature became a ritual for reproducing the frontier experience and what was taken to be the American character.

In addition to spawning certain recreational practices, I suspect this slow thickening of meaning has given rise to certain tendencies in how Americans relate to and manage the landscape. Given their relatively short history of occupation of the landscape, Euro-Americans have some difficulty legitimating emotional, symbolic, or sacred meanings, meanings that by their very nature tend to be rooted in the past. Because Americans encountered a landscape lacking the marks of their own history and culture, they were not burdened to uphold historical meaning and practice. They were relatively free to build a "rational" (a historical) foundation for landscape meaning and valuation. Thus, the history of public resource management was initially a laissez faire process of allocating land to limitless possible uses, a process of disposal of the public land to private, utilitarian uses. For those remaining lands, that were not transferred to private ownership, Americans developed highly bureaucratic and rational processes of allocating specific uses to specific tracts of land. Lacking deeper historical and cultural meanings, they were free to employ criteria of utilitarian efficiency to guide land-use allocations.

Only after extensive settlement of the land, with more and more of the land cultivated and civilized, could Americans imagine a symbolic value to "preserving" as opposed to "using" the land. As they began to associate the frontier with the American character and experience, portions of the land began to take on symbolic value as wilderness. Only as Americans created history could they sanctify places in the American landscape, and even then they often sought a more utilitarian reason for such actions.

In other cultural contexts, I presume it is more difficult to think in terms of unoccupied, unsettled, and uncivilized landscapes (this was very much the point of many critics of the wilderness idea in Tromsø). On the one hand, the deeper history and thicker meanings are more easily threatened by growing demands and changing uses of the landscape. As meaning deepens with time and occupation of a landscape, more complex and conflicting uses and meanings must be coordinated on the land. On the other hand, a shared sense of history and culture may give people a stronger sense of what is appropriate in a given landscape. These may be

institutionalized, not as bureaucratic regulatory processes, but in the form of law, custom, and traditional practices—as a shared sense of place.

The Meanings of Wilderness: Personal, Social, and Ecological _____

To understand the meanings of wilderness is to understand the way in which socially constructed landscapes define and symbolize who we are. As Greider and Garkovich (1994, p. 2) put it: "Our understanding of nature and of human relationships with the environment are really cultural expressions used to define who 'we' were, who 'we' are, and who 'we' hope to be at this place and in this space." In what ways, then, do wilderness landscapes create and re-create identity?

Some 10 years ago, I along with some colleagues were asked to review the "human development benefits of wilderness" (Williams and others 1989). Drawing on the social psychological theories of self-affirmation, we argued that through leisure people actively seek out and create opportunities for self definition. Wilderness can provide individuals with a sense of who they are through their use as symbols. The self-affirmation process can be thought of as composed of three facets: an affective dimension (an evaluative dimension we generally think of as self-esteem); a virtually infinite number of cognitive dimensions or self-images (a set of beliefs about ourselves, including who we are, our likes and dislikes, and our goals and aspirations); and a motivational dimension that actively searches for and creates opportunities for self-definition (as we develop as individuals, we strive to understand ourselves and be more clearly understood by others). This motivational facet is particularly significant because it makes human development less of a reaction to one's social and physical environment and more of an active "transaction" with it.

Self-affirmation emphasizes that we often act to "cultivate" a desired identity, as opposed to having our social and physical environments impose a given identity upon us. This is especially true in leisure, where we presumably exercise some level of choice of how we want to express ourselves. People tend to avoid situations that provide unwelcome self-definitions, and seek out and actively create situations that provide the supportive feedback they desire. The term self-affirmation implies seeking clarification of who we are when we are uncertain of our identity, the values we stand for, and so forth.

What role does wilderness play in this self-affirmation process? We suggested that wilderness contributes to identity at three levels.

1. Individual identities may be tied to wilderness and specific natural landscapes, such that the use of these places (through actual visitation or in vicarious and symbolic ways) affirms important beliefs about the "personal self" or who we are as individuals. We may exhibit certain behaviors related to a landscape that give us feedback that we are, for example, adventurous, self-reliant, independent, well-traveled, or physically fit. Particularly in Western individualistic societies, nature contact offers "individuation"—a free space where one can forge and affirm one's uniqueness as an individual and achieve one's own pattern of satisfaction.

2. Natural environments can give us feedback as to our "collective self" or cultural identity. Wilderness for Americans is an important symbol of our shared heritage. Historically, according to Nash (1982), national parks and wilderness (and the vast public land estate more generally) have served to give Americans a cultural identity, especially when we felt inferior to our European cousins who presumably had a richer cultural heritage. As Nash (1969, p. 70) observed, "Our national ego is fed by both preserving and conquering wilderness."

How natural places are "constructed" and managed and the ritual exhibition of recreational practices became national character traits. Again, Nash (1982) writes of the wilderness cult (Teddy Roosevelt's Boone and Crockett Club, the Appalachian Mountain Club, and the Boy Scout movement) at the beginning of the 20th century to argue that with the closing of the frontier America was prompted to seek ways of retaining the influence of the frontier's (manly) virtues of energy, resolution, and self-reliance on modern society.

Nature plays a prominent role in defining national identities in other countries as well. In work that I have been doing in Scandinavia, contact with nature appears to be a strong ideological theme in cultural or national identities, just as the conquest and preservation of wilderness is an American ideology (Williams and Kaltenborn 1999).

3. At a more philosophical level, nature contact may also provide a kind of identity feedback that is important to humans as a species. That is, nature contact validates our sense of "biological self" or ecological place in the world. It affords humans an opportunity to discover or affirm who they are as one race or species among the many species in the world. It affirms our earthy origins. As Rolston (1986, p. 104) states: "Humans are relics of… [the natural] world, and that world, as a tangible world in our midst, contributes to our sense of duration, antiquity and identity." While empirical evidence suggests that we humans are capable of living life in a world largely devoid of nature contact (such as, in dense urban environments), without some level of access to nature, we lose a part of ourselves.

The role of wilderness preservation and use in affirming an individual self identity—the process of individuation or establishing individual personality—is generally recognized in the psychological literature on wilderness benefits. What is perhaps less widely understood is the role of wilderness pursuits in cultural identity and national ideology. In the American context we have left this topic largely to historians such as Nash, preferring to concentrate on issues having presumably a more direct bearing on day-to-day nature management.

Similarly, the idea that wilderness serves as a symbol of shared biological or ecological identity (reminding us of our ecological relationship to the earth) has mostly been a philosophical discussion about environmental ethics. This gets debated in terms of ideas such as bioregionalism and ecophilosophy that seek to "rediscover" our lost sense of home and place in nature. The importance for management of wilderness has to do with how we justify the allocation of

lands for preservation of wilderness. If the goal is to advance the cause of wilderness, there is a danger in relying too much on recreational use (the individual identity) as the meaning and basis for wilderness protections. This narrows the value of wilderness to individual, instrumental purposes, suggesting that these values can be potentially achieved in other contexts and does not build on any shared or collective sense of value.

The Meaning of Wilderness in a Global Village_____

I have described the social construction of wilderness, place, and landscape, and attempted to connect these to the personal, social, and ecological meanings of wilderness. I want to now turn to the question of how modern social processes (globalization) impact the meanings of wilderness and what this suggests for wilderness research, management, and allocation. Globalization is problematic for wilderness. It not only makes it possible to rapidly transform physical space, but also the meanings society attaches to places. Globalization tends to thin-out and destabilize place meanings (Sack 1992) and aggravates conflicts over how places or natural landscapes should be developed and managed (Williams and Matheny 1994).

In a premodern era, local conditions were more predominant as constraints on how people adapted to and fashioned their world. Exploiting nature was limited by local knowledge, and the quantity and quality of locally available natural resources constrained economic and social activities. This tended to produce isolated local cultures with social patterns necessarily fitted to the contingencies of that place. This doesn't mean that humans were benign by modern ecological standards as Soulé (1995) reminds us. Rather the scope and scale of human-environment interactions were more directly embodied in a place. In other words, societies were adapted to the opportunities and constraints of local place.

In the modern era, as Harvey (1989) argues, the cultural invention of capital accumulation freed production activities from the constraints of local place and began a process of transforming places around the logic of market economics. Modernization (whether in the form of industrial markets, mass communications, or more efficient transportation) has in an important sense "freed" ourselves from constraints of place, or in economic terms, allowed for more efficient use of resources. This has had profound implications for both nature and society. Nature was, in a sense, demystified and disenchanted (Taylor 1992). Whatever inherent moral value nature may have possessed, it was supplanted by a view of nature as an instrumental resource to be exploited.

Similarly, individuals were liberated from local ways of life, community mores, and parochial society. Social theorists recognize that modernity—as the unmooring of social relations, production and consumption, and even our identity from particular places—also leads to greater freedom to contest the meanings we ascribe to both our immediate and more distant surroundings. Just as material life is no longer bound by local ecological limits, modern social norms and practices have become increasingly the province of the sovereign consumer or voter. While much has been gained in terms of material well-being and individual autonomy and liberty, modern social relations have also led to the displacement of local, community norms and standards of behavior by individual preferences as expressed in the marketplace or the voting booth (Wolfe 1989). The meaning of a place (wilderness) is increasingly subject to a kind of ideological marketplace with all of the competition and instability that goes with it.

Modernity has restructured time-space relations by making possible rapidly accelerating rates of exchange, movement, and communication across space—what Harvey refers to as "time-space compression," or what Marx once described as "the annihilation of space by time." Globalization is an important geographic outcome of modernity that contributes directly to the unmooring of social meanings and norms. But as Sack (1992, 1997) argues, the condition of modernity is not so much about a decline or loss of place-based meaning, as it is often interpreted, but about a change in how meaning is created or constituted in the modern age. He suggests that the processes of modernization, globalization, and time-space compression have the effect of thinning the meaning of places. "From the fewer, more local, and thicker places of premodern society, we now live among the innumerable interconnected thinner places and even empty ones" (Sack 1997, p. 9). Modernity partitions space into smaller and finer units and assigns specialized meaning to each. Under these conditions there is "virtually a place for everything and everything is supposed to be in its place" (Sack 1997, p. 8). With modernization and globalization, meaning is increasingly created in a spatially decontextualized world of mass consumption and mass communication, a world in which market forces continuously rework the meaning of places.

In places where contact with nature has been central to national and cultural identity, any change, loss, or thinning of traditional meanings and values associated with natural landscapes is likely to be especially troubling. For example, in Scandinavia there is considerable evidence that people feel their distinctive outdoor traditions are increasingly threatened by rapid urbanization, see their cultural identity as potentially threatened by the European unification, and express concern that the growing use of natural landscapes as nature-tourism destinations by the rest of Europe will interfere with these traditions (Kaltenborn and others 1995). As Eriksen (1997) argues, through their power to ritualize the cultural memories of rural Scandinavian life, these traditions provide a way to shelter one's identity from changes associated with an increasingly multi-ethnic, urbanized, and globalized culture. However, globalization also appears to be pressing in on these traditions of nature contact and "thinning" them as they become the commodified interest of increasingly spatially and culturally distant social groups.

The questions remain:

- Is wilderness a way to reconnect modern identities to nature, place, and community?
- Can nature facilitate maintenance of ancestral ways of life in a global world?
- Is wilderness just one more piece of ground to become segmented by modernity and thereby diluted of traditional meanings?

Implications _____

The social constructionist perspective on social theory suggests that society has more or less always functioned by working through contested meanings of places, things, resources, and ideas. However, the disequilibrium that is so much a part of modernity and globalization propel this process of contesting place meanings to new levels of intensity and geographic scope. Given our collective power to make and remake places, not even wilderness can escape from being a socially constructed space.

Still, the social construction of meaning is not completely amorphous. The creation and contestation of meaning involves social interactions structured within and by interest group formation and action, regulatory agencies, administrative procedures, law, local government, planning processes, and so forth. These processes are most obvious in the formal political arena, but they also occur through everyday practices such as deciding where to vacation or retire; whether and where to build a new shopping mall or Wal-Mart; and a thousand other small decisions made by consumers, businesses, families, and government officials.

The point is that focusing on a sociocultural view of meaning (whether personal, social, or ecological) causes us to examine not just what values people hold, but where these values and meanings come from, how they vary from place to place and community to community, how they are negotiated in society, how they are used in conflict situations, how they are impacted by modernization, and how they influence policy decisions. By focusing on how values and meanings are socially created and contested and how these affect the management system, we begin to develop models of the social system that recognize historical context, reflexivity, and disequilibrium, and we begin to develop procedures to address inevitable social conflicts and differences. By focusing on history and scale, social knowledge is made more compatible with ecosystem models.

Culture can be thought of as a map of meanings through which the world is made intelligible. However, culture is not entirely consensual or shared, as it has often been described, but is something that varies across individuals and groups, and is contestable by various interests (Hansis 1996). Wilderness designation, management, and use take on different meanings for different people and, in the process of negotiation, new meanings and group identities are created and modified. Cultural meanings are also made concrete through patterns of human action. Thus, planning, as a strategic human action, is a kind of meaning-making. Planning creates meaning rather than merely representing meanings "as they really are." Exercises in mapping meanings are, by definition then, necessarily political acts in which meanings are being created and contested, with certain meanings gained and lost in the process. This view recognizes power relations. It asks: Who gets to draw the map? It focuses on how meanings and values are produced and reproduced through actual social practices that take place in historically contingent and geographically specific contexts.

Regardless of how one feels about the "cultural politics" that globalization engenders and intensifies (and the corresponding reduction in the power and authority of science and expertise), such politics are part of the social reality. It is perhaps tempting to think that meaning should be defined by an elite of scientists and well-informed activists. We would like to discover some "rational" foundation for ecosystem health that transcends local cultural truths. But within the context of society in a hyper-modern age, such a foundation (or at least widespread agreement as to what it is or should be) does not exist. We have a social reality of contested meaning and practice. How experts, planners, or resource managers map natural and social systems is, in fact, highly contested. To not recognize and theorize about this aspect of social systems is to push away some part of social (political) reality. It is failure to integrate an important human dimension of ecosystems into ecosystem models (the human dimension of culture and politics). Scientists and other humans are political animals that create and negotiate social reality. As wilderness and ecosystem managers, we cannot set aside that political reality, as some seem to suggest, as if it were outside the wilderness or ecosystems we seek to understand.

The mere examination of topics such as landscape meanings, social identities, and cultural differences reflects a uniquely modern concern: these things are made problematic by globalization. Identity and sense of place become most valuable to people when these things appear to be threatened from the outside. From the theoretical perspective of social constructionism, a major impact of modernity and globalization is to destabilize and thin out the meaning of places. It further suggests that places contain multiple and conflicting histories and that people affirm multiple and conflicting identities. All histories, boundaries, and categories become negotiable. Experts are dethroned.

As unsettling as all this is, what we are seeing more clearly as a result of modernity is that most of what we thought was inherent and enduring was really socially constructed all along. The accelerated pace of change (time-space compression) just makes us more aware of the extent and manner that the world has always been socially constructed. Quite simply, the taken-for-granted can no longer be taken for granted.

Finally, as an applied researcher, I believe there is practical value to understanding how places are socially constructed and contested. Much of what I see as the current challenge for natural resource management grows out of the increasingly contested meanings of places and ecosystems that come with modernity and globalization. Understanding the processes of making and contesting wilderness meanings gets at the heart of natural resource conflict, not just in regard to wilderness and recreational uses, but other contested land uses as well (such as, timber, grazing, mining).

Moreover, the social constructionist perspective draws attention to the idea that the work of environmental scientists, managers, and planners is itself an effort that seeks, creates, contests, and most importantly, negotiates the meaning of environmental features. As planners, this means moving away from top-down, data and expert-driven management styles and toward more deliberative, discursive, collaborative styles. Stated more globally, we need to learn how to collectively negotiate through change and across differences. This is much easier said than done, of course, as societies have structured all manner of processes and institutions around single histories, defined boundaries, fixed categories, and reified meanings.

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