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Defining wilderness in IUCN

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The IUCN protected area classification system describes and defines a suite of protected area categories and management approaches suitable for each category, ranging from strictly protected “no-go” reserves to landscape protection and non-industrial sustainable use areas. Wilderness has its own protected area category under IUCN’s classification system, Category Ib, which describes the key objectives of wilderness protection and, more importantly, identifies the limits of what is and is not acceptable in such areas. At the 2008 World Conservation Congress, a new edition of management guidelines for the IUCN categories (Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories, Dudley 2008) was published following long consultation. Guidance for wilderness protection is now more detailed and precise than in the previous 1994 edition, and as a result will help further the application of this category around the world. We describe the revisions to the new guidelines generally, and some of the implications for wilderness protected areas specifically.

Wilderness areas and protected areas

The term “wilderness” has several dimensions: a biological dimension, because wilderness refers to mainly ecologically intact areas, and a social dimension, because many people – from urban dwellers to indigenous groups – interact with wild nature, and all humans depend on our planet’s wilderness resource to varying degrees. A wilderness protected area is therefore an area that is mainly biologically intact, is free of modern, industrial infrastructure, and has been set aside so that humans may continue to have a relationship with wild nature. A number of governments have nationally specific definitions of wilderness and have enshrined its protection in law. (Kormos

2008). Some governments have applied the wilderness designation in a marine context as well as to terrestrial protected areas.

More and more people value wilderness for its associations with wild nature and physical space, because of its aesthetic and spiritual values, because of its cultural significance, and because they increasingly understand that wilderness areas provide vital ecosystem services. As a result, we are seeing an increase in wilderness laws and policies around the world (Kormos, 2008).

However, because of its many dimensions, the word “wilderness” is interpreted in many different ways and often translates poorly across languages, and sometimes across cultures. There are some critics who continue to see wilderness in a more negative light, viewing wilderness primarily as unproductive land. Some indigenous groups argue that wilderness is a foreign western construct because it emphasizes nature as separate from civilization, and under-estimates the role that mobile and sedentary tribal groups have played in shaping ecology over millennia. In our view, the conservation community has made important progress in addressing these concerns. Although some of these issues remain in dispute we believe these differences can to a large extent be overcome. One of the important mechanisms for promoting the wilderness concept more effectively is the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), and more specifically its protected area classification system, which is discussed in greater detail below.

Wilderness and IUCN

IUCN's protected areas classification system includes the full spectrum of protected area types, from strict protection in places so fragile or irreplaceable that human visitation needs to be minimized, to working landscapes and sustainable use areas that often have quite high levels of permanent human habitation alongside their biodiversity values. Wilderness protected areas are included in this classification system as Category 1b.

Recognition of wilderness within this classification system – just like recognition of the sustainable use areas – has not been without its disagreements. Wilderness was not included in the first iteration of IUCN's protected areas categories published 1962. It took until the publication of the 1994 Guidelines for Protected Areas, and concerted lobbying from a variety of organizations including most prominently the Sierra Club and Parks Canada, and advocacy from the 2nd and 3rd World Wilderness Congresses, for wilderness to be recognized as its own category of protected area. (Eidsvik, 1990) Wilderness was included as Category 1b, one half of a management type that also includes strict nature reserves. It is the only category to be sub-divided in this way, reflecting the long been a debate within the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas as to whether strict nature reserves and wilderness are really different.

At the World Conservation Congress in Barcelona in 2008, new IUCN Guidelines for Applying Protected Area Management Categories (Dudley 2008 hereinafter "2008 Guidelines") were released, updating the 1994 document and maintaining Category 1b Wilderness. The IUCN's Member's Assembly embraced the revised 2008 guidelines through a resolution that affirmed all categories of protected area as important to the global conservation effort. This was an important milestone in the further development of the global wilderness movement. Before reviewing the changes to Category 1b Wilderness in the 2008 Guidelines, a brief review of the protected area categories is included below.

Re-evaluation of protected areas categories

A resolution at the 2004 World Conservation Congress (WCC) in Bangkok requested that IUCN assess and revise its guidance on protected area categories, drawing on a research project on their implementation carried out by the University of Cardiff in Wales (Bishop et al 2004). The decision to look again at IUCN's protected areas classification system reignited intense debates about the nature of wilderness protection, amongst many other questions relating to other protected area categories, and the definition of a protected area itself. Over a three year period,

IUCN members discussed a broad range of issues relating to what defines a protected area and what types of management could and should be permitted inside protected areas. More than fifty discussion papers were written and discussed in online discussion groups, workshops were held on four continents and a major “summit” was convened in Almeria in southern Spain in May 2007, which brought together over a hundred specialists from around the world. The guidelines on protected area categories, launched at the 2008 World Conservation Congress in Barcelona, resulted from this thorough consultation and discussion process, and sets out a clear vision for protected areas in the 21st century.

The IUCN view of the world is not binding; decisions about protected area definitions or management strategies are set by national governments and only influenced obliquely by regional or international institutions. But because most governments are members of IUCN, and because the World Commission on Protected Areas is regarded as the world’s major grouping of protected area specialists, any decisions from IUCN inevitably carry a lot of weight. Many governments have consciously based their protected area legislation on IUCN policy.

The new IUCN protected areas guidelines emphasize conservation of nature

The new guidelines reflect a subtle realignment rather than a revolution as compared with the 1994 edition. Most significantly, there have been some important changes in the definition of a protected area. Although there are, as before, six categories defined by management objective, the guidance for each is more detailed and precise and there are some changes in emphasis.

The new definition of a protected area is: **“A clearly defined geographical space, recognised, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values”**¹. This

¹ The 1994 definition was in contrast *“An area of land and/or sea especially dedicated to the protection and maintenance of biological diversity, and of natural and associated cultural resources, and managed through legal or other effective means”*.

packs a lot into a short sentence and the guidelines interpret each word and phrase in more detail. Importantly, the definition must be applied with a set of principles, the most significant of which is: "For IUCN, only those areas where the main objective is conserving nature can be considered protected areas; this can include many areas with other goals as well, at the same level, but in the case of conflict, nature conservation will be the priority". In addition, the guidelines state that all protected areas should: conserve the composition, structure, function and evolutionary potential of biodiversity; contribute to regional conservation strategies; be large enough to fulfil their conservation aims; maintain values in perpetuity and have a functional and equitable management structure and governance system.

This marks some important changes, which if governments take them seriously will alter what some countries recognise as a protected area. The wording switches from "biological diversity" in 1994 to "nature conservation" in 2008, in recognition that protected areas also include aspects of geodiversity (geology and geomorphology), and to bring the phrasing closer to that of IUCN's own name. However, although the wording is a little more general, the emphasis on nature conservation increases significantly: some argued that the 1994 language was ambiguous about whether biodiversity conservation always took precedence over "natural and associated cultural resources" and there was widespread disagreement about the interpretation even within IUCN. Contributing to the confusion was a matrix of objectives within the 1994 guidelines, in which biological diversity was not always identified as the major aim for each protected area category (including in wilderness areas where it was placed second to "wilderness values"). The 2008 Guidelines wording, agreed to at the categories summit in Almeria, Spain, and in subsequent discussion within WCPA and by the WCPA steering committee, and finally supported by motions at the World Conservation Congress, now puts the emphasis firmly and unequivocally on conservation.

Another significant change in the 2008 Guidelines is the use of the phrase "**achieve** long term conservation" (our emphasis). This language was designed to ensure that protected areas are

managed in accordance with their stated objectives, with the understanding that if management is substandard, that management should be improved. However, this language also opens the possibility that countries will now choose to assign protected area categories based on a protected area's actual management effectiveness, rather than their stated management objective, as before. This could lead to a perverse result, which is that governments will simply downgrade poorly managed protected areas, or even cease to recognize them as protected areas, rather than taking added measures to improve management. Recognizing this risk, linking the choice of category to effectiveness was overwhelmingly supported by most protected area managers, though with the explicit acknowledgement that vigilance will be required to ensure that this wording is not used as a pretext for eliminating protection for areas that are not effectively managed (something that the extractive industry has been seeking for years).

The refined categories of protected areas in the 2008 Guidelines

There are, as before, six categories of protected area recognized by IUCN with one subdivided that includes wilderness:

Category Ia: strict nature reserve, set aside to protect biodiversity and also possibly geological/geomorphological features, where human visitation, use and impacts are strictly controlled and limited to ensure protection of the conservation values.

Category Ib: wilderness areas, usually large unmodified or slightly modified areas, retaining their natural character and influence, without permanent or significant human habitation, which are protected and managed so as to preserve their natural condition.

Category II: national park, large natural / near natural areas protecting major ecological processes, along with characteristic species and ecosystems, which also provide environmentally and culturally compatible spiritual, scientific, educational, recreational and visitor opportunities.

Category III: natural monument or feature, set up to protect a specific natural monument, which can be a landform, sea mount, submarine cavern, geological feature such as a cave or even a living feature such as an ancient grove.

Category IV: habitat/species management area, to protect particular species or habitats with management reflecting this priority. Many but not all such areas will need regular, active interventions to meet the requirements of particular species or to maintain habitats (but this is a change from the 1994 guidelines where *all* category IV protected areas were assumed to need active habitat manipulation to maintain biodiversity and this was part of the definition).

Category V: protected landscape/seascape, where the interaction of people and nature over time has produced an area of distinct character with significant ecological, biological, cultural and scenic value: and where safeguarding the integrity of this interaction is vital to protecting and sustaining the associated values.

Category VI: protected areas with sustainable use of natural resources, generally large areas, mostly in a natural condition, where a proportion is under sustainable natural resource management and where low-level non-industrial use of natural resources compatible with nature conservation is seen as one of the main aims.

Categorisation is driven primarily by *objective* rather than by *status*; so for example a cultural landscape that is intended to be restored to a natural condition might be defined as category Ib, whereas a cultural landscape where the same management will continue might be defined as category V. The divisions are inevitably approximate and there will continue to be disagreements about where a particular protected area “sits” in the system.

What defines a wilderness area?

The primary objective of a wilderness area is now agreed as being: **“to protect the long-term ecological integrity of natural areas that are undisturbed by significant human activity, free of modern infrastructure and where natural forces and processes predominate, so that current and future generations have the opportunity to experience such areas”**. Other objectives, implemented at levels compatible with maintaining wilderness values, include: provision of public access; enabling indigenous communities to maintain traditional wilderness-based lifestyle and customs; protecting relevant cultural and spiritual values and non-material benefits; and allowing low-impact minimally invasive educational and scientific research activities.

Such areas are distinguished by being:

- ✓ Free of modern infrastructure, development and industrial extractive activity, including but not limited to roads, pipelines, power lines, cellphone towers, oil and gas platforms, offshore gas terminals, mining, hydropower development, oil and gas extraction, agriculture including intensive livestock grazing, commercial fishing, low-flying aircraft etc., preferably with highly restricted or no motorized access;
- ✓ Characterized by a high degree of intactness: containing a large percentage of the original ecosystem, native faunal and floral assemblages and intact predator-prey systems;
- ✓ Of sufficient size to protect biodiversity, ecological processes and ecosystem services; buffer against climate change; and maintain evolutionary processes;
- ✓ Capable of offering outstanding opportunities for solitude, enjoyed once the area has been reached by simple, quiet and non-intrusive means of travel;
- ✓ Free of inappropriate or excessive human use or presence (however, human presence should not be the determining factor in deciding whether to establish a category Ib area).

In addition, somewhat disturbed areas may be defined as category Ib if they are capable of restoration to a wilderness state, or are smaller areas that might be expanded or could play an important role in a larger wilderness protection strategy.

This marks some important steps in further defining and distinguishing wilderness areas, particularly from their cousins in category I, strict nature reserves. The latter, generally but not always set aside mainly for science, only have very limited human visitation. (In some cases, as in some sacred sites that faith groups have requested be categorised under Ia, *no-one* is allowed to enter.) Category Ia are often relatively small, in contrast to Ib (although large Ia reserves exist for instance in Australia). There would usually not be human inhabitants in category Ia, but use by indigenous and local communities takes place in many Ib protected areas, and so on. In some ways wilderness areas play similar roles to category II national parks in protecting large, functioning ecosystems where evolution, provision of ecosystem services and responses to climate change (including possibly biome shift) can continue. However, unlike national parks, which often place an emphasis on tourism, sometimes at very intense levels supported by roads and other infrastructure, wilderness areas are only generally accessible to those limited number of people who are prepared to make the effort of travelling under their own power for long distances and camping out without facilities or infrastructure. Differences between wilderness areas and the other four categories are already clear.

Next steps

Importantly, the guidelines emphasize the importance and usefulness of all the protected areas categories in balanced conservation strategies and this perspective was reinforced by a resolution passed by the membership at IUCN's 2008 WCC. This recognition, as well as the improved definition of wilderness in the new Guidelines, will help reframe the global understanding of wilderness, and will help grow support for wilderness protection around the world.

The Guidelines provide a necessary updated framework for Category 1b Wilderness. However, with the new framework agreed, much work still remains to be done in developing the individual elements addressed in the Guidelines. The WCPA Wilderness Task Force, founded and co-chaired by The WILD Foundation, played a key role in the debates around the revision of the categories and in shaping the final guidance on wilderness areas. The Task Force has also published *A Handbook on International Wilderness Law and Policy* (Kormos, 2008) which describes the elements of wilderness legislation and the various approaches many countries have taken to it. The Task Force's next activity is to develop detailed guidelines on management of wilderness areas to supplement existing works that tend to be country specific (eg Hendee and Dawson).

Interest in wilderness is growing around the world. Latin America will host the World Wilderness Congress (WILD 9) in Merida, Mexico in 2009 and Mexico itself is developing a wilderness protection system. Even in Europe where the concept of wilderness protection (which has recently been regarded in some quarters as impossible to achieve) there will be a meeting in Prague 2009 hosted by the European Union about European wilderness. With such momentum growing for wilderness protection around the world, additional guidance for protected area authorities on the maintenance and management of wilderness values would be very timely.

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