

Contemporary Wilderness and American Indian Cultures

BY GREGORY F. HANSEN

Introduction

Generally speaking, there are no specific words for “wilderness” in American Indian languages. The primary reason for this is that Indian people have always lived close to the land, and what today we call “wilderness” in the United States was literally their home with which they had many relationships (Lyons 1989). Many aboriginal people, including those in the arctic north, experience

“the environment as a whole, all the parts are interconnected in a seamless web of causes and effects, actions and outcomes, behaviors and consequences. People, animals, plants, natural objects, and supernatural entities are not separate and distinct. Rather, they are all linked to each other and to places where they reside through cultural traditions and interactive, reciprocal relationships.” (Turner, Ignace, and Ignace 2000, p. 1279)



Greg Hansen.

In many cases among traditional people, this strong interconnectedness with the land is still very much alive today. The Lakota words *Mitakuye Oyasin*, which translates to mean “All My Relatives” (Severt Young Bear and Theisz 1994) is a good illustration of how all aspects of the universe are still referenced as “relations” in modern times.

Some of the larger reservations have open space that could possibly be set aside with a natural or wild designation, but the concept of designated wilderness does not always fit

well into the modern-day agendas of Tribal Councils faced with the same real-life dilemmas of all modern societies, such as water-rights issues and natural resource utilization. As various authors have noted, there are important differences between the way Americans of European descent and American Indians think about and relate to land and resources (Krech 1999; Hansen 1992 and 1996).

Tribal Wilderness Designation

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes of central Montana set national precedent by being the first tribal group in the United States to establish what is recognized today as designated wilderness within lands surrendered to them, under governmentally sanctioned treaty decisions. The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes designated the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness (89,500 acres; 36,235 ha) because of the importance of perpetuating culture and traditional practices:

Wildlands or wilderness areas have always been very important to the peoples of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes for the perpetuation of culture and traditional practices. However, after the Allotment Act, the once natural and primitive lands of the Flathead Reservation became congested by settlement and development. Many sacred, cultural sites were destroyed. The only wild and untamed areas that remained were away from so-called “civilization,” in the mountains where the bridge linking the past to present could be found. When these mountain lands became threatened by more development (logging, settlement, etc.), a movement was made to preserve the remaining untouched areas in their natural state. (University of Montana 1999)

The Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness was designated in 1979 by the Tribal Council, who further defined

the geographic area and set the management direction in 1982 (Tribal Council Ordinance 79A and Resolution 82-173). In 1986 the Tribal Council established a wilderness buffer zone adjacent to the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness Area to further protect it from outside impacts and to preserve its ecological and cultural integrity.

The Tribal Council Ordinance 79A states:

Wilderness has played a paramount role in shaping the character of the people and the culture of the Salish and Kootenai Tribes; it is the essence of traditional Indian religion and has served the Indian people and the culture of the Salish Kootenai Tribes; it is the essence of traditional Indian religion and has served people of these Tribes as a place to hunt, as a place to gather medicinal herbs and roots, as a vision seeking ground, as a sanctuary, and in countless other ways for thousands of years. Because maintaining an enduring resource of wilderness is vitally important to the people of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes and the perpetuation of their culture, there is hereby established a Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness Area and this Area, described herein, shall be administered to protect and preserve wilderness values. (University of Montana 1999)

These tribal policy statements illustrate a difference between U.S. federal and tribal wilderness definitions. The tribes place the basic rationale for wilderness on preserving culture and religion while protecting the natural conditions on these lands in perpetuity, whereas the U.S. Congress focuses

more on preserving some of the last remaining natural and undeveloped lands. Special considerations are given for tribal cultural and religious activities, at the same time human uses are not to interfere with preservation of the area.

All of the same management issues that face state and federal wilderness managers are inherent within tribal wilderness management as well. The following list illustrates some of the “common” issues that are identified in the Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness Case Study:

- manage grizzly bear habitats for a sustainable bear population;
- manage endangered species and habitats for biological diversity;
- protect cultural sites;
- maintain fragile alpine ecosystems;
- manage riparian zones for water quality and wildlife protection;
- manage for municipal watershed protection;
- manage and maintain areas without trails for visitor experience quality;
- manage trail and campsite impacts caused by visitors; and
- manage fisheries to give special attention to waters containing native west slope cutthroat trout and native bull trout.

In addition to these common land management problems, there are some additional management challenges that tribal wilderness managers must address. For example, should nontribal members be allowed to enter and enjoy tribal wilderness lands and resources? The Mission Mountains Wilderness is managed primarily for tribal members, but does outline special management directions for nontribal members:

1. Use of any tribal lands or waters by nontribal members requires the purchase of a tribal conservation license and activity stamp (e.g., fish, bird hunt, or camp).
2. Nontribal group size limit of eight persons and eight head of livestock in tribal wilderness.
3. Nontribal use of a campsite for longer than three consecutive days is prohibited.
4. It is illegal for a nontribal visitor to carry or use a firearm.
5. No commercial outfitting or guiding on the tribal wilderness lands is allowed.

Although most resource and visitor use management issues transcend federal and tribal wilderness units, tribal managers are obligated to carry out strategies that solve unique issues, such as nontribal visitors. This, in some cases, makes tribal wilderness more difficult to manage than state or federally designated wilderness areas.

Reclassification of Federal Land to Tribal Wilderness

Federal reclassification and return of designated wilderness to tribal groups is rare, but it has occurred. One example is the return of Blue Lake and the surrounding area to the Taos Pueblo, which was legislated through Public Law 91-550, on December 15, 1970. The Blue Lake area, approximately 48,000 acres (19,433 ha) of U.S. Forest Service land located within the Wheeler Peak Wilderness, was returned to the Pueblo as it was one of their most important religious sites. However, legislation required the Pueblo to continue to manage the land as wilderness. The following excerpts from that legislation explain this unique wilderness management situation:

The lands held in trust pursuant to this section shall be a part of the Pueblo de Taos Reservation, and shall be administered under the laws and regulations applicable to other trust Indian lands: Provided, that the Pueblo de Taos Indians shall use the lands for traditional purposes only, such as religious ceremonies, hunting and fishing, a source of water, forage for their domestic livestock, and wood, timber, and other natural resources for their personal use, all subject to such regulations for conservation purposes as the Secretary of the Interior may prescribe.

Except for such uses, the lands shall remain forever wild and shall be maintained as a wilderness as defined in section 2 (c) of the Act of September 3, 1964 (78 Stat. 890). With the consent of the tribe, but not otherwise, nonmembers of the tribe may be permitted to enter the lands for purposes compatible with their preservation as a wilderness.

Although the government has ceded this area back to the Pueblo, both the Departments of the Interior and Agriculture remain involved in the overall management and administration of the Blue Lake area.

Conclusion

A native voice from the Alaskan village of Kotzebue renders: "It (wild-places) rejuvenates my Inupiaq spirit. It keeps my spirit alive like a vitamin for my inner strength and spirit. Reminds me of how weak and small we are compared to the powers of the land and ocean" (Watson, Kneeshaw, and Glaspell 2004, p. 6). Understanding this all-encompassing connection that American Indian people had, and still have, with the

land is crucial when attempting to gain a sense of how Indian people view the concept behind modern wilderness designation. The basic concept of designated wilderness being a place one visits to escape the pressures of society is quite contrary to most traditional American Indian beliefs of natural places simply being interpreted as—Home!

Despite such varying perspectives, an effort has been made by some tribal groups to transcend these differing cultural barriers in a manner that fosters both traditional and progressive tribal people to agree on setting aside wild places under their administration. No matter what designation—wilderness, roadless, primitive, or recreation area—tribes throughout the United States have found ways to combine their traditions with the contemporary management of wildlands.

It is difficult to predict what direction tribal wilderness protection and management will take in the future, but Indian people will always have an important relationship with the natural environment. Chief Luther Standing Bear—of the great Oglala Nation—maybe said it best when he stated:

We did not think of the great open plains, the beautiful rolling hills, and the winding streams with tangled growth as "wild." Only to the non-Indian was nature a "wilderness" and only to him was the land infested with "wild animals." To us it was tame. The Earth was bountiful and we were surrounded with the blessings of the Great Mystery.

It is within these words that one can begin to embrace the relatively conflictive ideologies that exist between American Indian cultures, and other cultures, in relation to the protection and management of wilderness.

Some tribal groups have been successful at integrating the mainstream concept of wilderness into their complex governmental organizations and, into existing contemporary American Indian cultures. For more detailed information pertaining to tribally managed wilderness, please refer to the State and Tribal Wilderness Management Toolbox and Manager's Resource Guide located on the Internet at www.wilderness.net. **IJW**

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