Solitude In Law and Experience

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Overview

Solitude as (not) defined in the Wilderness Act

Solitude in the legislative record

Research on visitors’ experiences of solitude

Implications

Discussion
Why focus on solitude?

Wilderness: “The environment of solitude”
“...has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation”
“Regulations and policy require the Forest Service to provide outstanding opportunities but provide no further direction. There are no definitions of key terms and no guidance regarding indicators or desired conditions. There is little or no policy that identifies when management action is needed, and no guidance on how to achieve the management objectives.” (USFS’s Wilderness Advisory Group, 2010)
The Historical Meaning of “Outstanding Opportunities for Solitude or a Primitive and Unconfined Type of Recreation” in the Wilderness Act of 1964

by JESSE M. ENGEBRETSON
and TROY E. HALL
Methods

Thematic content analysis of Congressional hearings and related documents

- 6,000 pages of documents from 18 hearings between 1957 and 1964
The emergence of “outstanding opportunities”

Arose in S. 3809 and H.R. 12951 in July, 1960
How was solitude represented?

- Senses
- Large and remote
- Natural
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Sensory escape from the city

“Americans need areas of peace and solitude away from the noisy, mechanized, and humdrum existence of the industrial conurbations” (NWPA Hearings 1964, p. 339)

“The airplane by its noise destroys for man in the canoe the intangible, almost indescribable quality of wilderness, a quality compounded by silence and solitude” (NWPA Hearings, 1957, pp. 180-181)
Sensory immersion in wilderness

“[Wilderness’s] impact is greatest when they [visitors] are absorbing in peaceful solitude, the voices of wind rustling the needles or leaves in a forest or whipping it during a storm, or listening to the symphonies composed by rivers and creeks, birds or frogs, with the added possibility of a note from a bugling elk. These are the sounds of wilderness’ aliveness” (NWPA Hearings 1962, p. 1384)
Large remote areas promote solitude

“The wilderness, by its nature, demands solitude. It requires as much remoteness from man and his works as possible. Only in comparatively large areas can a wilderness continue to maintain its wilderness character” (NWPA Hearings, 1957, p. 233)
Large remote areas promote solitude

“A crowded wilderness area quickly loses its qualities of peace and solitude”
(NWPA Hearings, 1964, p. 942)
Large remote areas promote solitude

“A crowded wilderness area quickly loses its qualities of peace and solitude” (NWPA Hearings, 1964, p. 942)

“Scenery and solitude are intrinsically separate things: the motorist is entitled to his full share of scenery, but motorways and solitude together constitute a contradiction” (NWPA Hearings 1957, p. 167)
Naturalness promotes solitude

Visitors could find “solitude and peace of mind” in the “precious, dwindling storehouse of unspoiled, untouched nature” (NWPA Hearings, 1962, p. 1306)
How was solitude represented?

- Senses
- Large and remote
- Natural
What about visitors’ experiences?

[Image: Two people canoeing on a lake with a rainbow in the background. Credit: www.wilderness.org; Alan Strakey, flickr]
Feels like wilderness

Sounds

Natural setting

Undeveloped

Remote, rugged

“...just being away from the noise, cars, and everything else that has to do with civilization...”

“...mountains all around, and ospreys, eagles...”

“...devoid of signs of human activity...”

“...after a hard day it always feels so good to take off your pack...”
Feels like wilderness

"...when you have people around you, when you’re out on the lake and you hear conversations... it’s not a true wilderness..."

"...the mass of people sort of tends to destroy a wilderness..."
Experience solitude feels like wilderness. Not crowded, seeing no one; few others. Natural setting is remote, rugged and undeveloped. Sounds are real wilderness experience is “not seeing people, not hearing people, or civilization… There aren’t very many places in this part of the country where you find real solitude.”
Experience solitude

Feels like wilderness

Sounds
Natural setting
Undeveloped
Remote, rugged

Seeing no one; Few others
Not crowded
Experiences sought and achieved

- Closeness to nature
- Away from crowds
- Away from the modern world
- Freedom
- Wilderness opportunities
- Remoteness
- Solitude
- Challenge

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Very Much
Not at All
“How often have you done each of the following in any Oregon or Washington wilderness?”

- Go to other wildernesses
- Avoid impacted places
- Go earlier in season
- Visit on weekdays
- Avoid holidays
- Use less crowded trails

Percent of Respondents
Conclusions
Use & Social Impacts

People prefer to have solitude & consider solitude an important quality of wilderness.

People are aware of other visitors, & “people” are part of what detracts from feelings of “wilderness” and “solitude”.

People often avoid high use times/places when seeking solitude.
Use & Social Impacts

Crowding is infrequent and short-lived

Behavior is more important than number of encounters

More people have positive than negative encounters
Management implications

Management plans typically measure solitude with “social encounters”

This is probably one of the better proxies for solitude (though the issue of “opportunity vs. reality” still exists)

Monitoring and management could be expanded to capture the complex foundations of solitude, such as:

- Night sky
- Soundscapes
- Natural features
Thank you!

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