

ENV.B.2/SER/2008/0046r

Conference on Wilderness and Large Natural Habitat Areas¹

May 27 – 28, 2009**Prague, Czech Republic**

DOCUMENTARY MATERIAL 01

Wilderness and large natural habitat areas: definition and background

The chapter is based on a script kindly provided by Professor Wolfgang Schroeder (Center for Life Sciences, Technische Universität München, Germany), which was modified based a consultation with the European Commission and the Czech Presidency.

Importance of Practical Definitions

One of the main reasons for the absence of a coordinated strategy on wilderness and large natural habitat areas in Europe is the lack of a common working definition.

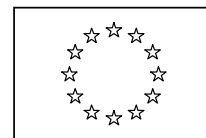
There are many different words for 'wilderness' and 'wild' and it is impossible to adequately promote, protect or restore an area if the qualities one is focusing on remain unclear, or are understood differently according to geographic location, individual perception or local culture.

Equally, if inappropriate definitions are employed, this can itself create an obstacle to achieving conservation objectives. Whilst the words 'wilderness' or 'wild' can evoke strong support in some quarters, they can lead to confusion among traditional conservationists and provoke negative reaction from landholding or farming interests whose resource has produced a well tended landscape which they do not wish to see 'reverting to scrub'.

Wildness in Europe

There are a few parts of Europe where large truly wild or 'wilderness' areas can currently be found in the sense of the IUCN Classification, referring to very substantial regions that are largely untouched by the hand of man. They occur in parts of Finland, Sweden, Norway, Ukraine and Western Russia together with bordering states; there are also elements in Central and Southern Europe. The strategy

¹ Also known as: Conference on Wild/Nearly Wild Areas in the EU



focus here is on protection of existing heritage.

By contrast smaller wild or nearly wild areas can be said to cover a range of intermediate landscapes – referring to smaller scale and often fragmented areas, where the condition of natural habitat and relevant species is either partially or substantially modified by grazing, forestry, sporting activity or general imprint of human artifact. These areas are scattered across the continent.

Any definition involves a multi-angled consideration of scale, landscape impact, prevalence of natural process, relative lack of intervention management and ability to deliver significant ecological services (most notably in addressing climate change) as well as host a range of wild land related recreational and social activities. It is further determined by subjective opinion: the spirit of wild land that enables solitude, sense of wholeness, belonging, healing, awareness and self-development.

In this latter context, there is also the concept of “urban and neo-urban wildness” where issues of personal perception and values play as much of a role as geography.

Finally, there is the issue of zonation, where identification of core, buffer and transition areas – each with different types and levels of intervention - can assist in articulation of ‘wildness’ and address the issue of spatial development over time.

The Need for Practical Definition

However, it is important to remain focused on practical objectives, and not get overly enmeshed in academic debate.

Wilderness areas, as defined above, are generally large and hardly modified by human activity. Championed since 1977 by the world Wilderness Congress, international recognition of wilderness as a distinct protected area classification was greatly aided by its inclusion as a specific Category 1(b) protected area in the Framework for Protected Areas (1992), developed by the World Commission on Protected Areas: *A large area of unmodified or slightly modified land, and/or sea, retaining its natural character and influence, without permanent or significant habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural condition.*

In a protected area context, an increasing number of professionals now accept wilderness as a distinct category, requiring specialized management. For practical purposes of landscape planning and nature conservation wilderness is further operationally defined. An operational definition is a clear and understandable description of what is to be observed and measured, such that different people collecting, using and interpreting data will do so consistently.

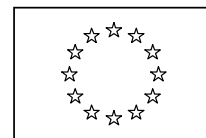
Wild land, by contrast, refers generally to areas of existing or potential natural habitat, recognizing the desirability of progressing over time through increased stages of naturalness – via restoration of habitat, wildlife and natural processes - and towards natural instead of built infrastructure; attainment of “wilderness” status is the ultimate goal in this process wherever scale, biodiversity needs and geography permit.

Wildness can thus be measured along a ‘continuum’ with wilderness at one end and marginal farmland and forestry at the other.

Why a Practical Definition?

It is important that any definition can be applied in operational circumstances:

* For development of clear policy proposals that can be uniformly applied



- * To promote wild land in the context of threats, opportunities as a form of land use
- * To enable ready identification of its status and monitoring of its condition
- * To calibrate the appropriate mix and level of intervention activity (if any)
- * To provide a context for guidelines related to management, protection, restoration

A key guideline for definitional practicality is to refer to 'generally large natural habitat areas' with wilderness or wildland predominantly employed as promotional labels.

Origins of the awareness of 'wilderness'

For most of their evolutionary timescale there was no wilderness for our ancestors. They lived as hunter – gatherers; there was only one kind of environment around them, in which they felt at home, they felt part of it. In the mind of early woman or man the idea of wilderness did not exist. Change came about roughly 10.000 years ago with the Neolithic Revolution: people began to transform some of their natural surroundings into fields and pastures for domesticated plants and animals. They created islands of civilization in a vast natural environment. Those islands were precious. In hard times nature would reclaim the works of man, would reclaim civilization. For the first time people experienced themselves as distinct from the rest of nature.

Now, with the fence around the fields the area outside became wilderness – a target for human projections: wilderness became synonym of disorderly, dark and threatening. Some wild animals were now seen as wicked and bloodthirsty. Wilderness was not only physically threatening; it was a sinister symbol of the uncontrolled wild in us.

The pioneers stepping off the boat on the American East Coast were re-experiencing the environmental situation of early farmers: with their European idea of civilization in mind they found only "hideous and desolate wilderness".

Harvard historian David Blackbourn writes about the North German Plain in 1750: "Dark and waterlogged, filled with snaking channels, half hidden by overhanging lianas and navigable only in flat-bottomed boat, these dwelling places of mosquitoes, frogs, fish, wild boar, and wolves would not only have looked, but smelled and sounded quite different from the open landscape of windmills and manicured fields familiar to the twentieth-century Germans."

Wilderness was there to be tamed, to be conquered. No wonder a negative connotation prevailed up through the Middle Ages and into the 19th century.

Wilderness appreciation

By then much of natural landscape was transformed into civilization. Wilderness was not threatening any more, wilderness itself became threatened. Now emotions and projections began to change. It changed first in the United States, where a sweeping colonisation had changed much of the land in so short a time. By 1924 the first Wilderness Area was protected (Gila Wilderness, New Mexico) and by 1964 the first Wilderness Law was signed by an American president: The US Wilderness Act.

Now wilderness became a place for inspiration, it was awesome. Wilderness recreation became a favourite pastime, and a growing awareness of its wider environmental, social and even economic benefits and their relevance to modern contemporary society has since emerged.

Editor's/Translator's Note

Whilst the above script conveys in English the meaning of appropriate key words with accuracy, it is recognized that translation into other languages and cultures must take account of the need to provide

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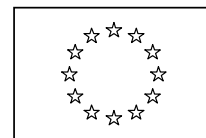
Czech Presidency
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alternatives or explanatory notes where the same words have different meanings.

These words include for example: preservation, conservation, maintenance, restoration.