

Definitions of Wilderness and Large Natural Habitat Areas

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 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.

Wild land 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.

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

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