

Focusing on wilderness character links on-the-ground wilderness conditions to the mandates of the Wilderness Act and agency policy to “preserve wilderness character,” helping to:

- Understand how stewardship decisions influence trends in wilderness character;
- Improve agency defensibility in legal questions regarding “preservation of wilderness character”;
- Establish priorities for stewardship actions that show the most promise to improve the trend in wilderness character; and
- Provide a powerful communication tool to easily convey whether or not the agency is preserving wilderness character.

What Is Wilderness Character?

The 1964 Wilderness Act doesn’t define wilderness character and the congressional committees that debated the Wilderness Act did not discuss the meaning of wilderness character (Scott 2002). The Forest Service’s national framework for monitoring wilderness character (Landres and others 2005) identified three mutually reinforcing societal ideals integral to the historical purpose of wilderness and to understanding wilderness character:

- Natural environments relatively free from modern human manipulation and impacts;
- Personal experiences in natural environments that are relatively free from the encumbrances and signs of modern society; and
- Symbolic meanings of humility, restraint, and interdependence in how individuals and society view their relationship to nature.

Wilderness character may be described as the combination of biophysical, experiential, and symbolic ideals that distinguishes wilderness from other lands. These ideals combine to form a complex and subtle set of relationships among the land, its management, its users, and the meanings people associate with wilderness. In total, these relationships and meanings are described as “wilderness character.”

Zahniser (1956) wrote that “to know the wilderness is to know a profound humility, to recognize one’s littleness, to sense dependence and interdependence, indebtedness, and responsibility.” This and other writings of Zahniser strongly reinforce the idea that, fundamentally, wilderness character is the capacity of an area to elicit humility, awaken a sense of relationship and interconnectedness with the community of life, and evoke a feeling of restraint and obligation toward nature.

Wilderness Character Is Unique for Each Wilderness

Congress determines the state of wilderness character at the time an area is designated as wilderness, so every wilderness is unique in its combination of legislative and administrative direction and social and biophysical settings. For example, the character of a wilderness close to an urban area is likely to have more visitors, air pollutants, and sights and sounds of modern civilization than the character of a wilderness that is far from