

To Spare or Share Wilderness

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Fred Pearce wrote an interesting article titled, *Sparing vs. Sharing: The Great Debate Over How to Protect Nature*, published in December 2018 at the [Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies](#). The text analyzed two options for how we may protect nature, either by *sparing* or by *sharing*.

The author inquired as to what could be the best way to save nature – whether to cordon off areas for parks and open space or to integrate conservation measures on the land that is actively used and managed. The research makes a case for each of these approaches and continues to fan a long-standing debate among scientists and conservationists.

This text also motivated the team of European Wilderness Society to apply these two alternatives to the context of European Wilderness.

The fundamental question that immediately arose at the start of our analysis was how to define the words “sparing” and “sharing” in the context of Wilderness. This would have to be our first step and we had to discover if these words could even be applied to Wilderness.

Our own inquiry revealed that both words are indeed relevant to the context of Wilderness. However, during the analysis, we found that the word *sharing* was especially complex and required a careful definition. This was because sharing in the context of Wilderness could mean both the use of natural resources as well as the use of the land in less tangible ways, such as the learning from and experiencing of Wilderness.

Sharing vs. sparing, an ongoing debate

Within conservation biology research, there is a frequent debate about how best to manage agricultural land for the purposes of nature conservation. In other words, whether to segregate agriculture and nature conservation (land sparing) or to mix nature conservation and agriculture on the same plot of land (land sharing).

From the perspective of nature conservationists, the question is what method is better for biodiversity, species, and even the general natural processes. High yield agriculture usually uses less land than more eco-friendly approaches for the same quantity of production, so researchers have been studying the tradeoffs of each approaches. For example, high yield agriculture may “spare” more land as protected areas, but then a question arises: at what environmental cost? Or, are such low yield, “shared” approaches effective means of conservation at all?

Wilderness conservationists in Europe are generally not dealing with these subjects and often only indirectly. Their priorities are usually concerned with how to support Wilderness

conservation such as how to implement non-intervention management in a larger scale than currently¹.



Figure 1 The mission of Wilderness is the protection of spontaneous natural processes, Uholka Shyroky Luh Wilderness, Ukraine (Photo credit EWS)

The mission of Wilderness conservation is not only to study what method of management is better for biodiversity or species protection but how to guarantee that land managers will not intervene in the spontaneous natural processes of the site. In practice, this means excluding attempts to implement intervention management, even if one argues that they are necessary to support biodiversity. Indeed, Wilderness conservationists can be said to be far more concerned with how to “spare” the Wild land, not “share” it.

population³ but to learn how spontaneous dynamics work, monitor the power of natural process, dynamics of species population, the self-recovering capacity of nature, and to protect something uniquely valuable.

The purpose of Wilderness² conservation is not to search for a way to combine biodiversity conservation with concerns of feeding a human

Roots of Sparing vs. Sharing

The Sparing vs. Sharing debate can largely be traced to Green Revolution founder Norman Borlaug and his 2007 paper, *Feeding a hungry world*.⁴ In the years since, a number of studies have sought to answer this question, at least for an immediate environment or species and spontaneous processes, but the chosen locales have mostly been set in the tropics and the aggregate results decidedly mixed.⁵ And so the debate continues, now across many disciplines, revealing the complexity of the issue as well as the diversity of our opinions on how nature should be protected, and, sometimes even, *why*?

Whether to share or spare nature is as much a question of environmental policy as it is of environmental ethics for it asks us why we are preserving nature in the first place. Is it because we believe in nature’s intrinsic value or because we believe solely in the ecosystem services it provides? Each of our answers are likely very nuanced and distinct to some degree from others. The debate also asks us what else we value besides biodiversity, such as the heritage of past traditional activities (pastoralism, forestry, mining, hunting and fishing, berry collection), the

¹ <https://wilderness-society.org/germany-can-reach-2-wilderness/>

² <https://wilderness-society.org/wilderness-functions/>

³ This argument is frequently used as an excuse to intervene even in areas with a sparing mandate

⁴ Borlaug, N. 2007. Feeding a hungry world. *Science* 318: 359.

⁵ Kremen, C. 2015. Reframing the land-sparing/land-sharing debate for biodiversity conservation. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 1355(1), 52-76.

aesthetics and experiential value of “wild” nature, or simply the practical benefits of nature (climate mitigation, water supply, erosion control).

However, considering only Wilderness conservation, asking these kinds of questions immediately shifts the discussion into a completely different context. Suddenly we see that all these questions only make sense from a purely human perspective, that is to say, a perspective that includes many intangible and subjective things. Nature itself has persisted and will persist beyond our human experience. It provides many important services to humanity but not always in the most accessible or best way for us, and so we are tempted to mould nature to our uses, including Wilderness areas. We may even be tempted to mould Wilderness for aesthetic or arbitrary reasons. Applying the Sparing vs Sharing debate to Wilderness conservation helps us think about our interaction with Wilderness and to help us answer questions about what best-practice Wilderness management may look like.

Ongoing Learning Process

Applying the Sparing vs. Sharing debate to Wilderness protection, however, may at first glimpse, seem to be quite inappropriate. After all, most definitions of Wilderness assume the area to be



Figure 2 Naturally rewilded forest in Kalkalpen Wilderness, Austria (Photo credit EWS)

as lacking in human influence as possible and explicitly prohibit resource extraction. Moreover, the primary objective of Wilderness preservation is usually not necessarily biodiversity conservation but rather the processes, character and *idea* of wild land. With biodiversity being but one value in a set that, by definition, also includes such intangible values as experiencing “solitude.”⁶

Managing the preservation of all these values is still tricky because Wilderness, which is often considered an anthropogenic idea rather than a quantitative subject, is usually preserved to be both appreciated by humans as well as to be

lacking in them and devoid of their habitation.

Looking at this subject from this perspective, another question arises: how much land is meant to be kept wild? In other words, how should we manage Wilderness tourism⁷, or, even, should such tourism exist? Answers to all these questions are slowly popping up due to the growing number of people experiencing Wilderness worldwide in addition to the changing needs and expectation of Wilderness visitors.⁸

Sharing – Experience in Man-Made land

⁶ <https://www.iucn.org/theme/protected-areas/about/protected-area-categories/category-ib-wilderness-area>

⁷ <https://wilderness-society.org/the-challenges-of-nature-tourism-in-wilderness/>

⁸ <https://wilderness-society.org/dealing-with-tourism-in-wilderness/>

The experiences of the previous decades confirm that tourism development plans in Man-Made land, such as the countryside in various European mountain regions (Carpathians, Pyrenees or Alps Mountains) can develop into an interesting setting for nature-based tourism destinations⁹. These areas are sometimes also used as examples or models of development for less developed regions, sometimes even as a model of sustainable land use.¹⁰

These experiences stress the need for careful planning and design in tourism destinations while aiming for eco-efficient land use. The efforts include conservation of native vegetation and landscaping practices, in addition to ensuring views of nature from an accommodation point of view. For Wilderness, accommodating human desires is on paper not compatible with the values and objectives of Wilderness conservation yet this is the question at hand and it is evident that we are nevertheless already accommodating Wilderness to humanity. In other words, despite the goal of Wilderness conservation, it is still being “shared,” and may indeed *have* to be “shared” for conservation to succeed.

Sparing - Experience in land Governed by Nature

Sparing in a context of eco-tourism is very much concerned with experiencing Wilderness. This usually means using attractive and well protected land where the main subject of exploration are spontaneous natural processes, self-restoration power of nature, dynamic of animal population, natural biodiversity. In these areas the priority of management policies is the protection of interactions among particular elements of the Wild ecosystems.

Implementation of management can be direct and extreme due to objective of these areas and if research has deemed it necessary. Land with Wilderness quality can be found in several categories of protected areas, such as Strict Nature Reserve, IUCN Category Ia and Wilderness Area, IUCN Category Ib. Sometimes also core zone of National Park, IUCN Category II and very rarely also in part of the core zones Protected Landscape/Seascape, IUCN Category V. Besides IUCN Category Ia, the majority of others have specific restrictions that are also suitable protected area categories for Wilderness tourism.

The experience of the recent years more and more frequently confirms that the visitor-management in Wilderness has a potential to offer not only a unique experience for visitors but also to motivate them to support protection of spontaneous natural processes.¹¹ So here lies a problem for Wilderness conservationists. Do managers reduce the “sparing” capacity of the Wilderness with the hope that the increased number of visitors, or their increased enjoyment, would promote more Wilderness conservation, offsetting the damage the management caused?

There are already good examples of this in action management decision across Europe (e.g. Kalkalpen Wilderness, Fulufjället Wilderness, Majella Wilderness or Central Balkan Wilderness). These areas are offering not only a unique Wilderness experience but also a model

⁹ <http://www.winktravel.com/alps-travel-guide/>

¹⁰ https://www.researchgate.net/publication/259119823_Towards_sustainable_growth_in_nature-based_tourism_destinations_Clients'_views_of_land_use_options_in_Finnish_Lapland

¹¹ <https://wilderness-society.org/natural-tourism-is-a-chance-for-nature/>, <https://wilderness-society.org/the-challenges-of-nature-tourism-in-Wilderness/?preview=true>



Figure 3 Last fragment of native forest in Majella Wilderness, Italy (Photo credit EWS)

for how to protect natural biodiversity and spontaneous natural processes. Yet, in the end, it is all a compromise.

International Experience

Looking at this question from a wider angle naturally brings even more nuances to the fore. The opportunity to experience Wilderness are well known in many countries around the world but particularly in the USA. In this country Wilderness is designated according the Wilderness Act, already since 1964.¹² The Act results in an extensive network of Wilderness areas across the country.¹³

One seeking Wilderness experiences can hike for example in a National Wildlife Refuge, but since these areas are designed exclusively for species protection, they are purposefully lacking of public trails.¹⁴ These refuges are a good example of Sparing nature that does not have to deal with all the complexities that Wilderness areas do. For Wilderness, what exactly should be shared or spared is far less simple to settle on.

Existing Wilderness areas across the world are managed quite differently from one another, with possible examples from either camp ready for study. Europe has a high number of sites that could represent mostly “sharing” approaches to Wilderness experience. Even among Europe’s larger Wilderness, this approach may be seen, such as with Soomaa Wilderness¹⁵ in Soomaa National Park, Estonia or the Majella Wilderness¹⁶, in Majella National Park, Italy. Only a limited number of European Wilderness areas have a distinctive “sparing” policy concept where access is abandoned or strictly limited, for example, the Archipelago Wilderness¹⁷ in Archipelago National Park, Finland or in Uholka-Shyroky Luh Wilderness,¹⁸ in the Carpathian Biosphere Reserve, Ukraine.

Soomaa Wilderness Example

Despite its size, Soomaa, Estonia as an example of European Wilderness, is promoted for its relative accessibility (i.e. its accommodation to Wilderness tourism). In the case of Soomaa, one need not helicopter or backpack into extreme remoteness but rather rent a canoe from one of a number of Wilderness tourism operators but nevertheless experience a fairly wild land. Another

¹² <https://www.wilderness.org/articles/article/wilderness-act#>

¹³ <https://wildernesswatch.org/the-national-wilderness-preservation-system>

¹⁴ <https://www.iucn.org/theme/protected-areas/about/protected-areas-categories/category-ia-strict-nature-reserve>

¹⁵ <https://wilderness-society.org/soomaa-wilderness-new-publication/>

¹⁶ <https://wilderness-society.org/majella-wilderness-new-publication/>

¹⁷ <https://wilderness-society.org/archipelago-wildcoast-new-publication/>

¹⁸ <https://wilderness-society.org/uholka-shyroky-ruh-wilderness-new-publications/>

option for exploring Soomaa Wilderness and its extensive peat bogs, is through the use of snowshoes in summer, which prevent soaking into the mud and other unstable surfaces.

The tourism here has also played a part in reviving the near extinct practice of operating and building traditional Estonian dugout canoes (*haabjas*).¹⁹ In the case of Soomaa, Wilderness preservation and recreation are in some degree of harmony with successful examples of both natural Wilderness heritage and cultural heritage preservation being found there. Similar examples can be found in several Wilderness areas connected under the umbrella of the European Wilderness Network.²⁰



Figure 4 Spring means high water level in Soomaa National Park. Boating inside the Soomaa forest, Estonia providing an interesting example of “sharing” approach in Wilderness. (Photo credit Soomaa NP)

Remoteness is important element of Wilderness

So, the question remains, what would truly “spared” Wilderness look like? Either by chance or design, spared Wilderness would have far more restrictive access than so-called shared Wilderness. Many people (particularly with extensive outdoors experience) think that except for maybe Svalbard, Europe has no truly naturally remote Wilderness. Elsewhere, the world is still replete with hard-to-reach²¹ places of relative wild character. Gros Morne National

Park in Newfoundland, Canada, is quite remote by European standards, save for the island’s residents. Its Wilderness is expansive and kept near-pristine by

regulations and access restrictions.²²

For example, those wishing to fully enjoy the Gros Morne Wilderness by backpacking in the backcountry must attend mandatory orientation sessions organized by park management. Yet, at the same time, the Park offers interpretation sessions and a high degree of accessibility to those with special needs (e.g. wheel chaired visitors). Yet Gros Morne’s inaccessibility is nothing compared to other areas of Canada, such as the Torngats Mountains National Park (in the northern tip of Labrador Peninsula, Canada). It is likely that something near to ‘truly spared Wilderness’ exists somewhere in Canada.

Still, in other places with even higher accessibility than Gros Morne, certain similarly wild, experiences are found through regulation. For example, one can visit the massive Grand Canyon in a number of ways, in multiple states, and through multiple protected areas. But, if one wanted to paddle the Canyon’s Colorado River (parts of which are Wilderness), they must apply through

¹⁹ Bastmeijer, K. ed., 2016. *Wilderness protection in Europe: the role of international, European and national law*. Cambridge University Press. 312.

²⁰ <http://european-wilderness.network>

²¹ Hard-to-reach (accessibility) is also part of the European Wilderness Quality Standard

²² file:///C:/Users/hlued/Downloads/GMVG2019_English_WebFinal.pdf

a lottery system designed to both protect the fragile environment down there and to sustain the splendour of the experience by limiting the number of people on the water.

Wilderness Stewardship²³

Remoteness is obviously an important aspect of Wilderness. However, Wilderness stewardship is a fundamental tool to take care of Wilderness. Best-practice Wilderness stewardship is a management tool used to achieve the objectives of Wilderness conservation. Ideally, it is a holistic, long-term approach to Wilderness management where Wilderness stewards first determine whether there is the *need* for any management measure before implementing an action plan. The main aspect of Wilderness stewardship is non-intervention management. The decision to implement non-intervention management, meaning the decision to take our hands off and let nature develop without human interference, is the essential step to shift from Wilderness management to Wilderness stewardship.

To achieve this, a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) can form the basis for determining the appropriate stewardship actions. During this process the stewardship of a Wilderness area is faced with various challenges and decisions. Examples of these include how to control invasive plant and animal species, how to coordinate partnership between different federal and state land management agencies, how to decide whether to intervene if human activities are causing the Wilderness character to change and, if so, what are the minimum tools allowed to use for intervention, and also in relation to limiting the potentially intrusive use of modern digital technologies.

Accommodation is also a concern, such as how to manage growing visitor rates, to what extent should stewards accommodate commercial uses in Wilderness. Additionally, in the age of the climate crisis, stewards must also decide between allowing natural fires versus fire suppression and sometimes even how to maintain high air and water quality in the region at large.

The key elements to successful Wilderness stewardship include consistent and long-term conservation policy, a strong partnership or network, and Wilderness stewardship expertise in forms of having a training programme for the protected area personnel and Wilderness rangers. However, no matter how well-trained or thoughtful the steward and their practices, even if their intentions are to “spare” the wilderness as much as possible, this stewardship practices could create a catch-22 situation, where the efforts to “spare” Wilderness have the side effect of reducing the *genuineness* of the Wilderness area.

²³ <https://wilderness-society.org/european-wilderness-definition/wilderness-stewardship-planning-guideline/>



Figure 5 Wilderness in Banff National Park, Canada is offering an excellent experience due to overwhelming size. (Photo credit EWS)

Wilderness Experience and Quality Standard

To properly implement and provide opportunities for public access and Wilderness experiences at all levels and of a type which will maintain the Wilderness qualities of the area for present and future generations is a key focus of Wilderness visitor plans.

Applying the sharing vs sparing debate to the experiencing of Wilderness (as a part of stewardship process) brings also the question of whether this should be an objective at

all. To spare Wilderness would mean, in the most extreme sense, to not just reallocate recreation to an ancillary objective but to even prohibit it *entirely*.

In this context is an important to mention that if the conservationist's objective is to preserve Wilderness then it is likely they would find more success if people were allowed to enjoy and value first hand these important places. One could also argue that the idea of Wilderness requires our experiencing its particular character for it to even exist. Removing one's right to public land for the purposes of an ideal would likely not go over well, legally or socially.

To simplify this subject, we can say that, in the context particularly of European Wilderness, the visitor management and visitor experience in Wilderness are critically important aspects for the future development of the European Wilderness Network and the character of European Wilderness at large.

Simultaneously, it is also important to mention here that if our baseline of Wilderness is transitioning from vast, untouched nature defined by its lacking human touch to simply often overused and overcrowded national parks then something is being lost which cannot be returned.

The Future of Wilderness Experience

The trouble with finding a suitable middle ground between these approaches is that the idea of Wilderness itself is very complex and is different so many different people and places. On the one hand, remote Wilderness with a low density of visitors is offering not only a unique opportunity to better understand the natural spontaneous processes but also a "genuine" Wilderness experience (if that can be defined).

On the other hand, many of the most remote places on earth used to be the home of indigenous peoples for countless years. These people actively lived in these places and consciously or unconsciously used and altered that land to make their life sustainable and more comfortable. This displaces many ideas of "genuine" or "true" Wilderness and makes one consider if Wilderness can ever be truly spared.

A way out of the Sparing or Sharing dilemma could be to consider two alternatives. Either to respect and use both models at once or separate them. To protect a land where natural processes are dominant and simultaneously protect the lands where still indigenous or local peoples are living,²⁴ accepting that Wilderness is, at the end of the day, a human idea. To protect a land where natural processes are dominant but with a minimal sign of previous and current indigenous or local people presence is, at the end of the day, very likely tool that could help us to pass opportunities to experience Wilderness to our children as well.



Figure 6 Exploring fragment of Wilderness in Slovensky Raj National Park is strictly controlled via permit system by park management. Slovensky Raj Wilderness, Slovakia. (Photo credit EWS)

Conclusion

The European Wilderness Society decided to implement the European Wilderness definition, based on IUCN Wilderness definition, to the European context and to distinguish differences between Sparing and Sharing. While we move forward in the development of our Wilderness strategies, policies, and management, we must remember that certain individuals and cultures view the idea of Wilderness differently, if they are familiar with it all.

The lesson learnt from the past and newly collected experiences should help us to decide on how much to Share and how much to Spare when it comes to Wilderness preservation. The European Wilderness Society has already made important steps to that direction. It has decided that we *need* Wilderness but that we must also question what Wilderness exactly is and from that questing better understand our needs and wants from nature.

Continuing this discussion will require the expertise of environmental historians, ethicists, and even philosophers. But the average visitor of Wilderness will always play the most important role in revealing what and how we value Wild nature.

Finally, it is important to mention that one must keep in mind that while the notion of perfectly untouched nature is of course now an impossibility in the Anthropocene,²⁵ the nearest we can get to that experience is becoming increasingly fragile and rare, and if the baseline shifts too far, it may be impossible to imagine in the future the Wilderness we value so much today.

²⁴ <https://www.culturalsurvival.org/publications/cultural-survival-quarterly/being-indigenous-21st-century>

²⁵ <https://cs.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antropocén>