



UNTRAMMELED BY MAN

**Wilderness, where man himself is
a member of the natural community.**

By MICHELLE REILLY



The Wilderness Act is the only law in the United States to use the word, “**untrammeled**” in its text.

Read the word again. It’s not “untrampled” and has nothing to do with trampling. Untrammeled is a seldom-used word with a powerful meaning. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines a trammel as “something impeding activity, progress, or freedom.” Untrammeled, therefore, means not confined, limited, or impeded, and as used in the Wilderness Act, puts the *wild* in wilderness. Polly Dyer, an environmentalist in the Pacific Northwest, suggested to Howard Zahniser, one of the authors involved with drafting the Wilderness Act, that he use the word to describe wilderness. Many others were opposed to the word because it wasn’t common and would confuse readers. They suggested using “undisturbed,” but Zahniser refused.

He believed that wilderness could be disturbed but also untrammeled. An untrammeled wilderness would exist under its own natural forces: free-willed and wild. >>

ChisikIsland Wilderness Area at Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge.
(PHOTO BY REBEKAH JONES/USFWS)

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Use of the word “untrammeled” in the Wilderness Act still garners criticism but for different reasons. The Wilderness Act states that wilderness is “untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” Critics suggest that this sets man apart from nature and that untrammeled wilderness refers only to pristine nature ignoring Indigenous presence on the land before European arrival. Critics also read into the word untrammeled and conflate it with pristine and pure, two words never used in the Wilderness Act. Did those involved in the Wilderness Movement mean to suggest wilderness was pure land devoid of human history of use? Although the authors’ intentions are unknown, we can do our best to uncover reasonable interpretations using the records that were left behind.

The first draft of the Wilderness Act was written in 1956, and before passage in 1964, 65 drafts were written. Many supported the idea of wilderness preservation but some groups opposed it. Over the eight years of drafting, many compromises were made, sections were rewritten, and language was changed. In an article in *Living Wilderness* in the late 1950s, Zahniser wrote:

“In the wilderness it is possible to sense most keenly our membership in the whole community of life on the Earth... We deeply need the humility to know ourselves as the dependent member of a great community of life...to know wilderness is to know a profound humility, to recognize one’s littleness, to sense dependence and interdependence, indebtedness, and responsibility.”

In 1956, at the International Union for the Protection of Nature, Sigurd Olson, another member of the Wilderness Society and co-author of drafts of the bill, quoted British author and historian G.M. Traverlyn when asked to describe his idea of wilder-



Bearce Lake in the wilderness area at Moosehorn National Wildlife Refuge provides great opportunities for hiking, kayaking, and fishing. (PHOTO BY KEITH RAMOS/USFWS)

ness, “We are literally children of the Earth and removed from her; our spirit withers and runs to various forms of insanity.”

In a testimony before the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs in 1957, Zahniser stated, “It is also characteristic of wilderness to impress its visitors with their relationship to other forms of life, and to afford those who linger an intimation of the interdependence of all life...”

These two authors seemed to believe that humans were a part of nature, not separate from it, and earlier drafts of the bill suggest the same. In a draft of the wilderness bill from 1957, wilderness was originally defined “as an area where the Earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a member of the natural community, a wanderer whose journeys are but visits and whose travels leave only trails” (emphasis added). This earlier draft of the bill emphasized that

man is very much a part of the natural environment and not separate from nature. This sentiment is contrary to critics’ interpretations that claim that wilderness sets man apart as “other.”

Criticism that untrammeled wilderness refers only to pristine nature seems equally misguided. The proposed definition of wilderness in the Wilderness Act was much stricter than previous regulations for administrative wilderness and not overly well received by industries or the USDA Forest Service. The Forest Service argued that, according to the Wilderness Act, lands previously impacted by humans in any way could no longer be considered as candidates for wilderness designation. Defining wilderness like this came to be known as the “purity definition of wilderness.” The timber industry and others invoked the notion of “pristine” wilderness to prevent commercially valuable lands from being included in the National »

An early autumn sunrise at Elk Springs Creek basks willows in the wilderness with soft warm morning light while the Centennial Mountains stand tall in the background at Red Rock Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

(PHOTO BY CORTEZ ROHR/USFWS)



Monomoy Point Light in the distance at Monomoy Wilderness. (PHOTO BY USFWS)



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Wilderness Preservation System. It is important to note that it was parties opposed to the wilderness system—not wilderness advocates—who embraced the purity definition of wilderness.

Polly Napiryuk Andrews, Cup'ik Tribal member, offered her Cup'ik perspective, “An unfortunate misunderstanding has been that the wilderness idea somehow erases Indigenous people from the landscape. It is true that pre-contact Indigenous populations and their activities were, until recent years, little understood. But the Wilderness Act’s description of Wilderness as a place ‘. . . where man is [currently] a visitor and does not remain’ does not imply that wilderness lands were ‘pristine’ or devoid of any Indigenous history or effect (Kaye, Andrews, Dimientieff, 2021).”

The intentions of the men and women involved in the early movement to protect land in its natural state as “untrammeled wilderness” seemed to be focused on protecting land for all as a counter to the industrial development trends at the time. In Section 2(a) the act states its purpose: “In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.”

Untrammeled does not mean un-peopled, pure, or pristine. And it has nothing to do with the land being trodden or untrodden. Untrammeled wilderness is wild and free.

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MICHELLE REILLY, Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center, National Wildlife Refuge System