

Why Wilderness Matters

A telepathic Conversation with a Martian Visitor

Your name is Gorp? Welcome to Earth and Sandpoint, Idaho, one of our small, rural towns. It has many of the same problems as a larger one, only on a smaller scale. Before heading out to the proposed wilderness, I'd like to show you another side of our environmental concern—the local garbage dump. We buy, consume, and discard a lot of stuff. What isn't donated and can't be reused ends up in places like this. It is either buried or burned, adding to pollution in the air and potentially contaminating the water supply. A dump is in stark contrast to the Scotchman Peak Proposed Wilderness area.

Now, Gorp, as we stand here at the foot of Scotchman Peak, enjoying its unspoiled beauty, I can share some of the history and feelings people have about wilderness. Wilderness is a difficult concept to define. It means different things to people and it isn't something we can actually hold.

When America was discovered, it was wilderness, wild and in its natural state. The discoverers had to remove trees to have land to grow food crops for both people and animals. The population grew fast. In the name of progress, wilderness was reduced dramatically. A new mindset emerged—one believing that the land was useless unless developed. So, development, mining, fishing, hunting and logging all increased. The land became scarred. Some animal and plant species actually became extinct. Outdoorsman Aldo Leopold wrote “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”

An important shift in our thinking began. Among others, writer Henry David Thoreau, naturalist John Muir, President Theodore Roosevelt, and Gifford Pinchot loved the beauty and espoused the value of the natural state of the land. Thoreau wrote nature is a “source of vigor, inspiration, and strength. It is the raw material of life.” Pinchot became the first chief of the United States Forest Service and argued that scientific management of the forests was much better than unregulated clear-cutting. In 1890 the Congress, under Roosevelt, designated our first National Park. In 1924 Leopold spearheaded the designation of our first wilderness. Many have fought and continue to fight to preserve places where animals, plants, and birds may live in their natural environs. Where roadless acres can be walked without the pristine silence being ruptured by motorized recreational vehicles.

On this planet, wilderness is being psychologically minimized and physically destroyed daily. Often only its commercial potential is valued when, instead, its total impact and benefit to man needs to be evaluated and preserved. Wilderness, as a functioning biologic community, needs to be preserved and protected so it will be spared the destructive actions of humankind.

So, Gorp, here is the abbreviated lesson: Wilderness on Earth must be cherished or life may well perish.