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Paying for Wilderness

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Had real wilderness in the U.S. finally succumbed? The news on the radio sounded like a final admission that wilderness areas were nothing more than government sponsored theme parks. Some wilderness areas were going to start charging admission. The report even hinted that many people see wilderness as a luxury that should be paid for by wilderness users. I understood how shrinking federal budgets made this new policy inevitable. I also knew this might control overcrowding. Still, I wondered would this apply to all wilderness areas? Would some people be priced out of wilderness? Would less popular wilderness areas advertise to increase revenue? Would anyone, like my children, ever again just wander unintentionally into a wilderness area?

The eternal cheapskate in me didn't want to pay for something I knew was a right, perhaps even a necessity. Why weren't wilderness areas being paid for by all the industries that were profiting from wilderness destruction? In fact maybe the government shouldn't be doing anything that costs money in wilderness areas anyway. The idea of wilderness being inexorably connected to commerce gave me a headache.

I was driving my family over the McKenzie pass in the Oregon Cascades, the radio report continued to explain how Congress had authorized entrance fees for federal lands, such as wilderness areas. My wife was from San Diego and our children were born in Tucson, but after years of living in the Arizona desert, we were visiting my "home" in the rain-forest. The road was passing the Three Sisters Wilderness area. The wet smell of the rain forest precipitated a flow of memories that must have been stowed away in the forest. Like a box of forgotten photos, the smells and dark green sunlight combined with the radio report to start a flow of thoughts that had been submerged.

Memories came floating back. I grew up and went to college in this part of Oregon. I worked for the Forest Service in this ranger district. The glacier covered peaks of the Three Sisters were my sanctuary. The mossy old forests that flanked the peaks were a place to be comfortably alone. I climbed into these peaks many times without the slightest understanding of the administrative uniqueness of wilderness. I used to head into these peaks alone for days without tents, stoves, or plans. Other times, groups of us would head to the peaks with only a few minutes of coffee shop planning. Some of my best friendships were cemented by these adventures. How different would it all have been with entrance fees?

I used to wander in the Three Sisters, often sleeping on the summits of the peaks to escape the ubiquitous mosquitoes in the meadows below. One of the best

aspects of these trips was the lack of planning, never knowing where I would go or how long I would be there. It was liberating that no one knew where I was. I would have broken the law if it had been necessary to fill out an itinerary and pay for specific days. I would have stayed too long, or gone up the wrong peak, or followed an elk herd to the wrong official campsite. I would have learned that the kind of freedom I needed was illegal.

As we drove to the crest of the pass we caught a glimpse of the North Sister's steep, intimidating snowfields. I suddenly remembered having the naive idea that wilderness was merely something the Forest Service pointed out, like a scenic view. I must have thought that wilderness areas were the remains of unsettled frontier. These places seemed too rough to be settled. The "entering wilderness" signs seemed to be posted like warnings of the end of the known world, "Caution, lions, tigers and bears."

In the past, the craggy peaks and snowfields seemed so inaccessible. I never wondered how they had escaped development. I had not yet seen how a mine can destroy an entire mountain. I had not yet learned where a stubborn logging road can be built. In my young mind, wilderness had existed as the background which surrounded civilization. Maybe I had misunderstood how time had changed the Northwest. Perhaps I thought wilderness and frontier were the same thing. I probably believed we were still carving civilization from the big Douglas-fir of the Northwest. That was what we were taught by film strips in the second grade.

Working for the forest service, I surveyed roads into roadless areas, and worked in hundreds of clear-cuts. Wilderness was something wild, we were surrounding with roads and clear-cuts so it could not escape. We didn't want it to grow and swallow up more merchantable timber. It was like an animal that had to be confined. As I grew cynical it became very clear that these sorts of wilderness areas were not only surrounded by civilization. In fact, wilderness has to serve people to exist, and it only exists because people design it into civilization like another mall or park. The Forest Service had to clean up the popular wilderness campsites and rope off areas to protect them from hikers. We were always improving the parking. Wilderness was a park that had to be tailored to the visitors.

Listening to the radio I once again felt young and naive. Wilderness access was not free because of the inalienable right of citizens to visit their national lands. Wilderness was free because the agencies lacked the legal authority to charge admission. Since the federal government was getting out of funding wilderness management, money had to come from somewhere. Phrases like "privatization," and "states rights," took on a new significance as I pictured the "Three Sisters Volcanic Amusement Park" complete with gondolas, casinos and summit espresso shops.

My wife listened patiently as I tried to explain why wilderness entrance fees

upset me. I rambled incoherently that "paying for a wilderness" is an oxymoron. It's like "wildlife management," or "military intelligence." If wilderness areas are truly wild, then managing them is absurd. It's like giving parking tickets to sleeping lions. Wilderness is a place to drop the pretense of civilization, and understand that humanity is not everything. Without the artifacts of civilization it is a lot easier to notice that we are just like all other organisms. Add entrance fees, and we are no longer residents of the natural world. We are paying guests, with the right to be entertained and the expectation of services. Wilderness becomes a purchased commodity. People are no longer at home, they are tourists separated from their own environment. I went on to conclude that the planet cannot afford people who are more alienated from nature.

My wife forced me to admit I was talking about the concept of wilderness, not any actual wilderness area. The reality is that most wilderness areas are highly managed. Fire has been controlled for years. Trail systems are built and maintained. Plant and animal species have been introduced, while others have been forced to extinction. Large predators have been mostly eliminated. Most of all, wilderness areas are too small to be "wild." They are surrounded by humanity. I admitted, the wilderness I was talking about was something else. I was talking about "wildness," and I was repulsed by the idea of paying money to maintain a human relationship with wildness.

We stopped the car as the road crossed a huge lava field, where we could see into wilderness areas on each side of the road. We carried our two little girls to the top of an old stone observation tower and pointed out the scenic view. They were unimpressed by the mile high volcanoes with blue ice spilling off purple cliffs, but for a few seconds we all looked into the mountainous hearts of Oregon's biggest wilderness areas. Then we returned to the immediate concerns of yucky diapers, stinky bathrooms, and who hit who.

Our 2 year old would not pee in the stinky outhouse. The rocks outside were a better place for that. Then she went looking for bugs. Her little sister just wanted to eat the bugs. Neither of them would wear any warm clothes in the cold mountain air. We walked down a short nature trail looking for lions, tigers and bears. My cynicism eroded as the little girls played. It is so obvious they are still a wild part of the world. Getting them back into the car seats was like wrestling anacondas. Everyone tells us they are little wildthings. Still, I wonder what paying for wilderness will mean to them. How much harder will it be for them to remember we are all wild animals.

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