



Wilderness Character Narrative



Introduction: Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve is a big place. The park stands astride all or portions of the Wrangell Mountains, the Alaska Range, and the Chugach and St. Elias mountain ranges. This vast mountain domain sits like a jewel in the crown of the North American continent. From sea to summit, the park encompasses over 20,500 square miles and rears up nine of the sixteen highest peaks on the continent. Sheer size and scale is what allows for the existence of the wilderness qualities that make Wrangell-St. Elias unique, and it is the primary theme that repeats throughout any description of its wilderness character.

With the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) in 1980, Congress established Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve to be the nation's preeminent mountain wilderness. The purpose of the park is "to maintain unimpaired the scenic beauty and quality of high mountain peaks, foothills, glacial systems, lakes, and streams, valleys, and coastal landscapes in their natural state; to protect habitat for, and populations of fish and wildlife...and to provide continued opportunities, including reasonable access for mountain climbing, mountaineering, and other wilderness recreational activities."

This vast undeveloped park contains diverse aquatic and terrestrial ecosystems, ranging from alpine to marine. It is here that the Nation preserves the largest and longest inland and tidewater glaciers on earth, and over a thousand miles of free-flowing glacial rivers in their natural state. Together with Canada's Kluane National Park and Reserve, Tatshenshini-Alsek Provincial Park, and Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve, Wrangell-St. Elias is part of a 24-million acre World Heritage Site, certainly among the largest protected areas on the planet.

At 9.6 million acres of designated wilderness within 13 million acres of national park and preserve, Wrangell-St. Elias is the largest wilderness unit in the United States and comprises over 10% of the entire National Wilderness Preservation System. Yet, within its boundaries is evidence of more than 3,000 years of cultural and historic development, revealing a range of human adaptations to changing climates, environments and economies.

Wrangell-St. Elias wilderness is an "inhabited wilderness" where local communities and traditional human activities remain integrated within the larger landscape. Within the park, continuance of living cultures is ensured by the opportunity for local people to engage in a traditional subsistence way of life.

There are five qualities that uniquely embody the wilderness character of Wrangell-St. Elias wilderness: Untrammelled, Natural, Undeveloped, Solitude, and Inhabited. Among protected areas worldwide, Wrangell-St. Elias combines both immense size and outstanding wilderness qualities to comprise a unique wilderness character that stands alone.

Untrammelled Quality: Wilderness is essentially unhindered and free from modern human actions that control or manipulate ecological systems.

Wrangell-St. Elias wilderness provides outstanding examples of untrammelled lands that defy any human ability to manipulate them. Large scale natural processes such as undisturbed fire

regimes carry out their role in the ecosystem without human interference. Fires burn unimpeded across thousands of acres of land with limited suppression efforts. Rivers flow freely with no dams, levies or flood channels to affect their routes and no bridges to span them. The glaciers feeding these rivers grind incessantly against mountain walls and wildlife travels across the landscape without human interruption.

The interaction between weather and land plays an equally important role in forming the glaciers that are such a prominent feature of Wrangell St. Elias wilderness. As air masses move inland from the Gulf of Alaska they are forced against the monstrous uplifts of the Chugach and St. Elias mountain ranges. The air rises, cools, condenses, and precipitates, much of it falling as huge amounts of snow that over millennia has fueled the growth of immense glaciers and icefields. Size expressed in acres is meaningless—instead these glaciers are often compared in size to lower-48 states. The glaciers carve deep valleys as they descend, grinding the mountains into fine silt which is then transported further by the rivers that pour from them.

The rivers provide an important habitat for salmon as they surge upstream every summer to spawn. Salmon are an important resource that cycles nutrients between the terrestrial and marine ecosystems and provide sustenance for wildlife and people. Similarly, wildlife populations are free to roam within the boundaries of the wilderness and may pass beyond the borders unhindered. No fences obstruct natural migration corridors.

There are several human actions that affect the untrammelled quality of the wilderness. While hunting, trapping, and fishing are a part of the cultural and historic fabric of the park, they require management of harvest and the need for the monitoring of fish and wildlife populations. While capturing and collaring moose and caribou add to our knowledge and increase our capability to manage for healthy populations, these management activities also detract from the untrammelled character of wilderness. While very little subsistence firewood gathering occurs in the wilderness, firewood cutting in association with permitted outfitter/guide activities does occur. This activity negatively impacts the untrammelled character.

Forces largely beyond the control of park managers threaten to erode the untrammelled quality. Predator control efforts outside the park boundary threaten to manipulate natural predator/prey systems. Large tracts of private land within the park but adjacent to wilderness are managed to suppress naturally occurring fires, potentially affecting natural processes. Climate change creates higher incidences of fire and perhaps a corresponding rate of suppressing fires in order to protect private property.

Natural Quality: Wilderness maintains ecological systems that are substantially free from the effects of modern civilization.

The scale of this wilderness defies description. Words such as “vast” and “huge” are often used. This is truly a land where natural processes dominate; to think of this place in terms of human management is trivial and somewhat arrogant. Wrangell St Elias wilderness contains mostly pristine and unimpaired natural ecosystems. Beaches, boreal forest, subarctic tundra, ice fields, rocky peaks, coastal forest and riparian zones make up some of the ecosystems

spread across the wilderness. These ecosystems are incredibly varied but all share the common feature of being well preserved within the geographic, geologic and political boundaries that serve to protect them.

Wrangell St. Elias wilderness is a naturally functioning, unfragmented and diverse series of ecosystems. Large natural obstacles such as glaciers and icefields create refugia for some natural processes to occur unhindered by human influence. Barriers of ice, powerful rivers, and towering mountain walls, all exposed to extreme winter conditions, conspire to keep human induced change at a minimum. Biological systems, weather patterns, topography, natural succession, and other natural processes combine into functioning ecosystems.

Because of these ideal conditions, Wrangell-St. Elias wilderness experiences free-roaming wildlife populations, healthy and productive fish populations, and the presence of large carnivores and other keystone species. Salmon swim upstream on their final journey to spawn and complete their life cycle. Wolves hunt moose, caribou, and other prey through the lower valleys, bears forage for roots and berries on the hillsides and migrating birds announce the coming of spring with their abundant return.

The presence of wildlife species that are considered rare or threatened in the lower 48 states is an indicator of the natural quality found here. A fresh grizzly bear track in streamside mud or a pair of trumpeter swans winging overhead leaves a visitor with a lasting memory of the wildness and naturalness of this place.

Natural cycles and relationships continue as they have for thousands of years, allowing evolutionary processes to occur unfettered by the whims and desires of modern civilization. These processes exemplify the natural quality in the Wrangell St Elias wilderness: a tremendous tract of land set aside to allow these natural relationships and processes to continue free from the effects of an ever expanding modern civilization.

Activities or processes that diminish the natural quality of wilderness do occur, though not in a manner that is noticeable to the average visitor. Climate change is already altering temperature and precipitation regimes in the region, resulting in longer growing seasons, an increase in forest insect infestations, and some glacial retreat. Predator control programs outside and adjacent to park boundaries reduce predator populations, in turn causing changes that ripple through the entire ecosystem and that we are just now beginning to understand. Resident fish populations show the evidence of sport fishing. Commercial, sport and subsistence harvest of salmon, while managed on a sustainable basis, certainly affect salmon returns in wilderness headwater streams and rivers. Sport and subsistence hunting has a direct effect on wildlife populations. These effects may be compatible with sustaining a healthy population, but they also have an impact on the natural quality. Invasive plant species have been documented at remote airstrips. Even more insidious, the presence of global pollutants is now being documented in fish samples taken from park lakes.

Undeveloped Quality: Wilderness retains its primeval character and influence, and is essentially without permanent improvements or modern human occupation.

Thousands of nameless mountains, glaciers, ridges and valleys exemplify the undeveloped quality of the Wrangell-St. Elias wilderness. Along with the lack of modern place names for many features, Wrangell-St. Elias wilderness contains very few physical developments. No modern roads or maintained campsites or trails are located within the wilderness and no bridges span the rivers. The permanent structures located here are scattered thinly across the landscape and blend into the environment rather than dominate it.

There are no permanent settlements within the wilderness boundaries of Wrangell-St. Elias. There are few informational signs, no kiosks and fewer park rangers or other NPS officials to answer questions or render aid. Because of this, the Wrangell St. Elias wilderness is unforgiving of the foolish or unprepared.

The few human “improvements” within Wrangell-St. Elias wilderness are primarily airstrips, cabins, and automated equipment used for scientific study. At the top of several mountains, largely unknown and unseen, are NPS radio repeaters, used to facilitate administrative activity. The airstrips and cabins are primitive. Some of these are no longer usable and harken back to an earlier time when the initial exploration of the land was ongoing and the park did not yet exist.

This extremely remote area is difficult for most people to access. Small aircraft are the primary form of transportation, and when they land in the wilderness they carry with them the full weight of modern industrial, techno-culture. However, once they takeoff, the drone of their engines are soon swallowed in the vast emptiness. As ironic as the use of airplanes for access into wilderness is, without these small airstrips, visitation would be very limited, difficult, impossible, or would require far more damaging technology such as Off Road Vehicles.

Besides fixed-wing aircraft, other motorized use does occur in portions of the wilderness. Off road vehicles are used to access traditional Dall sheep hunting sites in a small portion of wilderness in the Black Mountain area. This use supports subsistence hunting. Off road vehicle use has resulted in permanent scars on the landscape. To a subsistence hunter, these trails and associated impacts might represent a means of access to be able to continue to provide meat on the table. To some visitors, these trails and associated scars represent strong evidence of the presence of machines, and these impacts detract from the undeveloped character of the wilderness. Snowmachine use occurs in the wilderness, in support of traditional activities such as trapping, but also for recreational purposes. While this use does not leave permanent evidence on the landscape, snowmachine tracks and noise detract from the undeveloped character of the wilderness.

Wrangell-St. Elias wilderness does contain several historic mining areas. These sites and their remains are a testament to the will and determination of people to carve out a living within a truly wild place. The abandoned ruins of human endeavor only serve to highlight western man’s transience in this timeless landscape. It speaks to wilderness as a place where we have volunteered to exercise restraint with a storehouse of mineral resources remaining untapped just beneath the surface. This appreciation improves rather than degrades the undeveloped quality of the land.

Despite these few minor traces of human activity, the vast majority of Wrangell St. Elias wilderness shows few signs of humankind. Forests are untouched by loggers, rivers lack dams or bridges, no roads or trails traverse the tundra, and no ski lifts ascend the peaks. The Wrangell St. Elias wilderness is even free of many of the nonphysical developments found in other wilderness areas. For example, there is limited cellphone coverage or radio reception throughout the wilderness area. The Wrangell St. Elias wilderness truly epitomizes an undeveloped area and human “improvements” are soon lost in a vast, wild land.

Solitude Quality: Wilderness provides outstanding opportunities for a primitive and unconfined type of recreation.

Of what value is Solitude in an overcrowded world? Primitive experience? Unconfined recreation? Inadequate words to describe the nearly indescribable feeling one can get by stepping into the immensity of silence that is Wrangell St.-Elias wilderness. In a few days a visitor to this wilderness can begin to match the rhythms of a fiercely untamed land. Here, it is possible to sense both past and future in the now. Time speeds up or slows down. There is a very real spiritual aspect to Solitude. These perceptions of reality that Solitude can impart to visitors who come to Wrangell-St. Elias are perhaps the greatest benefit to be gained. Many visitors to the park return to their daily lives feeling spiritually renewed, and some are forever changed.

“The highlight for me, being in this mountain range, was being so far removed from any sign of civilization at all. On a day to day basis we had incredible views for miles and miles. I’ve never had an opportunity to experience that before and that was incredible. It’s gorgeous beyond description, everything we’ve seen. The mountains are just so untamed, and it seems like there’s fewer and fewer places like this.” Matt, wilderness visitor

The distance from major cities creates a buffer of remoteness that works to enforce the solitude. Because it takes expedition-like planning and logistics to get here, the few who come are rewarded with ample opportunities to find solitude. To some who visit, this can be intimidating; to others these conditions create a deep sense of humility. The fear and excitement of being able to “disappear” both literally and figuratively can provide opportunities for self-discovery unavailable in most other places. It is here where one can feel both humbled and exhilarated at one’s small place in an infinite universe.

“It was like, at first you need to fight against something, but after that you need to, to be humble, and just go with nature, and that was easier. We had the opportunity to see every kind of terrain. We had bad weather, a few sunny days...it was really wild. I mean, for me...it was something that, I won’t say that I just survived, but it was amazing...pushing yourself everyday further and further.” Tina, wilderness visitor

Accessing Wrangell St. Elias wilderness is difficult and most visitors arrive here via small aircraft. The irony of this form of transport is not lost on most people. What annoys them on the ground, is the very means for their arrival. But the size of Wrangell-St. Elias wilderness soon absorbs both the sound of aircraft, as well as one’s notion that help, resupply, companionship, and return-to-home are readily available. As the echo of the engine fades from the valley walls,

one soon realizes that one is alone. The authors of ANILCA understood that the size of Wrangell St. Elias wilderness would dwarf its motorized access; that the park is big enough to handle it. Once deposited on the ground, it is unlikely visitors will see any other humans. The ruggedness of the topography further increases the remoteness of a visitor's experience. A distance of one mile on the map may require many hours or even days to traverse, combined with sweat, stinging bugs and face slapping alders, the idea of recreation is redefined.

Primitive and unconfined recreation is certainly to be found here as wilderness enthusiasts paddle the rivers and coasts in rafts and kayaks. Backpackers employ their navigation skills, and not a little common sense, to explore where few have been. Skiers traverse glaciers and mountaineers climb, much as they always have, with muscle power, steel crampons and ice axes. Wrangell St Elias wilderness is a world class mountain climbing area containing numerous peaks that have never been climbed. Few mountaineers make the trip because the area is so remote, the storms so powerful and the chances of rescue so slim. These same qualities make it a haven for a select few, those seeking the purest experience unencumbered by crowds, self-reliant on their own skills and judgment to return them safely.

These primitive activities epitomize the wilderness experience found here. The largely unnamed peaks convey a sense of the unconfined, undefined and unexplored. It lends to visitors a strong sense of freedom and works with the Undeveloped Quality of this place to create a feeling of discovery. There is a sense of being unregulated in Wrangell-St. Elias wilderness. There are no backcountry permits, no mandatory camping sites, and few if any rangers to tell a person how to behave. Many visitors feel released from the constraints of society and the judgment of their fellows. Freed from these inhibitions, visitors can truly be who they are or who they want to be.

Some popular access "portals" and wilderness routes are showing signs of use that detract from a sense of solitude—campfire rings, trampled vegetation compacted soils, social trails, litter, and human waste. In certain areas, seasonal hunting activities can result in an influx of users and an increase in the potential for encountering sights and sounds of other parties. The sights and sounds of motorized access has the potential to detract from a primitive and unconfined experience.

One of the greatest threats to the quality of solitude may be its unwitting destruction through the use of ever advancing technology. Does it matter that some visitors navigate by GPS, and use the technologies of an advanced civilization to stay connected via satellite phone to other people half way around the globe? In times of trouble does pushing an emergency call button devalue the primitive?

As visitor use increases, access restrictions, group size limits and other regulatory efforts designed to preserve some aspects of wilderness character can degrade others. Motorized access or motorized recreation, including the constant reminder of modern aviation, can erode a sense of the primitive and can erase the feeling of solitude in a moment.

Inhabited Quality: Wilderness includes people on the land, a "working wilderness" where humans and cultures continue to live in and make a living from the landscape.

This fifth quality that defines the wilderness character of Wrangell-St. Elias wilderness is perhaps best defined as Inhabited Wilderness. At first this seems contradictory, but in the larger sweep of time it must be acknowledged that the human species evolved from and lived in wilderness for most of its existence. While there may have been areas depopulated by war, disease and colonialism, there were few truly empty places un-utilized by human beings. While very few people have lived or continue to live within the wilderness boundary itself, Wrangell-St. Elias wilderness has always been a “homeland” for Native people and a “working wilderness” for Euro-Americans who came to carve out a living in a wild land.

A subsistence way of life continues to thrive and evolve here. Traditional ways of living combine with modern forms of technology and are allowed to continue in order to meet the needs of people who depend upon the park’s wild resources for sustenance, cultural identity, and spiritual well-being. As described above, access to traditional activities has had some impact on the undeveloped and natural qualities of wilderness, but in limited areas. Cultural artifacts of both ancient and historical times are preserved or allowed to decay, but all of them are cherished for the contribution they make to the recognition that Wrangell-St. Elias wilderness is and has been inhabited.

A few hardy people seek out the area surrounding Wrangell St. Elias wilderness in order to live or witness a traditional homesteading lifestyle. They wish to raise children in a healthy and intact land. Self-reliant families seek to gather their own food through hunting and fishing as both a healthy alternative and a connection to their hunting heritage. There is a sense of wilderness as legacy, a connection between the past and future, something of what life used to be like to pass on to their children. The fact that residents of the area surrounding Wrangell St. Elias wilderness rely in part on the wilderness to sustain their lifestyles leads to a deep sense of connection and stewardship.

It is in this inhabited wilderness where area residents and visitors alike are able to project their hopes, dreams and aspirations onto a physical place. The very sight of Wrangell-St. Elias National Park and Preserve, its huge icy mountains hovering on the horizon, gives people a sense of hope. For many, Wrangell-St. Elias wilderness is iconic of all Alaska wilderness: big beyond belief, scenically stunning, and dangerous, but delicate. It is what people dream Alaska is really like: mountains and cabins, grizzlies and glaciers, trappers and gold miners.

Many are attracted to the Wrangell-St. Elias wilderness as a place that is “too big to know,” even for those who spend a lifetime living or exploring in it. Overall, there is a sense of place here that is characterized by the “heart-aching primal force of the landscape” itself. All of these human desires are a heavy burden for one place to bear, but Wrangell-St. Elias wilderness is perhaps large enough.

The biggest threats to the continuance of Wrangell St. Elias as an Inhabited Wilderness are people themselves and their hunger for the land and resources. Although the current population of the area is trending downward, it is likely that as world population grows and resources become scarce, pressure on these wildlands will increase: pressure to hunt, fish and trap, to harvest trees for homes and firewood. The Inhabited Wilderness idea only works at

low human density. There is an upper limit and, at some undefined tipping point wilderness is lost and it becomes something else. This is an all too common event throughout human history and it is what makes the qualities found in Wrangell-St. Elias wilderness rare and worth preserving.