

# A Taste of the North

## *Voices from the Wilderness about the Wilderness Character of Alaska*

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These voices from the wilderness were compiled to illustrate some of the values of wilderness in Alaska. Wilderness visitors, non-native Alaska residents, and rural, native people can all have different perceptions of wilderness character, define wilderness differently, go to wilderness for different reasons, see different things when they are there, perceive wilderness differently, and attach different importance to feelings of fear while in the wilderness, but they all find challenge in getting there, value wildlife as part of the wilderness, identify strongly with wilderness places, and find wilderness in Alaska to be unique (see Figure 1).

### Unique Alaskan Wilderness

The Brooks Range is a towering rampart against the north, the Aleutian and Alaskan Ranges a matching bulwark to the south, between them a complex of many other ranges, peaks, and valleys that are still relatively unknown and unnamed. Along its rugged, beetling coasts are fiords, living glaciers, and ice fields which remind one of an age that is past. (Sigurd Olsen, in Hedin and Holthaus 1989, p. 2)

This is a glacial mountain wilderness, for the most part it's not very hospitable ... and there just haven't been people living up here. I don't know the indigenous history, but I can't even imagine there were many indigenous people way up the passes because the glaciers are there and that's not an environment that anybody can live on permanently. (A wilderness visitor's voice)

Our wilderness here in Alaska is very different from the wilderness elsewhere, because of the use of aircraft, because of the history. An active area of



Figure 1—"In the Lower 48, if you can drive there it isn't wilderness. You have to walk. In Alaska, if you can walk there, it isn't wilderness. You have to fly" (student at the University of Alaska, Anchorage). Photo courtesy of U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

mining in 1980 all of a sudden has been declared a national park. ... All of a sudden it becomes wilderness, when in fact it always was wilderness. So the fact that there's other people in there, or there's activities that are historical, fits with the situation. (An Alaska resident's voice)

### What Is Wilderness in Alaska?

We climbed on top of the glacier and stopped for an hour at the center while a pile of rock had fallen from the mountain above. It seemed to be the end of the earth or the heart of another earth as we perched on top of this remnant of a long-vanished age. Everything we looked upon was unknown to human gaze. The nearest humans were a hundred and twenty-five miles away, and the civilization of which they constituted the very fringe ... seemed unreal, unbelievable. Our present situation seemed also unreal. ... It was the unreality of a remoteness

which made it seem as if we had landed miraculously on another planet which throughout all passage of time had been without life. (Bob Marshall, in Hedin and Holthaus 1989, p. 158)

Very rough terrain, wild. ... at first you need to fight against something, but after that you need to, to be humble, and just go with nature, and this 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 survived, but it was amazing ... pushing yourself every day further and further. (A wilderness visitor's voice)

For me it was an adventure because you never knew what was gonna be around the next corner, or if we'd be able to make it over the next pass, or what it would be like, or ... our whole goal initially was to get to the Regal Glacier, in 7 days, and it took us 12 days to get there and we turned the corner and it was totally impassible. (A wilderness visitor's voice)

I can't explain what I've seen or felt over the last six days. It makes you question yourself and learn about yourself, how far can I go, how hard can I push myself, and when I get to that end, what does it take to go on, because nobody can get you out except you. I learned a lot about myself this time. (A wilderness visitor's voice)

Freedom and the ability to get out there as an Alaskan Native ... instead of being restricted when I go out. Clean water—unpolluted—so we can get clean water and ice, that is pretty important. (A Native voice from the village of Kotzebue)

## Why They Go to Wilderness

A lot of predictions were made that Alaska would go to hell if this much precious land was taken away from the developers and the oil companies. Yet, Alaska's population has grown by fifty per cent and tourism has more than tripled. ... Tourists don't come to look at the back of the necks of others pouring off the tour ships into small villages along the coast, nor to see oil wells, nor to hear the constant noise of helicopters and snowmobiles. They come to find a different form of human pleasure and enjoyment, solitude, beauty, and sights that are not available to a Georgian or to a person from New Mexico or Maine or Texas. (Jimmy Carter, in Smith, Anderson, Kendall-Miller, and Van Tuyn 2000, p. 7)

Glaciers, volcanoes, spectacular gorges, big wide rivers, real wildlife, inaccessibility, vast territory. It gives me a greater respect for the wilderness. You

come to ... wilderness like this because you realize how feeble and insignificant you are. Four-thousand-foot cliffs, mile-wide glacial valleys, you know? (A wilderness visitor's voice)

I just love being out in the country. I also use it in a reciprocal way—like use the money I get from furs I sell to afford to go out in the country again and again—I enjoy it. (A Native voice from the village of Kotzebue)

It was pleasant to feel so removed from everything. Especially coming from New York. Just two different worlds. (A wilderness visitor's voice)

## What They See in Alaska Wilderness

My analytically inclined left brain grappled with the spectacle before me. ... At around one thousand kilometers up, the blazing began. The solar wind slammed into atmospheric gases, exciting them, energizing them, igniting them into an auroral display of ionospheric neon. Hydrogen, nitrogen and oxygen glowed red, violet and green. Or they might as easily have glowed green, blue and yellow-green respectively, depending on the collision altitude, the atmospheric temperature, the amount of energy released, and so on and so on. ... I blinked hard. ... My aesthetically inclined right brain sat up and took notice ... the lights danced. Cosmic choreography. (Jamie Bastedo 1998, p. 19)

The highlight for me, being in this mountain range, was being so far removed from any sign of civilization at all. We had incredible views for miles and miles, and after 30 days this is the first time I've seen ... a shed, or anything like that. Coming from the Lower 48 and particularly New Jersey, which is a much more populated area, there hasn't been a night in my life where I could look out into the night sky and not see the lights of a distant city, even if I were in a park, somewhere in upstate New York. Last night seeing the northern lights was an incredible experience. You really have to be out there away from civilization it seems in order to experience something like that. (A wilderness visitor's voice)

We have the best country around here, even compared to the rest of Alaska because of the great diversity of animals and landscapes—mountains, rivers, tundra, trees. (A Native voice from the village of Kotzebue)

I mean it was beautiful, just everything was huge, it's typical Alaskan scale, it's, you know, 10 times bigger than even like Montana and Yellowstone, where it's big country for the Lower 48. (A wilderness visitor's voice)

## Will You Find Wildness?

The West of which I speak is but another name for the Wild; and ... in Wildness is the preservation of the World. Every tree sends its fibres forth in search of the Wild. The cities import it at any price. Men plough and sail for it. From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind. (Henry David Thoreau 1950, p. 613)

You know, it's really feeling like you're the only one there. ... You may be the first one that's been there; you might not have been, but it feels like it. You can't tell you're not. That's kind of what wild is. (A wilderness visitor's voice)

Everything that happens out here is at a balance and it's doing it on its own, like the glacier functions on its own, the animals function on their own, the landscape functions on its own, and that's what makes this place special is we have no part in what it does. It just does it. (A wilderness visitor's voice)

It's like here you're subject to the wildness. You're subject to natural events, like if the river's too high because it's been a hot day and the meltwater is really swift like okay, so you don't get across the river that day, or if the trail, well the lack of trails, the brush is too thick, you gotta go another way, we're not in control here. (A wilderness visitor's voice)

## Wilderness Is Our Identity

But our fight is not just for the caribou. It's for the whole ecosystem of Gwich'in country, which covers northeast Alaska, the northern part of the Yukon Territory, and the McKenzie Delta. And our fight is a human rights struggle—a struggle for our rights to be Gwich'in, to be who we are, a part of this land. (Sarah James, in Lentfer and Servid 2001, p. 5)

It rejuvenates my Inupiaq spirit. Keeps my spirit alive like a vitamin for my inner strength and spirit. Reminds me of how weak and small we are compared to the powers of the land and ocean. (A Native voice from the village of Kotzebue)

My whole life revolves around it. (A Native voice from the village of Kotzebue)

I just really hope that the Park Service really tries to take the local views, the visitors' views also, but especially the local views, because I think it is unique, almost more so than the actual national park, and just remember that there are people living out here that live here for a certain reason and that the Park Service should really try to take those reasons into account and to really remember that it is a special

place and that we should try to keep it, have it so it has the same feel that it did for a long time in the past, you know change isn't necessarily bad, but I hope the Park Service doesn't change it so much that I have to change my whole lifestyle and that I have to look at the whole place in a different way than I did in the past. (An Alaska resident's voice)

It sustains all the life that is out there—from the smallest fauna to the whole chain of life that goes up from there. It's beautiful to be a part of that chain. (A Native voice from the village of Kotzebue)

## Wildlife Is an Important Aspect of Wilderness in Alaska

The herd occupied the whole length of the big muskeg flat clear to the river, which stretched for at least a mile. Now some were feeding, some even lying down, and the background chorus continued. Calves ran here and there, and we were glad to see them. Small groups split off and came back toward our camp. There were many bulls in dark summer coat, with great antlers looking black against the sunlit green muskeg. Some had black patches of new hair on their backs like saddles, light underneath; some were still in faded winter coats. Every kind and variety was here; something, in some valley west of here, had brought them together into this sixteen-hundred-strong herd of talking, grunting pilgrims—they traveled as though they had a goal and knew the way and were not stopping. (Margaret E. Murie 1997, p. 314)

I mean, on all of my backpacks, I've never seen this much wildlife. I mean, big wildlife, you know. ... Grizzly bears were the first time. The wolverine was a first time. The caribou. So, yeah, the wildlife was amazing. (A wilderness visitor's voice)

Seventy-five percent of my life depends on going out and getting caribou, rabbits, ptarmigans and hunting and trapping. It really does mean a lot to me. (A Native voice from the village of Kotzebue)

We saw bears, which of course everybody who goes back there wants to see bears, including me. And it was a mother with two yearlings and they took turns standing up on their rear paws and looking at us and then they'd pop down and one of the others would pop up. We just watched them for hours. (A wilderness visitor's voice)

## The Challenge of Getting There

People from outside write and say to friends in Alaska that they want to come stay with them and fish. "Fine," says the return letter, "but you'll have to charter. Air charter." "No," says the next letter. "We just want to

stay at your place and fish from there.” Urban Alaskans shake their heads at such foolishness and say, typically, “These people in the Lower Forty-eight, they don’t understand. (John McPhee 1979, p. 11)

But getting there is a bit more difficult, you know kind of finding the way, and then you’d run into a river or something, you’d have to backtrack and go a little bit further down and find another river that you couldn’t cross and go a little bit further down. Eventually I made it. Went down and then tried to climb Donoho, and then I had some bushwhacking problems, not a whole lot of fun, but you know, like they say, it’s part of the experience, makes you appreciate some of the alpine trips or glacier type stuff that you can do, when you have to deal with the alders and the bugs and stuff like that. Builds character. (A wilderness visitor’s voice)

I mean when you wander off through the woods and it finally gets so overgrown that you think that 25 feet a minute is the best you can do, and you just keep going, keep going. You finally get out and you sit down on the sandbar and you wait for the airplane and you go, “Ah, I did it.” Something right there [pointing to his heart], it clicks, and it makes you feel good about yourself. (A wilderness visitor’s voice)

It was a rough trip. We probably hiked 10 to 12 hours a day, a lot of it through brush, bushwhacking, no trail. I guess we probably hiked through 12 miles of brush ... but I mean brush where you’re just tearing away at it, and it’s over your head, that was the worst, but pretty country, high country. No trees, just brush and mountain and rock, a lot of rock, a lot of moraine. (A wilderness visitor’s voice)

## The Value of Fear

The experience of fear in a wild landscape, even of short duration, leads to a reorientation of mind. It can clear out the clutter of the modern scene and allow one to see life and land in a new context. ... My time in Alaska ... and on the Mogollon Rim with my father, was a coming of age. (Luna Leopold 2000, p. 6)

It’s a very beautiful place. People that don’t believe [he pauses as he tears up], people that don’t have any fear of life or have experience with making it on their own or being independent, or doing things and making for themselves have no concept of what this is about. Backpacking to me initially was a sport that you went out and you did, and I guess I thought you hiked trails where people had been, maybe like Rocky Mountain National Park. You come up here and there’s none of that available, so you realize that you’re out in the element, and you can die real quick, so you take that into consideration and what you’re doing,

where you’re going, and why you are out here. We only saw a real small part of this thing, and it’s huge, it’s huge beyond belief, so to come back and relate it, it’s difficult. ... I mean we’re so oriented to the city and having things. (A wilderness visitor’s voice)

He fell, and it was fortunate that one of the guys had put a rope on him, made him take a rope, or he’d a been gone, and that’s a hard thing to think about. You know, to be on a trip with somebody that dies. Life is being born and living, and you don’t think about the end, and you certainly don’t want to end it in a mountain stream, and when you pull that off and get him out of there, and you sit down, and you think about what you’re doing, and you make it back, wow, it’s pretty neat. (A wilderness visitor’s voice)

I guess initially I was afraid that we were gonna go out here and get eaten by a bear, so we came up here with guns and you know, protective things, and I realize at this point the only thing you need to protect yourself from is yourself, ‘cause you can get out here and if you don’t have confidence in yourself and knowing where you’re going, you could hurt yourself easy. (A wilderness visitor’s voice)

These wilderness voices are not the only voices for Alaska wilderness. In this compilation, we have failed to represent those distant people who only dream of visiting Alaska wilderness, or those who never plan to visit but take pleasure in knowing it exists. There are also outfitters and guides, pilots, dog mushers, lodge owners, miners, loggers, anglers, skiers, mountain climbers, and hunters that could tell us about their relationships with wilderness, if we only listen (see Figure 2). But, the generations of the future cannot speak to us, so it is our responsibility to try to imagine how important wilderness will be to them in their time. ❧

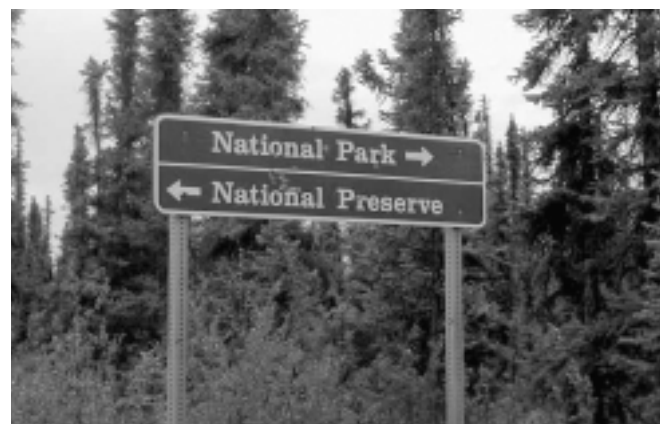


Figure 2—“In the Lower 48, the wilderness is surrounded by development. In Alaska, the development is surrounded by wilderness, and that is surrounded by wilderness” (student at the University of Alaska, Anchorage). Photo courtesy of Leopold Institute.