

# Wilderness Solitude: Beyond the Social-Spatial Perspective

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**Abstract**—The current scholarly and management approach to wilderness solitude has relied on substitute measures such as crowding and privacy to measure solitude. Lackluster findings have been only partially explained by additional social-spatial factors such as encounter norms, displacement, product shift, and rationalization. Missing from the discussion has been an exploration of the meaning of solitude and a questioning of the basic assumption of its social-spatial structure. In this paper, the concept of solitude is approached from an attitudinal perspective that emphasizes psychological detachment from society. We argue that solitude may result more from lack of management regulation and control than from low visitor use density.

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## Introduction

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Scholarly treatment of solitude in the natural resource and leisure literature has been approached from a largely ahistorical perspective. Our intellectual framework for solitude is grounded almost exclusively in the social-spatial perspective of privacy, crowding, and encounter norms. From this perspective, solitude is assumed to be either: (1) physical isolation, seclusion and withdrawal, or (2) the ability of the individual to control what, how, and to whom information about the self is communicated.

Similarly, wilderness managers and researchers faced with interpreting the “outstanding opportunities for solitude” clause in the Wilderness Act have focused on setting attributes assumed to be conducive of solitude. This approach assumes that solitude is a psychological response to social conditions experienced in the wilderness setting. If crowding is low or encounter norms are not exceeded, opportunities for solitude are presumably high.

We suggest that this approach only hints at the complex symbolic and metaphoric meaning that has historically linked solitude with wilderness. Outside of the natural resource literature, the intellectual framework for solitude is rooted in philosophical elements of the romantic and transcendental movements, which in turn were passed down from classical antiquity. Within this framework, solitude is viewed as a striving for independence and detachment from social constraints, norms, and expectations.

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As the wilderness idea became a means for exploring the relationship between nature and industrial society, so too solitude has been a powerful theme for exploring the role of the individual self in relation to society. Drawing on this tradition, we suggest an alternative definition of solitude that captures this contemporary meaning:

Solitude is *psychological detachment* from society for the purpose of cultivating the inner world of the self. It is the act of *emotionally isolating* oneself for self-discovery, self-realization, meaning, wholeness, and heightened awareness of one's deepest feelings, and impulses. It implies a morality that values the self, at least on occasion, as above the common good.

In this paper we explore the contemporary meaning of solitude in relation to wilderness. We begin by looking at social-spatial treatment of solitude that has predominated the natural resource literature. We then present a humanistic perspective of solitude and describe how our contemporary understanding of solitude is informed by this tradition. Implications of this perspective for policymaking and management are then discussed.

## A Social-Spatial Perspective of Wilderness Solitude

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Conceptualization of solitude in the natural resource literature has focused primarily on the examination of social conditions experienced in the wilderness setting, including concepts such as territoriality, personal space, crowding, social carrying capacity, social norms, encounter norms, and structure of the built environment (Patterson and Hammitt 1990; Shelby and Heberlein 1986; Shelby and Vaske 1991). A key assumption of this perspective was that the ability to achieve solitude is a function of onsite social conditions and the acceptability of these external conditions. If the conditions are unacceptable, the result is psychological distress in the form of a crowding perception and dissatisfaction, which in turn are assumed to be indicative of a lack of solitude.

In the early recreation research, it was suggested that solitude was dependent upon relatively low numbers of encounters with other visitors, and later as the lack of negative reaction to the densities encountered (in other words, “not at all crowded”; Hammitt and others 1993). Typically, these measures have been correlated against other social-spatial variables such as demographic characteristics and the resource and social conditions of the site in an attempt to identify recreation carrying capacities. However, contrary to expectations of both resource managers and researchers, inconsistent findings have been reported (Graefe and others 1984; Manning 1986; Shelby and

Heberlein 1986). Some studies report that social and psychological factors explained more of the variance in crowding than use levels while others revealed that use levels explained an equal or greater proportion of the variance in crowding as compared to user evaluations and expectations (Heberlein and Vaske 1977; Shelby 1980; Hammitt and others 1984).

In response to these inconsistencies, the focus of study shifted to encompass a normative explanation of solitude (Shelby 1981; Vaske and others 1986). Investigators have proposed two types of norms that influence wilderness solitude: social norms and encounter norms. Social norms are defined as rules of acceptability shared among members of a social group (Shelby and Heberlein 1986). A large number of studies have revealed that social norms do exist for social conditions in wilderness-type settings and include some degree of consensus (Lucas 1964; Stankey 1973, 1979; Shelby and others 1993; Whittaker and Shelby 1988). The concept of encounter norms concerns the question of whether people will be able to express a norm when asked whether the number of encounters is acceptable. Stronger consensus for encounter norms has been found among certain subgroups, with these norms being more crystallized for lower density wilderness experiences (Shelby 1981).

Despite previous generalizations about wilderness solitude from normative consensus data, recent evidence of considerable inconsistency among normative assessments has been argued by a number of researchers. Roggenbuck and others (1991) found that an overall lack of encounter norms and low consensus among norms for whitewater rafters was in contradiction to the preponderance of normative research findings and explain that underlying methodological and theoretical issues may have accounted for these results. Furthermore, Patterson and Hammitt (1990) suggest that encounter norms may not actually predict perceptions, behavior, or experience in wilderness. They found that 61 percent of the visitor sample whose encounter norms were exceeded, failed to react negatively when actual encounters exceeded personal norms. They interpret that these results reflect the notion that wilderness users are unable to express a salient conception of encounter tolerance, visual-social encounters are less relevant to overall solitude, and that, while encounter numbers may be important, predicting behavior by a hypothesized adherence to norms is a less than clear relationship.

A number of researchers have suggested that solitude is not simply the opposite of perceived crowding, but rather a multidimensional construct more closely related to privacy (Hammitt 1982; Patterson and Hammitt 1990). As an alternative to the social-spatial perspective, researchers have investigated solitude through the concept of privacy, which includes a number of dimensions that are characterized by societal detachment as discussed below (Hammitt 1982; Hammitt and Brown 1984; Hammitt and Madden 1989).

Westin (1967) defines privacy as "the claim of individuals, groups, or institutions to determine for themselves when, how, and to what extent information about them is communicated to others." For example, privacy in wilderness may involve an adjustment of one's perceptions of the experience as a contrast or reflection of social experience in daily life and a voluntary and temporary societal withdrawal. Defining the dimensions of literal solitude, intimacy, anonymity, and

reserve, Westin states that societal withdrawal may be reflected in one's privacy when engaging wilderness alone, as a small intimate group or while one is reserved among larger groups.

Adapting Westin's concept of privacy to the wilderness setting, a study by Hammitt and Brown (1984) revealed dimensions of wilderness privacy that are characterized by societal detachment including emotional release, personal autonomy, reflective thought, and limited communication. Furthermore, Hammitt and others have identified a number of cognitive benefits of wilderness privacy that focus more on introspection of the self than concerns for direct social conditions including: cognitive freedom, self-evaluation, personal autonomy, self-identity, emotional release, and reflective thought (Hammitt and Brown 1984; Hammitt 1982; Westin 1967; Altman 1975).

Beyond the notion of "literal solitude," benefits of shared-solitude have included feeling alone while sharing the experience with special others and feeling alone mentally (Marshall 1974). For example, this notion of a shared form of solitude has been described by the concept of intimacy. Lee (1977) found that intimacy with others in wilderness was more definitive of privacy than experiencing aloneness.

Recently, Hollenhorst and others (1994) set out to actually measure solitude and explore its relationship with various social-spatial and attitudinal variables. Relying on earlier work by Hammitt (1982), Hammitt and Brown (1984), and Hammitt and Madden (1989), the researchers developed a Wilderness Solitude Achievement Scale (WSAS) with five ordered levels, beginning with the physical and proceeding through the emotive, volitional, intellectual, and spiritual. Unlike the earlier work, however, the levels were used to measure the amount or degree of solitude experienced during a single wilderness outing. The hierarchical structure was confirmed using a Guttman scaling approach. No relationship was found between solitude achievement and social-spatial variables like crowding and encounter norms. Significant relationships were identified between solitude and attitudinal variables such as wilderness involvement. These findings cast further doubt on the social-spatial perspective and give tentative credence to the need for a more attitudinal approach.

## A Humanistic Perspective

Outside of the natural resource literature, the intellectual framework for solitude is rooted in philosophical elements of the romantic and transcendental movements, which in turn were passed down from classical antiquity. From the Greeks, Romans, early Christians, and Medieval writers, to the European Romantics and American Transcendentalists, solitude has been a powerful theme for exploring the tension between two forces: the idealization of the state and the individual's duty to the common good, versus the importance of the private, inner world of the individual.

To the Greeks, social solidarities and attachments were profoundly important. To be solitary (*eremos*) was the worst of all curses, and forests, deserts, open seas, and isolated islands were the *eremia* of Greek literature—dangerous and foreboding. This general revulsion of both solitude and wild nature was held by Roman, early Christian, and Medieval

writers, although a minority recognized solitude as a means of retreat from a corrupt world to find direct contact with God.

Petrarch secularized the idea of contemplative solitude, seeing it not as a means to a religious end, but as an end in itself. For Petrarch, solitude symbolized an affirmation of the individual as self-contained, intrinsically valuable apart from society. He argued that the inner world of the mind was of greater importance than a sense of community. He regarded the demands of public and familial life as activity that conflicted with solitude.

While Petrarch still recognized that God was one route to self-fulfillment, he recognized two other favorable paths: (1) self-examination and cultivation of the inner self through solitude, and (2) love and kinship. He formulates this view in the first words of *De Vita Solitaria* (trans. 1978):

I believe that a noble spirit will never find repose save in God, in whom is our end, or in himself and his private thoughts, or in some intellect united by a close sympathy with his own.

Three aspects of Petrarch's solitude distinguish him from both the Medieval perspective and the earlier classical attitude: (1) the idea that motivation could be found purely in the desires of the individual independent of external social influences, (2) the valuing of individual preference and independence above collective morality and duty to society, and (3) the absolutely secular nature of the solitude he sought (Dillon 1981). This was truly unconventional thinking for the fourteenth century. Steadfast in their view that society was the only way to personal fulfillment, Medieval writers thoroughly reject Petrarch's ideas on withdrawal from the active social life. Yet a small cult of intellectual elites repeated and perpetuated his ideas through the Elizabethan and Renaissance periods.

Metaphorically linked with solitude, wild nature in these writings is construed first negatively but eventually more positively (see Nash 1982 for more on this transformation) as that part of the world not encompassed by the dominant human culture. Varieties of this "other" generally include wild animals, dark forests, barbarians, and indeed, women (Roberts 1991). It should be pointed out that the European natural landscape was by this time largely pastoral—improved over thousands of years of agrarian activity. For the European Romantic, the result was a general resignation to the fact that even what appeared to be wild nature had largely been humanized, and the dismal proposition that the self is unavoidably socialized (Ferguson 1992).

In the New World, however, the European mind encountered what was truly vast wilderness, inspiring a radical reinterpretation of not only the wild, but the potential for the truly autonomous individual. The opportunity presented by freedom from societal constraint through voluntary isolation in wilderness has been a powerful theme in American literature. In fact Schopenhauer's statement "One is free only when one is alone" became an idea attached almost exclusively to works from or about America. Isolated from civilization, the solitary pioneers of the American wilderness assume the vitality and moral superiority of the untamed landscape surrounding them (Nash, 1982).

In North America, romanticism found philosophical expression through Transcendentalism. To the Transcendentalists, wilderness was synonymous with psychic solitude.

The passion with which they argued for wilderness can only be understood by recognizing that wilderness was in essence a metaphoric focus for a metaphysical solitude, or a spiritual state of detachment from human society in order to experience a deep connection with the natural world. (Clough 1964). While there are of course other important justifications, the fight to protect wilderness from the incremental and insidious pressures of expanding civilization can be seen at least in part as a plea for the freedom and autonomy of the individual as against the overwhelming influences of social life.

Nash (1982) and Allin (1982) have written extensively about the psychological and political transformation of the wilderness idea from a place of waste and evil to a place of beauty and goodness. Solitude underwent a similar transformation from a physical place of isolation, alienation and loneliness to psychological space in which the individual is not answerable to others. Wild nature—by definition a place that is not answerable to society—is valued both as a metaphor for the solitary mind untrammelled by society, and as a place to escape from the increasing demands of society. At the same time, wilderness is no longer simply "unimproved land" indicative of an inferior culture, but a place, maybe the only place, where one can retreat in solitude in order to achieve a true sense of self. Thus the two concepts—wilderness and solitude—become intricately linked as either in binary opposition to, or in their independence and detachment from society.

The writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau illustrate the symbolic meaning of solitude in relation to society and wilderness. For Emerson (1883), the essence of the American experience was resistance to the past and the formulation of a new idealism based on the private intuition of the self-reliant individual. Emerson was resolute in his protest of "externals": old systems, old thoughts, old institutions, old families. He looked instead to new confirmations and validations that might emerge from individual intuition and from nature's universal laws as interpreted by those intuitions. In his first book, entitled *Nature*, he asks "Why should we not also enjoy an original relation to the Universe?" Also, his essay *Self-Reliance* not only focuses on Americans being fiercely independent, but on the self as a fortified source of intuition and resolution.

Solitude became one of the most important sources of simile and metaphor for Emerson to extend these ideas. Believing in the "infinitude of the private man," Emerson's solitude embodied the inner world of self-reliance and ingenuity. Diverging from the elitist rhetoric of the romantics, Emerson's solitude was not for the rare individual, but the democratic privilege of each individual to seek their own potential. In a frequently reoccurring summons, he admonishes us in *Self-Reliance* to listen to "the voices which we hear in solitude," and to believe that "nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind."

Metaphor and analogy were the means by which Henry David Thoreau (1893) explored the inner worlds of the self. For Thoreau, foremost among these metaphors was the isolated individual facing the solitudes of the vast North American Wilderness. The solitude of the frontier contained the requisite elements to make it isomorphic to everyday experience. These included the positive elements of opportunity and hope on one hand, and loneliness, isolation, despair,

fear on the other. Thoreau found unique resolution for the solitude metaphor in characteristics of the individual: courage, self-reliance, survival against all odds, and the irrepressible human spirit. His conclusion to *Walden* (1893) is in essence a declaration of this frontier metaphor.

Be...the Lewis and Clark and Frobisher, of your own streams and oceans...explore your own higher latitudes...be a Columbus to whole new continents and worlds within you, opening new channels, not of trade, but of thought...there are continents and seas in the moral world, to which every man is an isthmus or an inlet, yet unexplored by him, but that it is easier to sail many thousand miles, than it is to explore the private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one's being alone...Explore thyself...Start now on that farthest western way.

The other unique element inherent in Thoreau's solitude is found in its social-moral dimension. It is not solipsism Thoreau seeks. In his *Solitude* treatise he writes, "I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude." He purposely distances himself from human civilization not to be alone, but in order to develop deeper relations with the "indescribable innocence and beneficence of Nature." The relationship of humans and nature was for him the supreme union towards which we should be concerned. Through solitary experience *with* nature, Thoreau anticipates Leopold's moral extension of "community" by including the nonhuman world in his definition of society. Thus, it is not aloneness, but the forging of relationship and connectedness with something of equal or even superior moral stature that he is after. Listen to these expressions from *Solitude*.

The most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object...There can be no black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature...I enjoy the friendship of the seasons...I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude. I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house, an infinite and unaccountable friendliness all at one like an atmosphere sustaining me, as made the fancied advantages of human neighborhood insignificant...Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary, and also that the nearest of blood to me and humanest was not a person nor a villager, that I thought no place could ever be strange to me again.

Yet Thoreau is no antique Stoic, defiant of all humanity. He had faith in human potential though little respect for the small extent to which this potential had been realized. Thoreau does not seek solitude to disconnect the self from communication with all forces external to the self. Rather than contraction from the external world into the self, he desires a moral expansion that allows the individual to find communion with the nonhuman world. "Shall I not have intelligence with the Earth?" he asks near the end of *Solitude*. "Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mold myself?" Like Aquinas before him, Thoreau believed that the individual and society were complementary. He simply sought a broader understanding of society that included Nature. The beautiful irony of Thoreau's solitude path is that it ultimately leads to this broadened sense of belonging and community.

## Contemporary Perspectives on Solitude

What of solitude in the twenty-first century? In *Solitude: A Return to the Self* (1988), Anthony Storr draws a fascinating psychological picture of solitude and its role in the post industrial world. Never mentioning wilderness, and making only passing reference to nature, Storr argues that modern society is preoccupied with intimate personal relationships as the "touchstone of health and happiness," and that this preoccupation is a relatively new phenomenon. Earlier generations would not have rated this focus on attachment so highly. Basic concern for survival and earning a living left little time for the subtleties of human relationships. Storr builds an anthropological argument to support this point, proposing that members of modern affluent societies are insulated from disease, poverty, hunger, and other natural hazards to an extent not fathomable by former generations. Needing to be preoccupied with something, he suggests that our present day concern for, and anxiety about, human relationships has displaced the former preoccupations with the uncertainties of the natural world. In essence, the physical environment has been replaced by an abstract environment—a "virtual world" of human relationships as the realm of most pressing concern.

Storr argues that the dominant theme in psychology, sociology, and social work is the belief that intimate personal relationships are the chief source of human happiness. Conversely, those who do not develop such relationships are neurotic, immature, or in some other way abnormal. This leads to Storr's next supposition. While he does not deny the importance of social attachments in our lives, he believes the preoccupation grossly underestimates the importance of the inner mind of the individual separate from the influences of external attachment. In particular, capacity for imagination and creative achievement hold a central place in the inner world of the mind, yet are relatively independent of external social forces. While recognizing that "Intimate attachments are a hub around which a person's life evolves," he is adamant that they are "not necessarily *the* hub."

Our culture, Storr argues, is preoccupied with the capacity of the individual to make mature relationships as the criterion of emotional maturity. Conversely, we fail to consider the capacity to be alone as an equally important criterion. He suggests that the need for solitude is organic, but that the capacity to experience it positively is a learned trait that begins in infancy. Referencing the iconoclastic work of psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott, Storr contends that building of the capacity to be alone in adult life begins with the infant's experience of being "alone in the presence of the mother." It is through this environment of secure (the mother) aloneness (the infant) that Storr and Winnicott believe the individual begins to develop an authentic sense of self based on true feelings and instinctive needs. Later, the capacity to be alone in the mother's absence must be cultivated. "It is only when the child has experienced a contented, relaxed sense of being alone with, and then without, the mother," Storr writes, "that he can be sure of being able to discover what he really needs or wants, irrespective of what others may expect or try to foist upon him." Development of a "false self," that is an inauthentic

self based upon compliance with the wishes of others, may occur in the absence of such formative experience.

Storr's notion of solitude thus becomes "the capacity to be alone" for the purpose of "becoming aware of one's deepest needs, feeling, and impulses." It is also conceptually parallel to the notion of solitude as a means of self-discovery and self-realization—previously explored by the likes of Petrarch, Aquinas, Thoreau, and Emerson—although it does not appear that Storr consciously builds his theory from this intellectual base.

Phillip Koch, in his work *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter* (1994), reiterates Storr's theme of solitude as social disengagement. He identifies three features associated with solitude: (1) physical isolation, (2) social disengagement, and (3) reflection. Thus unlike Storr, Koch explicitly recognizes the potential role of physical isolation as a catalyst for solitude. However he warns us to not place too great attention on it, arguing that while solitude may be easier to achieve in physical isolation, it is not requisite. Rather, he suggests the most promising place to look for the core experience of solitude is in the realm of social disengagement combined with contemplative reflection.

Koch goes on to identify five virtues or benefits of solitude:

1. *Freedom* from the social norms and constraints that control interpersonal life;
2. *Attunement to self* as compensation for the scattering and submersion of the self that occurs in social life;
3. *Attunement to Nature*, as opposed to our daily preoccupation with social attunement;
4. *Reflective perspective*, including introspection, recollection, and contemplative analysis; and
5. *Creativity*, or the "programmatic ordering" of the first four benefits/virtues into original expression.

Lastly, discussion of solitude in modern society should be placed in the context phenomena particularly characteristic of modern life; that of mass alienation, isolation and loneliness. Defined as a response to the absence of a particular type of relationship, loneliness results from the lack of or loss of intimate relationships and a sense of community in the individual (Bowlby 1982; Koch 1994). A vast and wide-ranging literature suggests that loneliness is an extremely common experience in contemporary society. While modernity creates the most complex and globalized social relationships between actors, it also tends paradoxically to alienate them from each other. We suggest that preoccupation with social attachment, combined with a generalized fear of alienation and loneliness, have served to effectively marginalize solitude as a legitimate form of experience in modern life. This radical mass de-emphasis on solitude has serious implications for wilderness policy and management.

## Policy and Management Implications

The 1964 Wilderness Act defines wilderness as containing "outstanding opportunities for solitude." By including this phrase, it appears that Howard Zahnizer understood that wilderness and solitude were metaphorically bound together in the American psyche as physical and mental

regions untrammelled by society. Ostensibly, the Wilderness Act counterbalances the relentless forces of "increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization" on the natural world. Yet in a deeper symbolic sense, the Wilderness Act also affirms the humanistic notion of individual will and self-determination in the face of ever greater pressure to become "socialized."

Drawing on this symbolic tradition, we have argued that solitude is *psychological detachment* from society. This detachment serves two primary functions: (1) affirmation of individual will and self-determination, and (2) cultivating the inner world of the self. As such, the wilderness solitude experience compensates for the limitations of social interaction and social institutions in the search for meaning, happiness, self-awareness, and emotional maturity.

Such a perspective has significant wilderness policy and management implications. First, we have generally assumed that a relationship existed between solitude and spatial variables such as density, encounters, and perceptions of crowding and privacy. Yet we have shown here that solitude may have little or no theoretical relationship with these variables. While managers have some control over use density, crowding, and encounters, and recognizing that management of these variables is defensible for other reasons, we probably need to look beyond such management tools in our efforts to enhance opportunities for solitude.

Secondly, while we recognize that limited encounters may help catalyze the solitude experience, there are other important factors related to social disengagement and opportunities for contemplative reflection that demand more managerial and research attention. What can we do to enhance visitor freedom, to maximize opportunities for attunement with self and nature, and to promote reflective thought and creative expression?

Thirdly, it seems that the paradox of wilderness management extends to a "paradox of solitude management." *Solitude* is a psychological condition that by definition implies freedom from social influences and constraint, yet *management* implies intervention from the very social institutions and mechanisms that solitude is supposed to be free from. Ironically, to the extent that we impose social controls on wilderness visitors, opportunities for solitude may be diminished. In our effort to provide outstanding opportunities for solitude, we may have overemphasized the impact of encounters with other visitors, while ignoring the greater threat of government control and regulation.

If we are truly interested in providing solitude benefits, we should turn our management and research gaze away from crowding and encounter norms towards our own management tendencies to impose constraints on visitor freedoms and independence. Wilderness visitors have always stood apart from the general run of American life. It is critical that we recognize and accommodate their need for independence in their personal and social lives. A management culture that resists all deviations, or even attempted deviations, from its uniformities is antithetical to solitude. It seems the great challenge we face is to find the means of respecting visitors' need for freedom and independence while protecting the ecological values of the wilderness resource.

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