

Wilderness in Alaska

Is it Exceptional?

BY GREGORY BROWN

Introduction

The common idiom that Alaska is “the last frontier” suggests that the relative remoteness and unsettled character of Alaska create a unique Alaskan identity, one that is both a “frontier” and the “last” of its kind. The frontier idiom portrays the place and people of Alaska as exceptional or different from the places and people who reside in the lower 48 states, especially in regards to human perception and interaction with the surrounding landscape.

Cuba (1987) described how the forces of migration and mobility have served to reinforce and strengthen Alaska place

identity among its residents. Symbolic images of a wild Alaska frame the expectations of migrants to Alaska with some migrants identifying themselves as different from other people (e.g., more adventurous or more independent) even prior to moving to Alaska. Once migrants arrive, they establish and perpetuate an identity based on comparative experiences with the world “outside” Alaska. The constructed Alaska image is one where the people are friendlier; more independent, economic opportunities

are greater and more challenging; and its government more accessible and immediately felt. The distinctiveness of Alaskan life is reinforced through travel to the contiguous United States where friends, family members, and even strangers expect them to display visible signs of their Alaskan experiences. Indeed, some Alaska residents begin to think of themselves as Alaskans only after they travel outside of the state. As Cuba noted, “residents of Anchorage assume a frontier mien because it is expected of them” (1987, p. 165).

But the construction of an Alaskan identity is not purely symbolic. The meaning of place is derived through everyday, local interaction and cannot be separated from its location. Accordingly, “the content of the Alaskan place identity is anchored in the particulars of place” (Cuba 1987, p. 170). In other words, it is the subjective response of Alaska residents to the place of Alaska that constructs and reinforces the image of Alaska as exceptional or different.

In his analysis of Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, Cuba (1987) wrote that Turner actually references three distinct types of frontier: (1) as a geographic territory with identifiable physical characteristics (e.g., “the margin of settlement which has a density of two or more to the square mile”), (2) as set of social conditions resulting from human interaction with the environment (e.g., “a form of society”), and (3) a subjective response to place that includes attitudes, beliefs, and values (e.g., “a state of mind”). Thus, the concept of “frontier” is an ambiguous one without reference to the definitional type of frontier. With respect to Alaska, Cuba believed that Alaskans, particularly residents of Anchorage, have adopted a frontier “state of mind” that is quite far removed from a daily routine that requires coping with primitive living conditions.

The adoption of a “frontier” state of mind stands in stark contrast to the realities of everyday life (social conditions) for the majority of Alaska residents. Historian Stephen Haycox (1999) noted that the majority of Alaskans live in what he terms a “replication corridor” consisting of a narrow strip of human habitation that mirrors urban conditions found outside Alaska. Here, life in both the large and smaller urban centers is nearly indistinguishable from life in cities and towns across the western United States. Residents can access all the amenities, conveniences, and comforts of urban life found elsewhere in America. Haycox believes Alaska’s replication corridor “manifests little that is different from the American West” despite its more remote location



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and the potential within it for an embrace of wilderness values. For Haycox, the culture where the majority of Alaska residents live does not support the Alaska exceptionality hypothesis, at least with respect to the set of “social conditions.”

The concept of “frontier” is predicated on contrasting images—civilization versus wilderness, urban versus rural life, and conformity versus individualism. Without the concept of “wilderness” there would be no “frontier.” The argument set forth here is that the concepts of wilderness and frontier are derivatives of each other and share the same basic typology and conceptual ambiguity. Like the frontier, wilderness may alternatively be conceived of as a geographic territory (e.g., an area within the National Wilderness Preservation System), as a set of social conditions (e.g., a subsistence lifestyle), or as a state of mind (e.g., a natural or pristine area). These three concepts of wilderness are described and followed by a discussion of the exceptionality argument.

Wilderness as “Exceptional” Geographic Territory

Since passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964 (Public Law 88-577), substantial additions have been made to the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) in Alaska. Most of the Alaska wilderness acreage was identified in 1980 with passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) (Public Law 96-487) that added over 56 million acres to the NWPS. Alaska now has more than 58 million acres of wilderness in 48 units located in National Wildlife Refuges, National Parks, and National Forests spread from the extreme southeast (Tongass National Forest) to the Arc-

tic Coast (Arctic National Wildlife Refuge). Over 55% of the entire NWPS acreage is located in Alaska, and Alaska wilderness has more land area as a percentage of total state land (15.4%) than any other state (Landres and Meyer 2000). The largest wilderness unit in Alaska is the Wrangell-St. Elias Wilderness at 9.7 million acres, and the smallest unit is the Hazy Islands Wilderness at 32 acres.

The geography of Alaska wilderness appears exceptional from an ecological perspective. Alaska is dominated by the polar ecosystem (Bailey 1980) with tundra and subarctic divisions defining the largest area of land. The tundra climate is characterized by very short, cool summers and long, severe winters. Polar ecosystems contain vegetation dominated by grasses, sedges, lichens, and willow shrubs. Subarctic ecosystems are shaped by a climate with great seasonal range in temperature, severe winters, and small amounts of annual precipitation concentrated in the three warm summer months. Subarctic vegetation is dominated by the boreal forest. These tundra and subarctic areas compose approximately 14.5% of the total land area in the United States (Bailey 1980). The other ecosystem division present in Alaska is the “marine” division that shares some characteristics with coastal areas in the Pacific Northwest. The marine ecoregions occupy a relatively small land area in the United States (3.7%) along the Pacific coast. These ecosystems of Alaska support abundant populations of faunal species not found elsewhere in such large concentrations including brown and black bear, caribou, and moose.

Alaska contains relatively few public roads for its size, a total of 12,686 miles of roads. Only the smaller states of Hawaii (4,257), Delaware (5,748), and Rhode Island (6,052) have fewer



Figure 1—The vast expanse of Alaskan wilderness is difficult to access and many visitors use commercial operators that provide transportation services into remote glaciers and mountains like those in Denali National Park. Photo courtesy of Paul Roderick, Talkeetna Air Taxi.

road miles, but with significantly higher road densities.

Thus, from a size and ecology perspective, the geographical territory of wilderness in Alaska is “exceptional” from that found in the lower 48 states.

Wilderness as Social Conditions

Are social conditions surrounding Alaska wilderness more primitive or wild than in the lower 48? The population of Alaska, like many western states, is urban with over half the statewide population of 627,000 living in Anchorage or the nearby Matanuska-Susitna Valley. Alaskans who live in the “replication corridor” are not self-sufficient in the frontier sense, many holding jobs in the service or government sectors of the economy. These people live ordinary lives and are accustomed to all the conveniences and nuances of

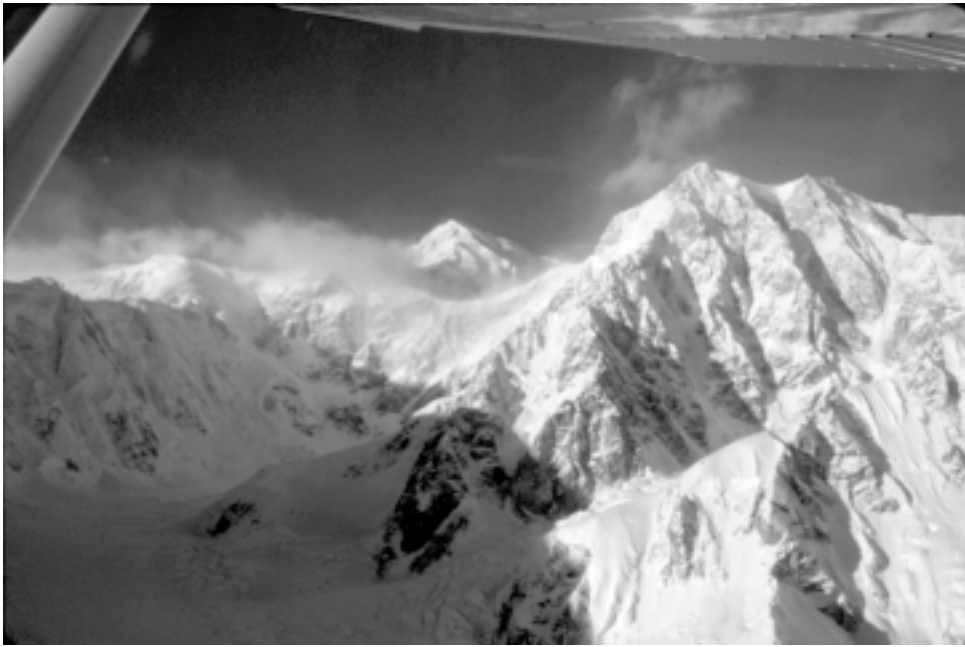


Figure 2—Many tourists to Alaskan wilderness will only visually access the wilderness from the cabin of a airplane, the deck of a cruise ship, or as a distant mountain range as seen from the few roads in Alaska. Photo by Chad Dawson.

modern, nonwilderness living that are nearly indistinguishable from cities and towns in the lower 48. The much touted “higher cost-of-living in Alaska,” a general characteristic of frontier geography, has largely faded, at least in the “replication corridor” through efficient transportation and distribution channels. As Haycox (1999) wrote, “in the human culture of the replication corridor . . . there is little to distinguish the places as Alaskan.”

The “primitive” living conditions, generally associated with a frontier and wilderness existence, are absent in the replication corridor although primitive conditions continue to exist in rural or “bush” Alaska. For example, 89 of the 192 Alaska Native villages do not have water piped or trucked to homes. But

for most Alaskans, water, waste, and health conditions are similar to those found elsewhere in the United States.

And yet, even in the area of social conditions, one could argue, perhaps unconvincingly, that small things in Alaska add up to “differences” in social conditions. Anchorage is the only large urban area in the United States where mega fauna such as moose and bears co-exist, uneasily at times, with urban residents. Anchorage is the only major city with a 500,000-acre state park (including wilderness) located within its municipal boundary. Alaska has a relatively high population (98,000) of American Indian and Alaska Natives whose unique and traditional culture continues to color the lives of Alaskan residents.

I have raised the supposition that Alaska wilderness is exceptional—its unique geographical and historical context resulting in a different subjective response to wilderness among Alaskans.

Wilderness as a State of Mind

If wilderness is a social construct as Cronon (1996) and others suggested, the Alaska wilderness exceptionality hypothesis would posit that Alaskans perceive and value wilderness differently than other U.S. residents in the lower 48. How do Alaskans perceive their wilderness landscapes compared to those outside? Ideally, one would construct a study to measure wilderness perceptions and values, sampling both Alaska and outside residents utilizing commonly recognized wilderness themes and places. Although this type of data is not currently available, a comparison of national wilderness values (Cordell et al. 1998) with landscape values from a study of the Chugach National Forest in Alaska (Brown and Reed 2000) provides a starting point for examining similarities and differences in perceived wilderness values.

Alaska residents appear to hold a more instrumental view of wilderness in Alaska (Brown 2002). Wilderness is a place to use, recreate, and explore, not a place to be left alone. Alaskans recognize the economic value of wilderness from a tourism perspective and fully expect that the landscape will be exploited for its tourism potential. Alaskans also acknowledge the extraordinary scenic beauty of the landscape and place a high value on aesthetics.

One important area of agreement between Alaska residents and those outside is the importance of wilderness to sustain life—as a source of clean air and water, and as a repository of biological diversity. These values ranked high with both Alaska residents and U.S. residents living outside Alaska.

In an analysis of the spatial location of landscape values, Alaska residents

identified proportionately more aesthetic, economic, historic, and subsistence values outside recommended wilderness areas whereas more life-sustaining, intrinsic, spiritual, and future values were located inside wilderness study areas (Brown 2002). The values inside wilderness study areas roughly correspond to values associated with indirect, intangible, or deferred human use of the landscape whereas values outside the area roughly correspond to direct, tangible, and immediate use values of the landscape.

The Case for Alaska Wilderness Exceptionality

Is Alaska wilderness exceptional compared to other wilderness in the NWPS? In support of the argument, one could point to the tangible differences between Alaskan wilderness and that found in the lower 48: (1) wilderness areas in Alaska are significantly larger and less fragmented, (2) wilderness areas are located in ecoregions not found elsewhere in the NWPS, (3) wilderness areas receive significantly more subsistence use by both Alaska Natives and rural residents, (4) wilderness areas are the destination of a large and growing "ecotourism" market, and (5) wilderness in Alaska is managed by a set of legal guidelines from ANILCA (1980) that provide a series of legal "exceptions" to wilderness management such as the construction and maintenance of cabins, the use of motorized vehicles such as snowmobiles, motorboats, and aircraft, and temporary fishing and hunting camps.

To refute the exceptionality argument, one could point to technology such as the airplane, helicopter, or snowmobile that negate size and scale differences in wilderness areas. The scale of the landscape may be larger, but technology can greatly diminish

the physical challenges required to access wilderness areas. Regarding the exceptionality of wilderness management, one can point to other wilderness areas in the NWPS that contain ANILCA-like management exceptions such as the use of airplanes in the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness in Idaho.

If the physical size, location, ecology, and management of Alaska wilderness appear exceptional, what can one say about the social construction of the wilderness concept in Alaska? Alaskans perceive themselves to be exceptional even if the social conditions (at least within the replication corridor) appear unexceptional. Alaskans hold higher instrumental values (e.g., subsistence, recreation, and economic) toward the landscape, influenced to some extent, by the concept, culture, and history of subsistence in Alaska. Even as the physical necessity of subsistence hunting and fishing diminishes in postmodern Alaska, the culture of subsistence as a surrogate for Alaska Native rights and land access increases in importance. For ru-

ral and Alaska Natives, the land is a place that provides sustenance (even if only symbolic) for survival.

The Alaska Native view and the Western concept of wilderness clearly diverge (Ongtooguk 2002). Visitors to Alaska appear disappointed to encounter Alaska Natives living in so-called wilderness areas, a situation that appears contradictory to the 1964 Wilderness Act. For Alaska Natives, the landscape is home, a land to be respected but equally important, a land to be utilized. But for Alaska urbanites and visitors to Alaska, the landscape is valued as a place to recreate and enjoy the scenic beauty rather than as a place for permanent habitation or resource exploitation. This romantic view of the landscape is more consistent with the Western "received" idea of wilderness whose ideals are embodied in the 1964 Wilderness Act (Callicott and Nelson 1998).

Thus, there is a paradox of the wilderness idea in Alaska, and it pertains to the Alaska exceptionality theme. Migrants (and visitors) to Alaska, particularly new professional migrants, are



Figure 3—The Alaskan wilderness experience includes many references to and stories of winter travel. Photo by Chad P. Dawson.

Like the frontier, wilderness may alternatively be conceived of as a geographic territory, as a set of social conditions or as a state of mind.

attracted to Alaska for the Western “received” idea of wilderness, as one of the last places where the landscape is largely pristine and empty. Over time, migrants to Alaska embrace the exceptionality of Alaska wilderness that is to acknowledge that Alaska wilderness is not, in fact, the “received” idea of wilderness as experienced in the lower 48, but rather wilderness that is a living and working wilderness. People come to Alaska as wilderness purists and evolve into wilderness pragmatists. The enormity and challenges of the Alaska landscape mollify the purist wilderness ideals of newcomers and visitors. Airplanes, helicopters, and snowmobiles become the pragmatic tools of the Alaska wilderness user and reinforce the exceptionality of Alaska wilderness in the NWPS.

I have raised the supposition that Alaska wilderness is exceptional—its unique geographical and historical context resulting in a different subjective response to wilderness among Alaskans. The data in support of the supposition is limited and would benefit from further research. Specifically,

it would be beneficial to compare the values and attitudes of Alaskans and non-Alaskans directly using the same measurement scales. It would be beneficial to apply wilderness “purism” scales to selected resident populations in Alaska to compare with Alaska visitor ratings. And it would be beneficial to closely examine ethnic groups that have migrated to Alaska to determine if their ethnic culture bonds have been modified or become “exceptional” in Alaska. ❧

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tected areas. In this way, diverse experience opportunities might be preserved. However, such regional planning requires site-specific information from other areas as well. It is

our hope that additional research efforts of this kind will help further understanding of wilderness experiences and also preserve the value of a diverse wilderness system. ❧

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