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Protected Places: Comparing Valuations of Public Lands in U.S. Conservation Legislation

by

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Honors Thesis

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Abstract

Across American history, the federal government has chosen to protect over 600 million acres, nearly a quarter of the country's total land acreage, as public lands. This paper considers the process of valuation — where institutions organize competing value frameworks to determine worth — and how new cultural formations prompt a new process of valuation. Through a comparative study of the *Wilderness Act* of 1964 and the *Great American Outdoors Act* of 2020, this paper analyzes which values justify the protection of public lands. I find that public lands are valued in their use for humans, which stems from their designation as protected. In the *Wilderness Act*, public lands were worth protecting because of their separation from the industrial landscape; in the *Great American Outdoors Act*, this worth came from the land's integration into the post-industrial landscape. These acts represent two starkly different cultural formations, and, therefore, two distinct justifications for the worth of public lands.

Introduction

In the U.S., public lands make up about a quarter of the total land acreage, spanning 600 million acres across the country. Throughout U.S. history, these lands have continued to be protected by all levels of government because we, as an American society, have deemed them as worthy of conservation. There is something about vast, undisturbed forests, roaring rivers, and never-ending canyons that we find worthy of permanent protection. If these places are worth something to us, then what follows is that they must hold value. The government continues to protect these places with the force of law because they have specific characteristics that make this nature worth protecting over other nature.

In order to understand why we have protected millions of acres of public lands, I analyze the *Wilderness Act* of 1964 and the *Great American Outdoors Act* of 2020. The *Wilderness Act* protected, and continues to protect, land as pristine wilderness. The *Great American Outdoors Act* provided funding to critical conservation efforts to ensure the longevity of our public lands. Both acts are considered by supporters to be the biggest conservation bills of their respective generations. This similarity in discourse is why they are key cases for comparison — each shows what was considered most valued and important about public lands at a specific point in U.S. history. I articulate how competing value frameworks have been organized differently over time to determine why public lands were worthy of protection in 1964 and 2020.

Through a comparative analysis of these two acts, I aim to understand why we have deemed these lands valuable. I examine how a shift in the cultural formation of public lands results in a new process of valuation which organizes specific value frameworks in order to justify the land's protection and derive the worth of public lands in a particular context. I explore how the value in the human use of these lands can override the organizational process of valuation. This human need is not synonymous with exploitation or disregard for nature, but I argue that public lands hold no value beyond their use to humans. In the *Wilderness Act*, the cultural formation of public lands saw this land as worthy of protection because of its separation from the American industrial landscape; in the *Great American Outdoors Act*, this worth was in the land's integration into the post-industrial landscape. While the categories through which these lands are valued have stayed constant over time, the cultural formation of public lands has changed, and, therefore, so has the rationale behind their worth.

In this paper, I aim to answer the following research questions: what values justify the protection of public lands in the U.S.? Given the vastly different contextual factors and unique

cultural formations of public lands in the 1960s compared to the present, what are the implications of these values for the continued protection of public lands? How do the *Wilderness Act* and *Great American Outdoors Act* reflect these values and illustrate the worth of public lands in 1964 and 2020? I will first present a review of the sociological literature on environmental values and valuation and how these ideas apply to public lands. Second, I will give a brief overview of the methods and defend my analytical decisions. Third, I will describe the larger context for the *Wilderness Act* and *Great American Outdoors Act* in order to frame my value analysis. Fourth, I will analyze the two acts. I begin with the *Wilderness Act* and follow with the *Great American Outdoors Act*. I conclude with some final considerations, limitations of this research, and possibilities for future research.

Literature Review

In this literature review, I consider how the value of nature, and public lands specifically, is not simply the result of static individual value categories. Instead, the worth and value of the natural world are developed through the process of valuation, which, when constrained in context, results in an answer to the question of “what is it worth?” Drawing on ideas from David Stark and Marion Fourcade, I connect the relationship between the process of valuation and the cultural formation of nature and explore how a new process of valuation is the direct result of a new cultural formation. I examine how organizations and institutions undertake the process of valuation practically, and how Congress, especially, reconciles competing value frameworks in an attempt to codify worth into law. However, while valuation always organizes competing value frameworks, there can be misalignment between valuation and value. Applying this process to

public lands, I explain how and why public lands are considered worthy and how this justification of worth shifts with changes in the cultural formation.

Values

Environmental Values. Sociological value research began as a functionalist theory in the 20th century, which assumed that values were present in everyday situations and that common values would distill onto all members of society (Spates 1983; Parsons and Shils 1951). In the late 20th century the discourse shifted to an empirical tradition, where sociologists argued that values directly influenced actions and were ingrained into the individual means of achieving an action (Spates 1983; Rokeach 1973; Schwartz and Bilsky 1987; Hitlin and Piliavin 2004; Miles 2015). From this empirical tradition, which focused on the individual's relationship to values, researchers began to construct categories of environmental values individuals could hold (Schwartz 1992; Stern et al. 1999). Schwartz (1992) was one of the first sociologists to conceptualize environmental values, including them in his list of universal human value motivations. In more recent discourse, three categories of environmental values emerged as dominant — biospheric, egoistic, and altruistic (Stern et al. 1999). They are considered to be the most influential values that underlie individual beliefs and attitudes about nature (Stern et al. 1999). Altruistic values indicate care for people beyond oneself; egoistic emphasize private benefits; biospheric center concern for ecosystems and nonhuman species (Stern et al. 1999). Van Riper et al. (2014) argue for the inclusion of a fourth category: hedonic values, which derive from short-term pleasure (such as recreation). While these four categories are a starting point for an analysis of environmental values by acknowledging motivational categories, this type of analysis neglects to consider the processes that create these categories in the first place, and the

role of larger social forces in shaping the reasons that individuals value nature. The value of nature cannot be ascertained solely through understanding what individuals value — there are dynamic processes and cultural understandings involved that must be recognized.

Valuation

What is valuation? While these categories help create an analytical framework, and I draw on them to create my value categories, it is the process of valuation that tells us how organizations actually value. Valuation is the process that an organization undertakes in order to figure out why something is valued and what that something is worth (Stark 2009). Valuation, which is distinct from the static category of a “value,” assesses competing value frameworks or incompatible evaluation measurements to determine worth (Stark 2009:8). It is the organization of competing value frameworks in order to discern which values matter most in a specific context (Fourcade 2011). For U.S. public lands, their protections derive from their worth, which is contingent on the valuation process.

The ultimate goal of valuation is to determine the worth of an entity. Whenever valuation introduces new competing value frameworks, the worth of an entity shifts. The process of valuation, then, occurs simultaneously with a process of figuring out worth (Stark 2009:7). When actors are presented with multiple values, they must determine which “order of worth is salient for the object in question” (Barman 2016:8). Stark (2000) underlines the importance of valuation because it answers this question of worth. He claims that the question of “what are you worth?” results directly from the relationship between values and valuation and becomes “unambiguous when constrained by context” (Stark 2000:16; Stark 2009). Valuation is about sifting through competing value frameworks and defending worth through the chosen values. Fourcade (2011)

asserts that this puzzle of justifying worth is how competing value frameworks (of nature) become a concrete answer to Stark's (2000; 2009) question of "what are you worth?" Valuation must be recognized as an organization searches for what is valuable and worthy in order to understand the rationale behind the hierarchical order of value categories which determine worth.

When does valuation occur? Valuation occurs whenever a new cultural formation is developed, and a new cultural formation results in a new justification for the worth of an entity, necessitating a re-evaluation of value (Fourcade 2011). Valuation itself incorporates structures of worth to reach a cultural formation that collectively represents how we view an entity such as nature (Fourcade 2011:1769). The cultural formation of an entity is critical in developing worth and value because it helps make certain the most valued value frameworks will rise to importance (Fourcade 2011:1731). Because valuation is not linear — organizations do not easily sift through information and automatically select what counts — they must take into account how the valued thing is collectively understood (Stark 2009; Fourcade 2011). The process must be studied in specific "cultural settings" because the worth of an entity becomes tangible only when constrained by context (Dewey 1939:64; Stark 2009:32). Fourcade writes, "It is also indispensable to look at the valuation of intangible goods as being dependent on the cultural meaning of the goods to be evaluated themselves" (2011:1735). Valuation does not occur outside of contextual factors— because it relies on a cultural formation, it is deeply intertwined with the processes of social construction. Nature, and public lands, are a human construction, and so "the way we describe and understand [the natural] world is so entangled with our own values and cultural assumptions that the two can never be fully separated" (Cronon 1995:25).

It is the role of organizations to funnel these collective representations into concrete valuation processes which decide what is most valuable (Fourcade 2011). An organization's role

is to elicit the value of things where the reasons for their valuation are not necessarily clear (Fourcade 2011). Fourcade (2011) asserts that to understand the economic value of nature, we must look beyond individual desires to the social organizations that frame our perceptions of the environment. Congress frames our perceptions, which is why its process of valuation is so critical; it is the “collective representation” (Fourcade 2011:1731). The cultural formation and valuation process are intensely connected — how and why we value is deeply affected by how something is culturally constructed. Looking to nature specifically, organizations must reckon with the “tension between the ‘useful’ and the ‘beautiful, the ‘commercial’ and the ‘inalienable’” — all parts of the cultural formation” (Fourcade 2011:1737). National parks, as an example, are simultaneously places of outdoor recreation, resource protection, and sites for scientific research. Their worth is dependent on which of these value frameworks becomes most important through valuation. The worth and value of an entity, then, is the result of a new cultural formation, which compels a new process of valuation and a reorganization of competing value hierarchies.

Do values and valuations line up? In valuation, the goal is to organize competing value frameworks to determine the new worth of an entity. However, there can be cases where valuation and values do not line up, where the process of valuation does not result in an accurate depiction of worth and value. Organizations try to arrange competing value frameworks but can struggle to in the face of competing definitions of worth. The valuation process does not always line up with the answer to the question of “what is it worth?” (Stark 2000; 2009). Fourcade (2011) claims that the cultural formation of nature ensures that the most valued values become the justification for worth, but, in particular contexts, these most valued values instead become only lofty goals. In the case of Congress, the final representation of worth and value is in the legislation produced, yet, oftentimes, the value hierarchy described in debates and by members

of Congress is not what the law reflects. Congress, as a “collective representation,” is still influenced by external social and political contexts, and so, while a consensus will be reached in the form of legislation, this does not mean that everyone will completely agree on the final valuation (Fourcade 2011). Valuation, then, does not always ensure that what is most valued rises to the top of the final hierarchy.

For Stark (2009), a challenge of valuation is what he terms “organizing dissonance.” In Congress, there are hundreds of members with different political affiliations, beliefs, moral codes, and constituencies, and the organization is tasked with attempting to reconcile these differences to create sound legal code. Dissonance is the clash of competing value frameworks as organizations, such as Congress, undertake the search for what is valuable (Stark 2009:27). Through the organization of dissonance, Stark (2009) argues that the true value and worth emerge because this clash ensures that the most important values rise to prominence. If dissonance is not successfully organized and organizations are unable to recognize a consistent value hierarchy, then valuation may not result in a current assessment of worth. As stated above, sometimes, in legislation, the values expressed most passionately by individual members of Congress are not present in the legal document. This is not a complete failure of valuation, but a case where external contextual factors limited the ability for the most intimately held values to become systemized. There are also cases explored in this paper where dissonance is organized — Congress agrees upon which values are most important — and even then they fail to show up as codified legal doctrine. Clearly, if Congress is able to pass a law, then there is a certain degree of coherence among members, even if a complete, collective consensus is not reached. Yet, we are still left with this disconnect where the organization of competing value frameworks (the

valuation process) may result in the worth of an entity that does not completely line up with the process itself.

Public Lands Valuation. In the case of public lands, valuation occurs in order for Congress to decide which values are most important in protecting public lands. Debate is less about whether or not public lands are worthy of protection, and more about how far this protection goes. This protection, and, therefore, the valuation of public lands begins with the idea of “weak anthropocentrism.” Bryan Norton (1984) argues for this idea, which simultaneously emphasizes the value of human experiences in nature and the existence of harmony between humans and nature as bases for value formation. Norton defines weak anthropocentrism as a non-exploitative anthropocentric value that does not recognize the intrinsic value of nature but still sees value in it (1987:12). Effectively, weak anthropocentrism identifies that the value of nature is not always direct and tangible — there are moral and aesthetic values that are still consumptive but not exploitive (Norton 1987). From weak anthropocentrism, subsequent, more specific, value categories emerge as specific reasons for protection.

The valuation of public lands, however, does not begin and end with weak anthropocentrism. As the cultural formation of public lands shifts, a new process of valuation must occur to understand the collective worth of these lands. Weak anthropocentrism frames the value of public lands, but it manifests differently as a result of different cultural formations. Fourcade (2011) explains that the valuation of nature is so powerful because it does not stand outside of society but is instead a process deeply embedded into our collective representations. Still, across the history of public lands in the U.S., Congress often does not live up to its promises of the worth and value of these places. Throughout the valuation process, members of Congress speak about lofty goals of conservation and land protection but always agree to

emphasize the interests of humans and weak anthropocentrism in the legal documentation.

Understanding the valuation of public lands means understanding how Congress must, over and over, decide which value frameworks are most valuable as it secures the worth of public lands as protected places under the law.

Methods

The main sources of data I will be drawing from in this analysis are the texts of the *Wilderness Act* and *Great American Outdoors Act*, and the Congressional Record where each act is discussed. While each act focuses on different aspects of public lands protection, they share overarching rhetoric of conservation and land preservation. I analyze the text of each act for the values most present and to understand how the discussions on the Congressional floor translated into legislation. Beyond the text of each act, I draw most of my analysis from the Congressional Record. In the case of the *Wilderness Act*, I also examine different versions of the bill that were available. I found the Congressional Record to be most important for my value analysis because it articulates the thinking of the individuals who wrote each bill, the cultural ideas most notable about public lands, what debates were most prominent, and how personal values were applied to the larger ideas present. The Congressional Record gives insight into the process of valuation through its detailed record of the thoughts of members of Congress.

I began by reading the acts and Congressional Record for statements that indicate any value of nature, and noted in what ways, and how often, this value was expressed. Over time, I developed a systematic set of categories. I coded each excerpt using that set of value categories, which provided the basis for my analysis and comparison. The categories are general use for humans (weak anthropocentrism), recreational, spiritual, concern for future generations, and

economic. I used excerpts from the acts and the Congressional Record that expressed each of these values to develop my analysis and conclusions.

Context

Before examining individual values, I consider the larger contextual factors of the *Wilderness Act* and the *Great American Outdoors Act*. There was over a half-century of history that occurred between their passing — each act exists in entirely different social, political, and environmental circumstances. They contain completely different cultural formations of public lands, which results in two distinct processes of valuation and determining of worth. These larger contextual factors are an important preface to my analysis because they illustrate the conditions in which valuation was taking place.

Historical Context

The *Wilderness Act* of 1964 created the National Wilderness Preservation System, which systematically protects millions of acres of wilderness across the U.S. Over the last sixty years, this system has continually created new wilderness designations, which is the strictest public lands designation in the U.S. The architect of this Act was Howard Zahniser, co-founder of the Wilderness Society. Zahniser saw the *Wilderness Act* as Congress' chance to ensure wilderness would be preserved and that this quality of land would not be lost (Harvey 2014:165). The Act was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson during a period in American history when outdoor recreation and ensuring a clean environment for the American public were of chief concern for the government (Turner 2012). At this time, most Americans held pride in the government, and the Act appealed widely to American values on nature. (Turner 2012). It had

broad bipartisan support, passing the House 374-1 and the Senate 73-12, and was a symbol of Congress' strong, bipartisan commitment to conservation.

The *Great American Outdoors Act* of 2020 was signed into law on August 4, 2020 by President Donald Trump. The Act has two principal purposes. First, the Act created the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund to address the massive maintenance backlog in the national parks system (*Great American Outdoors Act of 2020*, Public Law 116-152). Second, the Act designated permanent funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) (*Great American Outdoors Act of 2020*, Public Law 116-152). The Act faced massive obstacles to its passage: one of the most conservative presidents in U.S. history, a worsening global pandemic, a Republican majority in the Senate and Democratic majority in the House, and two parties that could not be further apart ideologically on environmental issues (Brenan and Saad 2018; Pew Research Center 2018). Its passing was a perfect storm of factors that few environmentalists believed to be possible — Americans were yearning to get outside as a result of COVID restrictions and several tough reelection battles created an opportunity for the parties to reach an agreement on conservation priorities (Harsha 2020). When the *Great American Outdoors Act* passed, it was praised for the real benefits it provides to the American people — from economic to recreational — and its power to further integrate these lands and make them even more accessible to the public.

The Biggest Conservation Acts of Two Generations

The *Wilderness Act* and *Great American Outdoors Act* are both considered to be two of the largest conservation bills of their generations. The *Wilderness Act* is solely concerned with wilderness lands and how to ensure their protection, while the *Great American Outdoors Act*

addresses the restoration of public lands more generally. While the *Great American Outdoors Act* makes no mention of wilderness, the two acts both directly address conservation and are considered to be once-in-a-generation conservation efforts. The *New York Times* called the *Great American Outdoors Act* a “Landmark Land Conservation Bill” and multiple *Associated Press* articles wrote that the Act is the most significant piece of conservation legislation in half a century (Karni 2020; Daly 2020; Superville 2020). Organizations such as the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society also applauded the passage of the Act, citing its importance for ensuring that our public lands stay protected and preserved (Karlson 2020; Wilderness Society 2020). The *Wilderness Act* was a turning point in American environmentalism, as it is one of the first bills in a wave of environmental reform that came in the 1970s (Turner 2012). The Wilderness Society and Zahniser alike consider it one of the U.S.’ biggest conservation achievements (Wilderness Society 2020; Harvey 2014). Still, while the rhetoric used to describe the *Wilderness Act* and *Great American Outdoors Act* hails them as the saviors of U.S. public lands, they are not. Over and over, these acts show how the primary justification for their worth was not in their inherent value as nature, no matter how many times this motivation was used. Public lands were protected because we decided, as a country, that their use was in their protection — this protection just looked different as the cultural formation of public lands shifted. Conservation, in these two acts, is not for the land, it’s for the people.

Wilderness Act of 1964

I split my analysis of the *Wilderness Act* into two sections. First, I look closely at how the Act defines wilderness, and how this definition created the foundation for the values on which wilderness was built. Second, I analyze the values present both in the text of the bill and the

Congressional Record. These values are: a general use for humans, recreational, spiritual, and concern for future generations. I argue that, in the 1960s, the cultural formation of public lands saw the worth of wilderness in its purpose as an escape for Americans to experience untouched nature. Wilderness was valued for its separation from imprints of the dirty urbanized, industrial American landscape (Block 1990). Members of Congress tried to emphasize that wilderness was worth protecting because of its inherent need to exist as untrammeled, but, ultimately, this worth could not become disconnected from wilderness' use to Americans as an opportunity to escape into nature.

Definition of Wilderness

Across the eight-year fight for the *Wilderness Act*, the legal definition of wilderness directly reflected the cultural formation of public lands, ensuring that this definition defined wilderness as land known for its primitive, enduring qualities. The first sentence of the *Wilderness Act*, which most succinctly defines wilderness, reads, “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (*Wilderness Act of 1964*, Public Law 88-577). This sentence juxtaposes wilderness against the imagined typical American landscape, stating that this land is valued for its separation from all other lands in the U.S. because it is untrammeled. “Untrammeled” originates with Zahniser, who intentionally chose that word because it emphasized wilderness as a place that is free from the hand of man (at least the white colonizer) (Harvey 2014). The persistence of this untrammeled ideal ensured that Americans saw this land as “morally pure” and their absolute right (Fourcade 2011:1736). Together, Congress and

Zahniser invented the societal idea of wilderness through this carefully curated word choice (Cronon 1996). Prior to the passage of the *Wilderness Act*, lands were protected as “wilderness,” “wild,” “primitive, or “roadless” (to name a few), all of which held similar characteristics and protections to the legally defined wilderness — the key difference was that these lands did not have the protection power of Congress behind them (Sutter 2002:253). When the *Wilderness Act* was passed, many of these areas were re-designated as wilderness and, therefore, defined using the Act’s definition (Turner 2012:50). Under the *Wilderness Act*, wilderness inherently became more valuable because it was now legally defined as untrammeled.

However, while wilderness was defined as untrammeled, the most important values, and provisions in the Act, tell a story where Congress went out of its way to ensure that the land could be trammled. Even as the untouched quality of wilderness was emphasized and defended throughout the process of valuation, ultimately, when the *Wilderness Act* became law, the values present in this definition did not line up with the most important values expressed throughout the rest of the Act. Untrammeled, as an answer to the question of ‘what is wilderness worth?’ became lost over debates of human use and degrees of permissible trammeling.

Values in the Wilderness Act

The Value of Wilderness for Humans. In both the text of the Act and the Congressional Record, supporters of the Act attempt to define the worth of wilderness in its intrinsic, untouched state. The valuation process, which constructed the worth of wilderness in its use as separate from the typical, urban-industrial American landscape, was coded in language of values that tried to convincingly argue that this act was only for the protection of the land. But, in practice, by setting aside huge tracts of land, the “federal government legitimated the conceptualization of

wilderness as an inalienable public interest good” (Fourcade 2011:1736). The purpose of wilderness lands, according to the legislation, is “for the use and enjoyment of the American people” (*Wilderness Act of 1964*, Public Law 88-577). Wilderness is for the people, not for the land. Congress protected wilderness because it served a unique purpose that not even national parks or national monuments could fulfill: it was untouched. In early debates around the Act, Sen. Morse (D-OR) drew on conservation leaders such as Gifford Pinchot and Teddy Roosevelt, calling on Congress to uphold its duty as trustees of this land (Cong. Rec. 19656:S9782). Evoking important figures in the conservation movement, supporters of the bill framed their fight as one of immense historical importance, but still placed the value of wilderness squarely in its benefits to American society.

In the final text of the Act, section four covers the use of wilderness areas, which illustrates this disconnect between the definition of wilderness as untrammeled and the valuation process that ensured human use was the most important value. Effectively, no motorized vehicles or roads are allowed within the boundaries, and by barring the use of motors within the areas, the ability for humans to damage and exploit the area is strictly limited (*Wilderness Act of 1964*, Public Law 88-577). However, in the following sections, the bill lists exception after exception to these “banned” uses (*Wilderness Act of 1964*, Public Law 88-577). The effect of these exceptions, following a definition of wilderness as “untrammeled,” shows that wilderness was not separate from humanity, but was an inherently human creation (Cronon 1996). The exceptions underlined that this land’s worth stood in its value to people, and, without this anthropocentric need, was worthless.

The largest contention point, and ultimately largest compromise in the bill, was over mining in wilderness areas, another exemplification of the misalignment between the stated

value of wilderness as untrammeled and the process of valuation to support a specific cultural formation. Some members of Congress saw it as a necessary compromise, others saw it as diabolically opposed to the goals of the bill. In 1963, Sen. Church (D-ID), a fervent opponent of mining, said, “I merely say that we cannot maintain a wilderness and leave it free and open for exploration, for prospecting, mining, and commercial activities. We shall either have a wilderness or we shall not” (Cong. Rec. 1963:S5927). Church saw mining as inherently contradictory to what Congress was attempting to do with this Act. Importantly, even though Church and others were against mining in wilderness, this does not mean that they were advocating for a completely untrammeled wilderness. This block of members still supported the dominant cultural formation of wilderness which placed wilderness’ untrammeled characteristics at the center of its use for the U.S.

In contrast to those against mining, Sen. Dominick (R-CO) said, “We are not trying. . . to determine whether or not the mineralized areas may safely be removed from the wilderness system because they are more valuable to the country by using them for mineral purposes” (Cong. Rec. 1963:S5924). Dominick wasn’t concerned with mining’s effect on the land and believed that allowing mining did not threaten the fundamental characteristics of wilderness as separate from other “regular” lands. As members of Congress tried to construct the worth of wilderness through its distinctive, primitive characteristics, proponents of the Act saw mining as a threat to the untrammeled character of wilderness. In the end, Congress allowed mining for a certain period of time in order to reach an agreement between the House and Senate but continued to underline throughout the valuation process that wilderness’ principal purpose was to be pristine, no matter what activities were allowed.

Recreational Values. Recreational values of wilderness ensure that the American public can escape the industrial city and experience forms of unique wilderness recreation, supporting the land's protection as untrammelled for human use. These values are weakly anthropocentric because they highlight using the land for activities people can only partake in on untrammelled lands. In section 4b of the *Wilderness Act*, wilderness areas are written to be devoted to recreational purposes (*Wilderness Act of 1964*, Public Law 88-577). According to members of Congress, this land was worthy of wilderness designation because it would secure this specific recreation's continued availability. Rep. Saylor (R-PA) said, "There is a composite value in wilderness recreation that cannot be reproduced anywhere short of an authentically rugged and big tract of undeveloped country" (Cong. Rec. 1962:H7970). Saylor makes a case for why wilderness is the only plausible place to experience this kind of recreation. The recreational value of wilderness is unique only to these wilderness lands, and, therefore, they must be managed in such a way that promotes multi-use.

Recreational values ensured that the land wouldn't be completely locked up from humans' use. In prioritizing these values, Congress made certain that this land was accessible to most forms of recreation. Exceptions to prohibited forms of recreation were allowed when "necessary to meet minimum requirements for the administration of the area for the purpose of this Act" (*Wilderness Act of 1964*, Public Law 88-577). Even the first bill introduced by Sen. Humphrey (D-MN) included a similar exception, recognizing that recreation was an integral part of why wilderness needed to be protected (Cong. Rec. 1956:S9776). Wilderness lands' immense recreational opportunity helped members of Congress advocate for the land's use for humans and reveals another disconnect between valuation and values as they sought to undermine their own definition of wilderness as untrammelled lands. Recreational use was a necessary assurance

because, if Americans were to escape to this untrammelled land, there needed to be permitted forms of enjoyment that emphasized why this land was so special.

Spiritual Values. The spiritual value of wilderness is where members of Congress valued the idea of untrammelled, primitive land beyond simply its physical utility to humans. This land was not just a place to literally escape the dirty, industrial city, but a place to emotionally escape to a serene, quiet nature. In the Act, Congress listed solitude as a purpose of wilderness, thereby making an explicit case for the spiritual value of wilderness and its benefit as a place of reflection and solace. These values' prominence in the Congressional Record also represents the gravity in which they were considered while developing the Act. The spiritual value communicates Congress' intention to frame the need for protecting wilderness in its opportunity to provide Americans with enchanted, expansive lands. It is a convenient expression of the untrammelled value of nature in the valuation process, while still legally advocating for the lands' use for the U.S. in its separation from the industrial city.

When pointing to spiritual values in the Congressional Record, members use images of grandiose beauty and juxtapose the primitive, serene wilderness with the overcrowded, urban, American landscape. Rep. Anderson (R-IL) stated, "I am sure all of us would admit the quickening heartbeat and the sharp intake of breath when for the first time he sees a majestic waterfall. . . . Who has not felt nature's rejuvenating power when he takes refuge from our highly industrial and mechanized society. . . ?" (Cong. Rec. 1964:H20632). Here, on the day the *Wilderness Act* was officially passed, Anderson contrasts the industrial society against wilderness; he sees the mechanized American city as opposed to the majestic waterfall and argues that this is where the value of the land must come from. On the day the bill passed the House, Rep. McDowell (D-DE) echoed Anderson, using Cold War images of bombs and nuclear

weapons to emphasize the need for wilderness to “help us ponder eternal truths” (Cong. Rec. 1964:H17445). The untouched condition of the lands, especially in contrast to the urbanized, industrial, society, is an opportunity for reflection that should not be overlooked in comparison to other values. Spiritual values contribute to a framework of weak anthropocentrism because they emphasize harmony between humans and nature, while still framing nature in its use to humans. Wilderness provides spiritual solace and contributes to a national image of primitive lands that drove the Act forward. It perpetuated the valuation process that centered on the untrammelled characteristics of wilderness, while simultaneously creating further justification for use of the land as a place to escape.

Value for Future Generations. The final value category is valuing wilderness for future generations. This value is heavily emphasized throughout the Congressional Record and appears in the first sentence of the Act. The last phrase reads, “It is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness” (*Wilderness Act of 1964*, Public Law 88-577). This sentiment appears in every iteration of the bill, signifying the high priority Congress placed on protecting this land for future generations. By valuing future generations’ use of wilderness, Congress shows its desire to protect wilderness for the benefit of people. Wilderness will create an enduring nature in the U.S. that generations to come can run off to when the pressures and pollution of the industrial city become too much to bear.

In valuing wilderness for future generations, Congress is, again, saying its overarching goal is to protect nature while continuing to promote wilderness’ use in an explicitly anthropocentric context. During discussions of the second wilderness bill introduced in the Senate, Sen. Douglas (D-IL), a sponsor of the bill, said, “We must have the boldness to project it

into the eternity of the future, to fashion deliberately the kind of policy and program that will insure now — before it is too late — the preservation of wilderness forever wild” (Cong. Rec 1958:S6778). Congress needed to make a bold decision to project their value of wilderness as a separate, escapable place by securing this land as “untrammled” for the remainder of history. Yet, as illustrated throughout this section, wilderness was never intended to be protected as “forever wild,” no matter how many times this sentiment was stated. Sen. Humphrey (D-MN) called the *Wilderness Act* the most significant piece of legislation in protecting this land for future generations and addressing the wilderness needs of a growing U.S. population (Cong. Rec. 1964:S20602). The urgency of a wilderness act was expressed not only in present terms but in making sure that the Americans of the 1960s did not fail their children and grandchildren in affording them the same outdoor opportunities as their own. The lands needed to stand eternally as untrammled, as a place of escape for all future generations of Americans, and it was Congress’ duty to ensure this promise.

Great American Outdoors Act

I analyze the *Great American Outdoors Act* using four value categories. These categories are: the value of public land for humans, recreational values, the value for future generations, and economic values. Economic values overtook the space of spiritual values, as members of Congress emphasized the tangible benefits of the land over the intangible. In stark contrast to the cultural formation present in the *Wilderness Act*, which was based in wilderness’ separation from the industrial city, I argue that, in the *Great American Outdoors Act*, the worth of public lands is built upon a cultural formation that supports the integration of public lands into the American landscape. In our post-industrial, service-oriented society, maintenance projects and funding

conservation efforts encouraged Americans to see these lands as a system of infrastructure that Congress could guarantee.

Values in the Great American Outdoors Act

Value of Public Lands for Humans. In the *Great American Outdoors Act*, there is a clearly articulated use of the land for humans. Similar to the *Wilderness Act*, this use is weakly anthropocentric, disguised in the language of environmental protections and preserving lands. Generally, however, values present in the *Great American Outdoors Act* were more explicitly weakly anthropocentric. Members of Congress valued human use in public land protections and illustrated this by not protecting any new land. Instead, Congress highlighted the importance of furthering the use of public lands (recreation, prospecting, etc). Here, values lined up more closely with the process of valuation because it became more acceptable under the new cultural formation, which saw public lands as a part of the entire landscape of the U.S., to support responsible human use of public lands. Sen. McConnell (R-KY) spoke of the broad bipartisan support for the bill and how public lands are “treasured in every State of our Union,” as well as their benefit to the human spirit (Cong. Rec. 2020:S2840). This Act protected our national treasures so that all citizens of the U.S. can cherish them — a sentiment that echoes the rhetoric of the *Wilderness Act*.

Members of Congress are proud to be protecting and improving the preservation of and access to these lands. Sen. Portman (R-OH) said, “This is about responsible stewardship. These repairs were a debt unpaid. . . . Our parks have stood tall for more than a century now as the embodiment of American history and shared commitment to preserving some of our most magnificent lands” (Cong. Rec. 2020:S4719). Members of Congress in 2020, like those in 1964,

saw it as a part of their duty to be responsible for preserving America's public lands. However, in 2020, the robust system of public lands already existed in the country. Framing their duty as one of "responsible stewardship" and fixing unpaid debts, members of Congress advocated for repairing public lands structures and funding conservation programs as a means of integrating these lands into the American landscape. This land has become a system of infrastructure that is used across the country. Congress, in 2020, was simultaneously preserving the progress of prior Congresses and advocating for a worth of public lands where its use to humans is attained through tangible benefits due to the land's deep integration into the American service economy. As a result of the new cultural formation, committing to preserving more magnificent lands was not Congress' principal goal, and it was more important to make sure that the lands that already existed were accessible and preserved. The valuation process and value categories were more closely aligned because this land's worth was not in its primitive exceptionalism, but, instead in its practical use, and, as a result, members of Congress more readily expressed the human-use values that ended up written into the legislation.

Democratic members of Congress also saw beyond the specific repairs and use for today's citizens by emphasizing the need for this legislation in combating climate change and ensuring everyone had access to public lands (Cong. Rec. 2020:H3648). The use for humans is not only in the land itself but in what establishing these protections can do for our fight against climate change — public lands needed to be preserved to guarantee the U.S. is well-equipped to protect its citizens. As sea levels rise and temperatures reach new highs, there must still be nature to be experienced. Though, this value did not make it very far in the valuation process because it was not key to the current cultural formation — Democrats tried to make this an integral argument for worth, but others ultimately took precedence. Climate change was unnecessary in

articulating the worth of public lands the valuation process of the *Great American Outdoors Act* aimed to support. Still, beyond the connection to climate change, Congress supported this Act based on its clear benefits for the public as a result of the lands' worth as a system of infrastructure in the U.S. which welcomed public use.

Recreational Values. Recreational values expressed in the *Great American Outdoors Act* underline why the funding provided is necessary for the health and enjoyment of Americans. If public lands are infrastructure, then recreation is a fundamental purpose of the public lands system — valuation and value were more closely aligned because the cultural formation encouraged human use. This Act was debated during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic when getting outside was one of the few activities permitted. Sen. Alexander (R-TN) said, “There is nothing any of us wants to do more than to get outside of our homes and get in the fresh air, and these lands are where we go. . . . Yet they are our treasures, and they are run down” (Cong. Rec. 2020:S2724). Congress used the circumstances of the pandemic to bolster the need for this funding and for ensuring that the recreational value of our public lands was preserved.

Recreational values were often tied to issues of access — issues of the ability for Americans to tangibly use the land. Members of Congress explained that we needed to make these infrastructure improvements and ensure the continuity of the LWCF so that all Americans have access to the recreational opportunities our public land provides. Sen. Alexander (R-TN) said, “We are talking about leaky roofs. We are talking about access roads with potholes. . . . We are talking about our national treasures. We are talking about where we like to go.” (Cong. Rec. 2020:S2724). The current state of public land infrastructure was directly impeding the recreational value held by Americans because they could not use the space for this value. The land was worth nothing if it was inaccessible.

The LWCF section also communicates recreational values. It is clear that one of the reasons this fund was receiving permanent funding was because of its ability to ensure recreational access and explicitly says that money allocated must be “consistent with the requirements for recreational public access” (*Great American Outdoors Act of 2020*, Public Law 116-152). The *Great American Outdoors Act* highlighted numerous forms of recreation, from hunting to hiking to fishing, illustrating the countless activities that must be available to Americans on these lands. This is a shift from the recreation valued in the *Wilderness Act* — the cultural formation present in the *Great American Outdoors Act* allowed for a greater range of recreational activities to all be heavily valued in Congress’ attempts to integrate these lands into the everyday landscape of the U.S. These lands, while still special, are not categorized as “untrammeled,” but are instead intentionally trammelled as an accessible system of infrastructure. The worth of these lands came from their potential to be valuable recreational infrastructure for all Americans.

Value for Future Generations. In discussions around the *Great American Outdoors Act*, the emphasis on protecting these lands for future generations was just as pronounced as for the *Wilderness Act*. Members of Congress spoke over and over again about their duty to protect public lands for generations to come. Sen. McConnell (R-KY) said, “These resources exist because of the visionary actions of prior Congresses. Now it is our turn to secure them for generations yet to come” (Cong. Rec. 2020:S2748). Members acknowledged the work of Congresses before them in creating the existing system of public lands while reminding their colleagues that there are more generations to come that deserve these lands as we have them today. Here, there is a discrepancy between value and valuation, as the Act did not actually secure any new lands for generations to come even as members of Congress spoke eloquently of

this goal. During a time that is steeped in partisanship, the value of these lands for future generations is used as a call for this Act to go beyond partisanship. Rep. Grijalva (D-AZ) said, “This bill goes beyond politics. It is about ensuring that we pass along a legacy of public lands stewardship and conservation to future generations, so they, too, can marvel at the grand canyon covered in snow” (Cong. Rec. 2020:H3644). This sentiment echoes the discussions in the 60s — passing along a legacy of public lands for generations to come. Yet, the *Great American Outdoors Act* did not go beyond politics, and, even though Congress came to an agreement on the Act, it was not without substantial partisan debate. Congress focused on guaranteeing that this system of public lands will continue to exist so that future generations can reap its practical values. Sen. McConnell (R-KY) stressed how permanent funding of the LWCF would make these lands accessible for generations (Cong. Rec. 2020:S2840). Congress must not only protect the aesthetic beauty of the lands, but they also must guarantee their accessibility for future generations to use.

Economic Values. Unique to the *Great American Outdoors Act* is a specific, articulated economic value of public lands. The main measures of the Act are heavily justified by the economic prosperity that will result from the needed maintenance upgrades and the general economic benefits of tourism and recreation that public lands provide. Just as spiritual values were barely present in the Congressional Record, in contrast to the *Wilderness Act*, economic values were significantly more present. As a result of a new cultural formation that saw public lands as no longer separate from the everyday life of Americans, these lands were now valuable economic assets (beyond only their resource potential). Members of Congress emphasized America’s reliance on public lands for sustaining local economies and employing thousands of people instead of the magical feeling one gets from standing in a never-ending forest. Sen.

McConnell (R-KY) said, “I am proud of the stand they have taken in support of our Nation’s natural wonders and the millions of American livelihoods that depend on them” (Cong. Rec. 2020:S2748). He directly connected the protection of public lands with the creation of American jobs — a major benefit many members of Congress saw in this act. The value of these lands is in the jobs and economies they create and sustain. Rep. Cunningham (D-SC) spoke of the importance of tourism and recreation for rural, western economies, and how the maintenance projects funded through the Act will create over 100,000 job opportunities (Cong. Rec. 2020:H3645). The protected land itself is an economic resource, and this is why it is worthy of protection today.

This value also appears in the text of the Act, as the valuation process made clear that economic values needed to be organized atop the value hierarchy. For both the National Parks and Public Land Legacy Restoration Fund and LWCF, Congress clearly defines where the money will come from and how much it will be (*Great American Outdoors Act of 2020*, Public Law 116-152). They account for the worth of public lands by placing a precise economic value on the maintenance projects and conservation efforts, just as Congress can place a monetary value on all other forms of infrastructure in the U.S. This focus on the economic value of public lands is a clear departure from values held in the *Wilderness Act*, where no direct economic value was mentioned. Today, under a cultural formation where the usability and accessibility of public lands are emphasized, this land is only worthy when there is a clear economic benefit in protecting this land.

Conclusion

In this paper, I presented an analysis of the *Wilderness Act* and the *Great American Outdoors Act*. Analysis of these two acts reveals that, while both value public lands for human use, the worth of the lands has changed as different value frameworks are used to justify protection. This use for humans is not inherently exploitative but is weakly anthropocentric because we do not acknowledge any intrinsic value of nature. Members of Congress spoke meaningfully of their desire to protect public lands from the perils of human overuse but always ensured that both these acts principally served Americans' interests throughout the valuation processes. In 1964, we protected wilderness because of its stark separation from the industrial city, and in 2020 we continued to protect public lands because they have become integrated into our post-industrial society.

Regarding specific values, I have two main conclusions. First, concern for future generations and recreational values stayed relatively stable between the two acts. In both 1964 and 2020, Congress took seriously a duty to enact each bill as a guarantee that generations of Americans could experience the land we have carefully preserved, and that recreation was a principal use of this land. Second, spiritual and economic values were inversely related. In the *Wilderness Act*, members of Congress relied heavily on the idea that wilderness and public lands existed beyond their physicality as a spiritual experience. In the *Great American Outdoors Act*, Congress defended public lands on a heavily economic basis, emphasizing that this bill would create jobs, bolster economies, and be a critical investment into our public lands.

Because the values that legitimize the worth of this land have changed, these two acts present distinct answers to the question of why public lands are worthy. In the *Wilderness Act*, public lands were worthy and valued because of their vast, pristine, untrammelled characteristics.

Access to this land was important, but it was sidestepped by an emphasis on the primitive, enduring nature of wilderness. Wilderness, specifically, stood in contrast to city skylines; its purpose was to be a place of physical and spiritual escape, away from the industrial city. In 2020, vast areas of public lands already exist, and will not be added at the rate that was occurring in the 1960s. They do not stand in contrast to an industrial nation as they once did, instead, we value them as an integrated system of infrastructure in our postindustrial world. They are a fundamental system in the U.S. that is seen by Congress as accessible, usable, and tangible. The worth of public lands does not come from its contrast to the American landscape; it comes from its integration into it.

Still, neither separation nor integration is inherently better. Today, public lands are significantly more accessible and abundant. They have become a fundamental system in our society that no longer needs to be seen as magical and pristine. In 1964, lands were less integrated, but they were more special. Wilderness was not only a physical experience, but an emotional one as Americans explored this pristine nature. Both today and in 1964, public lands hold worth in the U.S. — they are etched into the American landscape, as they were designed to, and will always be worthy of protection. In each case, although more present in my analysis of the *Wilderness Act*, members of Congress spoke of values and worth that put land over people, but the actual processes of valuations that were occurring always placed people over land. The dominant cultural formations in 1964 and 2020 may be starkly different, but, at their core, each undoubtedly supports the weakly anthropocentric use of public lands. The worth of public lands, while justified differently in each valuation process, will always ensure that public lands will be there for the U.S. however it needs them.

There are several important limitations of this project I will now address. First, this project was conducted over seven months as an undergraduate honors thesis. I did not read every single Congressional Record entry of each act, and I only looked at two acts. Other significant public lands bills should be considered to more fully understand the value of public lands. I also was not able to analyze every contextual factor. Most notably missing from my paper is a robust discussion about who has been historically included and excluded from accessing public lands, and how this shapes values. The U.S. Congress is also not demographically representative of the U.S., which raises important questions about the institution's ability to accurately reflect the values of the U.S. Congress is still a useful site of analysis because it is a chamber of elected officials who are tasked with speaking for the people, but it is not a perfect representation.

Future research should consider examining more public lands acts. Including more acts will bolster the impact of this analysis and provide a more robust picture of the value of public lands. Public lands are considered to be integral to the American landscape, and future studies should explore the connection between the American identity and public lands more clearly to aid in value analysis. Research should consider access to public lands and the history of colonialism in the U.S., which strongly influenced how this system came to be. This paper is only one piece of a history that spans over a century and millions of acres. There is extensive opportunity for future research to expand on the findings here and more comprehensively understand why we continue to find these lands worthy of protection.

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