

# A PHENOMENOLOGY OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES IN WILDERNESS: RELATING SELF, CULTURE, AND WILDERNESS

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## Abstract

This study uses thirty-two semi-structured interviews of overnight visitors to a northern wilderness to question, update, and improve our understanding of spiritual experiences in wilderness. The resulting narrative further develops the inputs, processes and outcomes of spiritual experiences in wilderness, and advances our understanding of: a) visitor definitions of wilderness and spirituality; b) the significance of wilderness spirituality mentors; and c) the growing impact cultural changes have on spiritual experiences in wilderness. Participants described wilderness as a setting where they can manage the information they are required to process and engage in rituals that support contemplation of spiritual themes. This study uncovers new threads such as the role of the numerous teachers of wilderness spirituality and the impact of escaping information technology.

## 1.0 Introduction

The highly subjective terms wilderness and spirituality have received some rigorous examination through empirical studies. Recent work from Ashley (2009), Ellard et al. (2009), Heintzman (2000, 2002, 2007), Marsh (2007), and Schmidt and Little (2007) have made distinct contributions to the field, addressing the role and character of spirituality in leisure and/or wilderness experiences. A special issue of *Leisure* in 2009 focused on the relationship between leisure and spirituality and received 35 submissions. Researchers are increasingly studying the topic due to a perceived rise in public interest and desire for spiritual experiences and a continued cultural emphasis on spiritual wellbeing.

Previous work has focused on either all-female or all-male groups, or has involved other purposive sampling, (e.g. sometimes focused narrowly on religious groups) with the exception of Marsh's (2007) means end analysis of backcountry skiers at Teton Pass, Wyoming. Until this current study, a broad sample of wilderness visitors had not been qualitatively studied in situ. Situated description that conveys the inputs, processes, and outcomes related to spiritual experiences in wilderness needs to be collected and updated as technology and culture continue to change. Schmidt and Little's (2007) phenomenology found a diverse array of leisure based activities, contexts, and triggers supporting spiritual experiences. Their phenomenology developed insights and captured many of the complexities of the lived experience.

The hermeneutic phenomenological methods employed within our study aim to capture each visitor's lived experience while in the moment. Using real-time examples, individuals connected personal wilderness experiences with their established understandings and previous experiences, adding intensity and further exposing the multifaceted character of spiritual experiences in wilderness. The interpretive analysis works to explain the current perceptions and practices of wilderness spirituality and relates them to visitors' *life history*, *religious understandings*, and *cultural understandings*. The work is attentive to the novelty of the water-dominated landscape in which the study was conducted and the array of existing social constructions of *wilderness* and *spirituality*.

## 1.1 Purpose of Study

This project was born out of an interest in learning more about the intangible benefits of visiting wilderness and a desire to better grasp how visitors develop a connection with a landscape. The effort examined the nature of visitors' relationships to wilderness, particularly their spiritual insights and habits, and attempted to capture descriptions of spiritual experiences as near to the time and place of their occurrence as possible. It also locates the phenomena within the life-world of the wilderness visitor such that future visitors, managers, and academics can better understand the role of wilderness and wilderness spirituality in the overall life course of individuals (Van Manen 1990). Accordingly, rather than define multifaceted terms such as 'wilderness' and 'spirituality' *a priori*, this study recognizes that research functions in a realm where these terms can mean whatever people think they mean and can encompass a variety of ideas, constructs, or realities (Hendee & Dawson 2002). The goal of the research was to accurately capture the first-hand accounts and conveyed impressions of *meaning-making experiences*. Beyond the work presented here, further analysis places the accounts and impressions within individual and cultural contexts, clarifying the *current* and *changing* importance and characteristics of spiritual experiences.

## 1.2 Background

Water-dominated canoe country has been the study site for multiple related studies on spirituality (e.g. Fredrickson & Anderson 1999, Stringer & McAvoy 1992; Young & Crandall 1984). Most recently, Heintzman (2007) used remote canoe country in Canada to examine the influence of wilderness experiences on the spirituality of a men-only Christian group's members. Participants of the Fredrickson and Anderson (1999) study described the land/waterscape of canoe country as an organistic whole that is interpretable as more of a gestalt. The uniqueness of the landscape may not impact this study any differently than a majestic mountain range, but is important to be cognizant of its potential novelty and of the previous work in similar settings. A 2008 report by McCool et al. titled "Water and People: Challenges at the Interface of Symbolic and Utilitarian Values" emphasizes the importance of the spiritual component of people's relationships to water landscapes.

Past work has provided researchers and managers many insights into leisure, nature and spirituality more generally (e.g. Driver et al. 1996, Kaplan 1995, McDonald & Schreyer 1991). Recent work has aimed to review antecedents, settings, activities and outcomes related to spiritual experiences in nature, and in some cases the work has focused on the role of wilderness. Demographics, attitudes, and circumstances are all antecedents that have received attention (Fox 1997, Heintzman 1998, 2000, 2007, Stringer & McAvoy 1992). The importance and actual characteristics of natural settings in supporting spiritual experiences has been cited in numerous studies (Ashley 2009, Fox 1997, Fredrickson & Anderson 1999, Heintzman, 2000, 2002, 2007, Marsh 2007, Schmidt & Little 2007, Stringer & McAvoy 1992, William and Harvey 2001).

Similarly, activity type, adventure, and challenge have been found to be sources of spiritual inspiration and/or spiritual well being (Fredrickson & Anderson 1999, Heintzman 1998, 2002, 2007, Marsh 2007, Stringer & McAvoy 2002). The outcomes, including specifically spiritual wellbeing, feelings associated with spirituality (e.g. connectedness, peace, happiness), and positive emotions have been analyzed by Ellard et al. 2009, Fox 1997, Fredrickson & Anderson 1999, Hawks 1994, Heintzman 2007, Henderson et al. 2009, LeDuc 2002, and Marsh 2007. Heintzman's 2010 *Leisure Sciences* article provides a complete review of the topic and emphasizes the complexity of the subject and the need for researchers to consider numerous components when considering the relationship between nature-based recreation and spirituality. Our study specifically targets three of his ten recommendations/implications for the field: 1) the need for more research on history and circumstances, motivation and attitude, socio-demographics, place processes, free-time, facilitation, and leisure-spiritual coping, 2) the need for more research on the most influential components, rather than research that discriminates between factors, and 3) the need for a better understanding of the pathways that lead to spiritual experiences.

## 2.0 Methods

In the summer of 2010, thirty-two in-depth, qualitative interviews were conducted with visitors to a northern wilderness. All interviewees, ranging from 19-67 years of age, were overnight backcountry campers travelling by canoe. Just over half were male. For convenience, visitors were sampled at seven backcountry lakes. One person was interviewed from each randomly selected occupied campsite. The in situ interviews were conducted along the rocky shores of the lakes between 2 p.m. and 5 p.m. and lasted between 13 and 57 minutes (average ~35 minutes). The interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed for analysis. Continuous comparison allowed for a thorough review of the audio data, transcribed interviews, and the researcher's notes and memos. Specifically, the hermeneutic circle approach, as described by Patterson and Williams (2002), was used to constantly examine the relationship between various parts of the data and the whole of the data. Individual interviews were initially analyzed as they were completed rather than waiting for the entire data set. The first goal was to understand each interview on its own and only then apply individual parts to a broader understanding of the whole data set. The process requires transitioning between idiographic analysis of lone interviews followed by nomothetic analysis that relates parts of interviews to their whole and explains individual interviews as they relate to the complete data set. Notes on the interviewees' non-verbal communication, their varying tone(s), and overall demeanor were taken immediately after each interview and became part of the interview memos.

## 3.0 Analysis and Results

The data further contextualizes: understandings of the traits (e.g. components of the setting and activity); antecedents (e.g. individual socio-demographics, memories, and attitudes); conceptual frameworks (e.g. understanding, recognition, and operationalization of religious frameworks); and outcomes (e.g. the benefits, values, and consequences that result from the experience) involved in the array of spiritual experiences occurring in wilderness. Connectedness, self-reliance, harmony, and search for meaning are just a few of the themes that will be expanded upon in the full study. In the present paper, the results focus on new threads that may contribute to the current body of knowledge on wilderness visitors' spirituality, beginning with an examination of the diverse definitions of wilderness and spirituality.

### 3.1 Varied Definitions

A salient theme through the whole of the data was that wilderness and spirituality had highly variable meanings to visitors. For some, wilderness was just another space, just slightly different from their local fishing hole, "a place to enjoy the peace of fishing as the sun rises." For others it was a world unlike any other, where solitude and harmony are found, "the only example of a world unchanged by humans." For still others, the northern wilderness should not even be called a wilderness, "since other more vast, rarely visited, and rugged spaces exist."

Spirituality was sometimes compared to religion: “religion is with a group while spirituality is the peace I feel when I am alone here.” Sometimes the spirituality of the experience was in a visitor’s gaze: “everything out here is spiritual . . . I am looking at, being, God’s creation and it is beautiful.” And, sometimes the spirituality of the experience encompassed a class of viewpoints: “I am definitely a spiritual person . . . I have my beliefs and this where I need to be to feel those.”

Four interviewees, each describing themselves as religiously devout, offered a critique of spirituality and wilderness spirituality. As Participant 36 explained:

I’m a very firm practicing Catholic, and that relates deeply to wilderness. I believe there is a gift of creation; that all things in our lives are gifts, and that creation is one of the most important, and how we experience that is up to us. . . I do think that creation and wilderness experiences are some of the greatest gifts. . . I think wilderness spirituality can be a component of, at least in my world, a faith life in Christ; knowing that from the standpoint of creation, it’s a gift as opposed to (pause) I don’t come here to worship the land; or to worship the spirit of the land; or to worship whatever it is that other people may come here for in terms of wilderness spirituality. I’m here and I’m grateful that it exists and I enjoy the experiences that I have here but I just simply consider it a gift.

The gift, and his experience of the gift, was not in a ‘spiritual realm’ but rather ‘immersion in a gift.’ Another of the four interviewees (Participant 9) explained that people specifically use wilderness spirituality to take the place of religion when they haven’t learned, or haven’t formed their own thoughts on religion. Though this way of thinking was uncommon, such definitions completely shaped how these individuals approached certain situations and dictated whether or not they considered any of their experiences spiritual. There were also abundant references inspired by understandings of Christianity. At this study site, people from other religions (e.g. Taoist, Jewish, American Indian) were not encountered.

Many respondents loosely described a view of wilderness as God’s creation, simultaneously entwining spirituality. For example:

This is a form of worship too, just coming out and enjoying God’s creation. I think he made this for people to enjoy and to take care of. And I think (pause) one of the things my wife has said to me too when we’re talking, she says, ‘You know, I’m glad that I got a husband that does these things in the right way. You care about not letting stuff get in the lake and about caring for the canoe and stuff like that.’ I don’t know. I think it – I mean there’s another – in the movie *Chariots of Fire* they talked about how you can praise the Lord by peeling a spud, if you peel it to perfection. I don’t know. I just think if you do things right as well as you can, I think that’s spiritual. And whether that satisfies God or not, I don’t know. But I think you get a spiritual satisfaction yourself and I guess that’s what you’re striving for. It is what this trip is all about. (Participant 42)

The same interviewee related an experience of fishing earlier that morning. His daughter was learning to cast using his father’s rod and he imagined how proud his dad would be. He said, “that was right in that spiritual category.” His off-and-on relationship with a church and desire to personally become closer to God were made clear through his definitions and anecdotes. His idea of a ‘right way’ also sheds light on religion’s influence on spiritual experiences.

In another interview, participant 11 used highly descriptive, yet succinct language to describe sunsets and the importance of primitive experiences as a component of her spirituality. Her candor and non-verbal communication were a window into how she perceived that the world would react to some of her beliefs. Her educational background in environmental history and description of “the mystery created by synchronicities” helped clarify many components of her interview. For example, her ideas of edge theory (water reflecting the sky, bringing viewers closer to the edge of the ‘unknown’) and references to the mirror qualities of water were more detailed than most. The key to understanding her comments came in her definition of spirituality:

I don’t think it. . . everyone wants it to mean God, everyone wants it to mean that greater power, that mystery, that we just can’t define that put us here, that explains us. I guess for me, my spirituality just really defines . . . this is hard . . . to put it in words . . . it defines what, like why I think I am here. . . People want it to mean God, but I don’t really believe in that so I guess when people say spirituality, I think about my connectedness with that essence that put me here or the chain of actions that it took to put me here. I don’t know, the mystery of being an egg and sperm and coming to life (laugh) . . . just all of that stuff. The complexity. I mean for me, it is really a thing of systems; it is so biological, so scientific. For me, spirituality doesn’t define a God, but a process. Just a moment of awe when you feel like you can’t explain things with science. (Participant 11)

This explanation helped explain her struggle to discuss spiritual experiences early in the interview. Other participants expressed how various social constructions of wilderness influenced their experiences, including spiritual ones. A woman traveling with her husband and son stated, “People look at wilderness as purely a risk, and I appreciate that as I age” (Participant 33). She appreciated it because it made her feel special, capable of something different, which she described as “spiritually satisfying.”

Another interviewee (Participant 32), a frequent visitor to designated wilderness areas, highlighted the importance of the lack of signage and emphasized how challenges, including navigational challenges, define wilderness and shape the spiritual outcomes of every experience during his trips. Beyond varying definitions, participant 11 and others noted that 'wild' spirituality did not always mean being in designated wilderness: "I spend a lot of time reflecting on Native American beliefs; they really believed in the connectedness of people to animals, to plants and to the elements. So I feel like I can find a wild spirituality in my everyday." For her and others, the process of defining wilderness and spirituality included the notion that 'wild' or 'wilderness spirituality' is also experienced outside of wilderness.

Five participants distinctly described their packing and travel routines as highly spiritual and entirely related to their wilderness spirituality. Participant 13 explained, "I actually start packing and have to watch Jeremiah Johnson, which I know tunes my brain and forces memory showers that help me prepare in every way. . . I always do things in a sort of order, the whole process is spiritual." He and others commented on the drive to wilderness areas as being a large part of their wilderness spirituality. Participant 35 noted, "The slow separation that occurs, like as we left Ely, it is really important, lets us know how this is different, (pause) I think my son slowly realized how different it is here because of that drive; that is spiritual."

The semi-structured interviews provided a meaningful context for these conversations and allowed for better understanding of the array of meanings and interpretations of spiritual experiences related to nature and wilderness. Sometimes on their own, but often in combination, traits such as the remoteness, solitude, roughness, beauty, intricacy, or the calmness or fierceness of the weather, offered something very different from the everyday. In addition, the activities of paddling and primitive daily routines provided time to consider those polar differences between the conditions of wilderness and the everyday or ordinary of the interviewees' lives.

### 3.2 Mentorship

A storyline that developed during the interview and analysis process was the depth and importance of mentorship on the pathway to spiritual experiences. Fiction and non-fiction, visual media, guides, friends, relatives, and parents were all sources of highly meaningful mentoring. Often mentors passed on subtle habits and/or pronounced rituals that shaped the way interviewees approached and managed their experiences in wilderness, guiding their wilderness attachment and spirituality. Referring to Lousie Erdrich's *Birch Bark House* series, Participant 16 examined her understanding of the place saying:

I guess I feel more of a spiritual connection to the past because I know that people lived here, this was their home, not all that long ago; I have read stories that include people living off this land and I feel that connection; I have loved to read about it, and now I can experience it.

Participant 25 captured the importance of a summer camp, which she attended and then worked at, saying:

It wasn't even something I did with my high school peers; it was something like each summer I would go away to this camp and that would be my experience away from home, independent of my family. . . I looked forward to it all year; being out there with those people, it was my way of identifying, wanting to identify myself, 'now this is what I do.' I was just really focused and concentrating, and just all year long, looking forward to those times.

Before this trip, she had not visited the northern wilderness in nearly sixteen years. Her past experiences included forty-day trips where she felt more at home than at almost any other time in her life. "Strong" camp counselors had mentored her. On the sixth day of this "reunion" trip she revisited a text, *Paddle Whisperers*, which brought many of her deepest, and most spiritual connections to the landscape, back to her. Before that she hadn't "slowed down" or "settled in" to her wilderness experience.

In another interview, after the semi-formal questions, Participant 19 was asked if there was anything else that he would like to add. He immediately linked his dad's passing on to much of his wilderness spirituality. He stated, ". . . and I remember when I was little, he took me to my first Cub Scout meeting, and I don't remember what it was, I honestly don't remember at all what set it off, but he was just like, there is no way you're doing this; I am going to teach you the right way to do this." He went on to explain the "right way" at length, referring to it as a pathway to a more spiritual way of experiencing the landscape.

Similarly, on a trip with just her boyfriend, Participant 18 frequently thought about her mentor:

At a few moments when we couldn't find a campsite, it was disheartening. After figuring out where we were I felt very accomplished; before the trip my dad was like, 'I don't know if you can do that, kind of like, totally doubting me,' so when we finally had the campsite set up I almost wanted to call him. Just thinking about that and how proud he would be seems spiritual to me.

A variety of mentors influenced the experiences and outcomes of nearly all interviewees. Coming full circle, many participants discussed how sharing the experience with their children, or with relative newcomers, resulted in outcomes such as spiritual

wellbeing. One individual told of bringing at least five different small groups of first-time wilderness visitors. "I think, now that I take people, I find that to be the spiritual surprise; their reaction to the experience. I love to see them enjoying the experience; it completes the spiritual circle," (Participant 13). Participant 14 explained his perspective on mentoring Boy Scouts,

It is all wrapped up, my role as an educator and the sense of accomplishment that we get from spiritual experiences, it is hard to separate the two; you feel better because you are closer to nature, or God, or whatever you want to call who created this, and you are sharing that.

A father traveling with just his son and dog deep in the wilderness talked about his son building a makeshift tent out of their kitchen fly, carefully selected downed branches, and some twine:

I was laying there watching him build this thing and I had no idea what he was doing and when he was done I was so impressed with it. It was a proud father moment . . . he got out the rope and did all the lashings and thought hard about the layout. (Participant 27)

He felt extremely grateful to have alone time with his son and said that is what these trips are all about. Similarly, Participant 42, a past canoe camp counselor, was travelling in a canoe he called "the minivan." He explained:

There's that click sometimes that you see in the kids' faces when they suddenly understand what wilderness travel is and seeing that can be a very spiritual moment for me knowing that they finally are starting to understand or have their own moment, whatever that might be. They can't usually articulate it; I have a hard time articulating it, but you can see it in their faces when they get in the canoe one day and they're like, '*this morning is really beautiful, a little chilly, I'm pretty tired,*' but they understand. (Participant 42)

He noted that those moments have spiritually taken the place of the physical challenges that he once sought out.

Though mentors have received mention in previous work, it has primarily been in the fields of spiritual development or environmental ethics. In the literature, direct references to nature and wilderness spirituality mentors are often missing. Future work with this data will aim to fill this gap with a thorough analysis of the assorted and important impacts of mentors to wilderness spirituality.

### 3.4 Escaping Information Technology

Descriptions of spiritual experiences and spiritualities included expectations and desires to disconnect from an 'information society.' While some research has focused on how technology such as GPS units and ultra-light gear change visitor expectations and behaviors (e.g. Borrie 2000, Freimund & Borrie 1998), this study shows how our digital culture is affecting visitors' wishes for and reactions to spiritual experiences in wilderness. Participants routinely expressed the importance of being able to manage the amount of information that they have to process. Though this sounds suspiciously like 'relaxing,' these participants described escaping communication technologies and feeling free from having to perform in digital spaces and maintain their constantly-judged digital selves. Instead, participants were seeking time out of judgment's eye, in which more meaningful thoughts and reflections could occur. After talking at length about the spiritual benefits of being 'away' from the 'everyday', Participant 37 was asked how he feels differently upon returning. His answer included the following:

It is interesting; I really don't like to come from this low-stress environment and plug right back into civilization. Because I leave behind the mental stress of work and constantly being attached to my cell phone, I am able to get to a whole different feeling up here. So when I return, I think; did it really matter how the baseball team did? Did it really matter, this and that? I learned a while back that it is important to slowly go back to the daily grind so that this doesn't become a long-lost memory; so that I, we as a family, can re-immense a little more slowly; so now we may spend a day on the big lake near Duluth, or stay at a cabin somewhere on the way back. I think it helps me remember, or, avoid getting overtaken by constant communication with my job. (Participant 37)

Whether related to work or social networking, participants emphasized that not having 'service' (e.g. phone service) was very important and led to more spiritual experiences. Knowing that no one could reach them was a significant part of their decision to travel to the backcountry. Part of the ongoing work with this study's data is trying to understand how that attitude manifested itself for individuals. Participant 31 conveyed the concurrent importance of her camp experiences that were "heavy on teaching and practicing wilderness spirituality" and her ability to share stories and emotions with her father who attended the same camp three decades earlier. Her comments demonstrated appreciation for the spirituality associated with the primitive and its ability to connect individuals who struggle to relate in 'everyday' culture:

Technology and things change so much, even education and schools, but paddling out here can connect generations. Sure, maybe they pack up different food every once in a while, but the same canoes that he used as a counselor and camper are the same canoes that I use. The exact same ones, so its like – and he's like,

'Oh, yeah, I did that, portaged out of Range River as a counselor.' And I was like, 'yeah, it was a difficult day with those campers.' It is a cool thing to be able to relate stories, challenges and emotions within that whole community; especially relating to my dad. (Participant 31)

She discussed her camp's approach, including their commitment to a particular canoe type, as wholly spiritual, "that is what we were taught and how we pass it along." For her, spirituality comes from the "connections" that she makes with other individuals and how interactions' create a 'bond' between them.

Others' comments about primitive living were often made in juxtaposition to an 'at-your-fingertips world'. One young couple referred to their camping-related tasks as "fun chores" that provided time for in-depth conversations. For one visitor, escaping everyday norms even included not having the judgment of his peers along for the wilderness experience. Participant 28 compared two wilderness trips and stressed his need for certain kinds of wilderness visits:

I feel that I can be myself more; you know with friends and stuff I just kind of have to, I don't know, pay attention all the time, I have to be involved in everything that is going on. Up here, now, I can be involved as much as I want. I can just sort of wander off and be on a rock alone . . . and I like that.

The most important part of this excerpt is the context. His definition of spirituality was, "Believing that there is a God and having time to think that there is something helping us through, or guiding us through life." He had taken a short trip earlier in the summer with close friends yet felt as though he didn't get the wilderness experience that he wanted. He considered the current trip a do-over and highlighted how he felt he needed this time because work was demanding, involving off-hours texts and random requests to step in. He also attributed much of his interest in wilderness to his father's spiritual habits and teachings. His dad often emphasized the importance of taking personal time to sit and watch the wild, and to slow down while in the wilderness. Moreover, his families' recent disconnection from their long-time church left a gap that he claimed his relationship with the wilderness could fill.

Though the connection between social interactions and nature spirituality have been looked at previously, individuals most often discussed the social aspects of their wilderness spiritualities as something opposite to the impersonal digital forms of communication that are becoming more and more common in many everyday lives. A father described his "need" for these trips:

You know, work gets a little chaotic and family life, you do the best that you can with your kids, raising them the right way, and, times with teenagers might be a little overwhelming, their head is in their phone and you think you don't understand them . . . so you come out here and you get a sense of who are and what you are doing and . . . that you are doing everything the best that you can and kind of take it from there. (Participant 27)

This father, who was travelling with his youngest of his three kids, went on to discuss how his spirituality is more powerful in the wilderness, especially his solo trips, and in times like that day when he had "learned more about [his] son in the past six hours than he had in the past six months." For him, spirituality meant, "Believing that there is a God or you practice what you believe . . . and you are happy in your hopes and dreams."

Numerous visitors expressed relief at not having to respond to their phones and computers and some went as far as to say that they wished they could go back home and not deal with them again. Taking a break frequently left them feeling more aware of what is personally important, and more certain and comfortable with themselves. A majority mentioned that once they return home, they often reflect on the moments they had in wilderness, the personal sense of accomplishment they felt.

Digital communication methods increasingly dominate our daily routines, thus impacting the way we view and interact with spaces that are free of them. This phenomenology confirms the findings of numerous previous studies but additionally describes the meaning of unplugging and leaving behind a digital citizenship in favor of exploring and developing spiritual ideas of self and world in a leisure setting void of screen based technology.

#### 4.0 Discussion

In wilderness, social constraints and expectations are minimized, cultural information to be processed is limited, primitive ways of being are practiced, and raw encounters with the natural world are lived. In these conditions, the human relationship with the wild is often kindled, stoked, and/or sustained. Kaye (2006) reviewed the spiritual dimension of wilderness, pointing out that wilderness is at once a place and a system of belief about our role in the larger scheme of things; spiritually, it is a refuge. The predicament is that wilderness areas must be understood and maintained by managers with an awareness that the land has value larger than self. The varied connections visitors make within wilderness will continue to change based on culture's (in)ability to meet our predisposed spiritual needs.

Participants of this study revealed new threads in our understanding of nature- and wilderness-based spiritual experiences: the significance of mentors and the importance of wilderness as a reprieve from constantly advancing technologies and visitors' digital obligations. By studying their lived experiences in situ, many visitors' rituals and expectations related to spiritual

experiences in wilderness became clearer. A vast majority stressed the mental calm and self-reflective thinking brought on by wilderness. While characteristics such as solitude have received much attention in the past, this research has illuminated how, for many people, the 'everyday' impacts the spiritual refuge provided by wilderness. As it becomes more difficult in our daily lives to find the time and space to re-connect with others, with the greater creation, and with different paces and practices of living, managers will be under even more pressure to protect these opportunities in wilderness.

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