

Northeastern Minnesotans for Wilderness Stewardship Guide

NMW was created in 1996 to protect the BWCAW and surrounding wildlands. Our wilderness stewardship policies are founded on the Wilderness Act (WA), which was enacted “to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness” (WA, Sec.2.a). It named the BWCAW as one of the original units of our Wilderness Preservation System when the Act became law in 1964. The BWCAW Act of 1978 expanded wilderness protections and clarified some issues. The full texts of both laws are posted on the **About NMW** tab.

Key provisions of the WA that shape NMW policy include the following:

“A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man...” (Untrammelled means self-willed; free of human intent to manipulate, alter, control, or subjugate.) Wilderness retains “its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; ...”(Sec.2.c).

The WA generally prohibits commercial enterprise, motorized or mechanized vehicles or equipment, and motorboats (Sec. 4c). It requires that wilderness areas be administered “... in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, and so to provide for the protection of these areas and the preservation of their wilderness character...”(Sec.2.a).

The non-degradation principle, derived from the WA, is a practical guideline wilderness stewards use in assessing the state of a wilderness and deciding if there is a need for action. It holds that the wilderness character of an area cannot be allowed to deteriorate. When a wilderness does not meet the ideal described in WA, Sec.2.c, due to harm done or uses established before wilderness designation, mismanagement of non-conforming uses, or bad management decisions, every effort must be made to repair the degradation and restore wilderness character.

NON-CONFORMING USES

Legislation that designates units of the National Wilderness Preservation System sometimes includes accommodations made during the political process. These may allow activities that are inconsistent with the legal definition of wilderness, and do not conform to expectations of what is generally allowed in wilderness. The activities specifically allowed by law as exceptions to wilderness protections are called non-conforming uses. Examples of such uses allowed in the BWCAW by the BWCAW Act and the Wilderness Act are motorboats and commercial use, such as towboat and guide services. These must be restricted to the minimum allowed under

law and should be carefully regulated under special use permit or other administrative device.

FOREST SERVICE

The U.S. Forest Service manages the BWCAW and is ultimately responsible for preserving its wilderness character (WA, Sec.4.b). NMW supports the agency when it follows its own policies and guidelines that are consistent with the non-degradation principle, and in its adherence to the minimum tool principle. Minimum tool means that in the case of each proposed activity within the BWCAW, the Forest Service must first consider the simplest, most subtle tool, method, equipment, device, action or regulation before considering something that might be less compatible with wilderness values. For example, if an observer can paddle in to monitor a lightning-caused fire, that is preferable to the person being dropped in by helicopter. The minimum tool for clearing a portage would be ax and cross-cut saw, not chainsaw. NMW also supports the Forest Service in its reliance on a comprehensive and effective program of wilderness education as well as robust law enforcement to ensure compliance with wilderness regulations and leave no trace principles, and its careful, conservative management of non-conforming uses.

SULFIDE-ORE MINING

NMW recognizes that the BWCAW and the ecosystem that encompasses it are nationally significant resources. Any mining of sulfide – or hard rock - ore for copper, nickel or other metals within BWCAW watersheds or on nearby lands and watersheds will critically degrade the ecological health and wilderness character of the BWCAW. The promised short-term benefits of this kind of mining to the local economy cannot outweigh the real danger to our precious wilderness and other natural resources, and to our sustainable local economies based on ecosystem health. Thus, NMW opposes actions by state and federal agencies and departments that would facilitate current sulfide-ore mining proposals.

FIRE

NMW supports efforts to restore a natural fire regime to the BWCAW ecosystem by allowing lightning ignited fires to burn within the wilderness whenever possible. We recognize that when fire danger is high or fire management resources stretched thin, efforts may have to be made to contain or control natural wildfire. We are generally opposed to planned management ignitions and related fire management activities within the wilderness because these activities are in violation of the untrammelled provision of the Wilderness Act, because management ignitions cannot truly mimic natural burns, and because fire management activities adversely impact wilderness, soils and vegetation, and visitors' experiences.

Planned ignitions may be called for in extraordinary and narrowly defined situations, such as during the years immediately following the Blowdown of 1999. At that time, after a full environmental review, ignitions in wilderness were allowed for the purpose of fuel

reduction to minimize the chance that fire would escape wilderness boundaries and burn private property. NMW favors efforts to protect structures and property, including education and “fire wise” techniques, in place of planned management ignitions. When the Forest Service does become involved in burning and fire suppression within wilderness, protecting large tracts of undisturbed forest from fire and fire management activities should be a priority.

Strict adherence to minimum impact suppression techniques must be ensured during all fire management activities and follow up work within the BWCAW. Chainsaws, motorboats and aircraft should be used as sparingly as possible, and not at all after the fire is out.

WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

Wildlife and wildlife habitat are fundamental components of wilderness. BWCAW visitors enjoy watching wildlife in wild settings, and for many, fishing and hunting within the BWCAW are exceptional experiences. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, as allowed by law and interagency agreement, regulates fishing, hunting and trapping within the BWCAW, as it does throughout the state. Its activities in the wilderness include monitoring, fish stocking, and law enforcement.

By definition of the Wilderness Act, wilderness is “...an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man...”, where natural processes prevail. Accordingly, all of these activities should be conducted in a manner that is consistent with wilderness legislation and regulations. For example, MNDNR should use non-motorized craft in motor-free areas. Beyond that, the active manipulation of habitat and populations that occurs outside wilderness boundaries is not appropriate within the BWCAW. In time, allowing native aquatic communities to flourish may be valued more highly than the stocking of non-native fish species.

Wolves are central to the ecological health of the Boundary Waters Ecosystem. They are also at the heart of the way we perceive the BWCAW, and of enormous spiritual and cultural significance to native people living near the Boundary Waters who want to see wolves protected. NMW believes there should be no hunting or trapping of wolves allowed in the BWCAW. We favor a moratorium on sport hunting and trapping of wolves outside wilderness boundaries at least until MNDNR agrees to implement the plan, set out in the USFWS Wolf Management Plan of 2001, that includes a 5 year hunt-free monitoring period following delisting of wolves from the Endangered Species Act.

BORDER ISSUES

The International Boundary Commission’s routine clearing of a 20-foot swath along the border with Canada can be accomplished with a minimum of damage to wilderness character, and for many years the primary goal of wilderness advocates was to ensure that that happened. Recently activities of Department of Homeland Security (DHS) and U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) have unnecessarily

jeopardized wilderness integrity and character. NMW believes the protection of the BWCAW is in the national interest and must be weighed on equal footing with border security proposals. NMW opposes legislation and administrative actions that would deprive BWCAW of protections conveyed by existing wilderness and environmental law. NMW favors cooperation between Forest Service, DHS and CBP on activities, including use of aircraft and other motorized transport, with the goal of limiting impacts to wilderness and to visitors.

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

People need to accept wilderness on its own terms, which always include a degree of risk. Visitors to the Boundary Waters are responsible for their own safety. Careful planning and preparation before the trip and staying alert and taking care while in the woods are the best protection against unacceptable levels of risk, not reliance on electronic devices, or unfounded expectations that someone will come to the rescue. The Forest Service should not modify the wilderness to eliminate risks that are normally associated with wilderness. Search and Rescue operations should employ motorized vehicles in motor-free areas and other extraordinary efforts only in life-threatening situations. NMW will carefully scrutinize proposals made with the ostensible purpose of enhancing safety in wilderness, such as the construction of tall communications towers that would harm wilderness character.

PARTNERSHIPS

NMW supports and works with other organizations when our missions overlap. We belong to the Minnesota Environmental Partnership (MEP).

LEGISLATIVE AND ADMINISTRATIVE THREATS

There will always be challenges to protections established by The Wilderness Act, The BWCAW Act, and good Forest Service policy. Vigilant NMW members are the first line of defense against these threats. Action alerts will be posted as issues emerge.