

Community Wilderness Stewardship in the Tongass

A Wilderness area is land that has been designated by Congress to be preserved in its most natural state. Unlike other public lands, Wilderness areas are meant to contain no traces of human impact, just the land in its pure and wild state. Although there are some exceptions in Alaska, that means no trails, built structure, or motorized machinery or transportation are allowed. Wilderness is defined in the Wilderness Act of 1964 as:

“...an area of undeveloped... land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation...”

Wilderness Character

Wilderness Character is the combination of qualities that make a Wilderness wild. Those qualities are explicitly mentioned in the Wilderness Act and include things like Preservation of Natural Conditions, an Undeveloped State, Protection of Unique Qualities, and Opportunities for Solitude.

Although we try to keep Wilderness areas as pristine as possible, sometimes management decisions are necessary that detract from its wild aspects. For instance, land managers might build a trail to keep a fragile muskeg from being trampled. The trail certainly doesn't fit into the “primeval character” of the Wilderness, but it is better than the damage that would be caused otherwise. When judging these kinds of decisions, managers weigh the impact of the management project on Wilderness Character.

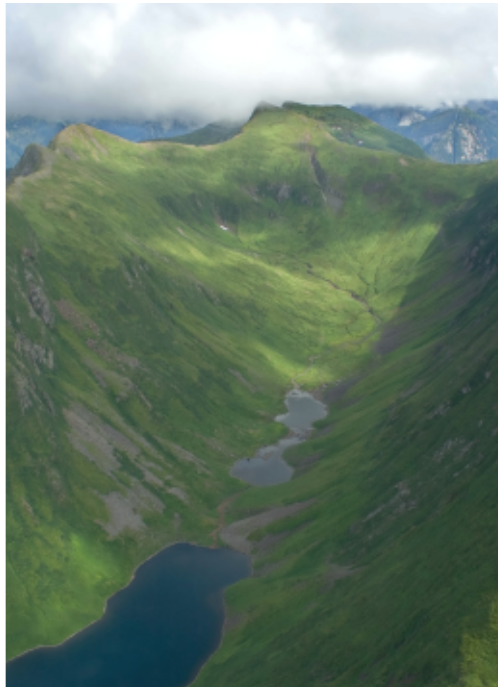


Why Monitor Wilderness Character?

We monitor aspect of Wilderness Character to create a baseline from which we can chart the changes in Wilderness areas over time. Imagine a glacier which is constantly changing, but so slowly that the change is not noticeable, even over a lifetime. But, if you took a picture of that glacier, then returned and compared the photo to the same glacier decades later, the change would be obvious.



Muir Glacier in 1941 and in 2004. With a baseline for reference, changes are more apparent.



Ways you can use Wilderness:

- hunting
- hiking
- gathering food
- fishing
- relaxing
- photography
- camping

In Wilderness you can not:

- use ATVs or any motors (other than float planes)
- log
- build trails or cabins

Why Monitor Solitude?

Solitude is the main reason most of us spend time in our Wilderness areas.

Although it might seem like a strange thing to study, it is something that we can all understand: your's is the only boot print on the beach or the only boat in the bay. All of us would like our grandchildren to have the same opportunities to feel solitude in Wilderness when hunting, fishing, hiking, or kayaking. By understand visitor use and your perceived impacts to solitude, we can chart where and when that opportunity is lost and then work to change that.

How do you Monitor Solitude?

Collecting data on solitude requires on-the-ground monitoring from folks already in the Wilderness areas. You can help by recording the number of boats, planes, or people you see or hear in Sitka Community Wilderness Stewardship Project Solitude Monitoring booklet and returning it.

How You Can Help

Wilderness Stewardship--In Alaska, we are lucky that our Wilderness areas are so pristine, but they need community support to stay that way. Here are some ways you can support Wilderness Stewardship in your area:

Solitude Monitoring Conservation groups and agencies throughout the Tongass are collecting data on the "opportunities for solitude" in our Wilderness. Contact Sitka Conservation Society before you head out to a Wilderness area to get a Solitude Monitoring Form.

Enjoy it! The best way you can help is to be an advocate for your local Wilderness area. Get out into Wilderness and enjoy it in a respectful way. If we all enjoy the Wilderness and try to keep our impact on Wilderness Character as minimal as possible, everyone can enjoy a pristine experience. Take other people with you and let them know what a Wilderness is and why it is important.

Start a "Friends" group If you want to ensure that Wilderness will still be wild for generations to come, consider starting a "Friends" group. These groups help coordinate volunteers for stewardship and engage the community in Wilderness issues, education, and protection.

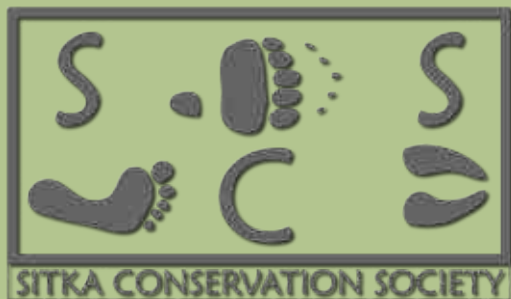
Invasive Plants Non-native plants are a major threat to many Wilderness areas in the nation. Luckily we have relatively few in Alaska, but it is important to treat them before the population can spread. Contact SCS to get an Invasive Plant Identification Guide and a Monitoring Form.

Volunteer Contact the Forest Service office in your district to see how you can volunteer.

For more information contact:

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www.sitkawild.org/wilderness



Resources for Wilderness Stewardship:

www.wilderness.net - a comprehensive guide to Wilderness management and stewardship including tools for Wilderness monitoring, education, and stewardship.

www.wildernessalliance.org - resources on Wilderness "Friends" groups including support and tools for starting a Friends group.

www.sitkawild.org/wilderness - information about the Sitka Community Wilderness Stewardship Project.

www.fs.fed.us - information on National Forest Wilderness and contact information for local Districts to find volunteer opportunities.

www.lnt.org - information on how to leave a minimal impact in Wilderness areas.

