

Untrammeled Wilderness

Kevin Proescholdt

Kevin Proescholdt currently serves on the board of Wilderness Watch and is a past board president. A former Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness guide, he helped pass the 1978 BWCA Wilderness Act and is the lead author of Troubled Waters: The Fight for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (1995).

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For many Minnesotans and others across the country, a visit to one of our nation's designated wilderness areas is a highlight of the year. The Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) in northeastern Minnesota has been the nation's most popular and most visited preserve for decades. Minnesota also has two lesser-known federal wilderness areas: the Agassiz Wilderness near Thief River Falls, and the Tamarac Wilderness by Detroit Lakes. While efforts to designate areas like the BWCAW as wilderness have received much public attention, the story of ongoing stewardship and protection is often neglected.¹

The word *untrammeled* is the key descriptor in the Wilderness Act of 1964 that designated and protects wilderness areas across the country, including what is now known as the BWCAW. In perhaps the most poetic passage in any federal statute, this law eloquently defined a wilderness 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.”

Despite recent historical research, the full meaning and some of the inspiration for choosing this touchstone word remain little known or understood.²

The 1964 act, in addition to defining wilderness areas and mandating their protection, also established the National Wilderness Preservation System. Initially this system encompassed 54 areas across the nation—all managed by the U.S. Forest Service—that totaled 9.1 million acres. The million-acre Boundary Waters Canoe Area, as it was then called, accounted for one-ninth of the system.³ Today, 47 years later, the National Wilderness Preservation System has grown dramatically to cover more than 757 areas and 110 million acres. All of these areas are governed by the 1964 law and its mandate to protect the character of untrammeled wilderness.

Howard Zahniser, executive secretary of the Wilderness Society from 1945 to 1964, largely wrote the Wilderness Act and purposely chose the word *untrammeled*. The scholarly “Zahnie,” as his friends called him, loved books and literature, thought deeply about wilderness values, and was a keen wordsmith in his own right. He edited the organization’s magazine, *The Living Wilderness*, and wrote a monthly column for almost a quarter-century in *Nature Magazine*.⁴

Zahniser also visited wilderness areas himself, some through his work and others with his family. He bought a cabin in New York’s Adirondack Mountains, which became his family’s retreat and base for many wilderness adventures. As part of his work, Zahniser traveled in such areas as the Big Horn Mountains and Wind River Mountains in Wyoming, the Gila Wilderness in New Mexico, Denali National Park in Alaska, and the Quetico-Superior region of Minnesota and Ontario.

Two of Zahniser’s close friends and confidants were Minnesota conservationists Ernest C. Oberholtzer and Sigurd F. Olson. Oberholtzer had served as one of the eight founders of the Wilderness Society in 1935 and remained on the organization’s governing council throughout Zahniser’s tenure there. Olson joined the council in 1956 and, like Oberholtzer, served there throughout the eight-year struggle to pass the Wilderness Act. Both Minnesotans provided advice and counsel to Zahniser throughout the lengthy legislative process.

Zahniser drafted the first version of the bill in February 1956, writing in longhand on a ruled pad of paper. In this first rough draft he did not define wilderness areas, nor did the word *untrammeled* appear. It was also absent from a March 19 version, but Zahniser had settled on *untrammeled* by May 15, as evidenced by a mimeographed, typed draft of the bill with that date.⁵

Untrammeled was retained in the wilderness bill introduced by Senator Hubert H. Humphrey as S. 4013 on June 7, 1956.⁶ In this first formal bill, Zahniser crafted this definition: “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 untrammeled by man, where man himself is a member of the natural community who visits but does not remain and whose travels leave only trails.” This definition, with only minor alterations to the last clause, would survive eight long

years of hearings and 66 rewrites until final passage in 1964.

Even at the time, untrammeled was a seldom-used word. Some people incorrectly assumed that it meant “untrampled.” Colleagues tried to talk Zahniser out of using such an arcane word. But untrammeled provided the precise definition Zahniser wanted for wilderness and wilderness character. A trammel is a net for catching fish, for example, or a hobble for confining horses. Untrammeled, then, means unconfined, uncontrolled, unrestrained, or unmanipulated—exactly the connotations Zahniser sought.

Wilderness areas would remain untrammeled by humans, allowing ecological and evolutionary forces to operate without restraint, modification, or manipulation. Untrammeled also matched the etymological origin of the word *wilderness*: literally, “self-willed land” or “place of wild beasts,” in Old English.⁷

Zahniser explained the intended meaning of his chosen adjective in a 1957 speech: “We describe an area as wilderness because of a character it has—not because of a particular use that it serves. A wilderness is an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man. (Untrammeled—not untrampled—untrammeled, meaning free, unbound, unhampered, unchecked, having the freedom of the wilderness.)”⁸

Sigurd Olson provided editorial suggestions to Zahniser at several different points in the process, as did other confidants. At a June 1957 meeting of the Wilderness Society’s executive committee, for example, Olson suggested a number of changes to the wilderness legislation, including eliminating the bill’s proposed Wilderness Council. In editing a July 22, 1957, draft of the bill, Olson crossed out untrammeled and wrote in “undisturbed by man,” noting that this was Forest Service language, suggested during the June 1957 Senate hearing. But Zahniser clung tenaciously to his eloquent description and his word, and Olson apparently deferred to his choice.⁹

Zahniser explained his rationale two years later to a colleague from the National Parks Association who also suggested that he substitute the word *undisturbed*: “The idea within the word ‘Untrammeled’ of . . . not being subjected to human controls and manipulations that hamper the free play of natural forces is the distinctive one that seems to make this word the most suitable one for its purpose within the Wilderness

Bill.”¹⁰ It would also provide guidance for understanding the act’s references to “wilderness character.” This key term was as yet undefined, even though the legislation required federal agencies to preserve the “wilderness character” of “wilderness areas.” Not until 2001 did the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service produce a definition, perhaps the best to date, and in keeping with the original intent.

Preserving wilderness character requires that we maintain the wilderness condition: the natural, scenic condition of the land, biological diversity, biological integrity, environmental health, and ecological and evolutionary processes. But the character of wilderness embodies more than a physical condition.

*The character of wilderness refocuses our perception of nature and our relationship to it. It embodies an attitude of humility and restraint that lifts our connection to a landscape from the utilitarian, commodity orientation that often dominates our relationship with nature to the symbolic realm serving other human needs. We preserve wilderness character by our compliance with wilderness legislation and regulation, but also by imposing limits upon ourselves.*¹¹

Untrammeled embodies this notion of restraint and humility. It provided an essential starting point in interpreting and applying the 1964 law.

Going forward, the concept of untrammeled has helped both to limit and to drive much of the ongoing stewardship required of the federal land-management agencies charged in 1964 with preserving an area’s wilderness character.¹² An untrammeled wilderness, for example, allows forces like natural fires to play out their ecological and evolutionary role without human attempts to suppress them, though the Wilderness Act does permit agencies to control fires. In the BWCAW, for example, the Forest Service allows some natural fires to burn but suppresses others that threaten to escape beyond the wilderness boundaries. Thus, the 2006 Turtle Lake Fire inside the BWCAW was allowed to burn without interference, but the Cavity Lake Fire (also inside the wilderness), which threatened homes and resorts at the end of the Gunflint Trail, was fought.¹³

An untrammeled wilderness must also be free from human manipulations, even those proposed for seemingly beneficial reasons such as restoring a diminished tree species to its former abundance through

extensive planting or aerial seeding. While beneficial, perhaps, from the standpoint of naturalness, such manipulation would detract from the area's wildness. For this reason, the Forest Service has consistently denied permission for extensive seeding of white pines in the BWCAW.¹⁴

Zahniser reiterated the concept of untrammelled wilderness in an editorial he wrote for *The Living Wilderness* a year before the bill became law. In 1963 a special panel of ecologists and biologists produced a study of wildlife management in national parks for Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall. Among other things, the panel suggested that, under some circumstances, some human interventions might be appropriate in national parks, including wilderness areas within the parks. In particular, the panel proposed landscape restoration and other changes that would return parks to the "condition that prevailed when the area was first visited by the white men."¹⁵

Zahniser took exception to this recommendation. To do as the panel suggested, he wrote, would "contrast with the wilderness philosophy of protecting areas at their boundaries and trying to let natural forces operate within the wilderness untrammelled by man." He argued that for wilderness areas, people should be "guardians not gardeners," underscoring his intent that wilderness areas should not be manipulated by humans. A dozen years later, in a case that halted logging of virgin forest in the BWCAW, Federal Judge Miles Lord echoed Zahniser's epigram: "Nature may not always be as beautiful as a garden but producing gardens is not the aim of the Wilderness Act."¹⁶

In his recent fine biography of Howard Zahniser, historian Mark Harvey wrote that Zahniser chose the word *untrammelled* after hearing his friend and long-time wilderness-preservation advocate Polly Dyer use it in 1956 to describe an Olympic Park beach in her home state of Washington.¹⁷ It is also likely, however, that Zahniser's conversation with Dyer reminded him of an earlier inspiration for the word, in the writings of legendary wilderness advocate Robert Marshall.


A founder of the Wilderness Society in 1935, Bob Marshall served as its guiding spirit and financial supporter until his untimely death four years later at age 38. He had worked for both the U.S. Department of the Interior and the U.S. Forest Service during Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. An exuberant and energetic wilderness traveler, often hiking 40 or even 50 miles a day, he had extensively explored the remote

Brooks Range in Alaska in the 1920s and 1930s. Like Zahniser, Marshall was a friend of Minnesotans Oberholtzer and Olson and had gone canoeing with Olson in August 1937 in the Quetico-Superior region, the international area now known as the BWCAW and Quetico Provincial Park.¹⁸

Marshall was also a prolific author. His articles and books, in all likelihood, brought Zahniser's attention to the word *untrammeled*, even if Marshall's connotations differed somewhat from Zahniser's (see sidebar). For Marshall, untrammeled usually described vast, natural, and undisturbed country; wilderness advocates of the 1930s felt less concern than did their successors about maintaining ecological and evolutionary processes. In a path-breaking 1930 article, however, he did describe wilderness as free "from the manifestations of human will," a concept that presaged Zahniser's thoughts.¹⁹

Marshall's uses of the adjective almost certainly served as examples to Zahniser, who was clearly familiar with Marshall's writings. When Zahniser began work at the Wilderness Society, he grounded himself in the organization's literary history and the thinking of its founders. And Marshall and Zahniser knew each other, having attended at least one Wilderness Society meeting together in 1936.²⁰

Zahniser himself acknowledged Marshall as an inspiration in "The Need for Wilderness Areas," one of his most important and frequently reprinted speeches. "Robert Marshall," Zahniser said, "whose memory I honor with admiration and deep gratitude, conveys such an appreciation of the wilderness *as a superlative*." After quoting a posthumously published article of Marshall's, Zahniser then asked, "Who that can see clearly these superlative values of the wilderness through the perceptions and interpretations of Robert Marshall can fail to sense a need for preserving wilderness areas?"²¹

Robert Marshall, then, clearly inspired Howard Zahniser's work in general and his selection of the critical word *untrammeled* to help define the concept of wilderness. The protection and stewardship of designated wilderness areas across the country continue to rely on this definition. Minnesota's Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and the rest of the National Wilderness Preservation System have greatly benefited from Zahniser's carefully considered and ardently defended choice of that "arcane" word. 

Notes

1. The authoritative text on the background and development of the wilderness idea in America is Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3d ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982).
2. Wilderness Act of 1964, Public Law 88-577, 88th Cong., 4 sess. (Sept. 1964). One source is Douglas W. Scott, "Untrammelled," *Wilderness Character*, and the Challenges of Wilderness Preservation," *Wild Earth* 11 (Fall/Winter 2001-02): 72-79.
3. For an overview of the wilderness movement and the passage of the Wilderness Act, see Doug Scott, *The Enduring Wilderness* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2004). For a more detailed legislative history, see Michael McCloskey, "The Wilderness Act of 1964: Its Background and Meaning," *Oregon Law Review* 45 (1966): 288-321. The Boundary Waters has a rich conservation history of its own, stretching back at least to the 1920s. In the 1964 act it was singled out for special compromise provisions that allowed certain logging and motorboat use to continue. With the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness Act of 1978, Congress removed those exceptions and afforded new protections—though not yet full wilderness protections. See Kevin Proescholdt, Rip Rapson, and Miron L. Heinselman, *Troubled Waters: The Fight for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness* (St. Cloud: North Star Press of St. Cloud, 1995).
4. Here and two paragraphs below, Mark Harvey, *Wilderness Forever: Howard Zahniser and the Path to the Wilderness Act* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005), 126, 142-44.
5. Scott, *Enduring Wilderness*, 48; Wilderness Bill folder, Wilderness Society Files, Conservation Activities section, Sigurd F. Olson Papers, Minnesota Historical Society (MHS).
6. See Humphrey's remarks in *Congressional Record*, June 7, 1956, 84th Cong., 2d sess., 9772-83. Rep. John Saylor introduced the House companion bill as H.R. 11703. On Humphrey's growing interest in wilderness conservation, see Proescholdt et al., *Troubled Waters*, 2-10. Though Humphrey did not continue as the lead Senate author after 1960, his stature and progressive reputation had given the bill great credibility. On the early involvement of Humphrey and the role of the Boundary Waters, see Mark Harvey, "Sound Politics: Wilderness, Recreation, and Motors in the Boundary Waters, 1945-1964," *Minnesota History* 58 (Fall 2002): 130-45.
7. Harvey, *Wilderness Forever*, 75-76; Dave Foreman, *Rewilding North America: A Vision for Conservation in the 21st Century* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2004), 192.
8. Howard Zahniser, "The Wilderness Bill and Foresters," delivered to the Washington, D.C., chapter of the Society of American Foresters, Mar. 14, 1957, Senate Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, *Hearings before the Committee on S. 1176*, 85th Congress, 1st sess., June 19-20, 1957, p. 212-13.
9. See Wilderness Society Executive Committee, minutes, June 25, 1957, and Proposed Wilderness Bill, July 22, 1957, both in Conservation Activities section, Olson papers. There is no proof that Olson transmitted his editorial suggestion to Zahniser, since no cover letter accompanies the annotated draft bill in Olson's files. The two men communicated so frequently and were such good friends that Olson most likely did pass it on.
10. Howard Zahniser to C. Edward Graves, Apr. 25, 1959, cited in Scott, "Untrammelled," 75.
11. Department of the Interior, Fish and Wildlife Service, "Draft Wilderness Stewardship Policy Pursuant to the Wilderness Act of 1964," *Federal Register*, Jan. 16, 2001, p. 3714.
12. "Wilderness stewardship" is preferred to the older term, "wilderness management," since stewardship implies a less manipulative and more wilderness-oriented oversight. The main text for stewardship is John C. Hendee and Chad P. Dawson, *Wilderness Management: Stewardship and Protection of Resources and Values* 3d ed. (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2002). The conservation organization that best understands and promotes wilderness stewardship is Wilderness Watch, Missoula, MT, www.wildernesswatch.org.
13. See, for example, *Duluth News-Tribune*, July 30, 2006, p. 1A. Section 4(d)(1) of the Wilderness Act allows agencies to control fire.
14. For arguments against manipulating wilderness ecosystems, see James M. Glover, "Can We Stop Trying to Control Nature?" *International Journal of Wilderness* 6 (April 2000): 4-8. For a good discussion of some of the problems associated with manipulation, see George Nickas, "Preserving an Enduring Wilderness: Challenges and Threats to the National Wilderness Preservation System," *Denver University Law Review* 76 (1999): 453-57.
15. Stanley Cain, Ira Gabrielson, Clarence Cottam, Thomas Kimball, and A. Starker Leopold, "Wildlife Management in the National Parks," *Living Wilderness* 83 (Spring/Summer 1963): 13.
16. Howard Zahniser, "Guardians Not Gardeners," *Living Wilderness* 83 (Spring/Summer 1963): 2; *Minnesota Public Interest Research Group v. Butz*, 401 F. Supp. 1276, 1331 (1975).
17. Harvey, *Wilderness Forever*, 119, 202. In a 1960 letter, Zahniser wrote about staying with Dyer: "Also that was the time we tried out the use of the word 'untrammelled' to describe or help define wilderness. Four years ago," Howard Zahniser to Irving Clark, May 19, 1960, cited in AnneMarie Lankard Moore, "Robert Marshall, Howard Zahniser, and the Wilderness Society: A Life History Study of Agency and Structure in U.S. Wilderness Conservation" (Ph.D. diss., University of Idaho, 2004), 373.
18. James M. Glover, *A Wilderness Original: The Life of Bob Marshall* (Seattle: The Mountaineers, 1986). For Marshall's canoe trip with Olson, see Sigurd F. Olson, "Quetico Superior Elegy," *Living Wilderness* 13 (Spring 1948): 5-12. For some of Marshall's Forest Service work that affected the BWCAV, see Kevin Proescholdt, "How Wilderness Returned to Brule Lake," *Minnesota Volunteer* 50 (Jan.-Feb. 1987): 25-31.
19. Robert Marshall, "The Problem of the Wilderness," *Scientific Monthly* 30 (Feb. 1930): 143. Moore, "Robert Marshall," 373, also suggests that this article influenced Zahniser's choice of wording.
20. Edward Zahniser, personal communication to author, May 14, 2007; "First Meeting of the Washington Section of The Wilderness Society," Apr. 4, 1936, Robert Marshall Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, cited in Moore, "Robert Marshall," 192-93.
21. Zahniser first gave this speech on May 24, 1955, at the National Citizen's Planning Conference on Parks and Open Spaces for the American People in Washington, D.C. Hubert Humphrey had the speech inserted in the *Congressional Record*, June 1, 1955, p. A3809-A3812. It was soon published as "The Need for Wilderness Areas," *National Parks Magazine* 29 (Oct./Dec. 1955): 161-66 and then reprinted under the same title in *Living Wilderness* 59 (Winter/Spring 1956-57): 37-43. It appeared more recently in Ed Zahniser, ed., *Where Wilderness Preservation Began: Adirondack Writings of Howard Zahniser* (Utica, NY: North Country Books, 1992), 59-66.

Robert Marshall "A perfectly new, untrammelled world"

- Marshall first gained national prominence as a writer with a seminal 1930 article, "The Problem of the Wilderness." In describing the self-sufficiency required in wilderness, he wrote, "This is inconceivable under the effete superstructure of urbanity; it demands the harsh environment of untrammelled expanses." Zahniser quoted this article extensively, including this sentence, in his lengthy 1949 essay for the Legislative Reference Service of the Library of Congress.
- Marshall used the word *untrammelled* twice in his well-known 1937 article for *Nature Magazine*, "The Universe of the Wilderness is Vanishing." In describing a remote Rocky Mountain lake, for example, he wrote: "Everything about the place, from the bright green sedges that surrounded the lake, to the lodgepole-covered mountain sides that rose from its shores, to the rock-covered pinnacles that jutted far above it, was a perfectly new, untrammelled world, just as it had come fresh from the dawn of time." Zahniser, who had been writing a monthly column for *Nature* since 1935, quoted from Marshall's article at least twice, in speeches given in 1953 and 1957.
- A posthumous collection of Marshall's Alaska journals and earlier writings, initially entitled *Arctic Wilderness* (later, *Alaska Wilderness*), was published in 1956, just as Zahniser began drafting the wilderness act. These pieces had earlier been typed and distributed among friends, family, and wilderness advocates. *Untrammelled* appears three times in this book, which Zahniser had read and reviewed favorably in *Nature Magazine*.