

Wilderness Implications and its Actional Construction for Polar Regions

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Abstract: The idea of wilderness has changed dramatically over the course of history through actional and discursive channels. By this time, wilderness has remained an ambiguous and subjective term and this ambiguity has rendered its boundaries unclear in both lexical and geographical terms. With the drastically accelerating urbanization progress especially after the beginning of Industrial Revolution, related and somehow dichotomously perceived terms such as nature, wilderness, city, rural, urban has started to lose parts of their meaning and gained new ones. Although this change is more noticeable in climates suitable for urbanization, the geographical and semantic boundaries of wildlife and wilderness in regions with extreme weather conditions such as polar regions have changed more slowly. Even now, Arctic and Antarctic wildernesses are perceived as the last great wildernesses of the Earth due to the challenging weather conditions that make access more difficult than other areas in the world. Wilderness areas in these regions have started to gain importance as the areas whose wilderness and aesthetic values should be preserved. Yet, wilderness does not only contain natural but also social, cultural, economic and political implications. Considering these places have natural resources and recently started to become tourist attraction points, their wilderness values are now threatened by economic and political factors. So, wilderness in these regions has been more an idea than a real condition due to global climate change, economic interests and touristic activities. Consequently, the meaning of wilderness and its boundaries in the polar regions has now being reconstructed according to the interests of parties through legal, political, social and economic discourses.

Keywords: Polar wilderness, Arctic-Antarctic region, polar tourism, polar economy

Introduction

The idea and meaning of wilderness have been subjected to change depending on location and time. The reason why this change occurs over time and geographies is because people's life practices change over time, and the languages, words and their meanings change accordingly. With the acceleration and expansion of urbanization, the way people perceive and relate to nature has also changed. The places where humans have not set foot and changed have gradually decreased, and for this reason, the areas that we call "wilderness" have decreased significantly. The identification of an area as wilderness is a culturally and historically contingent process that evolves over time, and changing ideas and practices concerning meaning, values and uses determine this process of identification (Sæþórsdóttir & Saarinen, 2011, p.249). According to R. Summerson (2012), the word is thought to have derived from three words:

“wild,” “deor,” and “-ness,” and he quotes the idea of R. Nash who suggests that the root of the word “wild” is “will,” that might mean self-willed or uncontrollable (p.86). T. Tin and R. Summerson (2018) argue that in societies under the Judeo-Christian traditions, and we can add the Islamic tradition as well, the idea of wilderness has had a long history from its biblical usage as a desolate place to be dreaded to its modern definition as a wild nature that is a desirable place to visit (p.269). As a concept, wilderness is hard to translate across geographies and cultures. Furthermore, its modern notion is not something universally agreed upon (Summerson & Tin, 2018, p.269).

The concept of wilderness often refers to images of wild, distant and untrammelled natural areas which are untouched by human impacts, however, most of these places are the products of human activities that reflect past relationships with the environment and current preferences and values (Sæþórsdóttir, Hall & Saarinen, 2011, p.249). Since what is natural and what is not is mainly constructed through social, cultural, and economic practices and discourses, wilderness, as a part of “nature”, is also accepted as a social construct. Sæþórsdóttir, Hall and Saarinen (2011) argue that wilderness invokes a varied set of implications and representations that depend on the period, socio-cultural environment, and experiences of people. Therefore, the boundaries and degrees of naturalness and “wildness” of areas considered to be “wilderness” are constantly changed by human practices. In order for a place to be described as wilderness, it must be compared to other areas such as urbanized or inhabited places such as cities and villages. In other words, wilderness cannot exist without an observer who experiences it, and therefore the notion of wilderness and nature contains an extraordinary amount of human history (Sæþórsdóttir, Hall & Saarinen, 2011, p.253). This history consists of people’s changing habits and lifestyles, their relationship with nature and changes they prefer to make in nature.

From the very beginning of history, humans’ relationship to nature has been problematic in the sense that people had seen nature as something to be ruled over. Consequently, the areas once called “wilderness” have significantly decreased as people become more and more capable of changing nature. In spite of all the developments, some places remained remote and inaccessible for until very recently. It can be said that polar regions have been among these inaccessible places due to extreme weather conditions. Hence, wilderness characteristics have long been associated with high latitude and polar regions (Sæþórsdóttir, Hall, & Saarinen, 2011, p.249). By the late 1990s polar regions came to be seen as among the last pristine wilderness of the world, symbolizing all that was threatening to move forever beyond our sight (Flack, 2016, p.651). However, polar regions are also extremely fragile areas since those places are susceptible to change through human activity (Stewart, Draper & Johnston, 2005;2010, p.383), and they become more and more fragile due to the global climate change. The polar regions consist of two geographical parts, the south (Antarctic) and north (Arctic) polar regions. Stewart, Draper and Johnston

(2005;2010) state that while it is easy to point out south polar region, the northern polar region is more complicated to mark:

Our definition of the Antarctic, delimited by its ocean boundaries, is self-explanatory. The definition of the Arctic is much more problematic. The confusion arises because terms such as “the Arctic”, “circumpolar north”, “northern regions”, and “the North” have been used interchangeably, depending on the needs of the research discipline. It comprises Alaska, northern Canada (Labrador, northern Quebec, northern Manitoba, Nunavut, Northwest Territories, and Yukon Territory), Greenland, Iceland, northern Fennoscandia (Norway, Sweden, and Finland), and northern Russia (p.384).

For a long time, while there have been settlements in some parts of the Arctic region, and it has been linked to the rest of the world which is populated by humans, Antarctica had remained more isolated and inaccessible due to its oceanic boundaries. It has long been perceived as a distant empty field. M. Senatore (1029) suggests that remoteness, extreme environment, isolation, and lack of a native human population are factors that historically have contributed to misperceptions of Antarctica as an inaccessible empty space (p.755). Even though Antarctica is a separate and unique entity, it is also linked to the rest of the world by atmospheric and oceanographic processes (Summerson, 2012, p.89).

Arctic region has a longer history with humans than Antarctica. People’s relationships with this icy world has differed depending on culture and period. For example, in the Middle Ages Iceland and other northern Europe regions was considered as a frontier of wilderness region, accordingly the frontier of the civilized European world (Sæþórsdóttir, Hall & Saarinen, 2011, p.254). Before that, it had been used by early settlers and farmers, then feared and avoided for centuries, and now it is admired by domestic and international tourist for its spectacular nature and “wilderness experience” it offers (Sæþórsdóttir, Hall & Saarinen, 2011, p.251). In the old stories and folktales, Iceland was reflected as a hostile environment, an exotic place with extreme weather conditions and these images were created and re-created through social practices (Sæþórsdóttir, Hall & Saarinen, 2011, pp.253-260). In the nineteenth century, Romantics began to portray a different perspective on the region, admiring its sublime and wild properties in the poems, pictures and writings (Sæþórsdóttir & Saarinen, 2016, p.83). It is suggested that in most cases, discursive practices by government agencies and tourism, business and political interests have transformed/constructed perceptions and portrayals of wilderness to serve their own interests (Sæþórsdóttir, Hall & Saarinen, 2011, p.253). Even though the image of wilderness remains today in the region, its meaning and notion has changed from a threatening and dangerous place to adventure and attraction destination for domestic and international tourists (Sæþórsdóttir, Hall & Saarinen, 2011, p.260). Many features that were once perceived as frightening and threatening have now become elements that increase the tourist value of the region.

Public imagination of the Arctic and Antarctic is fed by notions of untouched wilderness, but the polar regions have long been places of industrial resource extraction and other scientific activities that require large-scale infrastructures (Schweitzer, Povoroznyuk, & Schiesser, 2017, p.1). For example, in the 20th century, Soviet perspective of the Arctic is expressed in concepts such as “the war against the environment”, “the struggle with the elements”, “the conquest of nature” which portrayed the Soviet viewpoint of industrialization, so it can be argued that as other industrialized countries, Soviet Russia perceived nature from an economic perspective (Schweitzer, Povoroznyuk, & Schiesser, 2017, p.8). As it can be seen from the examples of Soviet Russia and Iceland, the idea of wilderness is interpreted differently depending on the period, political and economic interests, people’s and governments’ relationship to nature, therefore, the notion of wilderness is more an idea than an external reality.

The traditional idea of wilderness proposes a rejection of the evidence of human action and ignores the fact that most places called wilderness have been inhabited by indigenous peoples for a long time (Sæþórsdóttir & Saarinen, 2016, p.84). Besides, anthropologists and other social scientists have argued that “wilderness” is a western concept alien to the indigenous inhabitants of the polar regions (Schweitzer, Povoroznyuk & Schiesser, 2017, p.1). These remarks further strengthen the idea of wilderness concept as a social construct affected by social, cultural and economic patterns. Polar wildernesses’ meaning is different to everyone; a resource warehouse, a sacred environment to be preserved for future generations, a tourist attraction place, etc. (Loeffler, 2018, p.i). In general, the polar landscape is characterized by wide open spaces, (in the case Iceland) vast lava fields, large ice caps, geothermal areas, poor accessibility and harsh climate (Sæþórsdóttir & Saarinen, 2016, p.84). For this reason, it is defined as uncultivated and undeveloped by some people, a natural economic/touristic resource by others.

The beginning of accumulation of knowledge about European polar area, apart from the folktales and myths, coincides in the late 18th century. In particular, foreign scholars and natural historians started to study on the Iceland landscape and mapped the area, as the country became seen as a ‘laboratory’ where the history of the earth can be observed due to its creation by ‘fire and ice’ (Sæþórsdóttir, Hall, & Saarinen, 2011, p.262-267). Old routes were rediscovered, and interior areas were mapped in the 19th century and the knowledge about the area has gradually increased (Sæþórsdóttir, Hall & Saarinen, 2011, p.261). Consequently, the increased knowledge, the region's becoming more familiar than an unknown and feared space and scientific studies conducted on it changed the meaning of the region and increased its value. As for its wilderness value, there remained different points of view. First, the dominating attitude towards polar wilderness was fear due to its unknown properties. Also, it was perceived as a place untouched by humans; in the case of Arctic, the natural environment is generally regarded as hostile and it is characterized by low economic capacity and population density (Sæþórsdóttir &

Saarinen, 2016, p.82). The desirability of the landscape is mostly measured by its economic capacity. Conservationist and forestry expert Giffor Pinchot's famous statement "wilderness is waste" can be demonstrated as an example for this utilitarian point of view (qtd. in Newton, 2016, p.127). Nowadays these wilderness areas have gained economic importance and promoted as products or sites of consumption (Sæþórsdóttir, Hall & Saarinen, 2011 p.249). Sæþórsdóttir, Hall & Saarinen (2011) argue that in the case of Iceland wilderness, the areas with increasing touristic value are generally regarded as natural, but in fact human artifact:

Most travelers in Iceland probably do not know that the unvegetated land at the border of the Highlands is not 'natural' but partly created by poor natural resource management over the centuries. Ironically, such a situation (lack of environmental knowledge) has possibly helped to maintain a wilderness experience for present-day visitors (p.254).

It can be concluded from this information that although these regions are called wilderness, in fact, human effects have been continuing in these places since old times, and the traditional meaning of wilderness as an untouched place cannot be adapted to many 'wilderness' regions.

Increasing scientific and touristic value of polar regions are among the elements that increase both economic value and the fragility of these regions. This situation led to the necessity to consider the intrinsic value of the polar wildernesses. Recent analyses concluded that Antarctica is one of the planet's "least protected regions" and that the distribution of Antarctica's protected areas is inadequate, unrepresentative and largely reflective of national geopolitical factors (Summerson & Tin, 2018 p.267). Both Arctic and Antarctic regions are already threatened by global climate change, therefore these places have become the subject of many governmental policies and environmental protocols. In Madrid Protocol on Environmental Protection (1991) Antarctica's wilderness values are designated as natural areas to be preserved. In Article 3, it is noted that "intrinsic value of Antarctica" including its "wilderness and aesthetic values and its value as an area for the conduct of scientific research" should be preserved and activities should be planned to avoid "degradation of, or substantial risk to, areas of biological, scientific, historic or wilderness significance" (qtd. in Summerson, 2012, p.79). In the protocol, Antarctica has been pointed as a "natural reserve devoted to peace and science", but the key phrases in the Environmental Protocol such as "interest of all mankind" and "wilderness and aesthetic values" have not been defined and are subject to interpretation (Peden, Tin, Pertierra, Tejedo & Benayas, 2016, p.541). Also, the fragility of area is pointed in another report by SCAR (Scientific Committee on Antarctic Research), titled "Man's Impact on the Antarctic Environment: a procedure for evaluating impacts from scientific and logistic activities":

The Antarctic is the epitome of wilderness, yet it has contributed much to human welfare through the scientific discoveries made there. Continued use of the Antarctic, especially if increased, could erode or destroy some of the natural qualities of this unspoilt wilderness unless special care is taken to avoid or reduce the effects of new activities (qtd. in Summerson, 2012, p.83).

These documents and reports show that the fragility of these regions should be considered not only for economic interest, but because their assets are important for the ecosystem and have significant aesthetic value that should be preserved.

The most prominent feature of the polar wildernesses is that these natural areas are at risk, but there are very different views in societies about these areas and their importance. Some researchers state that differences in environmental attitudes and behaviours are determined by the values and world views, which, in turn, vary between countries. (Tin, Peden, O'Reilly, Bastmeijer, Maher, Handelshögskolan, 2019, p.63). In a study conducted between March 2007 and June 2008, Tin and others (2011) collected 269 survey responses from inhabitants in the Tilburg area. Respondents were between the ages of 15 and 91; they perceived wilderness as a place where "nature goes its own path without human intervention" and many respondents answered that 'as little (human activity) as possible' should be in wilderness, and that use should be restricted to 'activities that add value and have only minimal impact.' (Peden, Tin, Pertierra, Tejedo & Benayas, 2016, p.543). In another survey conducted in 2013, 227 randomly selected students from Tilburg University valued Antarctica as (i) an important component of the earth's climate system, (ii) one of the world's last great wildernesses, and (iii) a science laboratory for the benefit of mankind and these three values were chosen by 50%-500% more respondents than the values of Antarctica as a tourist destination or a reserve of mineral resources (Peden, Tin, Pertierra, Tejedo & Benayas, 2016, p.543). The studies were adapted into an ethnographic interview to be used in California, USA and Spain. Most of the American respondents agreed that wilderness is a place that is not destroyed by humans and that should be preserved. They supported the idea of protecting Antarctica but not values; the statement 'protecting the wilderness values of Antarctica' as stated in the Protocol, was called 'a scam', 'an empty slogan', 'illogical' (Peden, Tin, Pertierra, Tejedo & Benayas, 2016, p.543). T. Tin and others (2016) concluded that the viewpoints about the importance of the Antarctica changed between two groups:

When asked about the importance of Antarctica, students in USA were more likely to indicate that the area is 'a reserve of mineral resources that might support society in the future'. For students in Spain, 'an important component of the Earth's climate system'. Less than 3% of the

*respondents indicate that “Antarctica has no value”
(p.546)*

These studies supports the idea that people’s belief in the dominant social paradigm of Western industrial societies -economic self-interest, technological optimism, and political liberalism- influences their perception of the changes necessary to alleviate environmental problems (Tin, Peden, O’Reilly, Bastmeijer, Maher, Handelshögskolan, 2019, p.63).

Legal Boundaries of “Wilderness”

One of the biggest proofs that wilderness is a social construct is not only that it means different to everyone, but also that it is a legally defined concept. The Wilderness Act of 1964 (USA) created a legal definition for “wilderness” in USA. According to the act, no matter how untrammled or wild, the establishment of wilderness area depends on congressional legislation, which means there may be places that are wilderness in fact, but not wilderness at law (Nagle, 2014, p.376). For example, ANWR (Arctic National Wildlife Refuge) is a pristine wilderness but also it is the site of the largest petroleum reserves in the US, therefore George W. Bush made open ANWR to oil drilling as a national energy policy (Nagle, 2014, p.383). ANWR area is wilderness in fact but not wilderness at law, so wilderness designations depend on whether the Congress judges it desirable to impose Wilderness Act’s legal restrictions on certain lands (Nagle, 2014, p.387). According to the Wilderness Act, wilderness areas should be preserved, and their wilderness character should not be spoiled. The act prohibits nine activities on these lands: temporary roads, motor vehicles, motorized equipment motorboats, aircraft landings, mechanical transport, structures or installations, permanent roads and commercial enterprises, but the first seven of those activities the Act contain exceptions (qtd. in Nagle, 2014, p.392). Similarly, the Icelandic concept of wilderness was used in 1990 in proposal for parliamentary on national tourism policy in which wilderness is stated as one of the most important resources of Icelandic tourism and a definition for the concept of “wilderness” was proposed ten years later in the Icelandic Nature Conservation Act (Sæþórsdóttir & Saarinen, 2016, p.84):

Wilderness: an area of land at least 25 km² in size, or in which it is possible to enjoy the solitude and nature without disturbance from man-made structures or the traffic of motorised vehicles on the ground, which is at least 5 km away from man-made structures or other evidence of technology, such as power lines, power stations, reservoirs and main roads, where no direct indications of human activity are visible and nature can develop without anthropogenic pressures (qtd. in Sæþórsdóttir & Saarinen, 2016, p.84).

As can be observed from these act, proposal and definition, the meaning and importance of wilderness changes from country to country. In USA, wilderness

areas can be kept out of the Wilderness Act according to the economic interests of the country. Similarly, in Iceland, the wilderness values are decided to be preserved due to the area's touristic potential. Ultimately, what is wilderness may be kept as a relative and changeable concept for the economic interests of a place.

Activities Conducted in Polar Regions

Although there is much emphasis on the fragility and susceptibility of the areas, many activities are carried out in the polar regions. Research field stations, oil drilling activities, power generating plants and touristic activities take place in Arctic and Antarctic regions. In Iceland, there are many hydropower plants that generate cheap renewable energy for the country. According to Sæþórsdóttir & Saarinen (2016), hydro-electric generation development has increasingly come into conflict with wilderness conservation (p.84). People who favor development in the area argue that abundance of natural resources has made it possible for the inhabitants to live in this hostile environment, therefore should continue to be used for the maintenance and increase in the wellbeing of the nation (Sæþórsdóttir & Saarinen, 2016, p.88). Thus, the Arctic region is the symbol of the tension between economic development and environmental protection, meaning, the tension between human identities as global consumers and global citizens (Loeffler, 2018, p.2). The region is also an important tourist attraction point. An all-encompassing definition of polar tourism is "all travel for pleasure and adventure within polar regions, exclusive of travel for primarily government, commercial, subsistence, military or scientific purposes" (Stewart, Draper & Johnston, 2005;2010, p.385). Research among tourists in the Icelandic wilderness has demonstrated that power plants have a negative impact on the "wilderness experience" of tourists as these plants ruin the naturalness of the area and the visual landscape (Sæþórsdóttir & Saarinen, 2016, p.85). Although tourists think that power plants reduce the wilderness experience, the existence of too many tourists jeopardizes the wilderness character of the site (Sæþórsdóttir & Saarinen, 2016, p.85). In the area, tourists are offered many activities such as hiking, biking, hunting and ice climbing. These group activities also negatively affect the area's "unspoiled" properties. Even though human influence in the uninhabited area in of Iceland has been significant, romantic vision of the wilderness does not seem to have been seriously affected (Sæþórsdóttir, Hall & Saarinen, 2011). To create a perfect balance between protection of the area and development of other industries such as power production and tourism is nearly impossible, but these industries have to share limited resources which in turn put further restrictions and negative effects on one another (Sæþórsdóttir & Saarinen, 2016, p.88). A similar situation can be observed in Antarctica as scientific research plants and tourism coexist but restrict one another in the continent. Polar tourism in Antarctica does not have long history since first touristic visit to the continent was in 1958, but after 1990s tourist numbers exceeded the numbers of national Antarctic staff (qtd. in Summerson, 2012, p.87). Besides touristic activities, the continent is home to

many scientific research plants which require a considerable amount of infrastructure that has a negative effect on wilderness properties of the region. Based on the correlation between scientific research intensity and wilderness degradation so far, it is argued that coexistence of science and wilderness in Antarctica is possible in theory but is not being achieved in practice (Tin, Peden, O'Reilly, Bastmeijer, Maher, Handelshogskolan, 2019, p.68).

These activities take place in polar regions primarily because of the areas' natural properties which allows for scientific researches, power generation and "wilderness tourism" activities. Paradoxically, wilderness properties in polar regions has significantly reduced and continue to be degraded by these activities. It is marked that legally defined wilderness area in Iceland have been reduced to approximately 70% mainly because of the power plants and touristic activities (qtd. in Sæþórsdóttir & Saarinen, 2016, p.84). The effect of these activities, particularly of power plants, is observed by Sæþórsdóttir & Saarinen (2016) as follows:

The visual impact of power plants in Icelandic landscape is significant. Hydropower plants comprise dams, canals, reservoirs, and large buildings housing the turbines and transformers... Hydropower plants often alter the neighbouring environment and natural heritage values a great deal, as when waterfalls disappear or diminish, rivers and canyons become dry, and vegetation disappears under the reservoirs. The geothermal power plants require large buildings for turbines and steam separators, the drill holes are noisy and emit steam and are connected to the main buildings by pipelines that stretch between the drill holes and the plant. In addition, the geothermal areas, which are characterised by colourful boiling ground and steaming geysers, can be damaged and made less interesting to observe, both when buildings are erected there and when the geothermal activity of the area is altered. Both types of power plants are accompanied by electrical power lines and their visual impact is massive, especially in wilderness areas, as the land is very barren and there are no trees to conceal the masts (p.85).

Unfortunately, the situation in Antarctica is no different. Construction of the Antarctic bases, the refuse they generate and harvesting of marine life are among the main reasons for the degradation of wilderness in Antarctica (Stewart, Draper, Johnston, 2005;2010, p.386). Besides, touristic activities have a great impact especially on the coastal area. Tourist sites are generally located on the coastal site and these places are particularly vulnerable because they don't have permanent ice cover (Stewart, Draper, Johnston, 2005;2010, p.386). This situation creates a great danger for the preservation of ice sheet in the coastal areas and consequently leads to degradation of natural environment. According

to Stewart, Draper and Johnston (2016) recent biological research into diseases of Antarctic wildlife has identified a wide range of potential disease-causing organisms in Antarctic fauna and it's thought that humans might transmit important pathogens between wildlife colonies (p.386). Both in Arctic and Antarctica, human influence is found in a wide spectrum from micro scales to macro-visual scales and gradually decreases the "natural" and "wilderness" qualities of polar areas.

Conclusion

Wilderness implications and values has been subjected to substantial changes over time. Wilderness qualities of polar regions used to evoke fearful images due to their inaccessibility and extreme weather conditions. Folktales, myths and travel stories strengthened this notion of dreadfulness of polar wilderness. As technological developments and advances in science have made polar regions more accessible, these places that used to be scary in the past became the center of attention. In this process, the meaning of wilderness gradually changed as people's relationships to and practices with these natural environments changed. Polar regions became the main places of scientific researches. As the scientific studies progressed, economic value of these unspoiled parts of the world has become prominent in determining the humans' relationship with these places. In the last fifty years, what was once feared has become the main reason of attraction of polar regions. New economic activities such as power generation and tourism and scientific activities started to take place in these regions primarily because of the areas' natural properties which allows for scientific researches, power generation and "wilderness tourism" activities. Paradoxically, conduction of these activities in polar regions has caused degradation in natural areas and the regions started to lose their "wilderness" character. So far human influence in the Arctic and Antarctic regions has been substantial due to the development in scientific and economic activities. As these extremely sensitive areas are presented as the places of consumption, their wilderness qualities have been subjected to dramatic changes. However, the notion of "wilderness" also changed in this process and its economic value as a tourist attraction point and reserve of natural resources has prevailed. "Wilderness" of the polar areas is now a subjective idea than a reality which contains natural, social, cultural, economic and political implications, and it will continue to change as our relationship with these regions changes.

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Prof. Dr. Ruhet Genç worked in various countries like the USA, Canada, Germany and France. By doing so he became aware of "Thinking Globally and Acting Locally". After returning back to Turkey, he continued to his business & teaching & research venture and he has been serving as full-time Prof at four different universities. During his academic life, he shared his experiences with students and other academicians. He specialized in Management and Strategy with special application in logistics and Tourism Management. Between various courses he taught, Cross-Cultural Management, Business Negotiations and Dispute Solving Methods (DSM), Tourism Management, International Hotel and Restaurant Management were just a few to mention at this point which might be useful to understand his international ties. He is a full-time faculty member of Turkish-German University in Istanbul at the present time.