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Urban Idealism Versus Wilderness Realism

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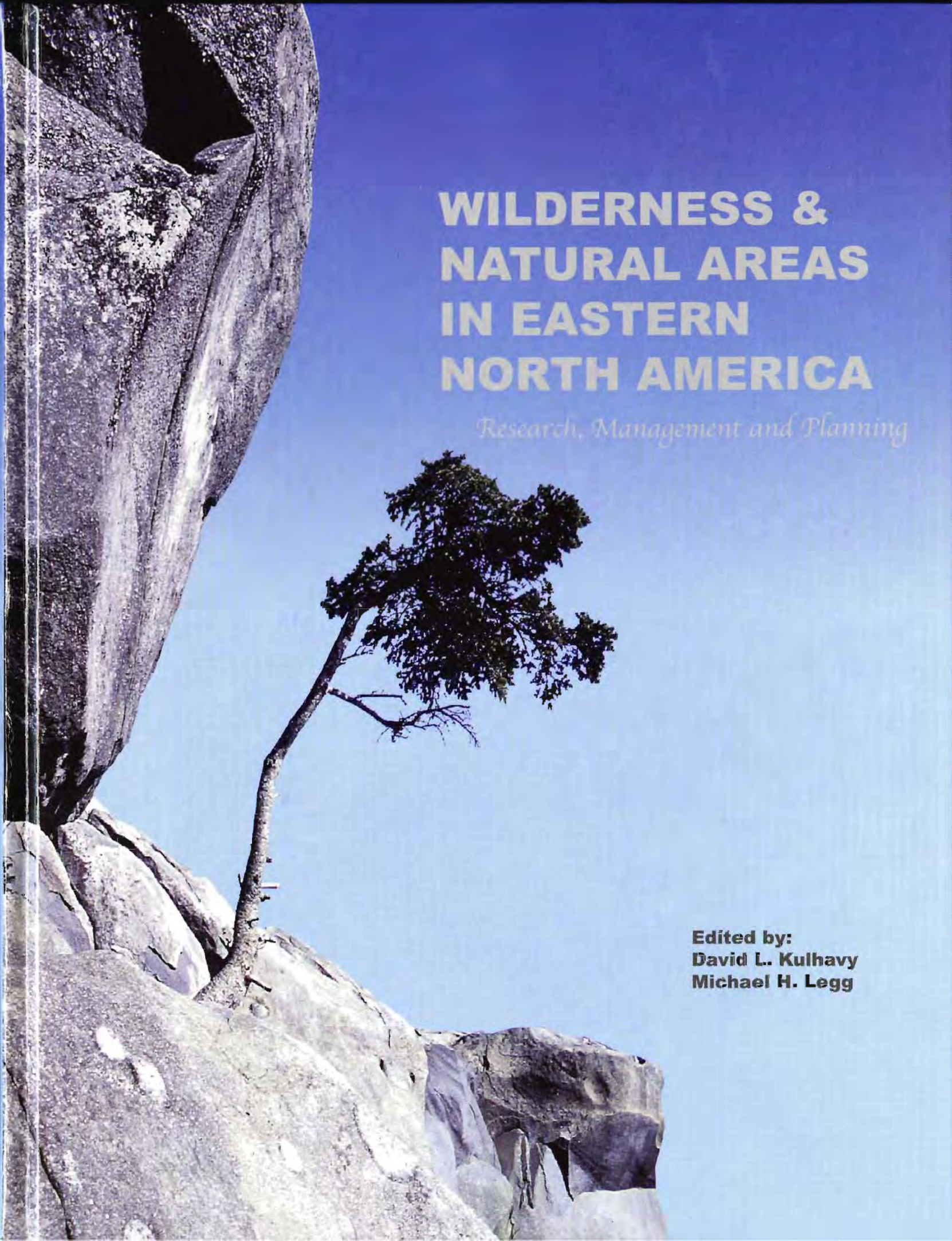

WILDERNESS & NATURAL AREAS IN EASTERN NORTH AMERICA

Research, Management and Planning

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A visitor to a large western park goads a bison to stand for a photograph. The massive beast tries to ignore him until he kicks it several times. Then it stands, charges and before the horrified eyes of his family, gores him to death Another bison, in Yellowstone National Park, falls through the ice onto a river. Environmentalists are shocked when the National Park Service takes no action. Amid strident protests, the Park Service finally backs down and attempts to rescue the animal. It dies in spite of their efforts. Unheard of not many years ago, coyotes, often fed by misguided suburbanites, now occasionally attack joggers and small children. Even mountain lions have joined in this seemingly alien behavior as civilization and the wild encroach on one another and blend in unpredictable ways.

A climbing party in the Cascade Mountains of Washington is hit by a sudden blizzard. Failing to use training they have been given, two people continue to hike through the storm rather than build snow shelters and they die of hypothermia. Their families sue the guides, the guides' company, and for permitting the forests to be used in this dangerous manner, even the US Forest Service is hailed into court. A little over a week ago, 8 people died attempting to climb 29,028 foot Mt. Everest in the Himalayas. Over the years, approximately 100 of the roughly 600 who have attempted to scale its heights, or 1 out of every 6, have died on the mountain. Radioing what would be his last words to any living soul, Rob Hall, an experienced climber and a leader of the expedition, spoke by VHF radio high on the mountain through a satellite telephone patch at base camp to his 7 months pregnant wife in New Zealand telling her not to worry about him too much. Trapped by a freak blizzard, without tent or sleeping bag, he was one who died during that night. One survivor was brought off the mountain by the highest ever helicopter rescue from an elevation of 20,000 feet. The paradox is that these deaths occurred in 1996 in the presence of the highest technology available. Even so, nothing could be done to save them when natural processes intervened. Does this mean that mountaineering ventures like this ought not be attempted, or that nature was unfair? No, it merely reinforces a point I've been making for years. In over 30 years of teaching wilderness survival, a major point I always make is that my students ñ be they fighter pilots or Boy Scouts ñ are not learning to beat Mother Nature at her own game. First of all, nature is not a female, whether mother or maiden. When we survive wilderness emergencies, we do so by learning to function within the constraints of a series of rather randomly distributed and very powerful natural forces. One of the things a person learns in true wilderness is the fact that "fair" and "life" have nothing to do with one another. If you are doing the last 15 minutes of Ph.D. research on mountain snow structure in a remote valley and a monstrous avalanche engulfs you, you're not going to graduate even if you scream "it's not fair" all the way down.

If wilderness is to remain, it is imperative that people stop trying to mold it to their ideas of "fair" and "appropriate" , demanding complete safety in the outdoors. Almost by definition, when we leave the relative sheltered confines of our homes and wander far from the doorstep of trauma centers and critical care units, life becomes less safe. And, that is as it should be. Yes, mentally limited people, whether youth or adult, should be protected from themselves and perhaps prevented from bringing deep sadness upon those who love them. And, we shouldn't allow children to wander untaught and unguided

in dangerous wilds. But, apparently competent adults ought to be able to, even if that means putting themselves in harms way. At the same time, we must develop a policy of " assumed risk" in wilderness activities. When normally prudent adults and older youth go outdoors, they should not expect to be able to cry foul and litigate their mistakes and misunderstandings.

As a mountain rescue specialist with the County of Los Angeles and the National Park Service, I noticed, even years ago, that more and more inexperienced people were getting into trouble in the outdoors. Lacking in technical expertise, wearing and carrying insufficient clothing and equipment and expecting either a transcendental, spiritual experience, or something akin to an extended stroll past the edge of their lawn, they fell over cliffs and succumbed to hypothermia instead.

Today, most people have no real comprehension of nature's forces or of what it means to live close to them. Most of us live out our lives in a series of artificial, life support boxes with little or no contact with nature's harshness or the source of our basic needs, such as food, clothing and shelter. That may be one of the most insidious and dangerous problems we have in maintaining a realistic perspective on what wilderness is really all about. Ranger, do your mean to tell me that you allow wolves and cougars to eat deer. Our urban lifestyles have created for us a strange, unreal set of expectations about the outdoors. And, the reasons are simple. Most people never come into contact with wilderness. It is quite possible today, living in a metropolitan area, to arise every morning in a tastefully decorated, windowless, environmental chamber, where we clean, dress, and feed ourselves while moving through a series of small boxes within the chamber. We then might walk down a long, horizontal box to a smaller, cable supported (we hope) box which, descends within another long, but this time, vertical box to the underground box in which our mobile, rubber tired environmental chamber awaits, already started by a radio control on its cooling or heating equipment maintaining its interior at an ideal comfort level. Then comes the peak experience of adventure, pumping adrenaline through our system, as we drive into the wild outdoors on the way to work. Brief glimpses of sky, an almost subliminal awareness of daylight and with a shudder of gratitude from having survived our foray into the outdoors, we plunge beneath our work building and into its buried garage. Of course, this subterranean vehicle repository is also environmentally controlled and we comfortably walk into another elevator, rise up another box, stroll down still another one and enter our office container. After a stimulating day of desk sitting, we reverse the entire process, box by box, day after day, month after month after year, until finally, they put us in a last, very expensive, tastefully or not so tastefully decorated, narrow box and place it six feet underground sealed, I might add, inside a concrete outer box, lest we contaminate the soil from which we came

And, these are the people who, after having wound their emotional springs for 50 weeks, migrate from the cities to the forests, the deserts and the mountains. There they seek to unwind in two weeks the stresses of the previous 50. They come in company with a cat, two dogs, three children, a 40 inch TV/stereo combination, separate bedrooms (a sized kingsized bed for mom and dad) tastefully decorated, mounted on wheels, environmentally cooled and heated, with a satellite antenna on top, getting 5 miles per gallon of gasoline or diesel fuel. Following obediently behind, towed by a special hitch, a smaller 4 wheel drive vehicle dutifully awaits the family's call to make occasional safaris away from the mother ship. Outside, as darkness falls, they enhance the grandeur of the night by stringing Japanese lanterns and a spectacularly popping and sizzling bug zapper.

Do you have any poisonous snakes here?" the RV visitor to a southern National park asks. "Yes, we do", replies the ranger." Coral snakes, rattlesnakes, water moccasins and copperheads". "What! How can that be? I thought this was a Federal park!" the visitor blurts. Encouraged by a completely unaware parent, a 6 year-old girl offers the "teddy bear" a peanut butter sandwich, and the ragged lacerations she receives reach from near her elbow to the tip of her fingers, exposing the bones of her arm. Over 200 stitches are required to close the wound initially, followed by several bouts of plastic surgery. The family sues everyone in sight for permitting wild, dangerous animals to exist in close proximity to people

Wilderness is by definition (wild=no perceived order, chaos; deer = wild, dangerous animals) a place which triggers the imagination. A place which frightens and awes us. A place of beauty and solitude and isolation Roderick

Nash (*Wilderness and The American Mind*) says "wilderness" is a noun that acts like an adjective. It describes a location; an area of land, but more importantly for us, it describes characteristics of the land and perhaps even more significantly, it describes intangible and difficult to describe feelings and expectations in the human mind and heart.

Today, most of the people in this country, if they think about wilderness or the outdoors at all, come from two extremes. The Bambi, Beauty and Bounteous Love folks and those of the Hunt, Fish, Trap, Live in a Log Cabin and Carry Heavy Loads Up Slippery Trails clan. On the one hand, the Bambi folks seem to believe that only peace, tranquillity and love exist in the wilderness. The HFT....clan are those who "wanna be a ranger and live in the mountains and never see people again". Or, at the farthest extreme, if it moves, they want to kill it. (No, I'm not against some kinds of hunting and fishing.) The frightening thing is that it is these urban Daniel and Daniella Boones' who, through legislation and law, will place demands and limitations on wilderness qualities and experiences which are entirely unwarranted and based on, instead of real experience and sound science, emotion and high intensity media hype. What can we expect from a population whose outdoor lighting drives even the stars from the heavens? Whose stereo boom boxes reduce to zero the chances of hearing crickets and Whippoorwills? How many will never hear the bulging of a bull elk or the magnificently desolate cry of a loon over northern lakes? How many will ever realize what they have missed? How many will care? And, how many can experience such things before the wilderness becomes no longer wild?

The questions are many and varied. The answers, it would seem are not so complex. They lie in education. Children need to be better educated about the outdoors, and it needs to begin early. In Michigan, beginning in the 1960's all children 11 years of age spent two weeks at outdoor education camp as a regular part of their schooling. I assume, or hope, that is still the case. It is imperative that our urban ignorance be ended and that increased understanding take its place.

The answers lie too in improved education for elementary and secondary teachers. Too often, our children's first teachers, in completing the requirements for their credentials and certificates have only two courses in science and one of them may be only first aid. It also lies in the enhancement of the quality of graduating teachers. Far too frequently, our colleges of education are populated by students whose grade point averages are the lowest in the university.

Part of the answer is also tied to us. We must expand our communication outside the narrow confines of our personal academic and professional boxes. To do so will require that we become expert communicators to nonprofessional and nonacademic audiences. We must be able to translate the technical and often complex language of the environment into non-technical language, with no loss in accuracy, in such manner as to create new sensitivity, awareness and understanding. Only when these three components are in place will we have any hope of helping the general public feel appreciation, enthusiasm and commitment about something that to most, is irrelevant and outside their experience or needs the earth beneath their feet, the forests and valleys around them and the sky overhead. Only then is there real hope that we can all develop and grow from where we are to where we ought to be. Only then will we have really accomplished enough to say our jobs are done.