

## The changing discourses of Northern wilderness areas: traditional use, modern conservation and touristic future\*

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**Abstract.** Wilderness as a concept is a contested idea which is constantly transforming. On the analytical level, we can understand the conceptual transformation and the changing meanings of wilderness as discourses, which are constructed in a certain socio-cultural context and historical power relations. In the Finnish and Nordic context, three different discourses concerning the concept of wilderness can be elaborated: (1) the traditional wilderness, (2) the conserved wilderness, and (3) the touristic wilderness. This paper discusses the nature and the context of these wilderness discourses and their relationship to the use and values of wilderness areas in Northern Finland. In conclusion, the development of tourism is emphasised to play an important role in the future use and management practices of wilderness areas in Northern Finland.

### Introduction

Wilderness is a contested idea which is constantly transforming. Wilderness accommodates new meanings and values, and some of the previous ones may become relicts, traces of the past with thinning connotations for modern people. Presently, the term wilderness has been replaced by ideas such as biodiversity or landscape ecology (see Noss 1994; 1996). Wilderness is seen as an ancient, too vague and value loaded concept and "not objective enough" for a scientific discussion.

In spite of the rhetoric turn in nature science, wilderness can still be understood as a meaningful and usable idea, and the

multiple meanings of the concept are not necessary negative aspect in the present pluralistic world. For most people wilderness conjures up distinct images, the content of which is dependent on the cultural and social context in which that person is living and on his or her personal history, experiences and values (see Karjalainen 1997; Hallikainen 1998). Therefore, it is understandable that different objectives, values and conceptual ideas, often contradictory ones, are connected with the idea of wilderness and the questions of the use of those environments.

The Northern wilderness areas have been in the focus of increasing political, economical and cultural interest and change in

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the recent years. Northernness as a viewpoint and North as a region have become prominent when defining the EU politics, natural and energy resources, environmental issues, regional development in national level, internal changes in Russia, and the position of the indigenous people. A change factor, that is becoming central, and that defines economy, management, use and value of Northern wildernesses has been the increasing tourism and its new forms.

This article discusses on some present, central and often competitive ideas of wilderness – *wilderness discourses* – and the underlying social processes and value systems constructing them in Northern Finland. The focus of the paper is to introduce the different perspectives to the wilderness and discuss the future changes in northern wildernesses.

### **Wilderness concept in Finland: a historical overview**

Wilderness as an idea and a physical environment is in constant change in the modernisation of the societies and the process of globalisation. In one sense, this process of change is about a struggle for power, a hegemonic struggle where some meanings, images and ways of using wilderness and their underlying value systems succeed in the social process of denoting meanings better than the others. This struggle takes place not only between different actors but also on different regional levels and between them: wilderness, its value and possible uses are often perceived in different ways on local, national, and transnational scales. Thus, wilderness is characteristically a geographical concept: wilderness is situated in a space, but it is also defined from a space that is socially and culturally constructed.

The value of the Northern wilderness areas has for a long time been defined in relation to the South, its culture and nature. Nationally, the Finnish word 'erämaa' (wilderness) is considered to be an ancient indigenous word whose etymological meanings are mainly related to fishing and hunting culture (Lehtinen 1991; Hallikainen 1998: 16–17). The first part of the word 'erä' refers to, among others, catch, game and a separate part of a certain space. Historically, wilderness has signified a region outside permanent settlement that has economic importance in terms of hunting and fishing. In the medieval system of the hunting economy, the wilderness is considered to have been an integral part of the system of society at that time. In the system, the hunting areas and especially their taxation were often organised according to families and communities (see Voionmaa 1947: 56–57, 70–72; Julku 1987: 15–15).

The Finnish wilderness concept, however, cannot be solely reduced to the practices of the fishing and hunting economy. Another ground and perspective was formed at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as the sense of 'Finnishness' and the ground for the forthcoming nation state were constructed. It was closely related to *karelianism* whose background reflected the pan-European ideological thinking. Then, the national identity – separating 'us' from others (especially from Russia and Sweden) – was actively searched for from Karelia, the land of almost untouched nature and wilderness, and later, Northern Finland. The karelianistic national wilderness did not, however, appear as a mainly economic and operational part of the society and the dominant culture but it caused the idealisation of wilderness and estranged it from people: wilderness became a positively



loaded landscape outside the dominant culture (see Okkonen 1945: 342–360; Varnedoe 1988; Tarasti 1990).

From the point of view of the struggle for hegemony, the essential question related to the meaning of wilderness is whose wilderness and construction of national identity these afore-mentioned concepts are really about. In a hunting culture, especially in the Middle Ages as the fishing and hunting commercialised, separate wilderness areas provided wealth to the areas of permanent settlement and commercial operators (see Jaakkola 1923; Jutikkala & Pirinen 1962; Julku 1987). This kind of financial profit distribution system replaced and later forced the Sami people to move more North. It also acculturated the Sami people more closely with the dominant culture, its livelihoods and ways of living (Lehtola 1997: 31–33). Partly due to this historical development, some Sami researchers perceive the concept of wilderness as a colonialistic one (see Aikio 1993).

## The competing conceptualisation of wilderness

### Wilderness as Discourse

The Northern wilderness areas, their meanings, management and use are not historically uncontested or unquestionable by nature. On the analytical level, the different ideas of wilderness can be seen as discursive structures that are culturally and historically conditioned. *Wilderness discourses* are ways of thinking, which are constructed in social practices and they, at the same time, construct and change the social reality: discourses map, construct and distinct a world meaningful for us. Through the practices linked to discourses, they also affect the physical environment: discourses are not just

ideas, words and meanings, but they are also made concrete in actions and the use of power (see Hall 1997).

Obviously, power relations between discourses change. Despite the numerous, often competitive and contradictory concepts of wilderness, there exists a discourse that is, at a certain period of time, a more dominant way of speech and thought than the others. The content of a separate discourse change, and along with the dominant meanings of a certain discourse, there are also remains of the previous contents and signs of the future contents to come (see Williams 1988: 140–145). In a sense, this is a 'continuum' that can be conceptually analysed through 'separate' meta-discourses. Therefore, it has to be emphasised that all the different discourses concerning wilderness are closely connected to each other and they can be analysed in relation to each other. By analysing the different discourses related to the wilderness, it is possible to make the contradictions related to the use of wilderness areas, and the current change in the future of the use and meanings of wilderness understandable. Next three, perhaps the most central, ideas defining the current and future Northern wildernesses will be introduced.

### Traditional Wilderness

By using Raymond Williams' (1988: 140–141) cultural theory and its terms, *traditional wilderness* refers to a relic cultural element and its characteristics. The relic cultural element has a current impact and it is under constant revision, but its content is formed in the past. Traditional wilderness is thus constructed historically in relation to the hunting and fishing culture and the conceptualisation of wilderness primarily as an



economic resource and subject of usage that, in addition, has cultural value in forming social and regional identity. The values connected to traditional wilderness are mainly related to the utilistic attitudes towards nature and the local present meanings of wilderness.

The relic cultural element is often socially and geographically slightly remote from the culture that is dominating and defining it in the modern world. These kind of social and geographical environments represent 'marginal places' (Shields 1991). They are not always, or at least primarily, geographical peripheries, but they are situated outside hegemonic cultural structures. Thus, they often represent peripheries in the geographical system of core-periphery. Peripheries often have, through social denoting of meanings and stereotyping, 'lower' cultural and other values attached to them when compared to the dominating culture.

Regardless of its relic nature, the traditional wilderness concept has for a reasonably long time formed the hegemonic Finnish wilderness discourse and it still represents it in many contexts. The traditional wilderness concept is manifested, among others, in the current Finnish Wilderness Act (Erämaalaki 1991), according to which designated wilderness areas (fig. 1) are founded for: (1) maintaining the wilderness character of the areas, (2) securing Sami culture and traditional livelihoods, (3) developing the versatile use of nature and possibilities for the different (economic) uses.

Apart from the first somewhat vague and open definition, the goals of the Act are notably similar to the concept of wilderness of hunting culture. The traditional wilderness described in the Act is a resource inside culture and economy, and it is defined

through its use and economic value.

Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-American reader may wonder if the Finnish Wilderness Law is really defining 'wilderness' or is it more related to the idea of 'wild lands'. Can the idea of wilderness stretched and modified in a way that almost everything and anything goes – even logging if needed, which is emphasised in the point three above. The meaning, values and uses of wilderness is based on contextuality and historically contingent processes, which should be recognised in order to understand the specific situation and conceptualisation. For example, in the case of United States or New Zealand wilderness system the practices related to logging and other such locally based use would simply be "not allowed" (see Public Law 1964; Shultis 1997). In Northern Finland forestry in wilderness represents clearly the political compromise and power relations at the time of the law process in the late 1980's and it also refers to the traditional idea of wilderness as a resource (even though the large scale logging is not historically integrated to the idea of Finnish wilderness).

The point of view of the Finnish Wilderness Act is remarkably 'local' – based on the local culture and economy. On the other hand, the goal of developing the versatile use of nature and the possibilities for such use can be interpreted as, among others, allowing logging in the designated wilderness areas founded by the Act. This way, the use of wilderness still has national importance and meaning.

### **Conserved Wilderness**

The legislative protection need of the wilderness became more prominent in public in the mid 1980's. Then, *conserved wilderness*

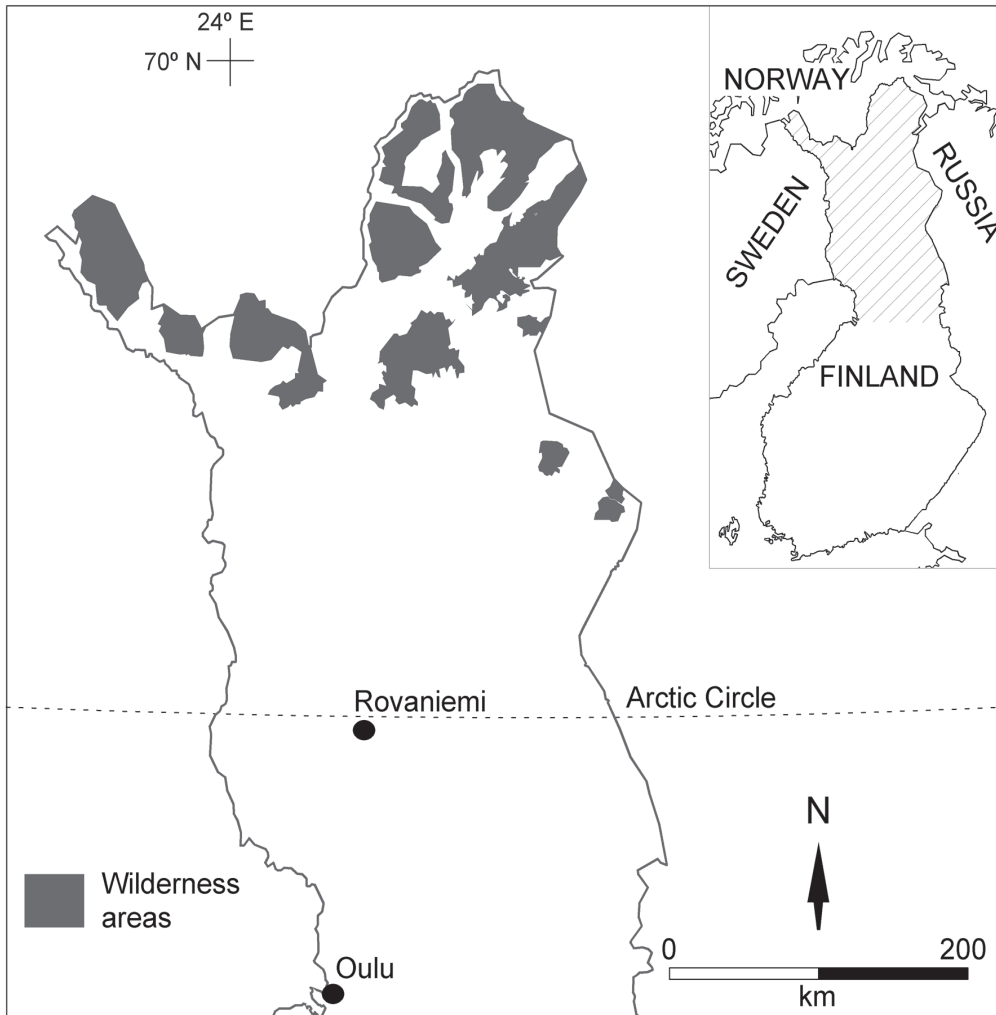


Figure 1. The location of designated wilderness areas in Finland.

visibly challenged the traditional concept of wilderness. This was made concrete in the process and conflicts related to the Wilderness Act, through which ‘protection’ in accordance with a rather traditional concept of wilderness resulted. On the other hand, the goals of conservation were also to maintain traditional livelihoods, such as reindeer husbandry. In that respect, the idea of

conserved wilderness and related conflicts in the 1980’s were also protests towards the traditional and Finnish wilderness discourse and politics at the time (see Lehtinen 1991; 2002).

Conserved wilderness is, in many parts, based on the Western concept of wilderness and the corresponding history of using the wilderness. Historically, wilderness



and wilderness nature with its primitive inhabitants were seen as opposite to, even as a hindrance of civilisation and development in the Western countries, especially Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-American societies. The Western concept of nature is thus mainly formed through conquering wilderness, transformation and through the juxtaposition of nature and culture – not through living in and from the wilderness (Short 1991: 5–10). As Roderick Nash (1982: xiii) writes in his classical book *Wilderness and the American Mind*: “Civilisation created wilderness.” Saying this, he refers to the construction of the juxtaposition of nature and culture in the North American societies, and to the clear line drawn between wilderness and organised society (see Short, 1991). When defining wilderness, Nash underlines a starting point according to which the culture must first develop into a certain level – i.e. higher than before – so that the concept of wilderness outside the society and the ‘relevant culture’ could be created. From a certain point of view, this is a logical way to approach the matter, but at the same time, it represents a colonialist attitude. For example, he states that “*Until there were fenced fields and walled cities ‘wilderness’ had no meaning*” (Nash 1982: xiii). However, it is well justified to ask whether the “unnamed lands of wild” where empty spaces in terms of their meaning before the arrival of the white man and his civilisation, or whether wilderness had some other meanings than ‘empty land’ or ‘place of savages’ to some other cultural groups at the time.

In addition to the process of conquering nature and defining wilderness outside culture, the Western concept of conserved nature is based on the Jewish-Christian tradition (Short 1991: 10–15; Hall & Page 1999: 215–217). According to the tradition,

wilderness is a symbol of composing oneself and purity, but also the landscape of biblical striving and torment (see Tuan 1974: 109–111; Nash 1982: 13–20). The Christian concept became prominent in Finland along with the religion, and it can be seen, among others, in the Finnish backpacking and other nature literature.

In North America, the increasing disappearing, ‘civilisation’, of wilderness finally resulted in the need to protect the remaining areas of wilderness. As a consequence, the first Wilderness Act was prescribed in the United States in 1964. It was preceded by social and political debate over conserving areas that lasted more than one hundred years (see Nash 1982). According to the Wilderness Act of the United States (Public Law 1964), wilderness is placed outside society and culture:

*“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, where man himself is a visitor who doesn’t remain (...).”*

The idea of the Act – “man himself is a visitor who doesn’t remain” – is somewhat opposite to the basis of the Finnish Wilderness Act and the content of the traditional wilderness discourse. On the other hand, conserved wilderness and the Western concept of wilderness do have a connection to the Finnish wilderness based on the construction of Finnishness and nation state. In addition, the karelianistic concept of wilderness outside culture was based on the pan-European national spirit and the juxtaposition of nature and culture. In Finland, this has, for its part, romanticised and created national bases for the image of con-



served wilderness. In this sense, the rise of nationalism and the industrialisation in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century represent the ‘civilisation process’ of the Finnish society in the very meaning described by Roderick Nash (1982) in North American context.

The conserved idea of wilderness and the related new connotations of the concept are sometimes evaluated as post-colonialistic attempts to take Northern natural resources under more severe national, non-local and political control. For example, Pekka Aikio (1993: 104–105) states about the (Finnish) concept of wilderness and its use: “I do not say in the wilderness (*erämaa*) because in the areas of the old Lappish villages of the Sami people wilderness as deserted, uninhabited and unused, as defined by wilderness enthusiasts, has never existed.” Saying this, he also refers to the idea that the Northern wilderness is not open to external management, ownership, use, or harsh environmental protection measures dictated from South.

### Touristic Wilderness

In addition to their placement outside culture or strong local connection, the wilderness areas are nowadays an integral part of modern societies and their institutional and economic relations. One central international phenomenon created by modernisation and, for its part, using, producing and reproducing the ideas of wilderness, is tourism industry. The impacts of tourism on wilderness and the surrounding regional structures are not simply directly physical, economic or affecting the local employment. Tourism, and especially the related advertising and media (travel programmes and literature) construct images of distant places, destinations and cultures on the ba-

sis of our own culture and way of life. Thus, images of the remote Northern wildernesses, their use and value can be constructed without people having direct personal contacts to these areas. The created images, however, may affect on the practices related to the wildernesses, for example, through nature politics and touristic demand (Saarinen 2001).

The *touristic wilderness* constructed through direct and indirect tourism development is based on consumption, marketing, visualising natural environments and staging wilderness settings for touristic purposes. In advertising, positive images, such as freedom, naturalness and authenticity are connected to the product to be marketed, and eventually as a part of the identity of the consumer: the tourist. Along with tourism, advertising also entails a possibility for ‘direct’ consuming and experiences where the wilderness nature, and the values and meanings of wilderness are in great extent defined on the basis of the images and representations of the wilderness created by advertising and other forms of the media.

Touristic wilderness is a commercialised space. It is a commodity: a resource and product that can be produced, replicated and consumed. In the touristic wilderness, the boundary between nature and culture is often unclear. Thus, travel advertising may combine the possibilities and rights of consuming and way of life created by the modern society, and the images of freedom, adventure and experiences in the wild and ‘past’. Similarly, the built environments of tourist attractions are often designed so that they would refer to wilderness and the connected cultural characteristics.

The basis of touristic wilderness represents the process of change affecting wilderness that is both international, perceived



through the eyes of outsiders and partly local. In tourism, wilderness is a 'glocal' unit: a resource inside the local and a wider economic system and culture. *Touristic wilderness is a place where the consumer is a visitor who doesn't remain.* It is based on the active production, reproduction and recycling of the representation of wild, free, harsh and rugged nature, and their combination in relation to the modern cultures of consumerism.

Table 1 sums the different wilderness discourses. The discourses should not be considered all-inclusive nor do the discursive structures exhaustively define all the possible wildernesses. They are rather the main ideas, meta-discourses, forming the

current conceptualisations of wilderness, and it is possible to construct other more detailed discursive structures than the ones listed below.

The hegemonic discourse of wilderness manifests power relations in action, but at the same time it is constantly contested and re-evaluated. For example, there are discussions in United States concerning the issue of wilderness experience and the emerging new technologies and activities in wilderness areas or whether the conditions of the Act 1964 are still attractive and relevant for the present and future public (see Fremund & Borrie 1997) – or should we say consumers and tourists? Hegemonic dis-

Table 1. The main wilderness discourses constructing and valuing wilderness environments and their meanings and uses in Northern Finland.

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Traditional wilderness

Based on: Historical and cultural tradition of usage (usufructuary area)  
 Image: An internal resource of the culture and (local) economic activity  
 Constructed: By traditional use  
 Perspective: Mainly local, partly national

Conserved wilderness

Based on: Western and Anglo-American concept of wilderness  
 Image: Area outside the main culture, a place where human is only a visitor who doesn't remain  
 Constructed: By conquering and through the civilisation process of the society  
 Perspective: Global and Western

Touristic wilderness

Based on: Modernisation and consumption  
 Image: A commodity that can be produced and consumed, an inside resource of economic operations and a place where the consumer is a visitor who doesn't remain  
 Constructed: By producing and reproducing in marketing and by consuming the 'commodity'  
 Perspective: 'Glocal'

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course, sometimes reflecting a non-locally constructed and controlled conceptualisation of wilderness, may also constitute marginalisation of the local needs and practices concerning wilderness areas and their use. As said, discourses are not just ideas or conceptual matters; they have also practical dimensions on the different uses of wilderness, rights over the land etc., which are important issues especially for indigenous people at the moment in Northern Finland and globally.

### **Northern wildernesses: local past and touristic future?**

The juxtaposition of nature and culture has for a long time influenced the discussion on Northern wilderness areas and their use: the aim has either been a more clear division or bridging the gap. This will affect the public discussion on wilderness areas and their use in Northern Finland also in the future. Along this, there are also other more extensive trends that will emphasise the importance of touristic wilderness and tourism in the use of the Northern wildernesses in the future (see Poon 1993; Hall & Johnston 1995; Hall & Page 1999; Saarinen 2001).

Tourism is perhaps the latest significant form of economy and consumption using the Northern wilderness areas. However, there is no clear knowledge of its scale and development. Internationally, tourism is considered highly important and a form of economy that greatly uses the wilderness environments and 'rurality' in general in its operations (see Butler et al. 1998; Hall & Page 1999: 214, 236–242). This is essential for the future of the Northern wilderness areas, because nature-based tourism is considered as one of the fastest growing sec-

tors of international tourism. However, the use of designated and other wilderness areas in Northern Finland will not follow the most optimistic development estimations of nature-based tourism, at least in the near future. According to the estimations, the annual growth of nature-based tourism in Finland would be as high as 8–10 % (see Ympäristöministeriö 2002). This can be an overestimation and, on the other hand, even lower direct touristic use of wilderness areas and the new forms of tourism activities can significantly influence the use and character of these areas, and the relationships between different forms of use (see Hall & Johnston 1995).

However, there are still many institutional structures supporting the idea of traditional wilderness, the strongest of which is probably the Wilderness Act. In addition, the traditional use of wilderness is supported by the international pressure to acknowledge the rights of the indigenous people (i.e. Sami) to land in Finnish Lapland. At the moment, there is an ethnic debate over questions of management related to the use of land, including tourism, and the power to define meanings concerning the wilderness areas in Northern Lapland.

Touristic wilderness is a staged and imaginative wilderness, based on the representations of wilderness. In many cases small scale tourism, like ecotourism, is not especially problematic for the sustainability of protected areas or local cultures and traditional economics (see Fennell 1999), but as the number of visitors are growing and additional infrastructure is needed, there appears problematic issues concerning both local needs and the goals of nature conservation. To use the old phrase, uncontrolled tourism can saw its own branch while growing in tourist numbers and fa-



cilities. In addition, the development of tourism in the daily environments of indigenous or other local people does not derive from the processes internal to those cultures and communities (Mowforth & Munt 1998). Therefore, tourism and the notion of touristic wilderness may harm the potential balance of the practices of local cultures using wilderness environments.

However, local people do not have a privilege to the ethical and moral issues of the sustainable use and management of wilderness areas. Local and indigenous cultures have also modernized and during the process the basis of fundamental arguments of the traditional sustainable ways of utilization may have disappeared. Still, it is important to recognise the possible conflicts between locally based discourses and the new ones, such as touristic wilderness.

Obviously, tourism will not completely re-

place the traditional or conserved meaning structures and values of wilderness. However, tourism has brought a new and influential addition to the layers of the cultural and economic meanings and uses of wilderness. More than the direct use of the Northern wildernesses, tourism constructs people's ideas of wilderness through the indirect touristic use, such as marketing and the related images of wilderness as a 'product'. At the same time, it affects people's opinions concerning the suitable uses of wilderness areas. The contradictions between the protection of nature and logging still form the most prominent conflicts concerning different concepts of wilderness and their power relations, but in the future, the relations between nature-based tourism and the traditional use of wilderness or tourism and the protection of nature will gain much more prominence on Northern Finland.

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