

Get Wild: What is the moral value of wilderness?

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A high meadow below Gore Lake in Eagles Nest Wilderness Area is pictured Aug. 28.

Mike Browning/Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance

As our days wane into fall, some of us wax philosophical. Moral philosophers distinguish between things that have intrinsic value and those that have instrumental value. Which does wilderness have, or does it have both? How you answer this question reveals much about how you value wilderness areas and why.

Things possessing intrinsic value have value in and of themselves. Utilitarian philosophers deem pleasure to be the only thing with intrinsic value. In contrast, things possessing instrumental value have value only because they help us realize or obtain things that have intrinsic value. For example, money has instrumental value because it helps us obtain other things. A hammer has only instrumental value because it is useful solely to help us build things that bring us pleasure and help us avoid suffering.

What about wilderness areas? Some might say wilderness has only instrumental value: It has value to the extent we can use and enjoy it.

But this is a very narrow and human-centered view of instrumental value. Does something have instrumental value only to the extent it provides pleasure to human beings? Even utilitarian philosophers would say “no.” They maintain that the pleasure of all sentient beings — human or not — must be considered. In this view, the pleasure (or absence of suffering) of elk, eagles, lynx and other animals with whom we share the planet must also be considered. Because animals can experience pleasure and pain — just ask your cat or dog — utilitarian philosophers say they have moral rights. If wilderness helps creatures survive and thrive, it has instrumental value regardless of whether humans use it.

Utilitarian philosophers say plants, fungi, trees, mushrooms, etc., have no moral rights since they do not experience pleasure or pain, though recent research suggests trees do. However, they at least have instrumental value because they are essential for a healthy ecosystem, which all sentient beings need to survive and prosper.

Note that such instrumental value would exist whether humans ever stepped foot in a wilderness area for at least two reasons:

- First, the other sentient animals require a healthy ecosystem to survive, and they have moral rights along with humans since they, too, experience pleasure and pain.
- Second, we are increasingly aware that wilderness areas provide essential contributions to the natural ecosystem that humans also need to survive and prosper. These include healthy watersheds, clean water, flood protection, medicinal plants and carbon sequestration.

This does not mean that wilderness areas should be closed to human use, but it does mean that they have value even if humans don't use them.

Many would argue that wilderness also has intrinsic value. If one accepts that all life has intrinsic value — sentient or otherwise — then wilderness areas have value in and of themselves. As we learn how rare and fragile all life is in the universe, its very existence takes on intrinsic value. A reverence for all life is an acknowledgment of its fragility and preciousness. Wilderness areas were established in part in recognition that there is value in wilderness above how it might serve human beings. So whether our wilderness areas have intrinsic value, instrumental value or somehow both, we all should work to help keep wilderness wild.

Mike Browning

"Get Wild" publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Mike Browning is the chair of Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit [EagleSummitWilderness.org](https://www.eaglesummitwilderness.org).

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