

REPLACING NATURE, PARKING PEOPLE: DISNEY'S WILDERNESS LODGE

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Wilderness Lodge, one of the deluxe-category hotels in Walt Disney World, opened for business in the spring of 1994. This 728 room, luxury to semi-luxury priced, hotel is imagineered to resemble Yellowstone National Park's Old Faithful Inn. It is built with massive logs imported directly from Washington State and rises eight floors above the shores of similarly Disney-imagineered Bay Lake within the Magic Kingdom compound. The themed back story of Wilderness Lodge harkens to the early 1900s period of National Park development, where "rustic" lodging was considered a more appropriate means by which to consume, yet also preserve nature's wonders. Wilderness Lodge is specifically imagineered to simulate what the "Official Guide to Walt Disney World" calls the architectural inspiration of the earlier National Park lodges the design of which allegedly sought to unify "the elements of the unspoiled wilderness parks," to keep "harmony with nature," and to incorporate "the culture of native Americans" (Birnbaum 2004, 61). This latter incorporation of Native Americans into the early project of nature preservation is particularly exhibited in Disney's hyperreal lodge. Two imported, quite "authentic," 55-foot northwestern totem poles are

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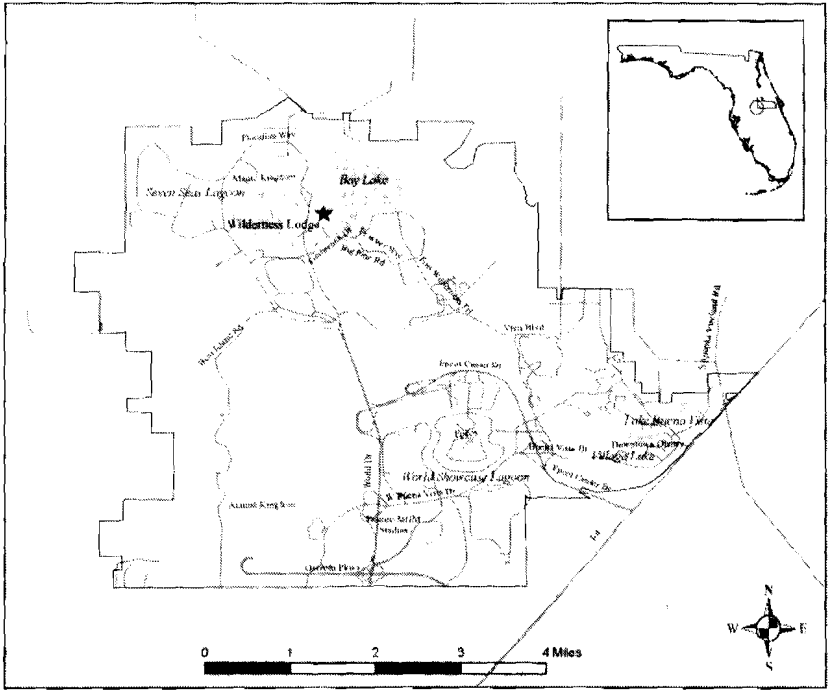


Figure 1. Location of Wilderness Lodge.

major design tropes within the main atrium lobby of Wilderness Lodge. The floor covering of the lobby also exhibits some Native American patterning, if somewhat less specifiable in origin or actual design.

Keeping close to, if quite overdoing, the original model of Old Faithful, a “hot-spring” bubbles up from the floor of the Wilderness Lodge lobby forming a stream flowing eventually outside and over a “waterfall” into a large swimming pool. Along with the quite massive stone fireplace and overall rustic-looking lodge ambience, the “wilderness” scene is definitely well set in material terms, regardless of the continuous intrusion of inappropriately fashioned theme park guests and Disney cast-members. There is

even a geyser, Fire Rock, which spews forth periodically on strictly-timed cue accompanied by an appropriately majestic wilderness-like musical score. As one journalist only half facetiously puts it, at least at Wilderness Lodge the geyser is well-timed and accurate in a way that Old Faithful simply has not been in recent years. Moreover, and most unlike the real hot springs of the southwest, Disney's rendition does not include the awful "rotten egg" aroma of the original (Otto 1994).

An Urbane Wilderness Experience

Now this brief description of the Disney Company's attempt at simulating wilderness lodging may not seem that remarkable against the backdrop of Disney's other attempts at such simulation, both within Walt Disney World and elsewhere. And, of course, themed environments are much the norm now, well outside theme park gates (e.g. Watson and Gibson 1995; Sorokin 1992). Here, however, I want to use the Wilderness Lodge example to explore some issues concerned with both the hyperreal experience itself and its connection with the evolving relationship between humans and non-human nature. The journalist just cited, for example, is on to something much bigger than the merely humorous. Disney's Wilderness Lodge is not only an attempt to replace geographical place and to re-live history, it is also an attempt to improve on the reality of this geography and history. What the Company calls "Disney reality," is a severely edited reality with all the bad bits safely sanitized or dropped from sight in the same way that Victor Hugo's literature can be rendered safely cartoonish. So, yes, Disney's Wilderness Lodge remains a mere hyperreal simulation but, much more importantly, it is a hyperreality which arguably *does* improve on the real for many more people than merely the aforementioned journalist.

The key is what "improving" reality means in this respect. And here is where the evolving human-non-human nature relationship becomes important. In these post-industrial times, most

of us who now work in some sort of service capacity have very little contact with non-human nature that is not already in some sense themed, even quite imagineered, like that of the Wilderness Lodge. The non-human nature most of us contact is thus of the garden variety, carefully controlled and managed for ease of consumption. In this context, non-human nature is actually best when it is molded into a background “scene” or landscape which is both aesthetically pleasing and, equally importantly, benign and certainly harmless to human activity. Disney’s Wilderness Lodge experience certainly fits this particular bill with the added bonus that the Fire Rock geyser is regularly timed to fit our schedule, not its own.

Now one possible path out of this story would be to worry about whether Disney guests will eventually be unable to tell the difference between the real and the hyperreal and what this may mean for the nearing future (e.g. the verging hyperbole of Baudrillard 1988). But I am more interested in the issue of how the Disney improvement on nature may be reinforcing what can be considered a double alienation from nature on the part of the majority population of mostly urban service workers in post-industrializing societies. This is an increasing majority population which not only does not produce commodities directly from non-human nature anymore but, as mentioned, only contacts this nature after it has been humanly managed, even rendered quite hyperreal-like. Significantly, this double alienation is directly embedded in the Disney experience where one can consume a wilderness probably one has never experienced anyway and, most importantly, with the really “wild” bits safely edited out.

Approaching the Wilderness Ideal

As argued elsewhere, I think that this double alienation from non-human nature on the part of a growing majority of people is the most troubling aspect of the post-industrial turn (Archer 1996). One potential outcome is the continuing expansion of the

imagined reconstruction and thus humanized coverage of non-human nature with very little opposition. Here is where Baudrillard's notion of the growing confusion between the real and the hyperreal could have the most widespread implications for our planet. And, thus, here is also where very significant concerns for losses of biodiversity, habitat, and overall complexity would need to be voiced with some urgency. In short, a doubly alienated human population is unlikely even to recognize the need for such ecological concerns, let alone act on them.

But let me propose an alternative potential for an increasingly alienated future. There has been much written, particularly recently, on the importance of wilderness for modern civilization and its discontents (Oelschlaeger 1992). In this brief essay, I will focus on only one concern of this growing literature: that is, the belief, expressed in some historical detail by Oelschlaeger (1991), that wilderness is important as a place where freedom, as well as diversity, is allowed to reign. Wilderness, in this respect, is as little like a garden as possible. The least humanized the landscape the more it approaches this conception of wilderness. It is essentially a conception of non-human nature that should only be visited and viewed by humans for very short periods of time and in very small numbers. The wild, in this respect, should not be controlled in any way by humans. Finally, on this view and as summarized by Zimmerman (1992, 249):

Preserving [such] wilderness is vital...not only for prudential reasons, and not only because it allows at least some beings to follow out their destinies without human interference, but also because it stands as a radical "otherness" to technological civilization, an otherness that serves as a reminder that humanity is itself inextricably bound up with a natural environment that cannot be fully "controlled."

The severe conundrum that arises for this view of humans, however, is that, as the human population continues to grow and, I would argue, as this human population continues to post-

industrialize, it is becoming increasingly clear that the only way to preserve the “wild” is by actively managing it. Put differently, humans will have to manage it more actively if “wilderness” is to survive at all. The well-known debate over what to do about the major fires raging in Yellowstone National Park in 1988 provided much fodder for an exploration of the implications of this conundrum (e.g. Chaloupka and Cawley 1993). How “natural” or “wild” these fires were considered to be, for example, determined one’s position as to what to do about them.

Here, however, I want to dwell on a less abstract concern about the wilderness ideal. Rather than attempt strictly to define wilderness, it is probably more fruitful to focus on the substantive difference between a thoroughly imagineered non-human nature like that at Disney’s Wilderness Lodge and a much less imagineered landscape like that of a National Park. Keeping fully in mind that Disney-nature is merely the garden variety pushed to conclusion, the difference is obviously one of the *extent* of human management and editing of non-human nature as well as the *aim* of such editing; that is, in Disney’s case, the aim of editing non-human nature is essentially aesthetic and not ecological. If the global concern is about biodiversity, habitat, and the overall hedging of our bets on our own survival as a species then it would seem that imagineered Disney-nature should not be the goal of National Park management. Instead, preserving something we have chosen to call “wild” or “ecologically diverse” should be this goal.

Now this is a key juncture. How, indeed, is it possible to minimize the human impact on non-human nature in order to protect the wild? One approach would be rigidly to restrict human access of any kind to wilderness. This is the National Park ideal simply taken to another, more extreme, level. Another possibility would be to attempt to educate as a means to overcome the double alienation of post-industrial urban folks by some sort of experiential, perhaps ecotourism solution. This latter certainly seems

to be the choice of most wilderness theorists, particularly since the first solution veers toward an anti-democratically rigid regulatory regime. Put differently, rather than forcing the issue, it would be much better if doubly alienated people could be educated to respect the wild themselves, or at least to leave it be as much as possible.

Parking People Instead

It may be, however, that a better solution could be found by approaching the problem from the opposite direction. Certainly regulation and education need to play a role. But, and especially on the basis of Disney experience, perhaps the fully imagineered experience of Wilderness Lodge actually holds the key to preserving the really wild world. If the present argument hits anywhere near its mark, then it seems quite probable that the post-industrial folks residing in Disney wilderness are quite content with their surroundings; so content and steady in their demand, in fact, that Disney expanded Wilderness Lodge to include 181 deluxe villas in November of 2000. Unlike more critical commentators, however, I do not think that Disney's guests are becoming increasingly unable to recognize the fully imagineered nature of Disney nature. Rather, Disney-nature simply suits their needs better than the real thing.

Why not, then, work through this post-industrial reality by attempting to work with Disney and Disney-like developers in order to add as much truly educational material as possible? Why not, in other words, bring the "real" wilderness to the people---quite virtually if necessary---instead of bringing the people to the wilderness? This seems a well-nigh better solution than taking increasing numbers of people out on the eco-trek, thereby littering the Antarctic, trampling the rainforest, and disrupting the mating habits of the Orca. It also seems a much better solution than haggling over what really is "wild" and who, indeed, should manage it for what purpose and to what end. In short, more purist environmentalists must realize that, just like the journalist cited above, most post-industrial folks rather like the idea of a real "wilderness" existing out there

someplace, perhaps even for the somewhat mystical reasons of “otherness” outlined by Zimmerman. But, at the same time, most post-industrial folks would rather not smell the real “rotten eggs” or wait endlessly in the mists for the geyser to go off according to the real rhythm of the wild. Packaged tours to see the Patagonian penguins are possible perhaps, but only in fully stocked and heated ships and individually bundled in uniform parkas.

Unfortunately, there is a double elitism among most environmentalists which blinds them to the possibility I am driving toward. The first part of this elitism entails an overly scientific arrogance which renders dialogue about conservation or wilderness preservation quite difficult. This arrogance leads many environmentalists explicitly to cast humans out of the realm of nature, particularly, of course, those humans with no or little scientific background. This is the view of those who would close off large areas of the world from human “intrusion” in order for nature to heal itself with the help of properly trained scientists (e.g. Meffe and Carrol 1994). One does not have to go as far as McKibben’s (1989) pessimism about this prospect to recognize the misplaced arrogance involved in this proposition. What, for example, is really more natural about this managed “nature” compared to that of Disney?

The second kind of elitism on the part of most environmentalists is less discussed and perhaps, then, less noticeable. This is a cultural elitism which automatically assumes superiority on the basis of some assumed authenticity compared to the overwhelming ersatz of the Disneyesque and its guests. This is the elitism which considers the hyperreal to be the mecca only of the ignorant in the same way that television sets reproduce only the dull-headed. From this perspective, Disney’s wilderness experience is only to be criticized in much the same way that criticism is brought forth concerning Sea World’s playful portrayal of the Orca. Instead of recognizing the potential of working with Disney and Sea World (etc.) in order to ensure ecologically sound

education, in other words, this posture merely shuns (and protests) any such hyperreality in favor of something believed to be the really real. Unfortunately, this sort of elitism does more harm to the environmental cause than not doing anything at all, particularly as by far the majority of people see nothing wrong with Disney's wilderness while, in turn, fully recognizing its hyperreality.

In the end, the main message of this essay is the same as that given in an interview of a resident of Key West when asked what he thought about Sea World's attempt to recreate the historic town site at its theme park in Orlando. Sea World's efforts at hyperreality were perfectly fine with him, he reportedly replied, because, as a result, there would be far fewer tourists periodically overrunning the real thing.

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