PRESERVATION OF WILDERNESS ON ISLE ROYALE

by

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The National Park status of Isle Royale is primarily determined by its wilderness character. There are, of course, other features of human value and interest on the island, but it is the wilderness character of it that is outstanding. A hundred years ago this quality would not have been given consideration in the setting aside by law of an area for preservation, for at that time most of the west was still wilderness. But today wilderness is becoming so rare that the mechanism of the National Park Service is being employed in an effort to preserve some remnants of it.

Since Isle Royale was given National Park status because of its wilderness, it is, of course, the duty of the National Park Service to preserve this wilderness. This mission and responsibility must always be kept uppermost in our thoughts. It is a difficult assignment, which, to carry out, will require complete faith in its worthiness.

To me, the essential attributes of wilderness are space and low human incidence. Activity which reduces space in any way, or increases human occupancy detracts from wilderness. Hence, in preserving wilderness we should guard against any sort of development which will reduce space or increase travel. All activities on Isle Royale should be judged first and primarily in this light, and it should be remembered that the wilderness spirit is tender; easily maimed and destroyed.

Today most of Isle Royale is without trails. To find one's way over the island one must generally use a map and take a direction from the compass or the strike of the rock. The traveler is not trammeled by trails, but goes cross country to find a lake or whatever the destination might be. Each trip, even to the same landmark, is usually over different ground so that the traveler is always exploring and coming upon new unknown points of interest, such as beaver colonies on tiny uncharted creeks, isolated stands of white pine, new moose licks, or especially fine unobstructed lookout points on the ridges. This exploration gives a type of enjoyment which is in striking contrast to the passive enjoyment received when one is led to a feature by
a broad trail. Incidents are not premeditated, so are always fresh and stimulating. In this connection, I recall a statement from Emerson which I quote roughly from memory: "Go expressly to enjoy the moon and it turns to tinsel, but discover it on a necessary journey and its beauty bathes the soul."

It is hoped that opportunity for ideal wilderness travel and exploration will continue on Isle Royale for some time, but in my opinion, if the trails which have been placed on the Master Plan of the island are constructed, this opportunity will be greatly reduced and the wilderness spirit of the region will have a good start on its way out.

The following trails have been proposed: One trail follows the main ridge, Greenstone ridge, for practically the length of the island. This trail connects the development centers now located on the two ends of Isle Royale. Another trail leads from Senter Point in Siskowit Bay to the Greenstone trail. Another trail crosses the island from Toad Harbor to Siskowit Lake. Six miles from here another trail is proposed from the head of McCargee Cove to Chippewa Harbor. Another six miles farther along a trail from Rock Harbor meets the Greenstone trail, and about six miles beyond this point still another trail crosses the island from Lane Cover to Tobin's Harbor. (The location of this last trail is not definitely determined as yet.)

Will these trails, if constructed, harm the wilderness character of the island? Most of the people with whom I have discussed the matter grant that the trails will detract considerably from its present character. The trail down Greenstone ridge cuts the island in two and forms a common boundary for the two halves; it reduces the stretch of trailless wilderness to half its breadth. The other trails crossing the island have the same effect; they cut the island into sections so that when one visualizes the pathless stretches of Isle Royale, one gets a gridiron effect. In placing trails through Isle Royale we must keep in mind that Isle Royale is not large in wilderness terms. Over most of its length, it is only four or five miles across and cutting this distance in two by the Greenstone ridge trails, we have a rather narrow stretch of woods remaining.
Not only do trails destroy wilderness perfection, but they open up the area to all kinds of travelers. They tend to introduce those who would be just as happy on short trails near resorts. A trail system reduces space and increases travel, thus destroying the two important characteristics of a wilderness; in this case the Isle Royale wilderness.

Then why are we building trails? Why are we so soon making inroads on the wild areas given to us for protection? I wish to discuss briefly some of the reasons for the trail building which have been advanced.

It has been stated that we should install a trail system now so as to direct the travel where we wish it to go. The thought is to make a sacrifice now to prevent a greater loss in the future and that this is practical planning. This planning and foresight is commendable in concentration areas where trails and roads are needed, but seems not to fit into wilderness preservation unless we place our trails outside the wilderness to act there as a sop or safety valve. It seems to me that wilderness travel should not be directed, for as soon as it is directed it fails of its purpose. Our true wilderness traveler will shun these trails, (but unfortunately they cannot forget them) which will probably be used by those who should be on the short loop trails at the resorts. The trail program seems to signal a renunciation of the wilderness traveler's interest and a catering to the type not particularly interested in search of wilderness; and able to appreciate it only superficially. The trail planning is destroying the wilderness before the public gets a chance to. Fearful of the future, we are committing wilderness suicide.

Fire protection has also been given consideration in the trail program. There is a high fire hazard in some parts of the island where the spruce bud worm has left dead trees, but over most of it the chances for a large fire at the present time seem small. There are a few stands of fine timber which warrant special protection. The old maple forest at the southwest end of the island is worthy of special protection, but the fire hazard here is probably not very great. Also there are small remnants of one or two groves of white pines which are fine, but most of the forests consist of young birches, poplars, balsams and
spruces and lack the magnificence which might make special fire protection desirable. But one is not obliged to share those opinions on the fire hazards to conclude that trails are not essential to fire protection. Fire protection plans provide a beat patrol for the island, and since the island is only four or five miles wide in most places, and the greater part of the shore line is accessible to boats, most fires would be approached from the shore, probably at a point some distance from proposed trails. Furthermore since travel off the trails is generally quite easy, absence of trails would not be a great inconvenience in gaining access to a fire. We must guard against permitting administrative perfection to destroy our main objectives.

Another reason given at times for the trail construction, which I have heard, is that we must take people to the beauty spots, to the points of special interest; that we must be sure that visitors to Isle Royale do not miss anything. Such a system of trails has its place in and around a development center, but should not infringe upon or enter into the wilderness. If carried out it would surely be killing the goose that is laying the golden eggs.

Also I have heard some talk about giving the wilderness traveler some little help, not only by building trails but also shelters. I suggest that we drop this coddling attitude and let the wilderness traveler worry about how he is going to move about the island. He does not wish us to be concerned over his comfort.

It seems to me that the arguments for trails on Isle Royale are completely overshadowed by the harmful effects of these trails to the main objective; the preservation of the wilderness.

If an area is set aside primarily to preserve its wilderness, surely this wilderness must be worth preserving. The way to save wilderness is to leave it alone; half-way measures and averaging of opinions will never do it. Perhaps in time, trails will become necessary and will develop, but let us not jump beyond and ahead of the natural demands for development of the area. I believe the proper technique here is to
lag behind demand and do our best to stave off intrusions. Let us go down fighting rather than surrender before the battle has begun. Something seems amiss when an area which has come to us so unspoiled is so soon to be subject to a relatively extensive trail system.

I am offering these comments in complete frankness, earnestness and sincerity, as my point of view in regard to our activities on Isle Royale. I believe I am also expressing the general feelings of the wilderness group. My remarks may sound extravagant to some, but when we consider how rare real wilderness is becoming and how readily wilderness disappears when given official and public recognition and made subject to administrative seal, I do not think the case can be stated too strongly. I am well aware of the good intentions of those who have been considering the preservation of Isle Royale; I am simply of a different opinion.

Recommendations:

In the interest of wilderness preservation, I wish to recommend that the trail program for Isle Royale be reconsidered, and that interior Isle Royale be left untouched, so that we can at least for a few years say with pride: "There are no trails in the interior of Isle Royale."