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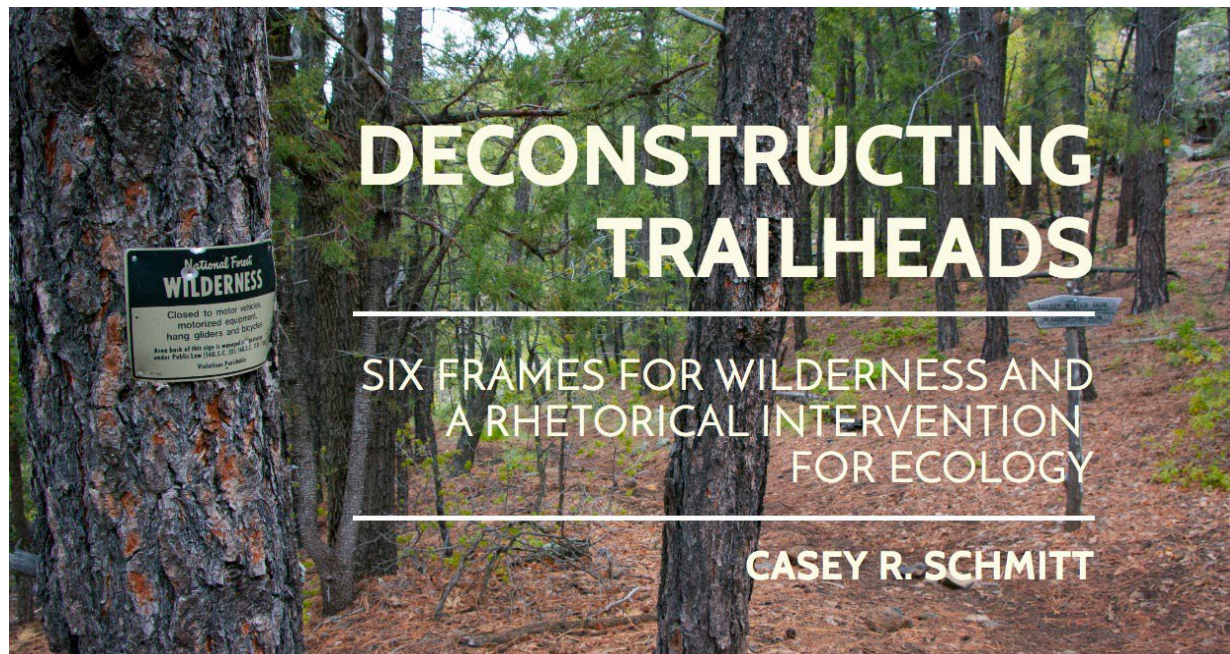
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Deconstructing Trailheads: Six Frames for Wilderness and a Rhetorical Intervention for Ecology

Casey R. Schmitt

This essay applies rhetorical analysis to the semantically loaded locations at trailheads, parks, and nature preserve entryways. Using the trailhead markers of the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore as a field-based case study, I identify six common rhetorical frames in the trailhead location: Distinction; Danger; Leaving Behind/Leaving "No Trace"; Stewardship; Prescribed Activity; and Trace of Tactics. I discuss how each perpetuates a problematic everyday nature-culture divide. In analyzing the rhetorical functions of physical places, I advocate for embodied critical methods and revisions to the rhetorics of nature preserves and conservancies.



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Introduction: The “Trouble with Wilderness”

When a bird flies across the boundary of a preserved natural space, it maintains its course of flight. When wind crosses the boundary and spreads fallen leaves or seeds, the leaves fall the same on either side of the boundary line. When water runs across the boundary, it carries with it all the same sediment, plant life, and animal life, regardless of the line. But when human visitors to the nature preserve cross the line, they often change their behavior, hushing their tones, turning off electronics, or approaching their surroundings in a nature-reverent way not as common in home or city environments. In recent years, American ecologists and environmental activists have wrestled with the problem of making more people aware that the ecosystem extends beyond the nature preserve or national wilderness and into suburbs, cities, and individual backyards. It is a matter of overcoming the popular distinction between “nature” and “culture” in the American tradition, one that historian William Cronon refers to as the “trouble with wilderness.”

“Wilderness,” Cronon notes, is more a state of mind than it is any actual place, but it’s also a useful term for promoting ecological campaigns and articulating that mixed sensation of the unfamiliar and the awe-inspiring that many people feel when wandering through a forested hillside or desert expanse. The allure of “wilderness” and the need to protect it are celebrated by environmental organizations like the Wilderness Society and the U.S. National Wilderness Preserve System. It is memorialized in print and pop culture every time we talk about going “into the woods,” “back to nature,” or “into the wild.” Yet there is trouble with wilderness, too. In Cronon’s words, it “quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject” (“Trouble” 80). That is, in perpetuating the term and a distinction between wilderness and civilization, nature and culture, wilderness and nature lovers may actually be keeping themselves from adopting more ecologically sound ways of thinking and acting.

When we speak of “wilderness” as a non-human sphere, worthy of our reverence and ecological efforts, or when we label a plot of land as “natural wilderness” with a guide map or state-sponsored sign, we might do so in the interest of promoting the environment but, Cronon argues, we simultaneously impose boundaries on the land where they did not exist before. In separating nature from culture in our vocabulary, discourse, and, thus, conceptual framework, we create a distinction between human and non-human spheres—one that ultimately inhibits continual ecological engagement (*Uncommon*).

Any “place” is ultimately interpreted through the words, stories, and other objects that surround it (Ryden; Tuan), but “wilderness” and “nature” are unique in the way the frames themselves seem to suggest unfiltered experience, free from human interference, definition, or constraint. In fact, in the United States, many official wilderness spaces are explicitly groomed and maintained by human actions while the discursive frames that guide visitor experience suggest the very opposite. As Kevin Michael DeLuca reminds us, wilderness “is not a natural fact—it is a political achievement” (645); it “does not preexist the human but instead is a human product” (637).

Thus, paradoxically, to identify or label “wilderness” is to impose culture upon it, to overlook how the “natural” and “human” spheres are in fact always bound up in and influencing one another, and to limit the scope of our collective ecology. Ecologists and park service management can attend to the rhetorical import of naming to better understand how signs, gateways, and other official labels subtly yet consistently frame public understandings of “nature” place, and then harness the rhetorical power of naming by re-crafting official signs and labels in the future.

Rhetorical Field Methods in the Apostle Islands

The United States nature trail provides a unique point of contact with “wilderness” and “nature” not only by virtue of its physical remove from urban spaces and its oftentimes immense size, but also for the ways in which ever-present human factors—including federal maintenance and high traffic visitor activity—are obscured from visitor attention. In wilderness locations like the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore (AINL), for instance, visitors are invited to experience wilderness directly in a location that was only a hundred years ago clearcut, with mines and yearlong residents, but is now “re-wilded” (Feldman) for preservation and tourism purposes.

The AINL is a federally protected recreation space on the southern shores of Lake Superior and home to the Gaylord Nelson Wilderness, a 35,000-acre federally designated wilderness space as of 2004. The Nelson Wilderness makes up roughly 80% of the AINL territory, which also includes 21 of the 22 Apostle Islands. In accordance with the U.S. Wilderness Act, area within the “wilderness” is “recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain,” both “protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions.” Given their physical history of habitation and industry—along with surveyor Harlan Kelsey's 1930 description of the Islands as “mercilessly and in a measure irrevocably destroyed” by the hand of man (Feldman 7)—the Apostle Islands are a curious addition to the U.S. National Wilderness and yet they have been officially labeled as wilderness all the same.

For the purposes of this study, I travelled to the Islands during the summer of 2013 and attended especially to the texts, images, and other rhetorical materials placed at entryways into the wilderness, priming visitor expectations and guiding visitor movements. As the Wilderness Act explicitly marks such areas as spaces of recreation, spectatorship, and education, these entryway texts especially invite tourists and travelers (more so than local inhabitants) to identify and engage with the land. Set aside for public appreciation, U.S. Wilderness areas are

generally criss-crossed with National Park Service hiking trails. Visitors are instructed to stay on these trails in order to both 1) provide passing human access to the “wilderness” space and 2) ensure that this access is indeed only passing, physically disrupting as little as possible by constraining human movement to the prescribed trail course.

With limited avenues for movement, the trailhead location becomes increasingly prominent in the rhetorics of designated wilderness. While some visitors likely do diverge from the scripted trails and forge their own paths through the environment, the vast majority who visit the space are channeled through the trailhead and, thus, encounter the dense rhetorical cluster of words and images before experiencing the “wilderness” itself. Moreover, in officially designated wilderness areas, interpretive signs and labels are prohibited, making the trailhead often the last and most prominent guide for experience before direct interaction with the wilderness space. In this way, the trailhead becomes not only an informational frame and guide for attention but a physical manifestation of a wilderness boundary.

Every trailhead in the AINL is marked by at least some textual and material guides, from mere trail names and signs on wooden posts to elaborate kiosks plastered with maps, informational content, and photographs. The trailhead sign, marker, or plaque directs visitor engagement in accordance with Park Service goals and makes the space legible to the visitor entering the area in a way that puts neither the visitor nor the environment at immediate harm.

In surveying the physical elements and textual cues at trailhead markers across the AINL, I identified six primary thematic frames repeated at the wilderness trailhead time and again. Let's take a closer look at these frames.

Frame I: Distinction



The first common rhetorical frame of the trailhead location is one of explicit distinction of the wilderness location from human spheres of activity. Simply put, this means by virtue of a sign's presence the place or object labeled is inherently made distinct—notable as different and thus separate from its surroundings. A boundary between “here” and “there,” “this” and “that,” is established. This is the “naming” that Kenneth Burke identified as the “primary rhetorical act.” Once labeled as “wilderness,” the biophysical space is set within an existing order of nature vs. culture, defined both by common archetypes of “perfect” wilderness and by their inverse of “civilization,” marking what “perfect wilderness” is not.

Apostle Islands trail markers with explicit mention of “wilderness,” “nature,” “forest,” and the like tell visitors that the areas before the trailhead sign are one sphere and the areas beyond the sign are another. Maps posted at many trailheads reinforce this distinction with visual illustrations of rigid boundary lines between wilderness and surrounding areas and color-coded distinctions between wilderness and non-wilderness that are not actually traceable on the land. Beyond such text and image labels, the material rhetorics of the trailhead also communicate distinction between locations, physically manifesting a boundary. As the visitor approaches the trail space in each location, for instance, mowed and seeded grass lawn gives way abruptly to overgrown and wooded space. Gravel walkways lined with linear 2-by-4's abruptly give way to curving dirt paths at the exact same location. The distinction is artificial as, without such human-made markers, there is little if anything to distinguish the forest space on one side of the trailhead from the forest space on the other, yet the distinction still stands, omitting the perspective that “wilderness” exists in constant interaction with the “civilized” spaces that surround it.

Frame II: Danger

The second common frame of the trailhead location builds upon the first, by casting the “wilderness” or “nature” space beyond the trailhead as dangerous or inhospitable to human visitors. At the AINL, rules for conduct, warnings of potential dangers, and recommended precautions dominate trailhead markers and kiosks. Visitors crossing from non-wilderness to wilderness are alerted to bear sightings in the



area and instructed on how to avoid confrontations with wild animals. They are directed to stay on trails for their own safety and provided with emergency contact information. Bullet-pointed lists warn visitors to be cautious of poison ivy, of ticks and the threat of Lyme disease, of waning daylight hours and darkness falling early in wooded regions, of cliff outcroppings and the dangers of falling, of Giardia and hypothermia from entering the waters, of rough and demanding trail slopes, of mosquitos, exhaustion, and sunburn.

These warnings, of course, serve to promote public safety in the National Lakeshore, but their abundant presence conveys a narrative frame of wilderness danger all the same and, again, a distinction between the place of culture and the place of nature; culture place is everyday, while nature place is potentially hostile to humans, necessitating unusual precautions. These markers do not note that bears, darkness, poison ivy, ticks, sunburn, and the like exist also in the non-wilderness but rather stress the dangers as particular threats beyond the wilderness boundary.

They maintain the separation between culture and nature by constantly reminding us that “nature” is no safe place for humans, even if humans might occasionally enter into it.

Frame III: Leaving Behind/Leaving “No Trace”



The third common frame of the trailhead location contributing to boundary is that of material sacrifice, or of “leaving behind” the comforts and trappings of civilization. AINL trailheads feature permit stands and refuse bins, encouraging visitors to pause and explicitly select what they will and will not bring with them into the “wilderness” area. The permit stands ask visitors to record what they carry with them and to also explicitly record the vehicles they have left behind. The refuse bins encourage visitors to empty their pockets and remind visitors that waste disposal facilities will not be available beyond the trailhead boundary.

Major trailheads also include toilets which, along with the refuse bins, construct the trailhead as a “last stop” for amenities before trekking into a non-human sphere. Park Service guides encourage a “Leave No Trace” ethic, whereby visitors to “nature” bring as little as possible with them and leave nothing behind. This physical performance of selection and sacrifice further encourages a sense of distinction between “nature” space and other areas, while not calling explicit attention to the trappings of civilization that visitors may still bring along beyond the trail, including cell phone signals, packaged food, global positioning systems, and more. Here, actions performed at the trailhead contribute to the nature-culture boundary and cloud reflection on “wilderness” as still affected by human actions outside of the officially marked bounds.

Frame IV: Stewardship

Fourth, the trailhead location often highlights or outright celebrates the preservation and stewardship efforts of human agents, perpetuating the frame of culture-and-nature as protector-and-protected-object. At the Apostle Islands trailheads, U.S. National Park Service logos abound. American flags fly at major trailheads with visitor centers and kiosks. These symbols claim the bounded wilderness area as Park Service dominion and imply that the biophysical ecosystems it contains exist only under the watchful eye of the ecological steward. The presence of the Park Service, marked explicitly at every trailhead, is in effect an essential element of how “wilderness” is labeled in the States. Despite the dangers the wilderness is said to present, the space is simultaneously framed as fragile and in need of human stewardship.

Visitors themselves are invited to take part in this stewardship by using foot brushes at trail entries to prevent the spread of invasive pollens, or by donating money toward preservation efforts at Park Service donation boxes. Moreover, in labels like the “Gaylord Nelson Wilderness,” the “wilderness” place itself is named for the environmentalist agent. Wisconsin Governor and U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson pushed for the National Park designation of the Islands and, most famously, established an annual Earth Day in 1970. Signs, plaques, and kiosks across the AINL celebrate Nelson as a “leader” and “visionary,” stressing his crucial role in establishing the Lakeshore. Such materials oversimplify the process of land reclamation and overlook the constant role of human ecological efforts both in and outside of wilderness locations.



Frame V: Prescribed Activities



Fifth, the trailhead boundary marks wilderness space as a sphere for particular kinds of action. Trailhead plaques feature photographs and lists of implicitly prescribed wilderness activities, including leisure hiking, camping, fishing, and boating. The activities depicted include only nature appreciation, education, and recreation, in accordance with the goals of the Wilderness Act.

The trailhead rhetorics thus encourage visitors to understand and experience “wilderness” as an especially ecological, educational, and recreational sphere. Trail signs explicitly guide visitor movement through the space with arrows and labeled destinations, encouraging visitors to follow similar routes.

The signs do not depict activities clashing with the ecological, educational, and wholesome recreational objectives of the Wilderness Act and, while activities outside of these objectives—including, for instance, commercial fishing and illegal drug use—certainly take place in the AINL, the bounded, distinct wilderness sphere is cast as one of particular avenues for action.

Frame VI: Aggregate Trace of Tactics

Finally, while the official guides for action encourage some visitor movements, a sixth and ultimate frame is contributed by the tactical choices of the visitors themselves. As Michel de Certeau writes, in everyday practice individuals resist and diverge from the strategic paths provided by official signs and structures and tactically forge their own interpretive routes.

Yet even these non-official movements, performed over time and marked physically on the trailhead location, contribute to the sense of a nature-culture boundary.



For example, trailheads in the AINL often become a repository for discarded walking sticks, collected for movement through the “wilderness” space and left behind upon one’s return to “civilization.” The piled walking sticks are not designed or prescribed by the Park Service or the official trailhead structure, but they contribute to the boundary frame as they imply for future visitors that on one side of the trailhead location movement is free and unusual while on the other, “wilderness” side, movement is more difficult and special tools may become necessary. Likewise, improvised paths, diverging from the official Park Service route, though initially breaking the frames

for movement, repeated over time dig foot-worn dirt lines in the flora. These improvised, tactical lines for movement across the wilderness space grow to resemble the other trails in appearance and size and contribute to a sense of proper and improper routes for movement within the natural zone. People in the space tend to follow the routes set by those who have gone before them and, through repetition, these routes become normalized.

Case Example: Meyers Beach

At the individual trailhead, we can trace the presence of each of these six boundary-shaping frames. At the entrance of the Lakeshore Trail of Meyers Beach, for instance, the boundary between culture and nature is explicitly labeled with a large entryway plaque. Footpaths direct the visitor to the plaque which, in text and images, distinguishes the area beyond it as “natural,” “unique,” and “wild.” A map marks the “wilderness” space as distinct with color-coding, and the stark difference between the carefully landscaped parking area and the overgrown, muddy expanse beyond the trailhead physically echoes this distinction.

The trailhead marker itself is covered in warnings of potential danger beyond the spot. Hikers who stop to read the sign are reminded: the trail is “not safe” for skiing; the trail passes several ravines where hikers should “STAY BACK FROM THE EDGE”; the trail is not maintained beyond a single backwoods campsite. Nearby, a bulletin board includes guidelines for water safety and an extended pamphlet on treating cold shock and hypothermia. Another bulletin reminds visitors to attend to weather conditions before setting out, stressing, “NOT knowing and understanding these things could do more than inconvenience you, it could cost you your life” and “We want you to come back ALIVE!” Along with these warnings, visitors are instructed to leave behind trappings of civilization and make use of amenities before leaving the parking area. A large indoor toilet, multiple refuse bins, and picnic benches mark the space on the parking side of the trailhead as one of creature comforts. Individual stewardship of nature is promoted by signs encouraging visitors to use the refuse bins, to brush their shoes of pollens before entering and exiting trail space, and to beware of transmitting invasive species.

Larger stewardship efforts are highlighted in the abundance of National Park Service logos and flyers. Upon reaching the physical entry to the trail, visitor actions are further prescribed with a small brown sign that directs movement to specific, labeled locations, orienting arrows, and icons that invite hiking but explicitly prohibit biking and motors. Individual visitors observed at this trailhead perform the spatial boundary by grabbing a walking stick from the accumulated pile and hushing their conversations to a quiet tone as they approach and move onto the trail.

Reflection

The six repeated thematic frames I've traced at the trailhead location combine to create a symbolic threshold that stresses human action in the place as recreational, temporary, and non-invasive. It perpetuates the very concepts of "nature" separate from or reliant upon human action that Cronon warns against. It confirms and further encourages popular imaginings of "wilderness" as potentially dangerous, as removed from everyday human activity, and as an object in need of careful preservation from human actions rather than an extension of the shared global space that always contains both human and non-human elements. While modern ecology pushes us to recognize that all ecosystems are inter-related and that environmentalism does not and should not end at the boundaries of any "wilderness," trailhead visitors are still encouraged to move with a sense of nature-culture distinction.

The six frames I have traced are by no means the only rhetorical guides for experience in nature places, and we might continue to look for others. Samantha Senda-Cook, for instance, demonstrates how trails and maps perpetuate themes of tension between access and preservation, safety and risk ("Materializing"). Elizabeth Dickinson examines how the museum-style labeling of forest space can also objectify the natural environment, divorcing it from direct engagement and voiding it of character. My six frames build upon and encourage this attention to the rhetorics of biophysical spaces, highlighting how the mere act of labeling a space and making it physically accessible for human visitors can implicitly create boundaries that separate it from wider human activity and concerns.

Those who intentionally travel to officially designated "nature" and "wilderness" spaces generally do so out of an already developed appreciation for the biophysical world and, increasingly, they support ecological efforts toward sustainability and preservation. However, the rhetorical vocabulary of "nature" in opposition to "culture" found in the nature preserve location inhibits visitors from disrupting the nature-culture divide, from extending their understanding of "nature" to include human activity in suburbs and cities, and from expanding ecological efforts to all areas in recognition that the two sides of the trailhead or national wilderness boundary are in constant interaction with one another. Besides, the nature-culture division perpetuated and made manifest in the trailhead location promotes unrealistic

expectations for the “nature” we actually encounter (Adams) and might, in practice, damage the very environments we seek to respect. As Cronon explains, “Once we believe we know what nature ought to look like—once our vision or its ideal form becomes a moral or cultural imperative—we can remake it so completely that we become altogether indifferent or even hostile toward its prior condition” (Uncommon 40).

By labeling and marking a place, we construct boundaries, and with boundaries, we “other” the the biophysical world. Yet, as George Lakoff writes, “environment is not just about the environment. It is intimately tied up with other issue areas: economics, energy, food, health, trade, and security. In these overlap areas, our citizens as well as our leaders, policymakers, and journalists simply lack frames that capture the reality of the situation” (76).

Recommendation

Thus, in our future trailhead construction, attention to rhetorical frames and how they guide perceptions of place can make clear interventions. We might work to combat the popular definitions of “nature” and “wilderness,” and to explicitly re-define the “nature” space beyond the trailhead not as an area “unique” for its non-human aspects, but for its place within the larger global ecosphere, where all is part of “nature.” Nature parks, conservancies, and national wilderness areas do serve a wonderful purpose of preserving a physical space for flora, fauna, and terrain free from skyscrapers, roadways, landscaping, and sewers, but we should work to avoid marking this space with such a rigid boundary line.

We might always encourage distinctions at the moment of labeling any area, but we can also call explicit attention to the artificiality of this label and the permeability of the boundaries by stressing on trailhead markers that the ecosystem extends beyond the boundary line in both directions. We might always strive to promote public safety and discourage pollution by posting warnings, directives, and rules for human movement, but we can also stress that visitors take lessons about safety and “leave no trace” ethics into their home environment, in cities and in suburbs.

By subtly changing the directives on our trailhead markers and plaques, ecological efforts can be expanded from the trailhead in both directions and the fabricated boundary between nature and human activity will become less and less of a barrier for our collective wellbeing.

The park managers and service staff that design and install such trailhead markers do so with the best interests of the environment, the plant and animal life that live there, and the visitors who pass through and live nearby in mind, but rhetorical analysis of such seemingly mundane and pragmatic signposts can help make them even more useful to the ecosystem and community. My experiences conducting this project alerted me to this opportunity for cross-disciplinary engagement and, in that respect, I hope this study also reaches beyond the

AINL trailhead case example to all markers of space and place, both in ecological spheres and beyond. Rhetorical analysis, by tracing the frames of understanding and how they persuade visitors to adopt perspectives about any place or object, is a useful tool in public place curation.

When I think of the imaginary boundary line between “nature” and “civilization,” where birds, leaves, and waterways pass unobstructed, I no longer think of human visitors changing their behaviors upon entry, then returning to electronic devices and everyday actions as soon as they return from the trail. I think of the opportunity to use trailhead markers not as boundary signs, but as reminders—visible to trail walkers both coming and going from the trails—to view all spaces as part of a local and global ecosphere. They can serve a pragmatic purpose of marking official “natural” space while also calling greater attention to the “nature” that expands beyond the trail, encouraging all readers to themselves deconstruct the nature-culture divide in their daily lives. Change will not come overnight, but just as subtly as it is perpetuated, the “trouble with wilderness” may be subtly amended.

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