To know the wilderness is to know a profound humility, to recognize one’s littleness, to sense dependence and interdependence, indebtedness, and responsibility.

—Howard Zahniser

All around I hear the exhalation of whales. Yet I see no slick arc of gray, no feathery column of mist. What I see is placid water punctuated by brilliant white icebergs, a flock of Bonaparte’s gulls rising against a forest of spruce, white shell beach and black lichen-covered boulders. No whales.

Perhaps my ears deceive me, disoriented by the contrast between where I am now and where I was this afternoon. Four hours ago, I stood in the parking lot of a grocery store in Juneau, Alaska, the sun beating down on asphalt, wind whipping my hair, traffic roaring by.

“Yes,” says Sean, when I ask him, “They’re whales. It’s just that they’ve already gone back under, and the spout mist has dissipated, by the time you hear them.”

The whales are that far away, but the bay is so quiet and vast, and the mountains so steep and containing, that the whales’ breath is echoing off them.

I’m on Little Harbor Island in the Tracy Arm-Fords Terror Wilderness in the heart of the Tongass, the nation’s largest national forest. Seven of us—Sean and four other rangers, me, and photographer Irene Owsley—have just arrived after a three-hour boat ride south of Juneau on the twenty-five-foot Sumdum Ranger. This small island houses the rangers’ base camp, from which they do fieldwork all summer long in this 653,000-acre wilderness. Irene and I are along for the Voices of the Wilderness artist residency. For eight days we shadow these wilderness kayak rangers to experience this wilderness and then create art inspired by it.

As we pull to shore in the inflatable, Solan, one of the rangers, tells me and Irene, “We’ll unload the boats, you go do your art.”

I hop from boulder to boulder across the beach, around the point, over a jumble of tan rock, and find a spot to sit. I pull
out my writing pad and pencil and stare at the blank page. But it’s too soon. It takes longer than the boat ride to truly be here, let alone to have anything to say about this new place, or even just to make field notes. Instead I listen to whales, stare at icebergs, and jot down the names of seabirds floating before me on the lee side of this island, diving for small fish that dimple the water’s mirrored surface.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 describes wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man.” That word “untrammeled” was chosen carefully, so that once it’s designated, wilderness is allowed to express its own will. But just over fifty years later, I come with a nagging question: what is the place of wilderness in this age of extinction, ocean acidification, and climate change? What is left untrammeled when the human footprint spreads over the entire planet, and beyond? What good is wilderness now?

Before long, I’m on the water in a bright yellow kayak, paddling with Solan to Round Island. Like Harbor and Little Harbor islands, Round Island’s shoreline is a weathered wonderland of soft eroded slate and greenschist forming knobby spires, rounded boulders, and turrets like cathedral spires.

Upon our approach the flock of Bonaparte’s gulls rise up, this year’s newly fledged with their bandit faces, rubber band calls filling the air. Closer, a bundle of harlequin ducks and surf scoters plop off the rocks and into the water and then slide away along the shore in a straight line.

Around a rock headland, we come across a kelp bed so thick it looks like solid ground, but among the kelp are the shiny heads of harbor seals, their big liquid eyes turned to us. At first they are motionless. Then one rolls and slaps the water with its side flipper, and they all disappear, not even a ripple among the kelp to mark where they were.

Just beyond the kelp bed, a humpback calf squeals loudly as it rolls on the surface with its mother. And in a small embayment along a pebbled shore, a silver cloud of tiny fish undulates around my boat, through eelgrass and between popweed-covered rock like a single animal.
“Most likely salmon smolt,” says Solan.

We have tried, three times already, to have a conversation, Solan and I, about my writing, about his work as a wilderness ranger, the kind of talk between two people who have just met. But each time the place interrupts—birds fly up, seals splash down, fish jump, and whales exhale. The vibrant fecundity of this place commands our attention and overwhelms me. I feel as if I’ve stepped into a living animal, all its life signs strong and organs pumping, the heaving and pulsing and current of life moving and swirling around me so that all I can do is paddle slowly through it all, keep my eyes and ears as open as possible, and breathe deep.

I sleep on the beach where the tide comes so near it wakes me in the night, and I think of what Sean tells us: once the tide did rise to their tents, and he awoke to feel his legs weightless, floating. What would that be like, drifting, boatless, in a watery wilderness?

Instead I awake to whalesong, which is soon joined by the steady drone of a boat engine. All day there is at least one boat engine in the background, groaning down the fjords and across the bay. Kevin, the lead ranger, had warned me of this. That afternoon, after a staff meeting on the beach, he sits cross-legged on the sand and tells me why there are so many boats.

Over one hundred miles from here along the Gulf of Alaska coast, Glacier Bay National Park began limiting vessel traffic to preserve the park’s wilderness character. In response, many cruise ships started carrying their passengers here. Only in Glacier Bay, designated before Alaska’s statehood, are the waters included in wilderness designation. Here in the Tongass, only the land is classified as wilderness, not the waters—so the Forest Service can’t restrict boat traffic.

The wilderness staff does what they can, and they have crafted a Wilderness Best Management Practices Agreement, which most operators voluntarily uphold. Ten international cruise lines and over twenty smaller companies have committed to eliminating most loudspeaker announcements, concentrating traffic in certain areas, reducing stack emissions, and giving space to wildlife, especially whales and pupping harbor seals.

But such agreements only work so well. Three rangers spent a week in Ford’s Terror—named for a naval crewman who, in 1889, got trapped in the ripping tidal surge—to monitor for an experiential aspect of wilderness called Outstanding Opportunities for Solitude. They concluded that, with growing boat traffic, such an experience there is now impossible.

All around are signs that land and water are inextricably linked in every single way, except by law. It’s the land that’s wilderness, but it’s the water where all the action is.

The next morning, Solan, Irene, and I paddle across Holkham Bay to Tracy Bar, a sand spit that juts out into the mouth of Tracy Arm. Fog obscures the line between water and air; whales spout all around. We walk among cyan icebergs stranded by wind and tide as if through a sculpture garden. Each berg is a unique form created from the way it broke away from the glacier’s face and the way it melts. Some have dark striations, some layers of bubbles; they melt into fantastical shapes of curves and narrow spikes. All this variation is the result of the compression and movement as part of a huge river of ice over hundreds of years. We drift apart, silently, Irene to her camera lens, Solan near the kayaks, and me wandering aimlessly through the bergs.

I’m sliding my arm down the long hollow of one iceberg when the deep moan of a foghorn startles me into looking up quickly. Above the layer of fog on the water is the top of a cruise ship, an apparition so huge it dwarfs the bergs and the mountains. I start to lose my balance and try to grab the slippery edge of the iceberg with my bare hand.

On the paddle back, a raft of scoters scatter at our approach, black singing butterflies on a white canvas. The splashdowns of breaching whales boom off the mountainsides. Then one whale surfaces so near me that my heart begins to pound. Bundled in several layers against the fifty-degree chill, I suddenly get very warm. Irene, Solan, and I instinctively move closer to one another, and I think about what our little kayaks must look like to a forty-ton whale—some slender white pieces of driftwood.
Solan says they know we’re here and won’t surface beneath us. That does not still my racing heart.

Three humpbacks circle us as they feed, surfacing on either side of us. One surfaces so close to Irene that she could have stuck out her paddle and touched it. We look at each other, her eyes wide. Then one surfaces right next to me, a paddle length away, and my heart leaps into my throat, lodged like a stick in the whale’s mouth, like the one Jonah used to make his way out. The three whales surface in unison, moving away from us. I feel even smaller and more insignificant than I did with the cruise ship towering above me.

Despite Solan’s assurances that the whales won’t hit our boats, a few days after returning home I read about a whale breaching on top of a sailboat in southeast Alaska, sinking the boat, leaving two boaters in the water clinging to a floating ice chest. What would we have clung to, had a whale breached on our kayaks, all three of which would have broken like toothpicks?

Still, through my hard-beating heart, what I feel more than anything is safe. Safe in this wilderness where we’re put into proper scale. Here, in the bay, in the fog, with the cruise ship out of sight, in our small yellow kayaks on a still and foggy sea, with whales around us, here is where I feel a safety of scale. Like the surf scoters or the marbled murrelets, we are small and held, held in the place, our human concerns and transgressions shrunk down to size, as if there’s still a place where we can go and be forgiven.

The next morning, in a light rain, Irene, Solan, Sean, and I arise early and pack our kayaks. We paddle along Harbor Island to its northeastern point and wait. Two boats slice the waters on the other side of the bay, turning at Tracy Bar to head up the fjord. Then another boat appears and slows alongside us. This is the Sikumi, our ride up Tracy Arm.

The rangers’ work here is a combination of observing and researching the status of the wilderness habitat and wildlife, and of educating and informing visitors. Education, said the principal authors of the Wilderness Act, is the most profound benefit of wilderness because it reveals our connection with Earth’s community of life. So, in exchange for a ride up the thirty-two-mile-long fjord, these kayak rangers spend up to a third of their time onboard tour boats doing a version of the quintessential ranger fireside chat.

After Sean and Solan finish their talk onboard the Sikumi, a woman from Colorado asks the first question: How is climate change affecting this wilderness?

I had already learned what climate change is doing to this place. It’s become a familiar story. The three tidewater glaciers at the heads of Tracy and Endicott are among the four southernmost tidewater glaciers in North America. So it’s no surprise that these glaciers are rapidly retreating. It’s not, however, a steady, predictable retreat; big changes occur in a matter of seconds.

Beyond that, the effects are more subtle. Yellow cedars, at their northernmost range in the Tongass, have suddenly begun dying, and scientists speculate it’s due to climate change. Winter snowfall has decreased, winter snow melt has increased, and tree roots freeze without the protective blanket of snow. Marine life, too, is changing, and not only because of rising temperatures. Ocean acidification from CO2 absorption is threatening shellfish and plankton—the plankton that feed salmon and humpback whales.

It’s no longer possible for any piece of the planet, no matter how remote and rugged and inaccessible, to be truly untrammeled. And it’s not just climate change; persistent organic pollutants now contaminate every region of the world. What’s more, humans have directly transformed more than three-quarters of the ice-free land on our planet. Even the polar ice packs are now rapidly disappearing from our fossil fuel use. In a story titled “Nature is Over,” Time magazine reports that there is no more free-willed nature. Human activity now shapes the Earth more than any other independent action, including geology and climate.

Sean tries to keep spirits up by telling passengers how lucky they are to be seeing these tidewater glaciers before they’re gone. But it’s like Aldo Leopold said—knowing all this leaves you living “in a world of wounds.” It’s a different feeling, watching a dying glacier, seeing something you know is on its way out.

This mountain and seascape before us are so expansive, these glaciers so ancient and massive, that it’s hard, standing on the deck of one small ship, to believe we’re affecting them so drastically. Even a passing cruise ship quickly fades from view. When John Muir came here in 1880, he wrote that the days he spent here were “two of the best and brightest of all my Alaska days.” It’s a nexus of geologic, ecologic, and even human history with two surprisingly different personalities: the eroded islands, old-growth forests, and the personality of the expansive waters of Holkham Bay and the fjord we’re about to enter.

Traveling up the fjord is like going back in time. From the wide-armed bay fringed with gentle forested slopes that contain some of the largest stands of coastal temperate rainforest left on Earth, the fjord narrows and then—as we make...
a sharp right-angle turn—suddenly becomes steep-sided cliffs. This turn marks a dramatic change in the geology, from eroded sedimentary and volcanic rock to immoveable granite. Spruce and hemlock give way to alder and willow here, and the arm is less than a mile wide, a stark corridor of rock so high we can’t see the seven-thousand-foot peaks around us. Waterfalls drop straight down to seawater from ancient icefields, and icebergs line the passage. Gone are the serenading whale spouts, gone the rafts of harlequins, scoters, and Bonapartes.

Around another corner, the rock walls containing us are bare; not even fireweed has pioneered them yet. Another turn, and the looming face of South Sawyer Glacier comes into view. From its forget-me-not face spreads an ice floe. Off to the south side the granite walls tilt back and there’s a small rock outcropping. As we move closer, this mound of granite explodes with the high-pitched sounds and lilting flights of an arctic tern nesting colony.

The ice floe—which we maneuver slowly, bumping our way through bergy bits—is dotted with the dark crescents of harbor seals. Hundreds of them. Endicott and Tracy contain some of the largest populations of harbor seals in Alaska—and the world. Seal populations have dropped sharply from Glacier Bay north into southcentral and western Alaska, but here their numbers appear more stable. The previous July, two rangers climbed nearby cliffs and counted over a thousand seals in front of South Sawyer alone.

“This place is like a nursery,” Sean says softly to nearby passengers, “especially during pupping season, which was just last month. All these seals are in a really delicate state right now.”

Harbor seals depend upon these icebergs to birth and raise their pups, safe from predators and not covered by tides. Arctic terns depend upon the upwelling at a glacier’s calving face for the nutrients that feed the fish they eat. This ice-laden environment, the complex connections and reliance among seals and ice and glaciers and terns—all this is evident before us.

Standing on the deck, it strikes me that we humans are a lonely species, moving as we do through our days with little connection to other species or our environment. For this we need wilderness: here we are more connected to the larger community of life, where no one, not a solitary bear or humpback or halibut, is ever truly alone.

This is one of four tidewater glaciers fed by the Stikine Icefield, an icefield rapidly disappearing, threatening to take with it this
entire web of life. Sean points out the line where the rock face turns lighter.

“That’s where the glacier came out to. Right where we’re sitting was glacier just a few years ago,” says Sean. “This entire bay is new.”

Over an eighteen-month period beginning in late 2003, South Sawyer retreated one and a half miles, its three-hundred-foot face slumping and receding. Now this new curve of a bay is filled with ice floe and harbor seals, and this rock mound nearly levitates with arctic terns.

As remarkable as the sight before me is, still, I can’t help it—my thoughts turn dark as I wonder, what does wilderness mean now? We can’t even protect these seals from too much boat traffic, much less from the loss of their glacier. In this interconnected world, pollution in India and China and Pittsburgh is destroying these glaciers and threatening these seals. There was a time when nature in some remote or protected places could have free will, but no longer, since there isn’t a pocket of the planet unaffected by the long arm of human activity and climate change.

A quote by Wendell Berry keeps circling in my head: “There are no unsacred places; there are only sacred places and desecrated places.” What is becoming of the sacredness of a wilderness like this?

After a time watching the face of South Sawyer for crashing icebergs, we slip back into our kayaks near another rock outcropping close to the face of Sawyer Glacier. Upon approach in the Sikumi our campsite didn’t look like much other than some bare rock and a rushing torrent of whitewater surging into saltwater. Up close I see a small indentation in the lee of the outgoing tide large enough for us to get out, one at a time, and climb vertical rock, coordinating with each other to haul drybags and kayaks up to another ledge large enough to wedge each boat into a crevice. The next day, we paddle back to South Sawyer and along the very same steep-sided walls of rock, but this time closer, more slowly, and more attentively.

Once more the scale and abundance astonish. The water changes hue at tidal lines, the blue milky with glacial silt. We paddle by a seal curving in and out of a waterfall’s outfall; we watch arctic terns dart by overhead with thin silver fish in their mouths. We paddle by the tern colony, keeping far enough from them that they don’t dive-bomb us. We sit in our kayaks to eat lunch, listening to the distant mewing of young seals and the groaning, cracking face of the glacier.

Paddling back from South Sawyer in late afternoon, I crane my neck to look up the vertical rock; the cliffs that looked bare from the Sikumi are adorned with dark bracken ferns, pale lichens, emerald mosses, and the dusty leaves and brilliant blossoms of fireweed and lupine. Sun pushes through clouds to warm my back. Then I hear a breath expelled, close. I glimpse a gray-brown skin break surface—it is a harbor porpoise, who are so shy that they are rarely seen.

I talk again with Solan, our voices soft against the rock cliffs.

“So, when John Muir was here, this was all under ice, right?”

“Yeah, we’re seeing a landscape he didn’t see.”

“And it keeps changing.”

“Yeah, that’s the thing about the retreating glaciers: it’s both exciting and sad.”

“That was a great first question, aboard the Sikumi, wasn’t it? About climate change?”

“Yes, I suppose,” Solan says. “But I find it hard to talk to visitors about climate change. It’s so—inimate, somehow.”

That’s all I need to ask the question that clings to me like kelp around an anchor: What does wilderness mean in this time of climate change?

“That’s a good question,” Solan answers. I shift in my seat; I can’t stand to leave my dark question hanging above these azure waters.

“Well,” I say, “maybe—I don’t know—maybe we need wilderness now more than ever.”

We ride the Wilderness Explorer, a larger boat with eighty passengers, back out of the fjord. Sean starts off with a map of wilderness areas in the United States. He asks people to find the wilderness nearest their hometown, and many do: the Upper Buffalo in Arkansas, West Sister Island near Toledo, Congaree Swamp in South Carolina, Sierra Estrella near Phoenix. Then Solan starts his talk by asking people why they’d come. Hands shoot up, answers ring out:

“To escape the heat.”

“To see wildlife.”

“To bask in the beauty.”

“To nurture my soul.”

“To feed gratitude back to help it survive.”
I sit in the back, listening. These answers make it clear why we need wilderness. There’s no denying the human need for places that we haven’t man-handled into homes, shopping malls, cattle pastures, and gas stations. And the last answer, which Solan repeated in a happy voice, implies our responsibility.

When it’s time for questions, the first one is, again, about climate change. It’s on everyone’s minds as they sit before the crystal cerulean of these towering glaciers waiting for the booming crack, the roar, the rush of huge waves from a calving berg: how much longer will all this be here?

On our last morning in the wilderness, we walk a forest trail so narrow it could have been made by bear or deer. Towering spruce and hemlock block most of the sky, and a feathery understory of blueberries, maidenhair fern, Solomon’s seal, and deer cabbage covers a forest floor of moss and dark soil. I wonder if the rock beneath this soil looks like those sharp-edged shores of upper Tracy Arm.

Climbing to a ridgeline, we enter a muskeg meadow. We step carefully on spongy earth, sphagnum moss and sundews, bog orchids, and bog cranberries. A necklace of small ponds meanders through, yellow lilies spreading flat leaves over dark water. On the edges of muskeg are the big leaves of skunk cabbage, many nibbled by deer to look oddly, in this wet place, like cactus. Quiet envelopes us. The only sounds are rain patterning on my coat and the distant cry of a crow.

I walk the edges, with water coming up to the tops of my rubber boots more than once, and the ground sucking so hard my boot nearly pulls off. It may be folly, but I want to reach the other side, where Solan has pointed out two tall yellow cedars, some of the largest still living around here. So I push onward. I stand between these two cedars growing on the edge of muskeg, behind them an open forest of stunted hemlock and berry bushes, and I look up into spiring limbs. The trunks are straight, reaching a hundred feet or more into the clearing blue air. Time and winds have draped old man’s beard over their flat, lacy fronds like the trimmings on a Christmas tree. Then I look down. A half dozen cedar seedlings flourish within a few yards of these two trees.

It’s true, there’s no such thing as untrammeled wilderness anymore; everywhere is damaged by human’s encroachment
across the Earth. Near the mouth of the fjords there was once a Tlingit community, and then a mining community of nearly 150 people, whereas now from the water there is no trace. Nature reclaims. With climate change, nature’s ability to reclaim is put to the test, and put to the task.

But I believe in the resilience and tenacity of nature. These two yellow cedars, pushing against their northernmost range, have not yet succumbed to whatever climate change-related phenomenon is killing their brethren; they stand as proof of nature’s abilities if left alone. I look out beyond the seedlings to a flat place on the ground: some animal’s bed last night.

If nature were a wild animal—and she is that, exponentially—then she’d want to hide away and lick the wounds we’ve inflicted. For this she needs wilderness, wilderness as the place to heal all. After many failed efforts to clean up and rehabilitate wildlife in the wake of the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill in Prince William Sound, many of us realized the best path to healing was to leave it alone. With all that we’re inflicting on the natural world through climate change—so much, so fast—wilderness might provide some place for nature to lick her wounds and heal.

When I’d told Solan that, with climate change, we need wilderness even more, it was nothing more than a momentary sense inspired by the sheer scale of the place. But the more I thought about it, the more I knew it was the kind of right insight wilderness gives. We need wilderness more than ever, and so does the rest of the planet. The answers given by passengers onboard the Wilderness Explorer made clear our emotional and psychological need for wilderness, no matter that it is not entirely untrammeled.

We need wilderness to provide some baseline, however imperfect, from which to know what a healthy temperate rainforest looks like, feels like, behaves like, even as climate change alters it. We need wilderness as a seed bank for restoration. In the same way marine protected areas help restore the surrounding habitats, we need places we leave alone so they can harbor the seeds of restoration—even if restoration is so far off, we can’t even imagine it. Not everything works on human scale.

But some things do. Photosynthesis, for example. Dr. Thomas Lovejoy has calculated that if we immediately set out to re-green our emerald planet, making every available area forested and grassed and covered once more in plants, then we would reduce CO2 to an acceptable level. What’s more, in order to withstand the effects of climate change on our world food supply, Dr. Sarah Scheer has pointed out that we need to foster in all areas of agriculture three things: resiliency, flexibility, and diversity. In other words, we need to grow more wild, for resiliency, flexibility, and diversity are the very qualities of an intact wilderness ecosystem.

Even—and especially—in this time of climate change, when it, too, is under siege, wilderness can save us. But I don’t know whether we’ll give it the chance. At the northern boundary of this wilderness, just across from Tracy Bar, is a bay that, if an Alaska Native corporation and some state legislators have their way, will soon house a lodge, complete with floatplanes and tour boats.

Kevin told me the question visitors most often ask is, what’s the biggest threat to wilderness? He doesn’t answer climate change, or development, or tourism; he says, “It’s if people like you who come here and experience this place don’t stand up for it when you go back home.”

Onboard the Wilderness Explorer, Solan had asked the passengers a question of his own: “How do we as human beings exercise the restraint necessary to leave part of the world untrammeled?”

I don’t know how we cannot. I can’t imagine not being able to spend time in a place like this, where I can let go and feel the deep relaxation that comes from being put in proper scale. I can’t imagine what would happen to me if I could not feel so small, insignificant, and held by something far greater than what human hands can build.

Back in Holkham Bay, Solan, Irene, and I paddle around Holkham Island. Before being renamed by Vancouver, this bay
was known by the Tlingit as Sum Dum—the name itself said to have expressed, in both meaning and pronunciation, the sound of falling ice. When the Tlingit lived here, the glaciers were closer. Now all is quiet, save the serenade of whales and the intermittent splash of a salmon. We round a corner to see before us Admiralty Island and the Kootznoowoo Wilderness, the wide stretch of Frederick Sound out toward Baranof Island, and beyond, a glimpse of the Pacific Ocean, curving to the horizon.

Solan names it all and says, “See? We’re just around the corner from the edge.”

And so we are. As we continue to transform the entire planet so completely that we now, with great hubris and unfortunate accuracy, refer to this geological epoch as the Anthropocene, we need to work even harder to protect, preserve, and restore the remaining portions of the planet that have not yet succumbed, that may be frayed at the edges and melting in the core but are still, though incompletely and imperfectly so, the closest thing to self-willed wilderness that we have left.

Wilderness can save us. And itself. If we let it.

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