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The Riddle of the Apostle Islands

How do you manage a wilderness full of human stories?

THE APOSTLE ISLANDS are not on the way to anywhere. I managed to grow up in southern Wisconsin, and even to fall in love with the wild beauty of Lake Superior, without ever journeying to the northernmost tip of the state. There, the Bayfield Peninsula juts out into the cold waters of the lake and an archipelago of twenty-two small wooded islands lies just offshore. Not until a few years ago did I find myself, almost by accident, gazing out at those islands and realizing I had found one of the places on this good Earth where I feel most at home. I have been haunting them in all seasons ever since.

There is nothing especially dramatic about the Apostles. In some places, they meet the lake with narrow, pebble-covered beaches rising steeply to meet the forest behind. Elsewhere, they present low sandstone cliffs, brown-red in hue, that have been so sculpted by the action of wave and ice that one never tires of studying their beauty. In a few places where the geology is just right, the lake has widened crevices to form deep caves where kayakers can make their way into darkness and listen to the rise and fall of water on stone. Northern hardwood forest, swamp, marsh, and shore are the primary habitats, with nesting bird colonies in the cliffs and a peripatetic population of black bears that is surprisingly unfazed by the need to swim from island to island despite the notoriously cold temperatures of the lake.

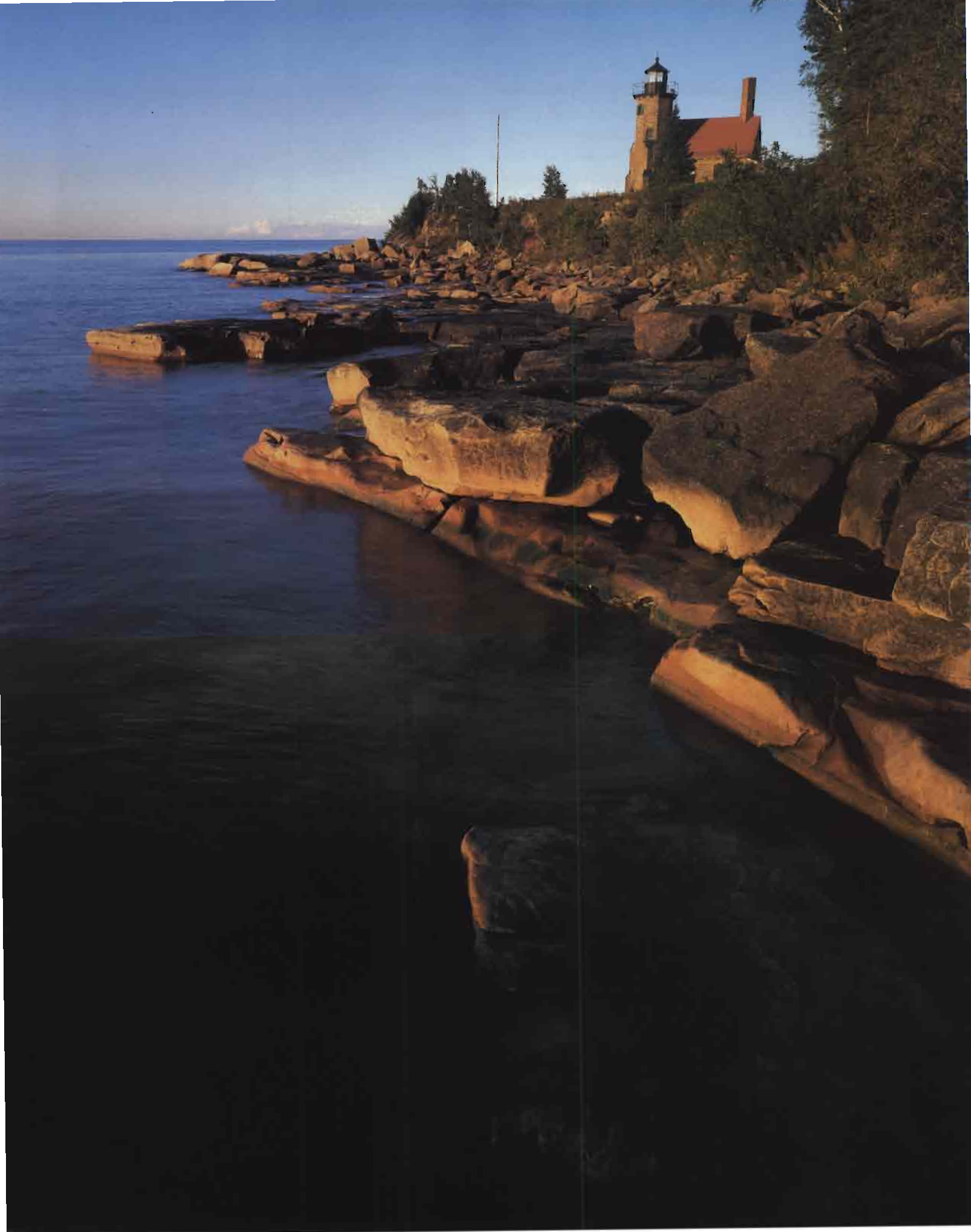
For nearly thirty-five years, these lands and waters have been protected by the federal government as Apostle Islands National Lakeshore—a legacy of Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson, father of Earth Day in 1970. Sometime later this year, the National Park Service will issue recommendations for future management of the park. Although the NPS study recommending wilderness designation for the Apostles (spearheaded by another Wisconsin senator, Russ Feingold) has not thus far

attracted much attention, its implications reach far beyond the Apostle Islands. Anyone committed to rethinking human relationships with nature should pay attention to its findings.

In the 1970 act that created it, the Lakeshore was dedicated to the “protection of scenic, scientific, historic, geological, and archaeological features contributing to public education, inspiration, and enjoyment.” Since then, millions of Americans have come to appreciate the subtle, ever-changing beauty of the islands. Designating the Apostles as wilderness will be a milestone in the ongoing effort to protect them for future generations, and will constitute an important addition to our National Wilderness Preservation System in a region where far too little land has received such protection. Look at a map of legal wilderness in the United States, and for the most part you will see a vast blank expanse between the Appalachians and the Rockies. At a minimum, the Apostles can serve as a reminder that the Middle West also is a place of wildness, despite the common prejudice that nothing here deserves that label.

On the surface, there seems little reason to doubt that many of the Apostles meet the legal criteria specified by the 1964 Wilderness Act. Most visitors who wander these islands, whether by water or land, experience them, in the words of that Act, “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.” Permanent improvements and human habitations are few, and those that do exist are often so subtle that many visitors fail to notice them. Whether one sails, kayaks, boats, hikes, or camps, opportunities for solitude are easy to find. Wild nature is everywhere.

And yet: the Apostle Islands also have a deep human history that has profoundly altered the “untouched” nature that visitors



find here. The archipelago has been inhabited by Ojibwe peoples for centuries, and remains the spiritual homeland of the Red Cliff and Bad River Ojibwe bands whose reservations lie just across the water. Ojibwe people continue to gather wild foods here as they have done for centuries. The largest of the islands, Madeline, was the chief trading post on Lake Superior for French and native traders from the seventeenth century forward. Commercial fisheries have operated in these waters since the mid-nineteenth century, with small fishing stations scattered among the islands for processing the catch in all seasons. The islands saw a succession of economic activities ranging from logging to quarrying to farming. Most have been completely cut over at least once. The Apostles possess the largest surviving collection of nineteenth-century lighthouses anywhere in the United States. Finally, tourists have sought out the islands since the late nineteenth century, and they too have left marks ranging from lodges to cottages to docks to trails as evidence of the wilderness experience they came to find.

All of this would seem to call into question the common perception among visitors that the Apostles are “untouched,” and might even raise doubts about whether the National Lakeshore should be legally designated as wilderness. But although most parts of these islands have been substantially altered by past human activities, they have also gradually been undergoing a process that James Feldman, an environmental historian at the University of Wisconsin-Madison who is writing a book about the islands, has evocatively called “rewilding.” The Apostles are thus a superb example of a wilderness in which natural and human histories are intimately intermingled. To acknowledge past human impacts upon these islands is not to call into question their wildness; it is rather to celebrate, along with the human past, the robust ability of wild nature to sustain itself when people give it the freedom it needs to flourish in their midst.

SHOULD APOSTLE ISLANDS National Lakeshore become part of the National Wilderness Preservation System? Emphatically yes.

But to answer the question so simply is to evade some of the most challenging riddles that the Apostles Islands pose for our conventional ideas of wilderness. In a much altered but rewilding landscape, where natural and cultural resources are equally important to any full understanding of place, how should we manage and interpret these islands so that visitors will appreciate the stories and lessons they hold? If visitors come here and believe they are experiencing pristine nature, they will completely misunderstand not just the complex human history that has created the Apostle Islands of today; they will also fail to understand how much the natural ecosystems they encounter here have been shaped by that human history. In a very deep sense, what they will



In the early twentieth century, this dock linked Sand Island to

experience is not the natural and human reality of these islands, but a cultural myth that obscures much of what they most need to understand about a wilderness that has long been a place of human dwelling.

If this is true, then the riddle we need to answer is how to manage the Apostle Islands as a *historical* wilderness, in which we commit ourselves not to erasing human marks on the land, but rather to interpreting them so that visitors can understand just how intricate and profound this process of rewilding truly is.

Among my favorite places for thinking about rewilding is Sand Island, at the extreme western end of the archipelago. Most visitors today disembark at a wooden pier on the eastern side of the island, and then hike more than a mile to reach the lovely brownstone lighthouse at the island’s northern tip, constructed way back in 1881. Built of sandstone from another island, it is an artifact of an earlier phase of Apostles history that has now vanished except for the overgrown quarries one still finds in the woods. Gazing out at the lake from atop the tower, it is easy to imagine that this is a lone oasis of civilization in the midst of deep wilderness.

But the path you walk to reach this lighthouse is in fact a former county road. If you look in the right place you can still find an ancient automobile rusting amid the weeds. Frank Shaw homesteaded the southeastern corner of Sand Island in the 1880s, and by 1910 more than seventy people—most of them Norwegian immigrants—were living here year round. Sand Island had its own post office and general store. Island children had their own one-room school. There was even telephone service to the mainland, though it soon failed and was abandoned.

How did Sand Islanders support themselves in this remote rural settlement? Fishing was of course a mainstay. Logging went on occasionally, and from the 1880s forward the summer months saw a regular stream of tourists. But for several decades



the mainland (left); young forest disguises an old road (center); a block of sandstone quarried at Hermit Island (right).

islanders also farmed. Few who visit this “pristine wilderness” today will recognize that the lands through which they hike are old farm fields, but such in fact they are. Indeed, look closely at the encroaching forest that was once Burt and Anna Mae Hill’s homestead and you will quickly realize that the trees are not much more than half a century old. Indeed, some of the oldest are apple trees, offering mute evidence—like the lilacs and rose bushes that grow amid ruins of old foundations elsewhere on the island—of past human efforts to yield bounty and beauty from this soil.

The old orchards are in fact a perfect example of rewilding, since Burt Hill’s farm still shapes the local ecology. As James Feldman describes the process, “In some areas of the clearing, willow, hawthorn, mountain ash, and serviceberry have moved into the sedge meadow in straight, regular lines, following the drainage ditches dug by Burt Hill when he expanded his farming operations in the 1930s.” Nature alone cannot explain this landscape. You need history too.

The dilemma for the Park Service, then, is deciding how much of the Apostle Islands to designate as wilderness, and how to manage lands so labeled. More bluntly: should Burt Hill’s orchard count as wilderness? And if it does, should park managers strive to erase all evidence of the Hills’ home so visitors can imagine this land to be “pristine”?

WHAT MAKES THESE QUESTIONS so difficult is that the 1964 Wilderness Act and current National Park Service management policies draw quite a stark—and artificial—boundary between nature and culture. The implication of this boundary is that the two should be kept quite separate, and that wilderness in particular should be devoid of anything suggesting an ongoing human presence. Under the 1964 Act, wilderness is defined as a place that “generally appears to have been affected primarily

by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable.” Strictly interpreted, this definition suggests that the more human history we can see in a landscape, the less wild it is. A curious feature of this definition is that it privileges visitors’ perceptions of “untrammelledness” over the land’s true history. It almost implies that wilderness designation should depend on whether we can remove, erase, or otherwise hide historical evidence that people have altered a landscape and made it their home.

Because this strict definition can exclude from the National Wilderness Preservation System too much land that might otherwise deserve protection, the less-well-known 1975 Eastern Wilderness Act offers an important counterpoint that is especially relevant to the Apostle Islands. It declares that wilderness areas can be designated east of the Hundredth Meridian even where land has been grazed, plowed, mined, or clear cut—land, in other words, that the 1964 Act would emphatically regard as “trammelled.” Unfortunately, the implications of the 1975 Act have still not been fully appreciated, so that federal managers continue to remove historic structures and artifacts in a misguided effort to fool visitors into believing they are experiencing a “pristine” landscape.

For instance, current NPS management policies adopt a strict definition of wilderness comparable to the 1964 Act in declaring that “the National Park Service will seek to remove from potential wilderness the temporary, non-conforming conditions that preclude wilderness designation.” The bland phrase “non-conforming conditions” generally refers to any human imprints that diminish the impression that a wilderness is “untouched”—imprints, in other words, that constitute the chief evidence of human history. As Laura Watt has suggested in her valuable study of Park Service management at Point Reyes in California, “The Trouble with Preservation, or, Getting Back to the Wrong



Tourism has been a major force shaping the natural and cultural landscape of the Apostles (left); wind- and water-shaped sandstone formations such as this one beckon beachcombers (right).

Term for Wilderness Protection,” NPS efforts to create the appearance of pristine wilderness—even in a heavily grazed and logged area like Point Reyes—have included the following:

- intentionally demolishing historic structures;
- promoting natural resources at the expense of cultural ones;
- implying that dramatically altered landscapes are much more pristine than they truly are;
- privileging certain historic eras over others; and
- refusing to interpret for park visitors the human history of places designated as wilderness.

At both Point Reyes and Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, Park Service managers have ironically become the principal vandals of historic structures—tearing down ranches at Point Reyes, removing farms, fishing camps, and cottages at Apostle Islands—in an effort to persuade visitors that land remains untrammelled. Park visitors deceived by this carefully contrived illusion not only fail to see the human history of the places they visit; they also fail to see the many features of present ecosystems that are inexplicable without reference to past human influence. As Laura Watt points out, although the Park Service has long opposed the reconstruction of historic buildings and sites as inherently false and misleading, it shows much less compunction about false and misleading reconstructions of “natural” landscapes.

NPS management policies do call for the protection of “significant” cultural resources even on lands designated as wilderness, but such resources must meet very high standards of significance—generally, listing on the National Register—to merit protection. As a result, NPS generally forces managers to choose between two mutually exclusive alternatives, wild and nonwild.

One either designates an area as wilderness and tries to remove “non-conforming conditions” so as to manage it almost exclusively for wilderness values; or one designates an area as a cultural resource and manages it for values other than wilderness. The heretical notion that one might actually wish to protect and interpret a cultural resource in the very heart of wilderness so as to help visitors better understand the history of that wilderness is pretty much unthinkable under current regulations.

All of this may seem abstract and academic, but it has very practical implications for how Apostle Islands National Lakeshore and other parks are managed when designated as wilderness. Under NPS policies, “improvements” are to be held to a bare minimum in designated wilderness. This means that even if historic human structures and artifacts are permitted to remain (most would typically be removed or destroyed), the best one could hope for them would be stabilization, not active protection, restoration, or interpretation. Trails would be kept to a minimum, and their routes would emphasize nature over culture to encourage visitors’ perception of untrammelled wilderness—even when, as at Sand Island, the trail is in fact an old road. Perhaps most importantly from the point of view of human history, interpretive signs would be removed altogether, so that historic features in the landscape that most visitors might otherwise miss could not be marked. Although one might hope that brochures, guidebooks, and displays in visitor centers would encourage visitors to look for evidence of these historic features, wilderness designation under current NPS policies would prevent them from being interpreted on the ground.

Why does this bother me so much? Because I can’t help seeing the straight lines along which willows and serviceberries are invading Burt Hill’s orchard. I can’t help caring about all the dreams and hard work with which he planted these apple trees so long ago. For me, Burt and Anna Mae’s story makes this wilderness all the more

poignant, and I cannot understand why we think we need to annihilate the record of their lives so we can pretend to ourselves—pioneer-like—that no one before us has ever stood here.

WHAT ALTERNATIVES DO WE HAVE? How might we combine designated wilderness with an equal and ongoing commitment to interpreting the shared past of humanity and nature? If we can answer this question for the Apostle Islands, I believe we can also answer it for many other landscapes whose histories also combine wildness with human dwelling. Among the suggestions I'd make would be the following:

Most importantly, we should commit ourselves to the notion that Apostle Islands National Lakeshore is and always will be a historical wilderness: for centuries in the past, and presumably for centuries still to come, human beings have played and will play crucial roles in these islands. Visitors should come away from the park with a deepened appreciation not just for the wild nature they find here, but for the human history as well.

The interpretive framework that can best integrate the natural and cultural resources of this park is James Feldman's concept of rewilding. It should be at the heart of what the park offers to visitors. Here is a natural landscape that has been utilized for centuries by different human groups for different human purposes: first by native peoples for subsistence, then for fur trading, then in turn for fishing, shipping, logging, quarrying, farming, touring, and other activities. Natural resources here have long been exploited as commodities, and island ecosystems have changed drastically as a result. The shifting composition of the forest, the changing populations of wildlife on the land and in the lake, the introduction of exotic species, the subtle alterations of geomorphology: all of these "natural" features also reflect human history. Visitors should come away with a more sophisticated understanding of them all.

Furthermore, these changes have not all been in one direction, which is why Feldman's narrative of rewilding can be a source of hope for all who support efforts at ecological restoration. Although parts of the Apostle Islands have been drastically altered by activities like clear cutting, wilderness is returning to such a degree that hikers can walk old logging roads and completely fail to realize that the woods through which they are traveling were stumps just half a century ago. I think they would learn more about restoration and rewilding if they could see those stumps in their mind's eye. We should be able to encounter an abandoned plow blade in the woods, or a rusting stretch of barbed-wire fence, or a neatly squared block of brownstone, without feeling that such things somehow violate our virginal experience of wilderness. We would do better to recognize in this historical wilderness a more complicated tale than the one we like to tell ourselves about returning to the original garden.

One of the most attractive features of Feldman's concept of rewilding is that it avoids the negative implication that past human history consists solely of exploiting, damaging, and destroying nature. As Feldman puts it, "rewilding landscapes should be interpreted as evidence neither of past human abuse nor of triumphant wild nature, but rather as evidence of the tightly intertwined processes of natural and cultural history." When we use words like "healing" to describe the return of wilderness to a place like the Apostles, we imply that past human history here should be understood mainly as "wounding" and "scarring." Such words do no more justice to the complexity of human lives in the past than they do to our own lives in the present. They implicitly dishonor the memories of those like Burt and Anna Mae Hill who once made their lives here and who presumably loved these islands as much as we do.

In keeping with the principle that the Park Service should not be in the business of promoting illusions about a pristine wilderness with no human history, the default management assumption should be that existing human structures and artifacts will not be removed even from designated wilderness. No erasures should be the rule except where absolutely necessary. Even in instances where there are safety concerns about a collapsing structure, other solutions for protecting visitors should always be sought before resorting to destruction and removal. In a rewilding landscape, old buildings, tools, fencerows, and other such structures supply vital evidence of past human uses, without which visitors cannot hope to understand how natural ecosystems have responded to those uses. Moreover, such artifacts today stand as romantic ruins, haunting and beautiful in their own right. Far from diminishing the wilderness experience of visitors, they enhance and deepen it by adding complexity to the story of rewilding.

Moreover, not all structures and artifacts should be permitted to go to ruin. The Park Service has already worked hard (with far too little funding) to preserve the beautiful historic lighthouses that are among the most popular destinations on the islands. But a grave weakness of current Park Service interpretation is its extreme emphasis on lighthouses and fishing as if these constituted the sum total of past human activities in the islands. Equally important phases of island history remain almost invisible. Ojibwe and other native histories are only beginning to receive the attention they deserve, and the histories of later island residents often go entirely unmentioned.

An NPS commitment to interpreting all phases of Apostle Islands history would mean more than just tolerating the presence of romantic ruins in an otherwise wild landscape. Certain structures and artifacts are so important to visitor understanding of island history that at least a few need to be stabilized or restored, and actively interpreted. Nowhere can visitors now

explore a former brownstone quarry with the benefit of informed interpretation to help them appreciate how important this industry was to the built environment of the United States during the closing decades of the nineteenth century. Visitors would look with entirely different eyes at the brownstone buildings in nearby towns if they were encouraged to see where that stone originally came from. The same goes for logging sites and especially for old farms. Visitors almost surely leave Apostle Islands National Lakeshore with no appreciation for farm families like Burt and Anna Mae Hill who once raised crops and children on these islands, even though the remnants of their farms are still visible on the ground and are still reflected in the ecology of the forests that now grow on abandoned fields.

The bias of historical interpretation in the Apostle Islands, like many other historic sites in the United States, is generally toward earlier, "pioneer" periods. One crucial human activity that goes almost entirely uninterpreted for tourists in the Apostle Islands is tourism itself. Many mid-twentieth-century tourist cottages have already been torn down as "non-conforming." So far, there has been no effort to preserve any of these structures as cultural resources in their own right, to help visitors understand how tourism has emerged over the past two centuries as one of the most potent cultural forces reshaping landscapes all over the world. (The designation of wilderness in Apostle Islands National Lakeshore is inexplicable without reference to this cultural force.) Interpreting the history of tourism should be just as important as interpreting the history of lighthouses and fishing, and at least a few early tourist structures need to be preserved if this goal is to be accomplished.

If I had my druthers, I would also permit limited signage and interpretation as tools for educating visitors and managers alike that the presence of cultural resources such as fishing camps and cottages in the midst of wilderness does not automatically degrade wilderness values or the wilderness experience. Does Aldo Leopold's shack or Sigurd Olson's cabin diminish the wild lands surrounding it? I honestly believe such cultural resources can enhance visitor appreciation of the complex history of rewilding landscapes. If we're to tell stories about ecological restoration, as surely we need to do if we're to envision a sustainable human future, we need to leave evidence on the ground that will bear witness to such stories.

I'm nonetheless willing to acknowledge that standardized bureaucratic rules and regulations may not easily accommodate the kind of interpretive ambiguities that I prefer. So the wiser, easier strategy is probably to think of wilderness in the Apostle Islands as existing along a continuum, from areas that will be treated as "pure" wilderness (even though they are full of historical artifacts that should not be removed) to highly developed sites like the lighthouses that are managed almost entirely for nonwilderness values.

I would argue for a few locations outside of the designated wilderness which, although still managed to protect wilderness values, could be modestly restored and actively interpreted so as to help visitors understand the historic landscapes of logging, quarrying, farming, and early tourism. One might consider designating them as "historical wilderness areas" to signal that they should be managed with an eye toward balancing natural and cultural resources more evenly than would typically be true in "designated wilderness."

Sand and Basswood islands are the obvious candidates to be designated as historical wilderness, because their histories are so rich and varied—encompassing fishing, logging, quarrying, farming, and tourism in addition to Ojibwe subsistence activities—and so can serve as microcosms for the whole archipelago. These islands could be regarded almost as classrooms for historical wilderness, where visitors can learn about the long-term cultural processes that have in fact shaped all of the Apostles. Then, when they visit the designated wilderness where much less interpretation is permitted, their eyes will be trained to see the rewilding process they will witness there.

WHAT ARE THE CHANCES that this new approach to protecting wilderness might actually succeed in the Apostle Islands? Surprisingly good. The Park's superintendent, Bob Krumenaker, has been both visionary and eloquent in refusing to choose wilderness over history—or history over wilderness. "I don't think, if we do it right," he says, "that wilderness has to entail either balancing nature and culture—which suggests one gains while the other loses—or sacrificing one at the expense of the other. We can preserve both nature and culture at the Apostle Islands and should embrace the chance to do so."

Like Krumenaker, I favor educating visitors so they will recognize that wilderness can have a human history and still offer a flourishing home for wild nature. If we adopt such a strategy for managing wilderness in Apostle Islands National Lakeshore, the park can offer a truly invaluable laboratory, with implications far beyond its own boundaries, for rethinking what we want visitors to experience and understand when they visit a wilderness that is filled equally with human and natural histories.

Indeed, among the most precious experiences that Apostle Islands National Lakeshore can offer its visitors are precisely these stories. Management policy in the National Lakeshore should seek to protect wilderness values and historic structures, certainly, but it should equally protect stories—stories of wild nature, stories of human history. It is a storied wilderness. And it is in fact these stories that visitors will most remember and retell, even as they contribute their own experiences to the ongoing history of people and wild nature in the Apostle Islands. ✎