

(Editor's note: Mike Link is one of the founders of the Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness. His article below is condensed from a speech he gave in 1992 to a conference of Forest Service wilderness rangers. The subject of that speech is even more important today than it was in 1992, because wilderness rangers and wilderness visitors are asking increasingly: What does risk mean in a wilderness setting? What does a wilderness experience mean?)

Mike Link has been director of the Audubon Center of the North Woods near Sandstone, MN, since 1971. With his wife, Kate Crowley, he has published 17 books and 1000 articles about wilderness and the outdoors. He sat next to Sigurd Olson at the infamous hearing in Ely during a contentious public debate preceding the passage of the BWCAW Act of 1978. Mike has experienced every wilderness area in the country.)

Risk and the Wilderness

By Mike Link

My life has been shaped by risk and the wilderness in ways I never could have predicted.

My son and I used to talk around campfires about grizzly bears, sheer cliffs, storms, distant rivers—the beauty and exhilaration of the outdoors. It was a common love we could share. And we also talked about risk. If a bear kills me, don't let anyone try to hunt it down, one of us said. If I get lost in the woods, don't send in the helicopters and search planes, let me find my own way out, the other responded. If I die on a river, don't let them dam it and steal its life on my account. These were our campfire conversations.

Since those conversations, I've had to wrestle with my perspective of risk in the wilderness. Someone named Karkov, perhaps the friend of the hero in Ernest Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, said "A whole person realizes that the real risk is living without risk." If we take that as our perspective, we can state that it isn't just a matter of putting risk and the wilderness into perspective, but rather risk and our whole life.

To laugh is to risk appearing a fool. To weep is to risk appearing sentimental. To reach out to another is to risk involvement. To expose feeling is to risk exposing our true selves. To love is to risk not being loved in return. To hope is to risk despair. To try is to risk failure. To live is to risk dying. But risk must be taken because the greatest risk is to risk nothing.

People who risk nothing simply cannot learn, feel, change, grow, love, live. Chained by certitudes, they have forfeited their freedom. Only a person who risks is free.

T.S. Elliot, the poet, gave us a perspective on why wilderness has to encapsulate risk. "The end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we have started and know the place for the first time."

The concept of wilderness was alien to Native Americans before Europeans arrived. Then it was all wilderness. To settlers, wilderness was a threat. Now we see it as a benefit. Today's wilderness system helps us discover our heritage; it ties us back to where we started.

Sigurd Olson wrote about Eskimos in the Arctic building skin boats when aluminum boats were available. He reflected on that period when change was occurring from historic to modern. "The primitive days are passing swiftly. The old ones may be regretful but accept the inevitable. As I made my camp, I wondered if we white men can hold on to the mystery that stirred in us since our beginning."

Today's wilderness system allows us to exist in the primitive. It means the acceptance of the opportunity to have risk. I do not mean the creation of risk, like hanging from bungee cords. In wilderness there is real risk, like having a tree fall on you, and a variety of other dangers that could happen at any time but probably won't.

Later, Sig wrote: "The mystery and unknown are the true lures of wilderness. We go for something that extends us, something we have to earn."

There is lots to be said about experiences that are earned, that we pay for, but not with money.

On a quiet Saturday afternoon in December, the phone rang. "Mr. Link, this is the American Consul in New Zealand. Your son has been in a kayaking accident."

In our campfire conversations, Matthew and I had talked about risk as a part of the beauty of our relationship with wilderness. "If I die on a river, don't let them dam it and steal its life on my account." We talked about risk being a necessary part of growing. We talked about acceptance.

"Your son is dead." In a single sentence was the summation of all of our conversations, risk taken to the final degree.

Like everyone who faces loss, I searched for meaning when there was none. I walked trails that were no longer the same, though they were no less beautiful and no less important. And neither is the concept of risk.

Anyone who has truly looked at nature knows that death is incorporated into the weave and weft of every existence. I could never reconcile my son's death and say it was good. It was, however, inevitable. There are more terrible ways of dying than by doing

something we love. Those who bemoan wilderness because of the risk, those who see no threat in toxic rain, ozone depletion and rain forest destruction, have suffered another form of death by removing themselves from Earth. Physical death is inevitable. Spiritual death is something else.

Around our campfires, Matt expressed the inherent risk in wilderness travel. He never blatantly defied the odds. He honed his skills until he was comfortable in Class 5 rapids. He assessed the risk, accepted it or turned around. He chose to paddle the river that day. And the river remains wild.

I led a five-week course, Wilderness Concepts, that took college students backpacking and canoeing the Missouri River in Montana, the Bighorn Mountains in Wyoming, the Badlands in South Dakota, and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. We went in asking the question: What is wilderness... from an ecological standpoint... from a personal standpoint? We read the works of Aldo Leopold, Teddy Roosevelt, T.S. Elliot, Sigurd Olson, John Muir, Bob Marshall, and others. We delved into our personal feelings. When we were finished, we determined that: 1) wilderness areas have to be large enough to sustain an unmanaged ecology; and, 2) wilderness must be where we can feel separated from other humans and human resources. This last quality includes the freedom to get lost and the freedom to die.

I can tell you that death hurts more than anything, so I'm not talking about a morbid desire to die or to get injured. It's not about bragging rights: "Wow, I broke two arms on this trip and still made it." It's about, as Will Steger wrote in his book, *North to the Pole*, "faith in the indomitable power of the human spirit."

It's about a condition of freedom in which we come to respect life: our own and all that is around us. The condition of risk and the wilderness creates self awareness. It pushes people to know themselves. It's the reason programs for youth at risk use natural areas where risk is not sociological.

Teddy Roosevelt, father of the U.S. Forest Service, said: "Every child has inside him an aching void for excitement." If we don't fill that void with something exciting and good, the child will fill it with something exciting and not good.

John Muir, founder of the Sierra Club, observed that "thousands of nerve shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that wilderness is a necessity." This was written in the 1890s!

Collin Fletcher, guru of long distance wilderness hikers, wrote: "I go to the wilderness to kick the man-world out of me, to pare the fat off my soul, to make me grateful, again, for being alive."

I would give anything to have my son back, but I would never willingly allow risk to be removed from our wilderness. It is not up to taxpayers to absorb rescue costs, it is up to us, as a nation, to accept wilderness for what it is—a place where we assume responsibility for ourselves as an act of respect for ourselves.

If I get lost in the woods, don't send in the helicopters and search planes; let me find my own way out.

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