Re-creating Wilderness 2.0: Or getting back to work in a virtual nature

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ABSTRACT
Camping on Twitter, trekking in Google Street View, mountaineering on Snapchat. Wilderness is dead. Long live Wilderness 2.0. In this paper, the term “Wilderness 2.0” refers to the articulation of new media technologies, including mobile digital devices, web 2.0 and locative media, with the practice of wilderness recreation. In this new era of virtual nature, outdoor recreation occurs as much in the statusphere and blogosphere as it does in the biosphere. While much public and academic debate about Wilderness 2.0 has focused on the extent to which new media technologies connect people to, or disconnect them from, nature, this paper argues that wilderness is not a static and essential reality that can simply be connected to or disconnected from, but a social construct that is continually re-created in different cultural contexts. In this sense, Wilderness 2.0 reflects the re-creation of a new ontology of wilderness as DigiPlace: an augmented reality that blurs the lines between the “actual” and the “virtual.” Moreover, Wilderness 2.0 does not simply refer to the creation of a new ontology of wilderness, but the incorporation of outdoor recreation into the political economy of the web 2.0. In the context of Wilderness 2.0, outdoor recreation is increasingly exploited as a form of virtual labour. Thus, despite being associated with a discourse of “sharing” and “connecting to nature,” Wilderness 2.0 is, above all else, a nature that capital can see.

1. Introduction

Camping on Twitter, hiking in Google Street View, mountaineering on Snapchat. Wilderness is dead. Long live Wilderness 2.0. In this new era of virtual-nature, outdoor recreation occurs as much in the statusphere and blogosphere as it does in the biosphere (Büscher, 2013; Escobar, 1994; Lewis, 2014; Germann Molz and Paris, 2015; White and Wilbert, 2009). As Germann Molz and Paris (2015: 174–175) observe, “today’s travelers are not just on the road, but also – like so many people – on the phone, online and on screen.” Indeed, while the ubiquity of the Internet and social media are widely recognized facets of urban life, they are increasingly central to the experience of wilderness as well. Consider the following statement from Joe Carberry, author for Sports Illustrated’s Extreme Exposure column:

Getting to the top of Everest is a gritty endeavor. But for the first time, live updates and video are being streamed from Everest via Snapchat. The mountain, if you can believe this, now has 4G cell service. No, this is not the same Everest Edmund Hillary first climbed in 1953. Adrian Ballinger and Cory Richards, two accomplished climbers who are attempting to make the summit sans oxygen … are broadcasting their expedition in near real-time on the app, a virtual first.1

Similarly, in a post titled “Camping on Twitter” on National Geographic’s Digital Nomad blog, Andrew Evans writes:

So what did you get up to this weekend? I went camping—in the woods, with my phone … Because I was so close to the city, I had 4 fat bars on my iPhone, which allowed me to sit back and let all my followers tweet me ghost stories round the fire.2

The post goes on to chronicle Evans’ camping adventure (which took place in a physical campground in Bronte Creek Provincial Park, Ontario, Canada) in the form of a blog, highlights the interactions and conversations Evans had around the campfire with his 34,000 Twitter followers, and includes an embedded YouTube video (with 609 views) that provides a visual documentary of the experience.3 Such anecdotes serve as vivid illustrations of how complex articulations outdoor recreation and social media are working to re-create wilderness as Wilderness 2.0 (see Fig. 1).

In this paper, the term Wilderness 2.0 is used to denote an emerging articulation of new media technologies – including mobile digital devices, web 2.0, and locative media – with the practice of wilderness-based recreation. As Graham et al. (2013) explain, three related trends in the realm of digital technology are currently playing important roles in changing the ways in which humans interact with and experience space and place. The first is the emergence of the “mobile web” facilitated by the proliferation of mobile digital devices (e.g., smartphones, laptops, and tablets) able to connect to the Internet and World Wide Web. As a result “web access has become largely untethered from a fixed physical location with mobile information access increasingly tied to local and everyday contexts” (Graham et al., 2013: 466). The second is the rise of web 2.0, a term that refers to a phase of the World Wide Web that has transformed Internet users from passive consumers of online content into active producers and consumers (or “prosumers”) (Fuchs, 2011; Büscher and Igoe, 2013). Examples include platforms and applications that allow Internet users to create, share, “like” edit and re-mix online content, such as blogs, wikis, file sharing and social networking platforms. The third is the rise of the geo-spatial web (or geoweb), which refers to a range of technologies (including GPS-enabled smartphones, cameras and drones, etc.) that allow online content, as well as the users that create it, to be linked to specific geographic coordinates.

To date, much of the discussion and debate about wilderness and new media has focused on the question of whether digital technologies work to connect people to, or disconnect them from, nature. Cal Martin, Product Development Advisor for Parks Canada, for example, argues that technologies like smartphones simply provide a new means for people to “connect with nature.” As Martin explains:

A few years ago, I was leading a guided hike in beautiful Vancouver, Canada. The program was for a group of junior high students in a near-urban park where black bears and cougars sometimes frequent. Everything was new to these kids. It was like they had never had a moment outside their perfectly groomed yards before. During the hike, I did notice something odd, though. Every time I stopped to show these 15 kids something neat – a bat house, skunk cabbage, or bear claw marks on a tree – out came 15 phones to snap pictures and capture video. Then they would huddle together to show each other and send photos/video to their friends. The kids were experiencing nature through their phones! At first it annoyed me. Why can’t people step away from their technology for one hour to enjoy their surroundings? But, then I realized something else. The technology was just a conduit, a go-between through which these students connect with nature.⁴

For others, however, the information superhighway is not a route back to wilderness, but a disruptive force that threatens to further disconnect people from the natural world. A proposal in 2014 by Parks Canada to install WiFi hotspots in a number of national parks, for example, generated significant public backlash on social media and negative coverage in traditional mass media.⁵

In a commentary in The Atlantic, for example, Jason Marks decries the disruptive and destructive effects of Wilderness 2.0:

But as a lover of wild places, I can’t help but feel a little freaked out by the whole thing. Wifi in the woods? I think I’ll pass. Because if we ever succeed in knitting all (or even most) of the physical world into the Internet, we could end up abolishing the sense of the Away. When we’re all able to connect from anywhere—well, then, there’ll be no place left to hide.⁶

Elaborating on his position, Marks goes on to argue that unlike earlier forms of infrastructure and outdoor gear, mobile devices and the Internet do not facilitate connection with wilderness, but serve to distract and disconnect people from their immediate surroundings:

I like my lightweight, water-resistant space fabrics. I like my high-altitude stove and my sleeping bag and my water filter. Most of the Pacific Crest Trail Thru-Hikers I’ve come across in

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