Creating Nature
Metaphoric Construction of American Public Lands

This document was written as my final project for Dr. Patti Wojahn’s Writing in the Workplace course (512). Dr. Wojahn’s guidelines for the project – to research an issue in workplace writing – were open-ended, and provided a great opportunity to explore issues that interest me: writing about nature and wilderness, and the use of rhetoric in these documents.

I chose the US Forest Service (USFS) as the workplace focus for my research. I have been an avid hiker and backpacker for years, and have had many encounters with the USFS: traipsing around on Forest Service land, driving on remote Forest Service roads, and talking with Forest Service personnel in the field. Through these encounters I learned about the many jobs the USFS performs: managing wilderness areas, creating and maintaining recreation opportunities, participating in wildlife research and conservation, and selling timber, to name a few. The USFS performs a huge variety of jobs, and in doing so must interact with many individuals and groups. The USFS also generates a huge amount of documents, each designed for a specific audience and with a specific purpose. For my project, I examined how the Forest Service talked about nature – how nature was described and valued – and how these descriptions and ideas about nature might vary according to audience.

The Writing Process

Early in the course, I read an article by Kay Adkins1 about the “metaphoric reconstruction” of nature; this paper provided the initial idea for my project. In it, she describes how metaphors are used to describe nature in writing; that is, describing nature

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in terms of something else and thereby allowing us to conceptualize nature as the other thing, such as describing a wilderness as Hell, as a resource, or as a living being. Adkins follows George Lakoff’s theory of conceptual metaphor and argues that metaphors of nature and wilderness have shaped our perceptions of what nature is and can be. For example, the writings of early American explorers and colonists often describe nature as something dangerous and inhospitable that must be subdued, later writing in the 19th century often describes the economic value of nature, while still later writings by conservationists describe the spiritual value of nature. These textual metaphors reflect and, most importantly, shape the ways that nature was perceived and experienced. Adkins’ study was an analysis of historical texts, namely the written accounts of the members of a scientific expedition to Alaska in the nineteenth century.

For the final paper in Writing in the Workplace, I wanted to apply some of Adkins’ analytical techniques – particularly her analysis of metaphor – to written documents from a particular workplace (in keeping with the topic of the course). The Forest Service provided an ideal workplace environment; they work directly in natural areas and produce mountains of documents that describe these natural areas. The Forest Service also performs a wide variety of jobs and works with many stakeholders.

I went back and looked at Adkins’ source text for her discussion of metaphor, George Lakoff’s “The Contemporary Theory of Metaphor,” to better understand the link between metaphor and thought, and to provide a definition of metaphor and a theoretical frame for my analysis. Based on my reading of Lakoff’s paper, I knew that I would be looking for statements in USFS documents where nature is directly described or

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characterized. This portion of my research was a bit of qualitative data collection: I combed through many documents looking for significant statements that I then categorized and used in my analysis.

This paper focused on an issue in workplace writing, so I had to situate my analysis of metaphors within the context of the Forest Service’s workplace, including its mission and goals, the work it does, and the audiences that have a stake in the actions of the Forest Service. After thinking about these issues, including many of my own experiences with the Forest Service, and looking at a few documents, I decided to compare the metaphors of nature in documents written for different audiences and stakeholders.

I collected samples of Forest Service documents that were written for internal USFS or specialized audiences, such as research reports and strategic plans, and documents written for external audiences or the general public, such as informational websites and visitor guides. After collecting data from all the documents, I analyzed the data to determine if there were differences in the way nature is described according to audience. I found that when writing for an internal audience, USFS documents described nature in terms of economic or resource value, while external audience documents emphasized the recreational or even spiritual value of nature. I used the data and my analysis to argue that a separate metaphor was used for external audiences — **NATURE AS BUSINESS** — and for internal audiences — **NATURE AS SPIRITUAL REFUGE**.

In this paper I was able to use theory to provide an explanation for how an organization presented its purpose and work in written documents for various audiences. Focusing my analysis on the differences created by changes in audience unearthed some
of the tensions in the USFS’s work, in particular the different ways that the same pieces of land – our forests and wilderness areas – are described, valued, and used. Although I chose the USFS because its work interests me, this paper’s focus on the way the same material gets presented in different ways for various audiences could be applied to writing in lots of organizations. Presenting material in different ways is an important skill for any technical writer to have, but, as I discovered in this paper, there are ethical, moral, legal, aesthetic, and even spiritual implications and repercussions for the decisions writers make. As writers, we should always try to determine whose interests are being served by the ways we present information.