

The Wilderness Act

Vision vs. Reality

The Wilderness Act

Section 2.(a) of the 1964 Wilderness Act established the need for wilderness and defines that these lands be administered in such a way as to leave them “unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness”.

SEC. 2. (a) In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness. For this purpose there is hereby established a National Wilderness Preservation System to be composed of federally owned areas designated by Congress as “wilderness areas”, and these shall be administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, and so as to provide for the protection of these areas, the preservation of their wilderness character, and for the gathering and dissemination of information regarding their use and enjoyment as wilderness; and no Federal lands shall be designated as “wilderness areas” except as provided for in this Act or by a subsequent Act.

Section 2.(c) of the wilderness Act is certainly the most quoted, the best known, and arguably the most eloquent part of the entire Act. It is in this section that congress offers Americans a definition of wilderness and provides direction to resource managers concerning the unique values of a vanishing resource that must be protected.

(c) A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized 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. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a

primitive and unconfined type of recreation; (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.

The Wilderness Act—vision and reality

The 1964 Wilderness Act specifies that wilderness should be managed in concert with nature and that mechanization and permanent structures (with some exclusions required for management) should have no place there. However it is increasingly evident that there is a growing disconnect between land managers and the purity of that congressional vision.

Nationwide, wilderness resource professionals are increasingly drifting away from management by pack string and crosscut in favor of management by helicopter and chainsaw. This evolving management approach is impacting the experience of every wilderness user and threatening to redefine the meaning of wilderness in the American psyche.

The Wilderness Concept

The importance of protecting wilderness as part of a country's heritage is a uniquely American idea. One of the most comprehensive sources of information on wilderness data is posted on wilderness.net.

The United States was the first country in the world to define and designate wilderness areas through law. Subsequently, countries around the world have protected areas modeled after the Wilderness Act. In 1964 our nation's leaders formally acknowledged the immediate and lasting benefits of wild places to the human spirit and fabric of our nation. That year, in a nearly unanimous vote, Congress enacted landmark legislation that permanently protected some of the most natural and undisturbed places in America. The Wilderness Act is one of the most successful U.S. environmental laws, standing for almost 50 years without a substantial amendment, and, as such, continues to be the guiding piece of legislation for all wilderness areas.

Wilderness in America

Again, wilderness.net provides the following summary on scope of designated wilderness in the United States.

Since 1964, the NWPS has grown almost every year and now includes 765 areas (109,127,689 acres) in 44 states and Puerto Rico. In 1980, the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) added over 56 million acres of wilderness to the system, the **largest addition in a single year**.

Overall, however, only about 5% of the entire United States—an area slightly larger than the state of California—is protected as wilderness. Because Alaska contains just over half of America's wilderness, only about 2.7% of the contiguous United States—an area about the size of Minnesota—is protected as wilderness.

Wilderness—an evolving idea

Early settlers saw wilderness as that untraveled and untracked expanse away from settlements and communities—a place where nature was hostile to man, a place fraught with challenge and adversity. Today wilderness is congressionally defined, managed, protected and patrolled; typically a pretty tame place that visitors enter armed with cell phones, GPS units, and personal

locator beacons.

Wilderness no longer confronts the visitor with daily dangers to survival as much as growing visitor pressure is a danger to the very concept of wilderness. Rather than a place to be feared, today's wilderness is a playground so much in demand that access is often regulated and controlled. It is also a resource threatened in ways congress never anticipated; mountain bikers wanting to speed along its trails or state wildlife agencies wanting interrupt the natural flow of the ecosystem by eliminating wolves, or the use of drones on our wild rivers.

Visitor pressures can be huge and today we have found our wilderness areas, and the very idea of wilderness, to be fragile things indeed. As the American population has grown to fill neatly ever nook and cranny of our country the early idea of wilderness evolved from a place to be feared to a place to be cherished, a place in need of protection.

Readers interested in a more detailed overview of this evolution are encouraged to visit wilderness.net/about/wilderness/history.

Wilderness Management—expediency vs. vision

When, in 1964, Congress passed legislation to protect a few remaining vestiges of the vast wilderness that once covered the country, it defined how these areas should be managed in order to protect that heritage. Today, wilderness managers are increasingly veering away from managing wilderness with the purity of focus mandated in the Wilderness Act.

Unfortunately, there is no requirement that a District Ranger or Forest Supervisor charged with management of a wilderness unit have prior on-the-ground wilderness experience or specific training in wilderness management. Without fully appreciating the values and historic perspective of wilderness, expediency, budgets, and political pressures encourage many managers to make decisions in direct conflict with the congressionally mandated definition of appropriate wilderness management.

Management decisions that exceed the guidelines defined in the Wilderness Act (e.g., the use of chainsaws when crosscuts would suffice or calling in a helicopter instead of using a pack string) contribute to a slow, incremental degradation of the wilderness system.

Wilderness Advocates—a voice often unheard

The voice of the individual advocate speaking in defense of wilderness is all too often lost, ignored or sidetracked. Doubtless much of the reason lies in the fact that the voice of the wilderness user is often isolated, unfocused, and unfunded. By comparison, outside of wilderness, snowmobile and ATV owners have created powerful and vocal organizations to focus and voice the concerns of their constituents. On our wild rivers jet boat owners and commercial outfitters are organized and vocal and in our wilderness areas aircraft owners have developed powerful lobbies land managers are often unwilling to confront.

Wilderness Organizations

In the America today there are many organizations dedicated to protecting, restoring or educating the public about wilderness. One group, wildernessalliance.net lists 140 stewardship groups on its website. A search for "societies, associations, collations and groups" on wilderness.net produces a list of 108 entities.

Wilderness service organizations can be divided into four general categories although admittedly there is often significant overlap between categories.

Stewardship

Stewardship groups are typically local organizations staffed largely by dedicated volunteers focused on supporting local wilderness areas and providing an on-the-ground workforce to help maintain trail systems, restore damaged areas, eradicate invasive species and other similar projects.

Advocacy

Advocacy organizations focus on expansion of the Wilderness Preservation System. They identify critical unprotected areas of outstanding importance and work to achieve protection for these areas.

Education and Training

The development and presentation of information to teach the public the wilderness system is a critical focus of many organizations. One or two produce materials and offer trainings designed to train managers and wilderness work crews.

Legal

Organizations with the will and resources to file legal challenges on the behalf of wilderness are few and far between. Currently, Wilderness Watch stands ready to take federal management agencies to court to force managers to comply with the terms of the Wilderness Act.

Wilderness—a critical need

As a group, these organizations offer wilderness a comprehensive umbrella however, there remains one critical aspect that is not addressed. Wilderness vitally needs a national data clearing house that collects, documents, and shares information on challenges facing wilderness on the ground on a day-in-day-out basis; an organization that empowers wilderness advocates nationwide to call managers to task on management that is not in accord with the Wilderness Act.

- Wilderness needs an organization group working on a national level to assure day-to-day management decisions are in accord with the Wilderness Act.
- Wilderness needs an option for resolving disputes before a legal action is required.
 - Lawsuits, though of proven effectiveness, are incredibly expensive, and time consuming.
 - Court actions represent an after-the-fact mind set; by the time a lawsuit is filed the damage has already occurred and typically can not be reversed.
 - Lawsuits are adversarial and do not help build partnerships for the future.
- Wilderness needs a more powerful nationwide voice. Time and time again letters from concerned citizens to resource managers have proven to have little effect on management direction—they are simply too easily ignored.

Wilderness Management—on the edge

After a 2016 trip down Idaho's Main Salmon River, federally classified as a Wild River and located in the Frank Church Wilderness, I wrote a letter to the Forest Supervisor. Part of that letter follows.

- Walking downriver I was surprised to encounter a team of Forest Service employees camped above the Mackay Bar Bridge equipped with four wheelers. Why were these employees violating the area's wilderness designation? In fact, after years of wilderness management why has the road up to Five mile not been naturalized and rendered impassable?
- The Mackay Bar bridge is shown on maps as a pack bridge. Signage on the bridge also indicates it is a pack bridge and that motorized traffic is prohibited. In fact, at some point, stanchions were added to the bridge to exclude four-wheeler traffic from entering the wilderness. However, quite some time ago, these stanchions were cut off with a welding torch and the bridge is now heavily used by motor vehicles. Why is this allowed?

After a spring 2016 float trip down the Owyhee River a letter was directed to the BLM Area Manager.

- We were drinking our first cup of coffee enjoying the morning after the storm. The world was quiet and peaceful until the silence was shattered by an insistent background buzzing—an annoying whine that destroyed the peacefulness and quiet of the morning for the next fifteen minutes. A member of a commercially operated trip camped upstream was piloting a drone up, over and around our camp!
- Operation of drones is clearly not an activity that should be tolerated within the Owyhee's Wild River corridor! Not only does it disrupt the outdoor experience for everyone in the area it is most certainly not in compliance with management of the area as wilderness.

After a fall 2016 hike on the Wonderland Trail around Mount Rainier I wrote a letter to the Park Superintendent.

- Every management decision can enhance or erode the quality of the visitor's wilderness experience. At Mount Rainier, one by one the most egregious decisions add up and the net is negative: splashes of orange and yellow paint marking rocks in the high meadows, stark steel signs on square metal posts, filter cloth peeking out from beneath imported gravel, metal, plastic and fiberglass culverts, rotary-peeled, creosote-treated water bars; all compounded by the roar of chainsaws and the whump-whump of countless helicopter flights bringing in yet more gravel or roofing or decking for shelter renovation. Such management decisions bother me; they are short sighted and willingly violate the sanctity of wilderness—they represent a vote for the efficiency of horsepower chosen over ideals and hard-won trail craft skills.
- Today many of our National Parks proudly maintain structures created by the Civilian Conservation Corps; the C's. We treasure this history and marvel at the quality of their craft. The ability of the C's to work and in build harmony with nature is astounding and admired. But today, where the C's used crosscuts Mount Rainier crews use chainsaws. Where the C's bucked out openings wide enough for a trail to pass Park crews cut a swath 30 to 50 feet wide leaving in their wake an unsightly jumble of rounds and smiley faces that, heaped below the trail, look like an industrial woodlot. It is a demonstration not of restraint or harmony with nature but of the unbridled power of our society; we do it because we can.

After a 2015 hike through the Three Sisters Wilderness I wrote to the Forest Supervisor of the Deschutes National Forest.

- During this hike I was stunned to discover that some years ago a long section of the Millican Crater Trail had been thinned and brushed into a hundred foot wide fireline. Since that time this section of the Millican Trail has been washing away and turned into an eroded gully. I am angered that fire restoration funds were not used to stabilize the impact of this wilderness intrusion before such damage

occurred and further that no restoration efforts have occurred in the years since the fire. What is the plan for restoring this site?

After a summer 2013 hike in Oregon's Eagle Cap Wilderness a letter was directed to the District Ranger.

- Approximately a half-mile from the wilderness boundary we encountered a herd of cows that had churned trailside riparian areas into muck and trampled surrounding meadows. The herd has trashed the trail leaving it susceptible to severe erosion damage. As we crossed the wilderness boundary we saw that there were no fences or other barriers limiting cattle access to the wilderness.
- It was an ugly unpleasant, dusty, smelly mess. Most certainly not the wilderness experience we had in mind! What is the official FS policy on grazing in the Eagle Cap? Why is the Forest Service allowing the owner of this grazing allotment to so severely degrade a congressionally mandated wilderness area?

Wilderness Report—a new approach

Wilderness Report (WR) will offer wilderness advocates the opportunity to develop a strong and organized voice focused on assuring our wilderness areas are managed in keeping with the tenets of the Wilderness Act.

Wilderness Report will focus on building a strong, organized and vocal constituency able to communicate with wilderness managers and resolve issues without recourse to legal action

Wilderness Report will build a nationwide constituency of wilderness advocates interested in providing input and feedback to wilderness managers. Members speaking on behalf of wilderness, as part of a strong, unified, and organized group will demonstrate that there is a broad base of interest in the health, care and management of our nation's wilderness system. WR will strive to recognize and celebrate progressive, visionary wilderness managers and highlight management abuses to the wilderness system.

- WR will work to protect our wilderness system through public involvement and education.
- WR will serve as a nationwide bulletin board and information clearing-house encouraging users to report on management issues impacting the wilderness areas they visit.
- WR will post correspondence with wilderness managers on the WR website and conduct one and two-year follow up conversations, also posted, to identify how the manager addressed the situation.
- WR will act as a hub identifying significant issues confronting wilderness and coordinating a nationwide response.
- WR will issue an annual report to the public, the media and to congress.
- Experienced wilderness advocates will post ongoing commentaries on issue related to wilderness manage e.g., how proceeds of lotteries for river permits are used, agency actions related to drones in wilderness, work of interagency grizzly bear committee, use of wilderness airstrips.

- WR will provide a forum to encourage a public exchange of ideas about wilderness and wilderness management.
- Only when all other options are exhausted will Wilderness Report consult established organizations with proven expertise pursuing corrective action through the courts.