

Being A Wilderness Purist!

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(Note: W, as in Wilderness, signifies land with Congressional designation as Wilderness in accord with the 1964 Wilderness, while w, as in wilderness, is generally used to refer to any publicly accessible lands that an individual might consider “remote” or wilderness-like)



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There was a time when being identified as a “Wilderness Purist” bothered me. It was offered up as a slight, a not-so-subtle insult suggesting I was too far overboard on the “wilderness thing”, with a narrow, unbending view of management, unable to compromise or let the little things pass. As a Forest Service Wilderness manager, I wanted to be seen, and see myself, as fair, reasonable and professional in my approach to managing Wilderness.



I got a summer job in Wilderness without any idea really what that big *W* meant, knowing only there would be no roads! That was 1968. It was the idea of no-roads, so different than my previous summer jobs, in Oregon building fire trail, burning slash and working on the landing of a logging show, in Yellowstone National Park working for a concessionaire, or even on a remote Montana Ranger District doing trail maintenance and a little fire-fighting, that excited me and proved the foundation for my immersion in Wilderness.

Over the course of the next +45 years, my personal and professional life became intimately intertwined with two big Wildernesses in central Idaho, the Selway – Bitterroot, an original 1964 Wilderness, and the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, which was the Idaho Primitive Area, an administrative designation, when I started my tenure and was designated as Wilderness in 1980. After that first summer in the “Selway”, doing trail maintenance and putting out a few smokes, I went on to become a “Wilderness Ranger”, an animal packer and ultimately a Wilderness Program Manager. Important slices of family and recreation time were spent in Wilderness, and each of my three kids spent important time in Wilderness growing up.



Wilderness became increasingly important to me. I came to embrace, personally and professionally, the ideal of **W**ilderness and the need to protect as an invaluable resource. After a career working, living and recreating in Wilderness, I see my “Wilderness purity” as nothing more than an honest reading of the Wilderness Act, with an acceptance of the vision, values and intent espoused in that Act. Wilderness management “purity” if you will, simply represents a guiding principle that dictates adherence to the Act’s vision and intent.

I believe Wilderness to be important to the quality of our life and environment in the United States. Wilderness protection and preservation adds to the strength, resilience and quality of our society, and is indeed a key

component of our social well-being. I desperately want Wilderness to survive. And I want Wilderness to exist within the poetic framework and vision of the Wilderness Act. I want my kids to be able to go back to the Wilderness they visited growing up, and have an opportunity to take along their kids, to experience that “wild” environment. But even if they do not make it back to those same ridges and meadows, I want them to know the possibility exists!

I see Wilderness preservation as existing on a pretty slippery slope. The 1964 Wilderness Act is a combination of poetry and compromise. Interpreting and implementing this Act has always offered challenges and difficulties. There are many ways that our social dynamic seems stacked against Wilderness preservation.

I fear the incremental, and often short-sighted actions and decisions, by managing agencies. They may seem often minor and harmless in the short term, but compound to result in a long-term degradation of the Wilderness. *I fear* the action of those, generally with little understanding or appreciation of Wilderness, who would modify and weaken the Wilderness Act to accommodate uses and activities that serve to undermine the Act’s original vision and intent. *I fear* a time when we will suddenly look up from our blindness, and with incredulity, realize that we screwed up, that somewhere along the way Wilderness, the Wilderness I know, the Wilderness we value today, the Wilderness of the Wilderness Act, has slipped away and disappeared ... “oops”?! “Death by a thousand cuts”?

Frankly, my personal outlook for the survival of Wilderness, as I have been lucky enough to know it, has grown bleaker. The evidence is not reassuring and if I let my guard down I am flooded with pessimism. Take a quick look at a small sampling of this evidence that, as a Wilderness purist, eats away at me ...

- There is a recurrent demand to modify the Wilderness Act to allow mountain bikes. Allowing this mechanized form of transport would be a fundamental change in Wilderness experiences and opportunities.
- In the Glacier Peak Wilderness on the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, the Green Mountain Lookout had been long abandoned and deteriorating when, in 2009, with no public notice or environmental review, the Forest began construction of a “replica” Lookout, the original 1933 structure having been removed seven years earlier. In 2012 the Federal Court ruled the Forest Service had “egregiously erred” in its actions and ordered the new building be removed from the Wilderness. To circumvent this court determination Lookout replica proponents went to Congress, and, sadly enough, were successful in passing the so-called Green Mountain Heritage Protection Act. A distressing stab at the “enduring resource of Wilderness”.
- During the past year the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest sought, and apparently received, authorization to use chains saws for trail work and maintenance of an allotment fence in the Pasayten Wilderness. The use of the chain saws was intended to facilitate the removal of trees across the trail and fence, as well as the felling of standing “hazard” trees along the trail & fence-line. The Forest , rejected the use of non-motorized means to conduct the work, in tune with the Wilderness ethic, as too dangerous, time consuming and costly.
- During a spring hike three years ago along the Salmon River in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, I encountered several situations that influenced my Wilderness experience and raised



several management questions. Perhaps the most egregious was coming across an ATV <all-terrain vehicle> parked along the trail.

- In early 2016 the Idaho Fish & Game and Forest Service collaborated to employ helicopters for elk and wolf collaring capture in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness on the Payette and Salmon-Challis National Forests. The period for review and final approval was seemingly carefully timed and expedited. The Regional Forester approved an MRDG (Minimum Requirements Decision Guide) and the Forest Supervisor approved a DN / FONSI (Decision Notice / Finding of No Significant Impact) and issued a Special Use Permit, all with a very condensed time frame?! The action was subsequently challenged in Federal Court, resulting in a rebuke to the Forest Service for its actions, but only after the capture and collaring project, involving over 100 helicopter landings, and hours of low level flights, had been completed.
- Incredibly enough however, despite the Federal Court's ruling in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, we continue to see proposals for helicopter use to support State wildlife projects. The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources for example, submitted a proposal to invade the Mt Timpanogos, Lone Peak and Twin Peak Wildernesses for the capture and collaring of mountain goats and sheep.
- Proposals for ignition of prescribed fire in Wilderness continue to surface. Perhaps encouragingly a proposal by the Willamette National Forest for helicopter ignited prescribed fire in the Mount Washington Wilderness was withdrawn. While no reasons were given as to why the draft decision was withdrawn, we can hope that it stemmed, at least partially, from an agency realization that such ecological meddling was inconsistent with Wilderness. The downside of course is that the proposal was even put forward, reflecting a lack of support among some of the agency's Wilderness managers to let nature be.

Frankly, and with some sadness, it would be easy to continue with this litany of examples that seem to suggest a tough road ahead for the survival of Wilderness as we know it now. Still unmentioned for example is ...

- The "Border Bill(s)", that would potentially impact many Wildernesses and millions of acres along the northern and southern boundary of the United States.
- The increasingly extensive, obtrusive and expensive fire management activities taking place in Wilderness, all involving helicopters, chain saws, pumps and air drops of retardant, supplies and personnel. Wrapping and fuel clearing to protect "historic" structures from fire, while in many cases the structures are otherwise being allowed to deteriorate, is frequently part of this fire management effort.
- The development of the small, turn of century Taylor Ranch Homestead, in the middle of the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, into a high-tech Wilderness Research Field Station by the University of Idaho, with new buildings, hydro-power, internet communication, and machinery.
- A proposal for mining in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness...



What has also become increasingly apparent to me is the lack of management openness and transparency regarding the challenges of Wilderness management. It appears at times as if there is an almost grim determination to avoid the hard questions and work of true Wilderness management. There often appears a reluctance by Wilderness managers to share, or be questioned about, decisions and actions that influence the Wilderness resource. This is accompanied by what often turns out to be a misguided insinuation that we just need to trust they are doing, and will continue to do, the right thing.

It is within this managerial framework that the involvement and commitment of those that care and understand the value of Wilderness, acting with a common voice and purpose, becomes so critically important.

Frankly I find this evidence of faltering Wilderness distressing! But I still believe in Wilderness. I want to see it survive and be available in as “pure” a form as possible - as a true reflection of the Wilderness Act! I want to feel that Wilderness protection is indeed permanent and enduring. I struggle against my pessimism and bleak outlook. What can I do as a Wilderness purist?

1. First, I can be a proud Wilderness purist. I do not need to be embarrassed about taking a stance that might be labeled as one of Wilderness “purity”.
2. I need not shy away from challenging managing agencies for pursuing actions and making decisions that do not represent the vision and intent of the Wilderness Act. And I can at least ask questions about what is going on in Wilderness.
3. I can identify, support and commend management actions (and staff) that exemplify purity in Wilderness management actions / decisions.
4. I can encourage and support Wilderness management transparency, that offers an honest sharing of the “good” things and the “bad” things happening in Wilderness.
5. I can ally with others, actively supporting and contributing to platforms linking like-minded Wilderness supporters to learn, share and support positive and informed Wilderness management, using these alliances to act as a “watch dog” for quality Wilderness management.



There is no one approach that will ensure the protection and propagation of Wilderness, but I am ready to accept that I am indeed a Wilderness purist, and if I am sincere in my desire to see Wilderness survive, I must contribute to the survival effort.