



50th Anniversary of the Wilderness Act

1964-2014

Celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Wilderness Act

On September 3, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Wilderness Act, thereby establishing our National Wilderness Preservation System. On September 3, 2014, lovers of wild lands will celebrate the 50th birthday of this landmark event that made history — its grand, golden anniversary.

In celebrating, wilderness activists bring attention to wild lands that recently became wilderness – as, for example, California’s “Lost Coast” or the Owyhee area in south-western Idaho. And they are drawing attention to many places that still need permanent preservation – by law – as wild nature.

WHAT IS WILDERNESS? What does it mean for you and me?

The Wilderness Act declared it a national policy **“to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.”** Wilderness is federal “lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition.” In 1964 about nine million acres of Forest Service “primitive” and “wild” areas in 13 states immediately received permanent protection, and since then bill after bill has added more lands as wilderness. Today nearly five percent of the U.S., more than 109.5 million acres in 757 areas in 44 of the 50 states and Puerto Rico, is designated wilderness. And more than half of that land is in Alaska.

Howard Zahniser: “The wilderness that has come to us from the eternity of the past we have the boldness to project into the eternity of the future.”

The Wilderness Act describes “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his 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.” (Note that untrammelled is not the same as untrampled, untrodden. A “trammel” is a kind of hobble to control a horse; untrammelled means uncontrolled, wild, free, not manipulated or regulated by humans.)

The Act defines wilderness as “an area of undeveloped Federal land **retaining its primeval character and influence**, without permanent improvements...and **which generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable**;...has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation;...and may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, or historical value.”



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The founders of the wilderness system saw a fundamental human need for wilderness. They were thinkers like Aldo Leopold, Bob Marshall, and Howard Zahniser, the drafter of the bill that went through many drafts between 1956, when Hubert Humphrey first introduced it into the U.S. Senate, and 1964 when it passed Congress almost unanimously. These visionaries shared a passionate conviction that **wilderness is not some luxury but is a vital link to human well-being and to American culture**. Writers like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Thoreau, and John Muir joined painters, photographers, and poets and popularized the distinct American cultural value of wilderness.

Edward Abbey: “Why wilderness? Because we like the taste of freedom. Because we like the smell of danger.”

Protection in Perpetuity

The founders saw that the American wilderness was fast disappearing. First they tried to preserve token elements of it in our national parks. But the great wild expanses were vanishing, and during the first half of the 20th century, they deliberated how to best guarantee open spaces left in a natural state. Aldo Leopold and others came to feel that only **through the power of law** could this be done; agency administrative decisions were too haphazard, too temporary. The post-World-War II popular push to travel around the country and recreate by automobile on roads galvanized wilderness leaders to work for national legislation to keep lands wild—efforts we now celebrate.

Wilderness is not just another form of outdoor recreation. We humans have an innate spiritual longing for contact with wild nature which we cannot get from urban and suburban living. By providing a vibrant refuge, and to some even a temple, from the distractions of modern life, nature’s silent wild spaces slow us down and realign us, if only temporarily, with ancient biological and geological rhythms.

Bob Marshall: There is just one hope of repulsing the tyrannical ambition of civilization to conquer every niche on the whole earth. That hope is the organization of spirited people who will fight for the freedom of the wilderness.”



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To Aldo Leopold wilderness was nothing less than “*a fundamental instrument for building citizens.*” But aside from the spiritual dimensions, and the character-building, recreational and philosophical motives for wilderness, there are some very practical scientific reasons to preserve wild nature. Our biological heritage depends on the evolutionary processes of nature continuing undisturbed. Preserving the diversity of species is potentially important to human welfare, such as threatened or endangered species or those important for medical breakthroughs. Wilderness guards the web of life, with its wild gene pools, that make life possible on earth.

And for people in urban areas, these undisturbed natural places are critical to filter air, retain water, and allow for recreation in nature, important for a good quality of life. Cities are not isolated; in subtle but direct ways, they depend for the flow of their lifeblood on the wild spaces around them.

Human Activities in Wilderness

Activities permitted in lands designated as wilderness include:

- Scientific research and nature study
- Hiking, backpacking, wildlife viewing, photography, and camping
- Horseback riding and guiding for horse and pack trips
- Float trips, canoeing, kayaking
- Wheelchairs (including certain motorized wheelchairs)
- Livestock grazing and related facilities, where previously established
- Control of fire, and insect and disease outbreaks
- Mining on pre-existing, valid claims
- Continued use of tracts of private or state lands within the boundaries of some wilderness areas, with reasonable access

NO roads or permanent structures are allowed in wilderness, nor activities like commercial logging, (most) mining, or motorized and mechanized vehicles (including bicycles), or motorized tools and equipment.

The prohibition against roads, road construction, and motorized vehicle use, especially, has proven to be a key tool that keeps these wilderness lands free from damaging impacts of vehicles and the de facto vehicle routes they all too often create. Such roads interfere with wild animals, fragment sensitive wildlife habitat, cause erosion and spread of exotic weeds, and bring more and more people into a wild area without controls.

But, **protection from harm** is not the main reason to set aside wild lands in perpetuity. In the eyes of the founders of the Wilderness Act, whose forethought we celebrate, it was the glowing, positive vision of the need for wilderness that led them to **preserve wildness for people** – for us and for the future. And, with effects of global climate change a new, serious concern, we see wilderness providing the core protected areas of an expanded network of connected habitat to enable wildlife movements as habitats change.

For more information on the [benefits](#) of and [threats](#) to wilderness, visit <http://www.wilderness.net>.