

# Wilderness

## Heritage



*"We need wilderness preserved — as much of it as is still left, and as many kinds — because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed."*  
— American historian, author and environmentalist, Wallace Stegner

## Why Wilderness is a Vital Element of Our American Heritage and Culture

Wilderness, as a social concept and compact, is a uniquely American institution, grounded in America's legacy of interaction with wild places over the years. The Wilderness Act of 1964 declared it "the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness," and this declaration charted a "course new in the history of nations" and ranks as a remarkable Made In America achievement of American culture.

During centuries of settlement westward in our nation, wilderness seemed enormous, unending and inexhaustible. Subduing it was the chief goal. Only after the frontier was gone and wilderness remained as scattered vestiges did the realization come that we had subdued wild nature all too thoroughly. Only then did wilderness assume an increasing value.

Today, overwhelmed with evidence of social and industrial progress, the American landscape has turned from an all-wilderness expanse to one almost totally transformed to human use. Thanks to the landmark Wilderness Act, our remaining wilderness is what it has always been— a gateway to the natural

processes and ways of life that thrive in Nature's explicit freedom. What can be more American?

Thanks to the gifted thinkers who worked toward the preservation of wilderness and the achievement of the Wilderness Act, Americans have the good fortune of holding on to majestic and essential vestiges of the greater wilderness that greeted our ancestors.

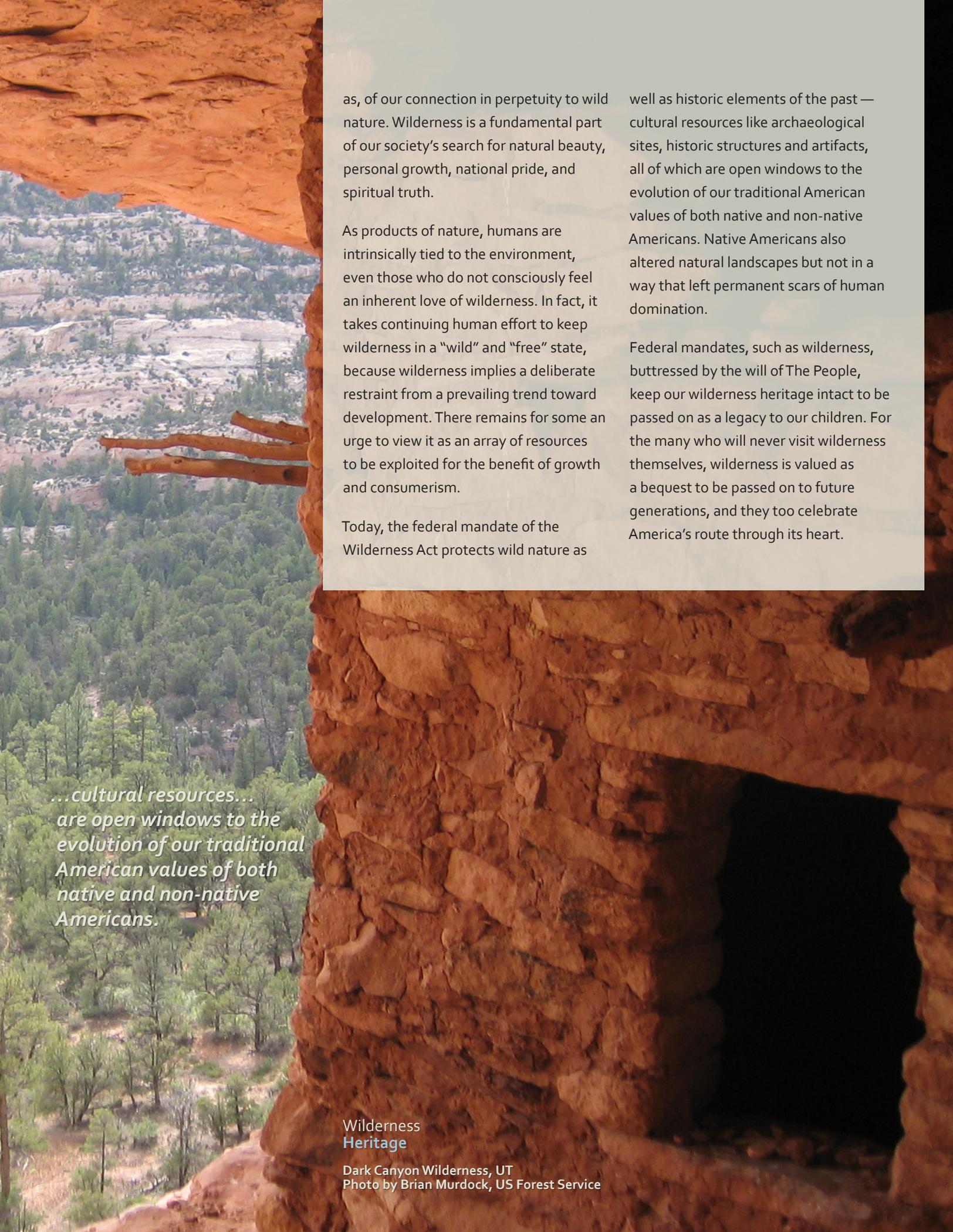
And as long as these wilderness areas remain in plain view, accessible and natural, Americans can engage the authentic, original quality of our collective past.

Through travel, survival, hunting, and many other uses of wilderness, Americans developed an explicit sense of independence, rugged individualism, and self-worth, all of which fostered a distinct American character while instilling patriotism and a strong devotion to country.

From a historical perspective, our centuries-long encounter with wild places has enlarged greatly our understanding of the continuing importance of wilderness to our American heritage, in particular the American emphasis on maintaining personal freedom, as much

*"It's all still there in heart and soul. The walk, the hills, the sky, the solitary pain and pleasure—they will grow larger, sweeter, lovelier in the days and years to come."*

— Edward Abbey  
*Beyond the Wall, 1984*



as, of our connection in perpetuity to wild nature. Wilderness is a fundamental part of our society's search for natural beauty, personal growth, national pride, and spiritual truth.

As products of nature, humans are intrinsically tied to the environment, even those who do not consciously feel an inherent love of wilderness. In fact, it takes continuing human effort to keep wilderness in a "wild" and "free" state, because wilderness implies a deliberate restraint from a prevailing trend toward development. There remains for some an urge to view it as an array of resources to be exploited for the benefit of growth and consumerism.

Today, the federal mandate of the Wilderness Act protects wild nature as

well as historic elements of the past — cultural resources like archaeological sites, historic structures and artifacts, all of which are open windows to the evolution of our traditional American values of both native and non-native Americans. Native Americans also altered natural landscapes but not in a way that left permanent scars of human domination.

Federal mandates, such as wilderness, buttressed by the will of The People, keep our wilderness heritage intact to be passed on as a legacy to our children. For the many who will never visit wilderness themselves, wilderness is valued as a bequest to be passed on to future generations, and they too celebrate America's route through its heart.

*...cultural resources...  
are open windows to the  
evolution of our traditional  
American values of both  
native and non-native  
Americans.*

Wilderness  
Heritage

Dark Canyon Wilderness, UT  
Photo by Brian Murdock, US Forest Service