Wilderness Recreation

As defined in the Wilderness Act, a wilderness "has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation."

While the Act further defines recreation as one of the six public purposes of wilderness, along with scenic, scientific, educational, conservation, and historical use, it also makes it clear that "Recreation is not necessarily the dominant use of an area of wilderness. This should be clearly emphasized...The purpose of the Wilderness Act is to preserve the wilderness character of the areas to be included in the wilderness system, not to establish any particular use."

Why Wilderness is Important to Recreation

Wilderness opens up public land for multiple recreational uses.

For its raw nature and wild integrity, and by living up to its definition of being self-willed land, designated wilderness secures a variety of excellent recreational opportunities for all who visit. While a portion of the American population believes wilderness locks out people from public land, in reality wilderness opens up public land for multiple recreational uses. While motorized equipment and mechanical transport such as bicycles and hang gliders are prohibited in wilderness, most types of recreation uses are allowed.

Surveys indicate that more than 12 million Americans take...trips to wilderness each year

Americans are progressively learning to appreciate the recreational potential of wilderness. Surveys indicate that more than 12 million Americans take between 16 and 35 million trips to wilderness each year, either on their own or with a guide. Popular recreational activities in wilderness include hiking, backpacking, mountain climbing, horse riding, skiing, rafting, canoeing, kayaking, collecting berries and mushrooms, hunting, fishing and star gazing. Growing in popularity are wildlife viewing, photography, nature study, athletic and survival training, and primitive camping and backpacking.

Half of all wilderness areas are within a day's drive of America's 30 largest cities

The popularity of recreation in wilderness is increasingly recognized as a mixed blessing. With more people recreating in wilderness to escape their fast-paced lives — half of all wilderness areas are within a day's drive of America's 30 largest cities — overuse poses important threats to the very wilderness character.
low-impact hiking and camping techniques...are increasingly important for ensuring that people recreate in the spirit of wilderness.

that has attracted them. Overuse threats include trampling, campfires and wood collection, tree damage, wildlife disturbance and trash. As such, low-impact hiking and camping techniques such as those advocated by Leave No Trace are increasingly important for ensuring that people recreate in the spirit of wilderness.