



Wilderness Signs and The Wilderness Act

The Wilderness Act of 1964 designates lands for a purpose that is unique and different from other public lands. The Act provides both a definition and a mandate for management that are useful in understanding why some signs may be an appropriate part of wilderness management.

The purpose for which the wilderness system was created is stated in Section 2(a). Occupying and modifying these lands are not the priority; preservation and protection of natural conditions is.

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.

Section 2(a) goes on to say that “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,...”. Wilderness is for use and enjoyment of visitors and others who view it from afar or know that it is there.

In the definition of wilderness, in Section 2(c) the Act further defines what wilderness is and how it differs from other lands. It is from this definition that agencies have determined that the need for signing in wilderness is not the same as it might be on more developed parts of the public lands.

- “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape...”
- “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...”
- “...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...”

By combining the purpose and definition of wilderness agencies have determined that a certain level of signing may be appropriate in wilderness when used to manage a system of trails, water routes, or access points or possibly to implement management regulations such as marking designated campsites. In other cases, such as areas without trails, no signs are needed in wilderness. Providing just what is needed and no more contributes to wilderness being maintained in an undeveloped condition in contrast to lands which exhibit a higher level of human modifications.