On September 3rd, 2004, Americans will celebrate the 40th anniversary of The Wilderness Act (PL 88-577), a landmark in world conservation history. Four decades later, it is difficult to comprehend just how completely that law recast the context within which agency wilderness stewards and citizen wilderness activists do their work.

The Weakness of Administrative Protection

Before there was a Wilderness Act, wilderness was, at best, an afterthought. Only the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) had actually delineated wilderness areas, propelled by visionaries within its own ranks—William Greeley, Aldo Leopold, Arthur Carhart, Leon Kniepp, and Bob Marshall (Gilligan 1953; Sutter 2002). By 1939, the agency had protected 14,235,414 acres (5,762,500 ha) by administrative order. Then the work of designating new wilderness areas all but stopped. No significant net additions were made in the 25 years that followed. Moreover, politically driven administrative boundary changes commonly eroded wilderness diversity within the few protected areas. Peaks and ridges above timberline were added to compensate for forests excised to be logged in the boom that followed World War II (Gilligan 1954).

The National Park Service (NPS) responded to the post-war tourism boom with seemingly boundless enthusiasm for more park development. Conservationists had long viewed national parks as reservoirs of wilderness, but the agency adamantly refused to define any specific lands as permanently off-limits to development (Gilligan 1954; Sellars 1997).

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Fish and Wildlife Service provided no explicit protection for wilderness. As for management, even in the relatively few national forest wilderness areas and the yet-undeveloped park backcountry, wilderness stewardship practices were often haphazard and inconsistent.

Facing the onslaught of national forest and national park development, conservation organizations mobilized their members to urge more and stronger wilderness protection. Leaders pleaded the case with agency officials but were largely rebuffed. As Congress began consideration of the so-called Wilderness Bill in 1956, the USFS and NPS opposed it in behind-the-scenes lobbying and in formal testimony, a posture that changed only when the Kennedy administration came to office in 1961.

In opposing the Wilderness Bill, agency leaders fought to preserve their administrative discretion. The chief of the USFS told Congress the bill would “tend to hamper the free and effective application of administrative judgment which now determines, and should continue to determine, the use, or combination of uses, to which a particular national-forest area should be devoted” (McArdle 1957).

To draw the line against further development and to stand by that decision regardless of pressures requires a degree of
institutional commitment inconsistent with realities of how large hierarchical agencies operate, given conflicting mandates, powerful development constituencies, and ever-shifting political leadership (Gilligan 1954). The head of the Izaak Walton League wrote in 1939: “There is no assurance that any one of them [wilderness areas], or all of them, might not be abolished as they were created—by administrative decree. They exist by sufferance and administrative policy—not by law” (Reid 1939). Disappointment with administrative protection, reinforced in test case after test case, drove conservation group leaders to conceive the Wilderness Bill and lobby it through Congress (Scott 2001; Harvey 1994).

Explaining the rationale for removing administrative discretion over wilderness designation, one of the Wilderness Bill’s leading sponsors, Senator Richard Neuberger, a Democrat from Oregon, stressed:

This bill in no way reflects on the wonderful career services which now are in charge of wilderness areas and similar outdoor realms, but it actually seeks to safeguard these splendid men and women from undue political pressure, no matter what the source. (Neuberger 1957)

A 1956 conservation group pamphlet written to rally grassroots support summarized the case for the Wilderness Bill:

Our rare, irreplaceable samples of wilderness can be diminished at the will of the administrator, without the sanction of Congress. … under the bill Congress would protect the wilderness interior as well as the boundaries of all dedicated wilderness. This would strengthen the hand of the good administrator, steady the hand of the weak one. (Trustees for Conservation 1956)

Before there was a Wilderness Act, wilderness was, at best, an afterthought.

The Wilderness Act: Protection by Congress

Had citizen activists not doggedly lobbied The Wilderness Act into law, how much wilderness would be officially protected behind real boundaries in America today? The answer, it is fair to say, would be dramatically less than the 105,852,000 acres (42,848,900 ha) now comprising in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) by January 2004. And it is a fair question to ask how much land once-protected as wilderness would a later administration have thrown open to development. The 1964 act changed everything about wilderness preservation in the United States:

• It set a national goal to preserve “an enduring resource of wilderness” in perpetuity (Wilderness Act, § 1131[a]).
• It designated the first 9,139,721 acres (3,699,760 ha) of the NWPS, all national forest lands.
• It required agency reports on hundreds of potential wilderness areas, including all roadless portions of all units of the NPS and the National Wildlife Refuge System.
• It shifted the power to decide which areas to protect from agencies to Congress, with an act of Congress required for each new designation.
• It proclaimed a common mandate for wilderness stewardship on all types of federal lands: to preserve “wilderness character” (Wilderness Act, §1133(b)).

Wilderness advocates understood that decisions made by Congress would be inherently political, but their experience showed that the secretive upper echelons of federal agencies were no less political, just less visible and less open to effective citizen influence.

Advocates also knew that the labyrinthine process of enacting laws affords disproportionate opportunities to its opponents to delay or kill a bill, as the eight-year odyssey of The Wilderness Act demonstrated (Zahniser 1964a). But they saw in this immutable fact of legislative life the key to preserving wilderness in perpetuity. Once Congress has designated a wilderness area, those seeking reversal or boundary deletions face this steep procedural burden. Most recently, Congress altered a wilderness boundary by just 31 acres—but it took a law to do so (Mount Naomi Wilderness Boundary Adjustment Act 2003). As for all earlier boundary changes, conservation groups agreed to the change.

Figure 2—Lake Tahoe basin surrounded by mountains and coniferous forest, Desolation Wilderness, California. Photo courtesy of U.S. Forest Service.
However much wilderness Americans may choose to designate, through their elected representatives, future generations are likely to judge that we preserved too little, rather than too much.

The Wilderness Act initiated three fundamental changes, more apparent now than at the outset, each of great portent for the future of wilderness:

1. **The wilderness advocacy movement has decentralized for greater political impact.** Congress is a national body, but great deference is paid to the views of the senators and representatives from the state involved in any bill. For the wilderness movement to be effective, this legislative reality requires building citizen leadership from within the local state and congressional district of each proposed area.

2. **Congress does not defer to agency wilderness recommendations, but reaches its own decisions.** Agency leaders play a powerful role in congressional decision making, but the Congress has often designated areas they recommended against, expanding agency-recommended boundaries where citizen groups have made an effective case for the larger area.

3. **Stewardship of wilderness areas has become a professional specialization.** Agency personnel draw on a wide range of knowledge to meet the unique challenges of preserving wilderness character. Training courses offered by the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center promote best practices in wilderness stewardship and encourage consistency among the four wilderness administering agencies (Myers 2003).

### Building the Wilderness System

Administratively protected wilderness did not grow appreciably in the 25 years before The Wilderness Act. In contrast, Congress has since enacted 114 laws, adding 96,712,191 acres (39,149,100 ha) beyond the original areas designated in the 1964 act (see Table 1). And, in 1976 Congress expanded the scope of the wilderness system by bringing the BLM under the mandate of the 1964 act. In the 1970s, the USFS conducted two nationwide inventories of roadless areas with potential for designation as wilderness.

A wilderness system that began in 1964 with 54 areas in 13 states now includes more than 650 areas in 44 of the 50 states, ranging in size from 5 acre (2 ha) Pelican Island in Florida to a single wilderness complex of some 13,000,000 acres (5,262,400 ha) within Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve and the contiguous Noatak National Preserve in Alaska. The progress of wilderness preservation in the United States over these four decades can be assessed in another way: Today, 4.7 percent of all land in all ownerships in the United States, including Alaska, has been protected under The Wilderness Act, and looking only at the lower 49 states, 2.5 percent of all land in all ownerships is statutorily protected wilderness. This dramatic increase in the scale of wilderness protection resulting from the 1964 act reflects two factors:

1. **The American people overwhelmingly support designation of more wilderness.** A review of all public opinion polls concerning wilderness taken between 1999 and 2002 found that the American people want more of their federal lands preserved as wilderness—by very wide margins. Strong support is consistent across age groups and political affiliations, between regions of the country, and between urban and rural residents (Campaign for America’s Wilderness 2003). Although the absolute size

### Table 1—Historic Summary of Wilderness Protection and Designations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>As of November 1939 (end of establishment of primitive areas)</th>
<th>As the Wilderness Act became law in 1964</th>
<th>As of January 2004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Forest Service</strong></td>
<td>14,235,414</td>
<td>14,617,461</td>
<td>35,036,737</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(wilderness)</td>
<td>(0)</td>
<td>(9,139,721)</td>
<td>(34,862,975)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(primitive areas for study)</td>
<td>(14,235,414)</td>
<td>(5,477,740)</td>
<td>(173,762)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>National Park Service</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>43,616,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20,687,034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bureau of Land Management</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6,511,891</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total acres protected</strong></td>
<td>14,235,414</td>
<td>14,617,461</td>
<td>105,851,912</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of states with areas</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Boundary changes can be made</strong></td>
<td>By administrative decision</td>
<td>Only by an act of Congress</td>
<td>Only by an act of Congress</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However much wilderness Americans may choose to designate, through their elected representatives, future generations are likely to judge that we preserved too little, rather than too much.
of public support for more wilderness varies between polls and over time, the spread between support and opposition is dramatic (see Table 2). In a political portent for the future, strongest support is registered among the youngest age group and within the fast-growing Hispanic population (Cordell, Tarrant, and Green 2003).

2. Congress has been a more responsive agent for designating wilderness than were the agencies when designation decisions were in their hands. This vindicated the view Benton MacKaye, a founder of The Wilderness Society, shared with Howard Zahniser, who led the campaign for the Wilderness Act, in discussing an earlier legislative concept: “We have here the chance perhaps to launch a constructive national legislative campaign … toward the capture of a real wilderness domain. It would make a definitive maneuver to shift our ground from the defense to the offensive” (MacKaye 1946).

As a 1976 congressional report noted, “The Wilderness Act was the first land conservation measure requiring public input into Federal land management decision making,” but “the Act affects neither the President’s authority to make recommendations to the Congress nor the authority of Congress to enact legislation absent an agency recommendation” (U.S. Congress 1976).

Beginning with The Wilderness Act, designation of wilderness has always drawn bipartisan congressional support. Through periods of disinterest, and even hostility, from the White House or congressional leaders, continuing expansion of the wilderness system is fueled by strong support from the general public coupled with sustained grassroots advocacy by citizens groups, often with informal, if not official, support of on-the-ground agency personnel.

Elected representatives respect this kind of citizen advocacy. Representative John P. Saylor, the Pennsylvania Republican who championed The Wilderness Act in the House of Representatives, sponsored a 1970 bill composed of wilderness proposals formulated by grassroots groups. He explained:

Across the country groups of citizens are working skillfully … preparing inventories of potential wilderness areas in various … jurisdictions. In cooperation with national forest and other appropriate agency officials and working in task forces exhibiting impressive professional talents, they are delineating outstanding de facto wilderness opportunities, refining proposed boundaries, and drawing up detailed maps and supportive documentation. (Saylor 1970)

Table 2—Percentage Spread between Public Surveys Studying Support and Opposition to Wilderness Issues (Scott 2001).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Poll</th>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Oppose</th>
<th>Spread</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nationwide poll, Mellman Group, 1999, N = 800</td>
<td>48.0</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>40.0</td>
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<td>respondents (not enough wilderness designated vs.</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>too much wilderness)</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Nationwide federal poll, National Survey on</td>
<td>49.2</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>43.3</td>
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<td>Recreation and the Environment (NSRE), 2000–2001,</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>N = 15,620 (not enough wilderness designated vs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>too much wilderness)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>NSRE (all respondents), N = 10,382 (designate</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>12.4</td>
<td>57.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>more wilderness in your own state?)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSRE (Hispanic respondents), N = 10,382</td>
<td>75.2</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>68.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(designate more wilderness in California?)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California poll (Hispanic respondents), 2002, N = 500</td>
<td>81.0</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>69.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(too little wilderness designated in Nevada vs.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>too much wilderness)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevada poll, Mason-Dixon Polling &amp; Research, 2001,</td>
<td>56.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>52.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N = 625 (too little wilderness designated in Nevada</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>vs. too much wilderness)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Vermont poll, University of Vermont Center for</td>
<td>73.0</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>53.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rural Studies, 2002, N = 472 (more wilderness should</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>be designated on Green Mountain National Forest?)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2—Percentage Spread between Public Surveys Studying Support and Opposition to Wilderness Issues (Scott 2001).

That kind of grassroots citizen work continues. In many cases, Congress has returned again and again to expand individual wilderness areas. The Ventana Wilderness Area on the central California coast originated in 1931 as a 54,857 acre (22,206 ha) national forest primitive area. When Congress designated it in 1969, it was expanded to 98,000 acres (39,670 ha). Congress has since expanded it four additional times (most recently in 2002) to now comprise a 239,688 acre (97,025 ha) statutory wilderness area.

Figure 3—Aerial view of Cedar Keys Wilderness, Florida. Photo courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
Howard Zahniser
FATHER OF THE WILDERNESS ACT

“T
he wilderness that has come to us from the eternity of the past we have the boldness to project into the eternity of the future.” In these words Howard Zahniser distilled the essence of the preservationist impulse—and then he infused it into federal law (Zahniser 1957).

When “Zahnie” became executive director of The Wilderness Society in 1945, there was little prospect that wilderness could survive in America except in scraps and backwaters. Zahniser and his colleagues concluded that the seemingly inevitable loss of wilderness could be reversed only by a wilderness law.

A painstaking evangelist for wilderness, Zahnie spent a decade patiently building the coalition essential if any bill were to be politically plausible. Only then did he draft the bill. Its evocative language and precise word choices reflect his genius as draftsman. (Scott 1968)

Consider Zahniser’s later explanation of his choice of the word untrammeled in the definition of ideal wilderness:

The idea within the word “Untrammeled” of [wilderness areas] not being subjected to human controls and manipulations that hamper the free play of natural forces is the distinctive one that seems to make this word the most suitable one for its purpose within the Wilderness Bill. (Zahniser 1959)

While the second sentence in the definition provides what a key senator described as a “somewhat less ’severe’ or ‘pure’” definition, the first “is a definition of pure wilderness areas. … It states the ideal” (Anderson 1961). When the act commands that wilderness stewards preserve “wilderness character,” it invokes this ideal (Scott 2002).

With final success in sight, Zahniser looked ahead in a speech in mid-April 1964: “I can see now that [preserving wilderness is] going to be served better by our successors than by us who are already falling away and getting out of breath, but that objective requires the establishment of basic policies” (Zahniser 1964a). Ten days later, he testified during the final congressional hearings. Seven days after that, he died. In eulogy, his close colleague, David Brower, wrote:

What made the most difference was one man’s conscience, his tireless search for a way to put a national wilderness policy into law, his talking and writing and persuading, his living so that this Act might be born. …

Wilderness that lives on is the most fitting of memorials to the man who did not turn, who gave the most of all, to give wilderness that chance. (Brower 1964)

In his first detailed outline of the idea of the Wilderness Bill, in 1951, Zahnie expressed the core of his commitment to wilderness:

We are a part of the wilderness of the universe. That is our nature. Our noblest, happiest character develops with the influence of wildness. … Some of us think we see this so clearly that for ourselves, for our children, our continuing posterity, and our fellow men we covet with a consuming intensity the fullness of the human development that keeps its contact with wilderness. Out of the wilderness, we realize, has come the substance of our culture, and with a living wilderness—it is our faith—we shall have also a vibrant culture, an enduring civilization of healthful citizens who renew themselves when they are in contact with the earth. (Zahniser 1964b)

Agencies continue to recommend additional wilderness as they periodically revise their comprehensive land use plans. As of January 2004, political appointees of the George W. Bush administration in the Department of Agriculture have approved 2,264,570 acres (916,700 ha) of new wilderness recommendations in completed national forest plan revisions. By contrast, Bush political appointees in the Department of the Interior exhibit open hostility to wilderness. In April 2003, in secretly settling a lawsuit they did not bother to defend, they reversed well-established policy to block the BLM from even considering recommendation of new wilderness to Congress.
More Wilderness in Our Future

The wilderness system will continue to grow.

- In 2002, President George W. Bush signed four laws designating 526,395 acres (213,085 ha) of new wilderness.
- Bills proposing more than 20,000,000 acres (8,096,000 ha) of new wilderness in six states were pending in Congress in January 2004, with major bills being prepared for additional states. Among the strongest prospects for enactment are proposals in which conservative Republicans are taking a lead.
- Also pending in Congress are presidential recommendations from earlier administrations for wilderness designation in many national parks, national wildlife refuge units, and on BLM-administered public lands in states where the current congressional delegation is disinterested or hostile to the proposals.

Many factors influence the pace of congressional additions to the wilderness system, including the attitude of leaders of congressional committees through which wilderness legislation must pass and the degree of White House support. Long-pending agency recommendations (particularly those for national park wilderness) and some citizen-initiated proposals will take more years to be resolved, for they involve states where current political leaders are hostile to further wilderness protection. As always in legislative bodies, compromise is part of the equation.

Many current proposals expand higher elevation wilderness areas to include lower elevations, enhancing ecological diversity and year-round wilderness recreation opportunities. Often the addition of lower elevation valleys also means more difficult land use conflicts to resolve during congressional consideration.

The challenges of wilderness stewardship are now the daily work of thousands of federal employees, aided by thousands of volunteers. It is heartening to listen to these dedicated people discuss the conundrums of protecting the naturalness of wilderness ecosystems and the wildness of wilderness recreational experiences. They revere The Wilderness Act as the touchstone for each decision.

“An Enduring Resource of Wilderness”

In a delicate balance of idealism and practicality, detailed direction and realistic flexibility, the 40-year-old Act has proved itself what Bob Marshall dreamed of: “as close an approximation to permanence as could be realized in a world of shifting desires” (Marshall 1934). The concept of wilderness has become what it was not before 1964: “an imperative in American life” (Broome 1964). Wilderness has real meaning for tens of millions of Americans, and this, too, is part of what we celebrate on this 40th anniversary. This broad public understanding was achieved “in large part because of the battle for the Wilderness Bill” (Brower 1964).

Nearly six decades ago, Bob Marshall spoke of the possibility:

For American citizens to enjoy what can be enjoyed in few other countries, a twofold civilization—the mechanized, comfortable, easy civilization of twentieth-century modernity, and the peaceful timelessness of the wilderness where vast forests germinate and flourish and die and rot and grow again without any relationship to the ambitions and interferences of man. (Marshall 1936)

Soon after the Wilderness Act became law, U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas observed that “we look backward to a time where there was more wilderness than the people of America needed. Today we look forward (and only a matter of a few years) to a time when all the wilderness now existing will not be enough” (Douglas 1965). In the final analysis, how much wilderness will be preserved—or should be? The answer is unknowable, appropriately left to the American people and the Congress they elect.

Nonetheless, I will venture my own prediction: However much wilderness Americans may choose to designate, through their elected representatives, future generations are likely to judge that we preserved too little, rather than too much.

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Figure 4—Barchan sand dunes in the Cadiz Dunes Wilderness, California. Photo courtesy of Bureau of Land Management.
Figure 5—Viewing wildlife like this egret walking in the Okefenokee Wilderness is a primary activity of visitors. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Georgia. Photo by Pam Sikes.


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