Soul of the Wilderness

A Wilderness Agenda and Legacy for the U.S. Forest Service

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(Speaking at the 75th Anniversary of the Gila Wilderness, New Mexico)

"It is hereby declared to be the policy of Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness. A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." With those words, 35 years ago, Congress created the National Wilderness Preservation System in the United States.

Of all of the natural resource management laws, The Wilderness Act remains my personal favorite. It has a soul, an essence of hope, a simplicity and sense of connection. Unlike the jargon-filled tomes of most laws, in a very few words The Wilderness Act says that what we have today is worth preserving for future generations. That in a world of compromises and half measures, there are lands and waters where we will not allow expediency to override conviction.

Gila—The First Wilderness

Our wilderness heritage in the U.S. Forest Service runs deep. Passage of The Wilderness Act was the result of a lifetime of work by U.S. Forest Service employees such as Arthur Carhart and Bob Marshall. But it all began here in this place in New Mexico when a young assistant district forester in the Albuquerque office, Aldo Leopold, worked proactively in New Mexico and Washington, D.C., for the creation of the Gila Wilderness Area, finally succeeding in 1924. Who would know that 25 years later an older Aldo Leopold would publish A Sand County Almanac, condensing a lifetime of experience into a work that today rivals Silent Spring as one of the most influential books about the relationship of people to their lands and waters. And who would have known then that creation of the Gila Wilderness would lead 40 years later to creation of an entire wilderness system.

The National Wilderness Preservation System has grown from nine to 104 million acres since 1964. It provides ecological services such as clean water and air, naturalness, habitats for endangered and non-endangered plants and animals, solitude, scenic beauty, and economic benefits to communities through tourism and recreation. Wilderness, with proper stewardship, can serve as a benchmark for determining our nation’s environmental health. I want to share with you our new strategic agenda for wilderness whose purpose is to strengthen and insure that proper wilderness stewardship occurs.

A New Wilderness Agenda

In recent years I have become concerned, like many others, that our national commitment to The Wilderness Act has diminished, and that resources committed to protect and manage the wilderness have not kept pace with our needs. Five years ago, my predecessor Jack Ward Thomas asked the...
question, “I wonder who will be the next ones to step up, lead, and sacrifice for this precious (wilderness) resource? Who will see that the wilderness doesn’t get inched away from us, one compromise at a time?” It was with Jack’s words in mind that I commissioned the development of this new wilderness strategy. It is a “work in progress”—not unlike the wilderness system. The agenda builds upon the Interagency Wilderness Strategic Plan, renewed in 1995 (see the article by Chris Barnes in IJW, vol. 3 no. 1). Considerable progress has been made in implementing this plan, but significant challenges still face us. Our wilderness agenda is an expression of our continued commitment, and sets forth some specific actions to help meet the broad goals of that interagency plan.

More Representative and Diverse Wilderness
I have six goals for us to focus on as we implement our new agenda for wilderness.

1. Should there be more wilderness? Ultimately, that’s for Congress and the American people to decide. The responsibility of the U.S. Forest Service is to identify those areas that are suitable for wilderness designation. We must take this responsibility seriously. For those national forests undergoing forest plan revisions, I’ll say this: Our wilderness portfolio must embody a broader array of lands—from prairie to old growth. As world leaders in wilderness management, we should look to better manage our existing wilderness, and identify potential new wild lands to become wilderness. The National Wilderness Preservation System can, and should, play a larger role in our efforts to address concerns of forest health and sustainability. Future additions to the wilderness system may be targeted to enhance this role. We should pay special attention to potential wilderness areas that may fill critical habitat gaps in our wilderness system.

2. Wilderness requires collaboration; no one agency or entity controls the whole system. Thus management of existing wilderness will and should be coordinated by area managers in different agencies. But we can help strengthen coordination. I pledge within a year to bring together government and nongovernmental interests to strengthen trust among players and identify wilderness actions that can be successfully addressed through collaborative efforts.

3. I have formed a U.S. Forest Service wilderness advisory group of employees, from every level of the organization and every region of the country, to advise me about wilderness needs. It’s a long way from the backcountry to the beltway or from the woods to Washington. Wilderness will now enjoy a higher profile among our national office concerns.

4. Our agenda places a renewed emphasis on wilderness monitoring. Such monitoring takes place through long-term forest inventory and analysis and forest health monitoring programs. We receive help from other agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Geological Survey Biological Resources Division. The U.S. Forest Service research organization and the interagency Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute will lead this approach, enabling us to better use wilderness as a baseline of comparison for determining our nation’s environmental health. In addition to acquiring better information about the condition and trends in wilderness, we are also putting an emphasis on learning what society understands and values about this resource. Wilderness will be a major component in the upcoming National Survey on Recreation and the Environment.

The Alpine Lakes Wilderness in Washington State is one of the gems of the wilderness system, which is managed by the U.S. Forest Service. Photo by John C. Hendee.
Wilderness requires collaboration; no one agency or entity controls the whole system.

led by our Outdoor Recreation and Wilderness Assessment Group.

5. We are placing an added emphasis on the wilderness and recreation interface. The American people are welcome in their wilderness. However, all uses must occur within the limits of the land and the preservation goals for each area’s wilderness values. We will provide a range of recreational opportunities in wilderness, from solitude to more social experiences, yet this will occur within the context of protecting wilderness resource conditions. We are piloting this approach on the revision of the Mt. Hood National Forest plan, working with wilderness users and the public to address concerns about access to their wilderness. We are also partnering with other agencies, states, and private recreation providers to ensure the availability of quality backcountry recreation opportunities outside wilderness.

6. I want every U.S. Forest Service employee to understand our wilderness stewardship responsibility and what it means to their jobs. I fully expect employees with decision-making responsibilities for wilderness areas to demonstrate wilderness expertise. The interagency Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center will refocus its offerings to meet the needs of our diverse, multidisciplinary workforce. Wilderness management work occurs at all levels of the organization, with some of the most important tasks taking place on the ground in the wilderness. Dedicated employees, cooperators, and volunteers are the lifeblood of wilderness stewardship.

In closing, I would like to pay one last tribute to Aldo Leopold, the man whose vision and passion we celebrate today. Leopold said, “There are two things that interest me: the relationship of people to their land and the relationship of people to each other.” I believe that the respect we accord one another is reflected in the way we treat the lands and waters that sustain us.

Leopold understood that the same qualities that define a good land manager—patience, humility, study, and learning to listen rather than always talking—were more than a recipe for stewardship. Today it is those same qualities that provide our most important hope for protecting wilderness, as well as for learning to live in community with each other.

MICHAEL DOMBECK became the 14th Chief of the U.S. Forest Service on January 6, 1997. Raised in northern Wisconsin’s lake country, Dombeck worked as a fishing guide in the region for 11 summers. He holds a doctorate in fisheries biology from Iowa State University. Dombeck was formerly acting director of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). As Forest Service Chief, Dombeck has focused his efforts on promoting partnerships, collaborative stewardship, accountability, and financial health. For additional information contact Jerry Stokes, Assistant Director for Wilderness. Telephone: 202-205-0925. Email: jstokes/wo@fs.fed.us

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Chad Dawson, professor of forestry in the College of Environmental Science and Forestry, State University of New York (SUNY) at Syracuse, is IJW acting executive editor for science, August 1999–February 2000. Chad is standing in for Alan Watson, winner of a Fulbright visiting scholar award to study wilderness in Finland, during that time period.

Chad received a B.S. degree in conservation and resource planning from University of Michigan (1970), a Masters in resource policy and planning from Cornell in 1979, and a Ph.D. in resource management and policy from SUNY in 1983. He teaches courses and does research in wilderness and river recreation management. “Chad is an experienced wilderness scientist, teacher and IJW author; and I know he will do a great job,” said John Hendee, IJW editor in chief.