MANAGING WILDERNESS IN PERPETUITY AND IN DEMOCRACY

By Roger Kennedy

[Editor’s Note: During his tenure as head of the U.S. National Park Service, Director Kennedy has rekindled interest and renewed the agency’s focus on wilderness. IJW is pleased to share some of Director Kennedy’s ideas on this subject. —John C. Hendee]

WILDERNESS WRENCHES humans out of their habits and complacencies. The wilderness experience is not one of finding a destination, but, instead, of being restored for a more effective return. Back from wilderness, Moses brought obligations and rectifications of bad habits; Jesus brought back from wilderness a stern repudiation of tribalism and an assertion of unity among all human-kind. From his wilderness voyage, Darwin brought a sense of the unity of experience among all species.

We may go to wilderness in a state of inflation, but we return in scale; very small, but very responsible. We are, of course, responsible for ourselves, but, because we have memory and anticipation, we are also responsible for the consequences of our actions upon other species.

The Best of the Very Best Lands

After decades of priding itself on managing the best of the very best of America’s public lands legacy, the National Park Service (NPS) was wrenched from its own sort of complacency by passage of The Wilderness Act in 1964. We had been managing the best of the very best, as we thought and still think, since 1864, or 1872, or 1916, depending on how you account for such things. And then Congress announced that there was in fact a very best within the very best to be managed somehow differently. The NPS by no means leaped on the wilderness bandwagon, but from the first wilderness area designation on national park lands in 1970 to passage of the California Desert Protection Act in 1994, designated wilderness grew to become more than half of our NPS land base. NPS management responsibility now extends to 40% of the entire National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). We are not, nor can we afford to be, complacent about wilderness management.

In 1964 when The Wilderness Act became law, the NPS was still preoccupied with concluding Mission 66 and its ambitious program of rebuilding park infrastructures, after the serious budgetary neglect of park facilities during World War II collided with the postwar surge in tourism. Wilderness stewardship was difficult then; it is likely to always be so. Today we face forces in the public arena that assert parks are not worth the cost of maintaining them. These forces say the places that we chose as our best places, these landscapes and shrines, places of wonder and reverence, these commons grounds of the common good are a needless expense. They say we cannot afford these places where we invite each other to consider what it is about the United States in which we take the greatest pride. We cannot afford, they say, places where we consider what we are at our best.

And now as we move to become better stewards of our wilderness areas, the NPS finds itself struggling to remind U.S. citizens and their representatives in Congress that these places of wonder are also places of national pride. Land is a source of pride and passion in our culture. Yellowstone, Yosemite, and the Grand Canyon were established with the language of patriotism. We live, so these acts of Congress come true, in a land where such places exist, and we are a people capable of reserving such places from exploitation.

Wilderness: Balancing Technology and Exploitation

Concern for Yosemite and Yellowstone in 1864 and 1872 was concern for wilderness, although it was not called that then. Protection for these areas reflected the U.S. citizens’ concern for the best of their national public domain lands.

We still care very deeply about this. Our concern is a reality, despite our apparent inclination to believe technology has a life of its own and develops without regard for our opinions. Few people speak against growth and expansion, yet a potent tide of environmental conservation has developed in this century to slow the headlong rush of blind progress. This concern reflects not opposition to progress but rather a deep-seated uneasiness about how narrowly progress has been construed. We care about some other things than making a living. We have some values not governed by market forces. And this tension between U.S. citizens’ deep concern for their environment and the fatalistic rush to the myth of progress constitutes the dynamic in which wilderness stewardship takes place.
After the Civil War, railroads expanded western settlement and made ravenous eastern urban markets accessible to western natural and agricultural products. Federal public land laws of this period encouraged the scandalous exploitation and abuse of the public domain. Approximately 50% of U.S. public forest lands passed into private ownership within a mere 15-year period, in a tremendous assault on the public good from 1863 to 1878. This was truly a disgraceful era of land theft and resource exploitation, reflecting an extension of the political spoils system to our public domain lands.

We can look back and see that the National Park System and now the NWPS are, in part, reactions to exploitation and destruction of the public domain. Public uneasiness and disgust at the exploitation of natural resources was an important factor in President Theodore Roosevelt’s progressive political agenda that led to the establishment of national forests, wildlife refuges, national monuments, and other protected areas. However, it was the travesty of invading Yosemite National Park in 1913 for a commercial hydroelectric power project that contributed to the establishment, by Congress, of the NPS in 1916. The NPS grew under the aggressive leadership of Stephen Mather, and later, his understudy Horace Albright, at a time when recreation and tourism development were believed to be entirely consistent with the NPS Organic Act and unrecognized as impacts on wilderness. It was only with the legislation in the 1930s that established Grand Teton and Everglades National Park, and in the 1940s, Kings Canyon National Park, that wilderness protection expressly motivated national park establishment.

The tension between U.S. citizens’ concern for its remnant public domain lands and acquiescence to the myth of progress changed even more significantly in the 1950s and 1960s. In the mid-1950s, national park lands were threatened by dam construction, just as with Hetch Hetchy in Yosemite, but this time conservationists waged their war nationally. The plan to build the Echo Park Dam within Dinosaur National Monument resulted in the first truly national campaign of conservation groups working in close concert. In a coming of age for the U.S. conservation movement, the dam proposal was defeated, despite the powerful commercial, legislative, and bureaucratic forces allied in favor of building it. Leading that conservation battle were The Wilderness Society and the Sierra Club. Rather than disband their coalition and return to fighting isolated conservation brush fires, the groups opted in 1955 to redirect it to press for federal legislation for wilderness protection. As Roderick Nash has written, “the Echo Park victory gave promise that statutory wilderness preservation might be more than a dream.” Today there are more than 100 million acres of designated wilderness in the NWPS. This system lies at the heart of that deep and abiding concern of the U.S. public to take care of those public lands to whom progress will show no mercy.

The NPS is in the heritage-keeping business. The heritage we keep embodies the entire gamut of human interactions with Earth, with so-called nature and culture, from wilderness at one end of the spectrum to intense urbanism at the other. From Alaska’s Gates of the Arctic that Bob Marshall so loved, to Philadelphia’s Independence Hall that symbolizes the heart of our great experiment in national self-government. The NPS is unique as a national entity for its mission to preserve the real places that exemplify the whole of that treasured spectrum in perpetuity. We mean to do our best with our wilderness heritage too. We know and share with all other wilderness stewards the meaning and challenge of a mission “in perpetuity.” We are set for wilderness stewardship. We are fully engaged with the interagency Arthur H. Carhart National Wilderness Leadership Training Center and are represented on its staff. Our wilderness steering committee is involved in making wilderness management part of everyday NPS business. This means addressing wilderness management as a training issue, funding issue, personnel management issue, social issue, and, therefore perhaps most importantly, an education issue. We are looking for the best way to engage with the interagency Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute. We know the need for wild areas and the recognition of that need most likely will grow, not diminish.

We recognize that the story of wilderness is the story of the United States, a story that serves as our link to the commonalities of our many-storied natural and cultural past. It is also 3 story that will continue and evolve, so we must not be complacent about the challenges we face. Democratic government is by its very nature always an experiment "to be continued."
Wilderness Facing Change

As the United States democratic experiment changes and evolves, National Park Wilderness Stewardship will face these changes:

1. Wilderness issues are shifting from primarily allocation (how many acres and where) to stewardship (seeing the wilderness condition perpetuate itself). We will continue to press for park wilderness designations, and we will continue to manage all qualified lands as wilderness until such time as Congress acts on designation. We will also impress our considerable land stewardship experience into the service of wilderness management. Land stewardship is not independent from social and political realities but entwined with our history, culture, economy, politics, and faith. Knowing this, we will reach out for new partners to help educate U.S. citizens about both their legacy and the continuing need to steward the land.

2. Dramatic demographic changes in the West are and will influence wilderness. The proportion of total U.S. population living in the West has tripled since 1950. Were the 20 counties in and adjacent to the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem a state, it would be the nation’s fastest growing state. We will approach the stewardship of parklands, wilderness, and otherwise in ever more collegial fashion. We want to lend rather than to insist on our expertise. Rather than play cards close to our chests, we will try to give away all that we know. And we recognize that many new residents are now drawn to the West more because of its wildlands character than for its other, more traditional economic possibilities.

3. The national population is aging, becoming more ethnically diverse, and growing in numbers. We will broadcast the benefits of wilderness that accrue to people whether they visit wilderness or not. We will seek out, learn, and carefully enfranchise the wildlands connections and heritage of ethnic groups and hope to make them wilderness partners and stakeholders. We will continuously examine our own cultural assumptions. We will aggressively impress upon wilderness users the “Leave No Trace” ethic (see article by Ralph Swain in this issue) and other types of zero impact awareness. We will become apostles for sensitive, sustainable environmental stewardship to all who share park boundaries, live upwind and upstream, or share the heritage vicariously through various media. We can no longer merely wait for people to come to their parks before we press our case.

4. Public involvement in public land management has increased greatly. When powerful opponents of wilderness at the 1st hour injected the review process into The Wilderness Act, they hoped to stymie the growth of the Wilderness System. Quite the opposite happened. They motivated citizens to learn how to influence federal decisionmaking and soon put an end to the old closed-committee mode of the Congress. The NPS appreciates the voices of citizens as individuals and members of nonprofit organizations as wholesome expressions of the common good. Again, we will both share our expertise with and work to educate public involvement for wilderness allocation and management issues. As proponents of biodiversity, we have no argument with a rich mix at the grassroots of politics.

5. The role of science is changing in the United States, and this will affect wilderness stewardship. Since World War II, scientists here began a half-century expansion of their role in policymaking. Conservation biology and the new forestry express this expansionism today, and limits-of-acceptable-change (LAC) management injects social science concepts into resource policy. Though increasing numbers of U.S. citizens now reject science and faith in technology, and Congress is clearly impatient, we will continue to make use of the best available science to inform our wilderness management decisions. And we will support responsible science in park wilderness.

These factors certainly will influence NPS stewardship of wilderness as well as its overall heritage-keeping mission. Indeed, the meaning and value of that wilderness stewardship may well be challenged in the future just as we so recently witnessed challenges to the national park idea itself. And to the extent that we let wilderness remain the exclusive concern of a small cadre of professionals, aficionados, and today’s wilderness user, we invite such challenge. The same democracy that raised the wilderness system can also raze it! It is incumbent on the NPS then, as the steward of 40% of the Wilderness System, to reach out and make wilderness relevant to citizens in South Tucson, Miami’s Little Havana, St. Maries in Idaho, and East Harlem. Any stewardship that asserts itself in perpetuity within the democratic framework, as the Wilderness Act clearly mandates, must ask and keep asking itself, “Who benefits? Who loses? Who has the power?” and perhaps most of all, “Who cares?”

In the NPS, I assure you, we pose that question as “Who else cares?” For we do care about wilderness. Had we not cared, and deeply, about wilderness,
we could not now be charged with managing so much wilderness land.

Wilderness wrenches us out of complacency about constituents and partners. We are and we will reach out and forge partnerships with wilderness-related industry, wilderness educators, and environmental nonprofit and nongovernmental organizations. We have many potential allies, but we need better ways and many other places besides our parks to reach them. We must bring new recruits to the cause, beginning with many of our fellow and sister citizens who have, in their way, been part of our alliance all along, but who have not heard much from us, to invite them to join us. Why should we do this? Who cares? Who are our caring allies? And who should be our caring allies? The reality is that all around us are citizens who should be with us in this great venture.

We humans believe ourselves to be important but not all-important. Even the most secular of conservationists would admit, I think, that they often feel humbled in the presence of wilderness. This feeling goes beyond awe to reverence. Humans, in the religious tradition, are not the only significant species on Earth. Our orchards, farms, and woodlots are not the only places worthy of respect. All of the more-than-human world is worthy of respect. The Wilderness Act is the legislative expression of that respectful idea, that outside our cultural constructs there are forms of life deserving our due regard. This is the heart of ecosystem management.

What better platform than wilderness, then, for both the practice and the preaching of ecosystem management? And in several instances now, designated wilderness in national parks lies at the innermost protected core of Biosphere Reserves and World Heritage Sites. What better platform than such well-situated wilderness could we ourselves have devised for the practice and the preaching of the most far-reaching and all encompassing passages of our holistic heritage-keeping gospel?

What does it mean that the U.S. public has considered it important to embed wilderness in national parks, and wilderness management with the prudence and moderation needed to pass on our amazing wilderness posterity to our children and grandchildren. That is the burden and challenge of the Wilderness Act. George Perkins Marsh put this in perspective, in talking about his own book, *Man and Nature*, published in 1864, the same year Abraham Lincoln signed the Yosemite cession into law, the book that placed our culture on a path of environmental consciousness: “The whole force of Man and Nature lies in its assumption that the welfare of future generations matters more than any immediate consideration.” The NWPS exists in this same spirit, and it extends Marsh’s assumption to enfranchise all creatures with whom we share Earth. It is fully within the mission and culture of the NPS to promulgate that spirit in perpetuity-in wilderness!

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