

“Wilderness Forever,” from *Voices for the Wilderness*, 1969, Howard Zahniser, ed. by William Schwarz.

It is a bold thing for a human being who lives on the earth but a few score years at the most to presume upon the Eternal and covet perpetuity for any of his undertakings.

Yet we who concern ourselves with wilderness preservation are compelled to assume this boldness and with the courage of this peculiar undertaking of ours so to order our enterprise as to direct our efforts toward the perpetual—to project into the eternity of the future some of that precious unspoiled ecological inheritance that has come to us out of the eternity of the past.

This is a requisite of our undertaking, and there is yet another of primary importance also:

We must deal with actual areas. Only as we preserve areas of wilderness does there exist in reality the basis for a vital interest in all the many aspects of wilderness that give it the meanings we have been discussing, not only in our recreation but also in our science, literature, art, entertainment—our whole culture, our way of living.

We who are concerned with wilderness preservation must accordingly have these two clear purposes: We must relate all our effective concerns and efforts to the preservation of actual areas, and we must work for their preservation in perpetuity.

When we address ourselves to wilderness preservation with such a purpose we are dealing with those still remaining areas of the earth where the landscape is not dominated by man and his works, areas where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a member of the natural community, a wanderer who visits but does not remain, whose travels leave only trails.

These are the areas that still retain their primeval environment and influence, that remain free from routes that can be used for mechanized transportation, where the freedom of the wilderness still lives on unfettered by the restrictions of the urban industrial life to which mankind has become increasingly confined, primeval areas where a human being can still face natural conditions directly without the mediating conveniences and instruments of domination fashioned in his inventive and technological civilization.

These are the areas that are still as God has been making them without man’s aid, but for the protection of which the Almighty now seems to be relying on this His remarkable creature, man—this free-willed, so often untractable participant in the eternal purposes of the whole boundless universe.

At the very beginning of these biennial meetings, at the world’s first wilderness conference, we did indeed recognize that protecting areas is only part of our concern.

We saw that safeguarding wilderness involves the wildness of ourselves and of other visitors to the wilderness, for we all have an inborn tendency to make over wilderness rather than to adapt ourselves to it.

We emphasized accordingly that in back country designated as wilderness our concern should always be with the preservation of the wilderness conditions. It is more important, we saw, to safeguard the authenticity of our experience than to make it of long duration or to provide it for large numbers at any given time.

We wished then, as we wish now, of course, to have as many as possible share the wilderness experience—but the wilderness must be wild when we get there, and we want to experience it as wilderness.

In our second wilderness conference we discussed more specifically our deep dependence on the wilderness. We saw ourselves as indeed a part of the wildness of the universe. That is our nature. Our noblest, happiest character develops with the influence of wilderness. Away from it we tend to degenerate into the squalor of slums or the frustration of clinical couches. With the wilderness we are at home.

Some of us think we see this so clearly that for ourselves, for our children, our continuing posterity, and our fellow man we covet with a consuming intensity the fullness of the human development that keeps its contact with wildness. Out of the wilderness has come the substance of our culture, and with a living wilderness—it is our faith—we shall have also a vibrant, vital culture, and enduring civilization of healthful happy people who like Antaeus perpetually renew themselves in contact with the earth.

We not only value the wilderness because of its own superlative values but because our experience in the wilderness meets fundamental human needs. These needs are not only recreational and spiritual, but also educational and scientific, not only personal but cultural. They are profound. For the wilderness is essential to us, as human beings, for a true understanding of ourselves, our culture, our own natures, our place in all nature.

At the second wilderness conference we sensed clearly that our only hope to avert the loss of the wilderness we cherish is in our deliberate effort to preserve it. The ramifications of our developing mechanical enterprises, our population growth, our whole civilization, are such that only those areas which are set aside for preservation will persist as wilderness.

We saw that we must do two things. We must see that an adequate system of wilderness areas is designated for preservation, and then we must allow nothing to alter the wilderness character of the preserves.

Then came the challenge of the Echo Park controversy, the test whether any designation can long endure. We passed that test. The third conference theme (as Charlott Mauk—the heroine of all these early conferences—entitled its summary) was “Working to Keep What We Have.” By the time of the fourth conference, in 1955 when we moved across

the Bay from Berkeley to this metropolis, San Francisco, we were again moving forward toward a clear policy of wilderness protection with a strong legislative program to implement it. Two years later we were able to see even more clearly the nature of our undertaking, for in the interval between the fourth and fifth conferences national wilderness legislation had actually become a proposal in congress.

Many new-found professed friends, as well as familiar opponents - who were converts in testimony, at least, to an increasingly popular idea - brought to us the advantage of sharp scrutiny of all our details. The yes-but wing of the movement began to mobilize and our understanding of difficulties became clearer.

One of the most startling realizations four years ago was the almost sudden awareness that already there are no areas available for preservation as wilderness which are not already devoted to some other purpose. In other words, not only is it expedient to join wilderness preservation to other purposes, compatible purposes of course; it is actually necessary. This realization gives an urgency and a self-awareness in our efforts to establish policies and programs. It does not discourage us. It informs us. The wilderness is still a part of our heritage. In national parks and monuments, national forests, and wildlife refuges, it not only still lives, but exists within federally owned lands where the nation, if it wills, can preserve and use it indefinitely, simply by recognizing that the wilderness character can be preserved while the areas also serve their other purposes as park, forest, or refuge.

Our opportunity to establish thus an enduring policy and program for the preservation of wilderness is one of the superlatively great opportunities of our history. We are its custodians who have in part inherited, in part created, a chance to fashion in the midst of a highly organized, urbanized, mechanized culture enduring policies and effective programs for preserving wilderness. If our opportunity is lost the ultimate loss will be wilderness itself. The issue is not whether we shall have parks or wildlife refuges or outdoor recreation areas in forests and parks. The question is will there live on in any of these areas what we know as wilderness.

We have seen and are seeing difficulties, distractions, even temptations of our own. Policies and programs that endure are opposed by those who wish to exploit commodities in wilderness or see wilderness preserved only tentatively, merely until they have a chance to exploit or develop; thus the exploiters' fear of perpetual protection emphasizes the need for it.

Recreationists looking for areas to serve their good purposes see unspoiled areas of wilderness as invitations for parkways, cabin colonies, picnic grounds, and other conveniences that enhance the landscape for many but destroy wilderness for everybody.

Confronted with such opposition, we ourselves find patience and persistence less interesting than the newness of other good outdoor programs. In the wilderness we are tempted to rationalize airplanes, justify administrative, mechanized equipment, tolerate

machinery that might save forage by replacing pack animals, or construe wilderness in a more convenient way for ourselves.

Our difficulties, our distractions, our temptations diminish and jeopardize our unique perishable opportunity.

By not acting promptly and effectively, by modifying our effort for some more practical or more exciting reason, by unwillingness to devote all our resources as needed to the effort that is basic to all our future as wilderness preservers, we are running the risk of sacrificing the basis in reality for all our interest in wilderness.

It is a sacrifice that would take from us the scientific values of wilderness, also the areas of reference which give meaning to the photographs, the motion pictures, paintings, and literature that can inform and inspire us so long as we continue to maintain their basis in reality in the wilderness itself.

The frontier values of the picnic grounds and campsites at the end of the road would perish, too, and the wilderness meaning of the prospect from many miles of our best roadsides.

We would gain a whole world of well-developed outdoor recreation and lose our sole purpose as wilderness preservers.

Toward national forests where “multiple use” may everywhere embrace the uses that sacrifice wilderness; toward national parks where even the back country will include the roads and accommodations that introduce more and more people to less and less wilderness—toward a beautiful, lovely outdoors where any of us would gladly live on century after century if we could, a marvelous land, but without wilderness—toward such a destiny we are surely headed if we hesitate and turn aside from the only way that we have yet found toward enduring policies and programs for wilderness preservation.

The only way is through the establishment of a policy and program by the nation regarding lands that belong to the public under which wilderness areas shall be designated and protected as such. A basic step is the enactment of Congressional legislation.

It is to this end we have pending the Wilderness Bill.

As conservation-minded citizens, we have a deep interest in our national wilderness heritage. As citizens we share also a responsibility for observing as well as using our democratic processes. We are compelled both by our requirements and our obligations to respect those who may emphasize other aspects of the public interest or indeed their own interests.

Enactment of legislation by the Congress of the United States to establish an enduring wilderness preservation policy and program is as great an undertaking in its difficulties of realization as it is in its promise of a future for wilderness.

Yet if we are to anticipate a wilderness-forever future through a national sanction we must in this country take this difficult first step.

It is a step that is so difficult not because it goes so far but because it must be taken by so many. A whole nation steps forward with purpose in the enactment of such legislation, and it marches only when so many are ready to go that the others must move too. Nor in our great government do we disregard the reluctant ones. Rather, we persuade, we confer, we try to understand, we cooperate with; only ultimately do we compel.

We are now in the midst of these democratic processes as directed toward the establishment of wilderness preservation on an enduring basis.

There is nothing so important to us in our wilderness undertaking as the favorable working out of these processes.

The Congress in Washington cannot, however, be our sole concern - not even temporarily. Nor are the courses of action in Congress determined entirely in Washington D.C. Throughout the land we have also immediate and urgent concerns, and throughout the land are the citizens to whom the legislators in Washington are responsible.

In working toward the adoption of this basic policy and program by congress—the body charged by our Constitution with the responsibility for the land where our wilderness exists—we are compelled not only by the exigencies of events and the interest of people to deal with far-flung problems throughout the land. We also are under the compulsion of recognizing that legislators are representatives of the people. If we are to gain the understanding and support of legislators—of the Congress—we must have the understanding and support of the people.

We must go out from our conferences on wilderness to work with our people on wilderness—to inform them through the press, television, through all our media of publicity, and to help them organize in such a way as to make their informed purposes effective.

The question is not one of dealing or not dealing with all our various and far-flung problems. It is a question of how we shall deal with them in our development of an enduring program.

It is of great importance to enlist the civic leaders of our communities in the study of problems relating to wilderness preservation. In every community there are among the local people, businessmen, teachers, clergymen, laborers, farmers, and the many other groups, those who will become effectively interested in wilderness if we can only help them get started.

This is a leadership task that involves us in showing people how to provide a positive influence under the prerogatives of our democratic system.

In brief we need to practice the art of helping others work effectively in fighting for the things in which we believe.

Nor have we exhausted our educational possibilities when we have adapted our wilderness information activities to all the common media of information and means for organizational effectiveness. We need also to entertain in our own imagination every new stimulus of the public mind that we perceive.

The pioneer spirit that stirs in youth is the spirit of the wilderness. Through wilderness experience it can be reborn. We can stir again the youthful energy which has made America strong. We can show that there are yet new frontiers, including our own frontier in fashioning a wilderness program that will endure.

Primeval wilderness, once gone, is gone forever; but it can be preserved forever. The vision of generation after generation, through an enduring future perpetuating a soundly established human purpose, is as glorious as a man's view of sons and daughters when he himself senses the period of his own time and cherishes more and more the Eternal.

The practical program for wilderness preservation, even in its discussion, leads us thus into the inspiring contemplation of something that endures. That is the nature of wilderness and we can hardly fail to realize it. What we must also recognize is that there is still the drive of the self-interest that exploits the wilderness for profit. There still are mining and lumbering interests who seek to confound, frustrate, and defeat every effort to secure wilderness as wilderness. There still are hazards in various enterprises that would continually modify wilderness rather than limit or regulate their own projects. We must use our inspirations to deal patiently, persistently, but practically with these contending forces.

Our political realities are such that we must continue, in our role as citizens, to strive to see the nation of which we are citizens espouse this cause to which we have become devoted. In this effort we are compelled to recognize that we must have the concurrence of many who have not yet or have not long shared our purposes. We must recognize that wilderness as a resource of the people has not been assured perpetuity until those among the people who would and could destroy it have been enlisted in or reconciled to its preservation. We must continue to work for the passage of the basic legislation that is the first step in whatever we can accomplish, and as it is enacted we must promptly mobilize for the ten or fifteen year program that it will inaugurate. There must not be any hesitancy in this, our immediate course of action.

If some of us may indeed become wearied physically, and profoundly, in the years through which frustrations continue—

Who are only undefeated

Because we have gone on trying—
we should never lose heart. We are engaged in an effort that may well be expected to continue until its right consummation, by our successors if need be. Working to preserve in perpetuity is a great inspiration. We are not fighting a rearguard action, we are facing a frontier. We are not slowing down a force that inevitably will destroy all the wilderness there is. We are generating another force, never to be wholly spent, that, renewed generation after generation, will be always effective in preserving wilderness. We are not fighting progress. We are making it.

We are not dealing with a vanishing wilderness. We are working for a wilderness forever.