

THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY---

Advocating for Wilderness in Changing Times

BY GREG APLET AND JERRY GREENBERG

"All we desire to save from invasion is that extremely minor fraction of outdoor America which yet remains free from mechanical sights and sounds and smells."

WHEN THE FOUNDERS OF THE WILDERNESS Society inked this phrase for the founding platform of their new organization in 1935, they could not have imagined what the wilderness movement would someday become. From an initial group of eight, The Wilderness Society has grown to an organization of over 300,000 members, and as the popularity of wilderness preservation has grown, so have other organizations pledged to protecting America's wild places. From humble beginnings early in the 20th century, the wilderness movement and The Wilderness Society have endured significant change and are now poised to convey the momentum of the past into the next millennium.

The Early Years

The story is now familiar to wilderness advocates around the world. In October 1934, on their way to a Civilian Conservation Corps camp in Tennessee, four men began arguing over Robert Marshall's handwritten draft of a constitution for a new conservation group. As the discussion heated up, they pulled off the road and gathered around Marshall, the chief of recreation and lands for the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), and went over Marshall's draft line by line. They ended the roadside session with a definite intent to form a new organization, whatever its name might be.

Three months later, in January 1935, the group met at the Cosmos Club in Washington, D.C. participants included Robert Sterling Yard, publicist for the National Park Service (NPS) and former president of the National Parks Association (from which perch he criticized the NPS for not keeping the parks suitably primitive), and Benton MacKaye, a planner for the Tennessee Valley Authority and even then recognized as the "Father of the Appalachian Trail." After two days of francorous debate, they adopted a platform. For a name, they settled on The Wilderness Society.

The group soon added four more carefully selected co-sponsors including Aldo Leopold, a leading wilderness advocate and author of the classic work, *A Sand County Almanac*. "We want no straddlers," Marshall said. During the 1930s, the small but energetic Wilderness Society was busy. Robert Marshall continued to borrow from within the USFS, nudging the agency to expand upon its designation of primitive areas until his death in 1939 at the age of 38. So it was that The Wilderness Society joined in the effort with other conservation organizations to establish Kings Canyon and Olympic National Parks with the stipulation that each was to be



Wilderness in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. (Photo courtesy of Arthur Carhort Wilderness Training Center.)

managed as wilderness. Similar language was inserted into the management directives of Everglades National Park.

World War II and the infatuation of growth that characterized the boom years of the postwar period soon stalled the successful start. The USFS responded by dramatically increasing timber production from the national forests. The Bureau of Land Management accelerated grazing and mining programs throughout the 300 million acres of public lands under its control. Managers of units in the National Wildlife Refuge System were encouraged to allow farming, oil drilling, and other activities having nothing to do with the preservation of wildlife. Even the NPS became infatuated with growth, launching a program it called "Mission 66" and vowing to expand roads and tourist facilities in the parks to spectacular new levels by 1966. Almost no one in government was talking about wilderness. The movement foundered.

Then in 1950 the Bureau of Reclamation (BR) decided to build enormous dams on the Colorado-Utah border in Dinosaur National Monument. Like any national park unit, Dinosaur by law was to be kept inviolate, "unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." The BR turned to Congress for permission to violate the inviolable, and the conservation community, such as it was, found a cause around which it could organize.

And organize it did, led by Howard Zahniser, executive secretary of The Wilderness Society, and David Brower, the militant young head of the Sierra Club. Zahniser and Brower

joined with several other conservation leaders to form a coalition devoted exclusively to defeating the Dinosaur dams. When the smoke cleared from the congressional battlefield in 1936, the final legislation for completion of the Colorado River Project contained no dams in Dinosaur.

The Wilderness Act

Despite the victory, Zahniser realized "that all our lands are destined to be put to some human use. If any of it is to be preserved in its natural condition it must be as the result of a deliberate setting aside of it for human use of it in a natural condition." With that conviction in mind, he produced a wilderness bill that in 1957 was introduced in Congress. The bill enabled Congress to set aside selected federal lands as areas to be kept permanently unchanged by human enterprise—no roads, no development for economic purposes, no structures, no vehicles, no significant impacts of any kind.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 states that, "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 untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." These wilderness areas would form the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). Zahniser rewrote the Wilderness Bill 66 times and testified or had testimony presented before no fewer than 18 public hearings in 10 states as three separate Congresses took it up for consideration between 1956 and 1964. He testified for the last time on April 27, 1964. A week later he died, and only his memory was present in the Rose Garden of the White House on September 3, 1964, when President Lyndon B. Johnson took pen in fist and signed the final version of the long dream into law.

Protecting the Wilderness

Although truly a remarkable victory, passage of the Wilderness Act was only a beginning. At its inception, the act

designated some 9 million acres as wilderness. The hard work of identifying and designating additional wilderness still lay ahead. Through 30 years of slow, steady, state-by-state accumulation, punctuated by historic events like the Alaska National Interest Lands and Conservation Act of 1980, which designated 36 million acres of spectacular beauty and the 5-million acre California Desert Protection Act of 1994, the NWPS has grown to 104 million acres.

At the same time that the nation was cultivating a wilderness preservation system, Congress was busy creating a framework of environmental laws governing management of all federal lands, wilderness and nonwilderness alike. Among the most important of these inspired laws was the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA). NFMA established a process for identifying the appropriate uses of the national forests through public participation in land management planning. Thus, a wholly new tool had been created for the protection of wildland: input from the growing number of Americans calling for more wilderness.

The battles over wilderness designation and forest planning defined The Wilderness Society through the 1970s and 1980s. The organization grew from a staff of 28 in 1980 to 134 in 1991, establishing offices in 15 states. State-wide wilderness bills were passed for all states containing suitable national forest wilderness except for Idaho and Montana. Forest plans were approved for most national forests, identifying two-thirds of the land base as unsuitable for timber production. A number of forest plans were appealed and revised to protect wild places and wildlife. The Wilderness Society led the way in professionalizing the conservation movement, countering prodevelopment claims with credible, technical analyses of timber sale economics, regional economic trends, and old-growth forest inventories. Guides authored by Wilderness Society staff explained the intricacies of wilderness and national forest management to an army of dedicated forest activists who fought to protect special places from

coast to coast.

By the early 1990s, the protectors of wilderness had chalked up an impressive record. To some, it looked like the work of The Wilderness Society was largely over. But even as Congress was busy protecting special places, profound change was overtaking the conservation movement.

The Next Era of Wilderness Protection

The handwriting had been on the wall for decades. The works of George Perkins Marsh, Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, and others had caught the attention of the public many times. But by the 1980s, the growing evidence of environmental degradation—rising carbon dioxide levels, tropical deforestation, an exploding endangered species list—forced the entire world to face the question: Can we go on living like this?

In 1987, the World Commission on Environment and Development issued its landmark report *Our Common Future*, offering an answer to that question. It recognized the relationship between healthy ecosystems and the ability to meet the needs of current and future societies and concluded that saving species and their ecosystems is "an indispensable prerequisite for sustainability." In this context, land allocation decisions were no longer about aesthetic versus commercial preferences; they had long-lasting implications for the sustainability of our life-giving ecosystems. Wilderness protection suddenly took on new importance as a vital tool to sustain ecosystems for future generations. Protected natural areas could no longer be regarded as islands in a hostile sea; they had to be seen instead as the cornerstones of sustainable ecosystems.

Even as it continued in its traditional role of wilderness advocate, The Wilderness Society began to champion sustainability principles in public land management. From its advocacy of public lands as reservoirs of biological diversity to its role in defining sustainable forestry, The Wilderness Society began to call for management that would not simply protect wilderness, but sustain it as well. It began to focus on building a sustainable nationwide

network of wildlands. Its goals evolved from wilderness protection to creating the conditions necessary to sustain wilderness, including protecting land and changing the socially accepted norms such as laws, economic systems, and institutions that govern land management decisions.

It has become a cliché that sustainable management is ecologically sound, economically viable, and socially acceptable. Nevertheless, this notion serves as the foundation of The Wilderness Society's approach to wilderness protection for the future. Ecologically sound management sustains the complexity and dynamics of ecosystems while meeting human needs. It protects biological diversity and the productive potential of ecosystems, including soil productivity, air and water quality, and opportunities for spiritual renewal at multiple scales. It weaves protected areas, intensively developed areas, and lands managed for both natural values and other uses into an integrated, sustainable whole. Under this approach, wilderness is not apart from the managed landscape, it is a part of the managed landscape - managed for wildness. The Wilderness Society will continue to advocate for wilderness designations and management of enough land to sustain wildness, but it must also advocate management reforms across the landscape necessary to sustain a functional wildland ecosystem.

As important as ecological planning is, wildlands will not be sustained if they are at odds with economically rational allocation of resources. Historically, resource allocation has been determined by short-term market economics. Outputs for which there were markets (e.g., timber, forage, minerals, hunting, and fishing) were favored over nonmarket values such as aesthetics and backcountry access. However, this bias is breaking down as traditionally nonmarket values have been shown to contribute greatly to local economies. The beauty of natural settings and access to outdoor recreation are highly valued contributions to the quality of life in rural communities. They serve to draw new business into the community and to hold onto residents who might other-

wise be tempted to leave. A recent analysis by the USFS shows that national forest recreation contributes 30 times the commerce to the national economy as does national forest timber. The Wilderness Society has been at the leading edge of this unfolding story, contributing landmark studies of rural economies throughout the nation. At the same time, growth stimulated by natural beauty is creating new problems for rural towns, including loss of open space and a widening income gap-problems with difficult solutions. Nevertheless, recognition of wilderness as an economic asset instead of a liability means people are more likely to want it as part of their sustainable future.

Finally, ecologically sound, economically viable management can be stymied by social forces. A switch to sustainable management means change, and change does not always come easily. If we are to build a sustainable system of wildlands, it must be done with the support of people across the spectrum of interests. Conservationists must reach out to new constituencies and cultivate a love for wild places. In urban settings, this will require introducing people to the beauty and magic of the wilderness; for rural audiences, it will require cultivating an innate love of wild places into a powerful political force.

Around the country-in Alaska, in the magnificent forests of the Pacific Northwest, the Columbia River basin and northern Rockies, the Sierra Nevada, the Colorado Plateau, the southern Appalachians, and the northern forest of New England-The Wilderness Society has worked with land managers to allocate lands appropriately and to manage them well. Research has demonstrated the economic benefits of sustainable management, and the Wilderness Society has worked to develop new constituencies and to find the common ground with rural residents to ensure that our ecosystems will be sustained in the future. Indeed, at the close of the first century of U.S. conservation, the work of the Wilderness Society and other organizations has not waned, it has only increased in magnitude and importance.

Epilogue: Two Steps Forward, One Step Back

The events of the last two years demonstrate just how fragile progress can sometimes be. Soon after helping to lead the charge for the most important environmental victory of 1994, passage of the California Desert Protection Act, The Wilderness Society, like the entire conservation community, found itself confronting an extremely hostile Congress. Bills to sell off, give away, or privatize America's public lands began appearing like a bad flu epidemic. Legislation to open the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to oil drilling, to gut the Endangered Species Act, and to transfer all 270 million acres managed by the Bureau of Land Management to the states are among the worst examples. Perhaps most disturbing have been the numerous attempts to undermine The Wilderness Act itself. Various attempts to pass precedent-setting legislation have been made, including bills that would allow motorized vehicles and industrial development in designated wilderness areas. Among the targets are southern Utah's red rock canyons and Minnesota's Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Combining forces with other conservation groups, The Wilderness Society largely stymied the antiwilderness forces in the 104th Congress, though future assaults seem certain.

Ironically, the last two years may have laid the foundation for additional wilderness designations. The outrageous actions of the 104th Congress have shaken millions of U.S. citizens who had grown complacent about the future of the natural world. Just as the fight to save Dinosaur and the assaults of former Interior Secretary James Watt energized wilderness protection, so may the initiatives of the 104th Congress set the stage for renewed attention to the United States dwindling resource. **IJW**

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