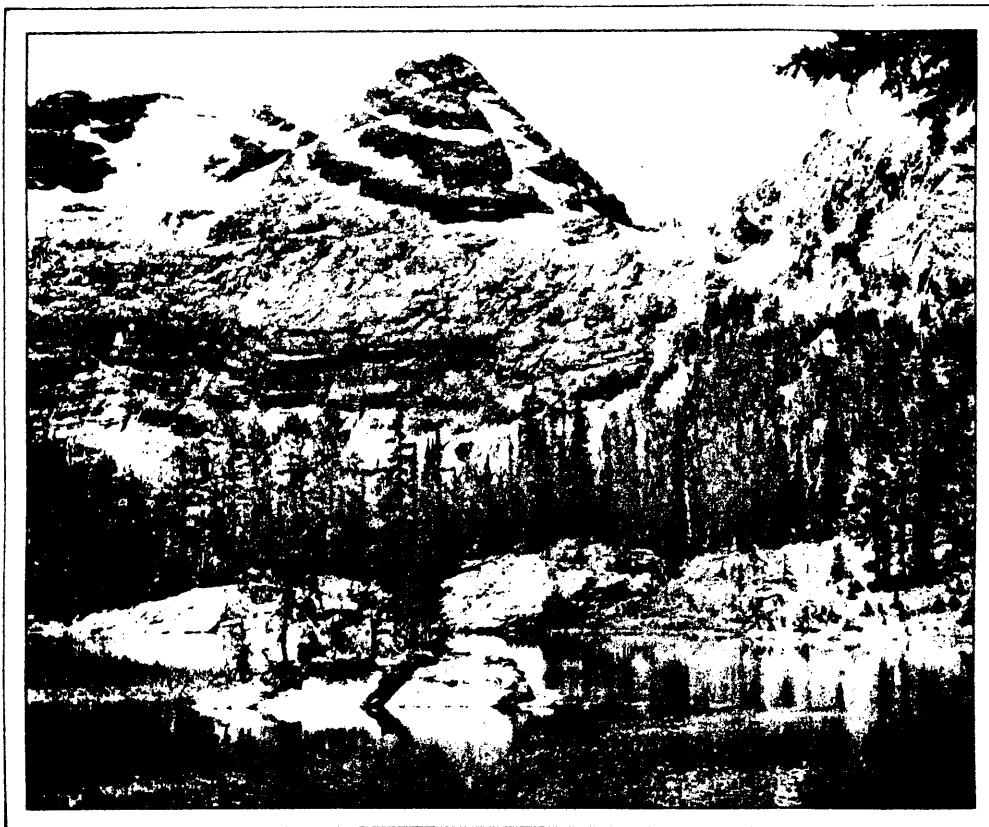


# Wilderness Myths:



## *Some falsehoods are put to rest*

by Judith King Norgaard with Tom Kovalicky and George Stankey  
of the Region One Offices,  
U.S. Forest Service

Have you ever heard someone say, "Wilderness locks up the land?" Of course you have. And it is just one of the myriad of myths concerning wilderness which are perpetrated — and perpetuated — year after year.

How about "locking up the land?" We have all heard this is what happens when an area becomes a wilderness. While it's true that activities such as logging or snowmobiling for pleasure are not permitted in wilderness, does their absence really "lock up" the land? Isn't it also true that where these activities are permitted, the option of wilderness is "locked out?"

In wilderness, activities that are permitted include protection of watersheds, mining, and grazing of domestic livestock as well as many forms of recreation, including hunting and fishing. One might well ask where, and how, this "locking up the land" myth originated.

Some claim that the areas designated as wilderness could be improved by timber management practices. Obviously, since some areas in wilderness are — by design — of forest lands with timber productivity potential, timber management practices could possibly improve them for the production of commercial wood fiber, but the

attendant facilities, roads, machinery and structures are simply not compatible with the basic concept of wilderness.

It is the intention of the Wilderness Act to preserve a wide variety of land for wilderness: wildernesses are designed to contain a representative slice of landforms, ecosystems, habitat types and timber productivity classes.

We all know, of course, that wildernesses are primarily for wealthy people from the big cities. Another myth! Many visitors do come from urban areas, because an outdoor vacation of this type offers such a marked contrast to their everyday

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environment. However, in Montana, most visitors come from small- to medium-sized towns.

Admittedly, it takes a certain amount of careful planning and funding to fly or drive from a distant location to Montana for a vacation, but wealth is not a requirement for a trip, even if a portion of that trip is spent airborne. For many, a trip to a Montana wilderness may be a once-in-a-lifetime, never-to-be-forgotten experience. Clearly, some level of income is necessary for people to visit wilderness, just as it is for them to bowl, drink beer or ski; but it is not only the wealthy who indulge in these activities any more than it is only the wealthy who visit wildernesses.

For example, in 1970, a study of visitors to wilderness and primitive areas in Idaho and Montana showed that in the Bob Marshall Wilderness, about six percent earned less than \$5,000 annually; 30 percent earned from \$5,000 to \$9,999; 23 percent earned between \$10,000 and \$14,999; 29 percent were in the \$15,000 to \$24,999 bracket, and 14 percent earned \$25,000 or more. In the Spanish Peaks Primitive Area, the percentages in the same categories respectively were 17, 29, 26, 17, and 11.

The fact is, this research data indicates that a fairly even distribution of visitation occurs across income categories.

Studies of national forest wilderness use have shown that wilderness visits can be summarized as usually of short duration, involving small groups of family and friends, traveling afoot and participating in a variety of activities. Contrary to another myth, lengthy trips are quite rare.

More fiction which is deserving of oblivion is that wildernesses are only for the young. Studies show that all ages are fairly well represented. Older citizens do visit wilderness; these areas are far from being the turf of only the young.

The same study mentioned above showed that in the Bob Marshall Wilderness, 13 percent of the visitors were aged 1-15, 17 percent aged 16-25, 21 percent aged 26-35, 25 percent aged 36-45, 13 percent aged 46-55 and 10 percent 56 and over.

Arguments have been put forth that no more wilderness should be designated because the elderly and

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*Photo by George Wuerthner*



***Does one ever hear the suggestion that no more tennis courts or golf courses or jogging tracks be constructed because the elderly and the handicapped cannot take advantage of them?***

the handicapped cannot take advantage of it. How odd: Does one ever hear the suggestion that no more tennis courts (or golf courses or jogging tracks) be constructed because the elderly and the handicapped cannot take advantage of them?

It has been shown that physical ability has no relation to whether people visit the wilderness. Lack of interest is of more importance than lack of ability as a barrier to participation.

Some people have asserted that wilderness is not a resource — another myth which must be dispelled. The Wilderness Act of 1964 employs the very words, "enduring resource of wilderness." (Emphasis added) A natural resource has certain definable characteristics and has the potential to satisfy specific needs of individuals and of society as a whole.

The Wilderness Act was the first document in world history to accord statutory protection specifically for the wilderness resource. The legislation also provided for a primitive type of recreation in this resource as well as a multitude of other uses.

Some have said that the Wilderness Act has no purpose, but we can point to section 2(a) of the act, where the purpose is clearly stated, to dispose of this myth: to administer wilderness areas in such a manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use as wilderness, and to preserve and protect their wilderness character.

In an eloquent plea during debate on the wilderness bill in 1964, Congressman John Saylor addressed the purpose to be achieved by this legislation:

"... Such (wilderness) areas now enjoy only the protection of the executive or, more specifically, the Secretary of Agriculture who at some future time could by the stroke of the pen remove all or part of such areas from wilderness if it should be so desired.

"Wilderness is not only fragile but also perishable. The United States continues to be a fast-growing nation . . . development of every conceivable type . . . races forward at breakneck speed . . . Once the stroke of a pen is made to change a wilderness area to one of development, the act has a finality that enables few comparisons . . . No

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ted States mining laws and all laws pertaining to mineral leasing shall apply to National Forest wildernesses to the same extent as they did before the area was incorporated into the National Wilderness Preservation System. After that date, no additional claims can be filed, but existing ones will be allowed to continue in operation.

In connection with this, another myth has been circulated, that wilderness classification blocks access to mining claims or other occupancies. To the contrary, persons with valid mining claims or other bona fide occupancies, as in the case of state-owned or privately owned land being complete surrounded by wilderness, are permitted reasonable access. The means of access must be consistent with the protection of the wilderness resource, and commensurate with the access "customarily enjoyed" (as the act says) by persons with lands in a similar situation.

Another fable offered by some of the uninformed is that trapping is not permitted in wildernesses. In actuality, not only is trapping allowed, but also hunting and fishing. Harvesting of all wilderness game is in keeping with management objectives of State Fish and Game Departments. It is, however, a Forest Service as well as State Fish and Game Department obligation to direct special emphasis to the preservation of threatened or endangered species and their habitats.

In addition to sighting wild animals in wildernesses, the visitor may find cattle or sheep, which debunks another popular myth, that livestock grazing is prohibited in wilderness. The Wilderness Act specifically states that the grazing of domestic livestock where it had been established prior to the passage of the act will continue. This utilization of the forage is managed within the objective of maintaining wilderness values. Existing livestock management improvements, such as fences, may be repaired, reconstructed, or replaced, as determined on a case-by-case basis. Grazing management plans are carefully prepared for each allotment so that they will best meet the needs of the stockman while protecting the wilderness resource.

Management of livestock grazing in the wilderness means bringing people and their animals into a bal-

***"Once the stroke of the pen is made to change a wilderness area to one of development, no amount of soul-searching self-criticism or scientific application can turn the area back to wilderness."***

ance with the resource. Necessary changes and adjustments can be handled in a manner that benefits the wilderness, the rancher and the wilderness visitor.

Another myth about which the public needs to be enlightened is the idea that wilderness has no economic value. This completely ignores the value of watershed for agriculture, the sale or rental of recreational equipment and the livelihood of outfitters and guides, in addition to the commodities previously discussed.

Wilderness include some of the highest water-yielding lands of any in the national forest system. Large acreages are located in high mountain areas that receive heavy precipitation, much of it snow. Melting at these higher altitudes normally begins later in the season than at lower elevations, and therefore contributes to a continuing flow late in the summer. This water is the backbone of many agricultural operations.

The lure of hiking, backpacking, fishing, hunting, horseback riding and camping contributes to the expenditure of ever-increasing amounts of money for equipment with which to carry out these activities. One widely known outdoor supply company increased its sales 22 percent between 1974 and 1975. Sales of camping equipment in the nation in 1977 amounted to a whopping \$517 million, an increase of seven percent over the previous years. When the statistics on wilderness visitors are reviewed, there is no reason to believe that this is declining.

Nationally, wilderness use has been growing steadily. Between 1960 and 1975, use grew at an annual rate of more than seven percent, and this rate of growth does not appear to be slowing. Between 1970 and 1975, use increased eight percent annually in Montana. From 1976 to 1978, wilderness use in Montana and Idaho rose from 650,300 to 694,400 visitor days, an increase of almost 15 percent.

Besides contributing to the economy of the purveyors and manufacturers of recreational equipment, wildernesses provide a livelihood for local outfitters and guides, who have one of the few options in America to furnish their guests with a taste of wilderness living.

All this points to the fact that wilderness is one of the multiple uses, along with forage, timber, water, minerals, wildlife and fish, and recreation.

As can be seen, commodity products, such as forage, water, minerals and game, which are located in wilderness, can be utilized as long as it is not at the expense of wilderness values.

The wilderness resource means different things to people who hold different values for using this resource. Wilderness management policies are delineated by a Code of Federal Regulations established by the Secretary of Agriculture. The Forest Service is responsible for a management direction that protects the wilderness "naturalness" and allows people to use the wilderness with a minimum of restrictions or regulations. It is a challenge involving management of people rather than altering the wilderness resource to accommodate users.

The policies that have evolved are intended to protect this unique resource; they are also intended to be realistic and fair. The Wilderness Act provides a legal basis for these policies and, while laws require interpretation, the overall goal of protecting the wilderness resource underlies these actions.

Management difficulty increases as the establishment of myths increases, and as myths are perpetuated by many people. Obviously, it is in the interests of the wilderness visitor as well as the wilderness manager to dispell these myths.

Now, let us consider Bigfoot. . . M

amount of soul searching, self-criticism, or scientific application can turn the area back to wilderness. Therefore, it is deemed advisable that these remaining areas be given the statutory protection that can only be afforded by act of law."

Having countered the claim that the Wilderness Act has no purpose, let us address the fiction that it has no objective. To the contrary, the objective is set forth in the first sentence of section 2(a) of the act: "to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States."

The act also defines the policy by which Congress will accomplish this objective: "... it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness..." by establishing the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Once the resource is secured by act of Congress, it must be maintained, and certain prohibitions were established to insure the perpetuity of these wild lands. These prohibitions include construction of roads or structures and use of motor vehicles or motorized equipment.

The task of management would have been outlined more clearly if Congress had left these prohibitions specific and absolute. However, administration is complicated by exceptions, some of which are mandatory and some of which are left to the discretion of the Agency.

Exceptions include existing private rights, administrative activities, emergencies involving people within the area, fire control activities, insect and disease control, mining, grazing domestic livestock, access to surrounded private land, commercial operations by outfitters and guides, and continued use of motorboats and aircraft where such use had been established prior to wilderness classification.

Myths abound as to what is permissible and what is not in classified wilderness.

For example: Myth — Fire must be immediately put out when it occurs in wilderness. Fact — Natural fire is permitted in National Forest wildernesses under certain conditions in prescribed areas. The basic objec-

## **Research shows that wilderness visitors come from a wide distribution of income and age groups. It just isn't true that wilderness is for young, rich, city folk.**

*There are a few additional points about wilderness myths that the staff of Montana Magazine believe need to be made.*

*1) About 80 percent of all the visitors to wilderness areas in Montana are Montanans. It is a delusion to think of wilderness areas as playgrounds for rich easterners.*

*2) Wilderness areas are not set aside to protect endangered species. Endangered species receive protection in their habitats regardless of wilderness designation. Thus, it is wrong to view wilderness as a "lock-up" for a few bears or eagles. Wilderness designation provides protection for a variety of wild values and pristine resources for future generations.*

*3) It is a verifiable fact that the authority exists in the Wilderness Act to allow the necessary use of motorized equipment within wilderness for permittees for the maintenance of range improvements.*

*4) There never have been any curtailments in the numbers of livestock permitted to graze in wilderness because of wilderness designation. Many range-management factors figure in grazing densities permitted, but some people incorrectly believe that wilderness designation alone causes reduced grazing.*

tive of allowing natural fire is the preservation or enhancement of the wilderness resource. Natural fires are being allowed to play their role more fully in shaping and maintaining the ecology of the wilderness area.

It is true, however, that prescribed burning (that is, burning by other than naturally caused fire) is prohibited except in certain instances as part of approved prospecting or mining operations plans.

This brings to mind another piece of fiction regarding activity allowed in wilderness: that prospecting and mining are not permitted. The facts are absolutely opposed to this: The Wilderness Act recognizes the rights of the mineral claimant under existing mining laws and provides for prospecting and mining of wilderness while still recognizing the wilderness resource. The claimant follows guidelines which are compatible with wilderness management concepts.

Until December 31, 1983, the Uni-