

Wilderness At 60: A Brief Overview

By Howie Wolke

On September 3, 1964, humanity's unrelenting quest to tame, civilize, industrialize, and obliterate wild nature crashed into the Wilderness Act, signed into law by President Johnson on that momentous day. This visionary legislation—written primarily by the late Howard Zahniser of the Wilderness Society—created a federal policy to secure for the American people “*an enduring resource of wilderness*”. Under this law, Wilderness areas must remain “*unimpaired*” and be administered “*for the preservation of their wilderness character*”. Considering humanity's history, this was a revolutionary moment.

Sixty years have now passed since the birth of the National Wilderness Preservation System. During this time, our perception of wilderness has expanded from a focus on primitive recreation and spectacular geology (“monumentalism”) to a broader view of wilderness in maintaining biodiversity, evolutionary processes and wildlife habitat. In other words, ecosystem conservation is now recognized as fundamental to wilderness. This does not negate the importance of recreation or solitude, but it illustrates the evolution of the wilderness idea from anthropocentrism to a more biocentric emphasis.

There've been other positive trends, too. Since 1964, the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS)

has grown from 9.1 million to nearly 112 million acres (about half that acreage is in Alaska), a formidable accomplishment. In addition, large carnivore populations have resurged in many western Wilderness areas. Ecologists consider large carnivores to be “keystone species”, essential for ecosystem health.



Gros Ventre Wilderness, WY by Howie Wolke

On the other hand, wilderness in the 21st century faces many challenges. For example, early wilderness visionaries could not have foreseen the impacts of climate change, nor would they likely have anticipated the extent of the spread of invasive exotic species. Also, with continued human population growth, many Wilderness areas, parks, and wildlife refuges have become isolated habitat islands in a sea

of development, with corresponding biodiversity losses. Conservation biologists have taught us that Wilderness areas and other nature reserves should be big, interconnected, and include all representative habitats of a given area.

“Special Provisions” added to wilderness bills are a long-standing problem. Special provisions weaken the Wilderness Act, diminish the meaning of “Wilderness,” and complicate management by allowing uses in Wilderness otherwise prohibited by law. Expanded grazing rights, allowances for mechanized travel, and the construction of

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artificial water developments are just three examples. Some conservation groups endorse such provisions in a misguided attempt to mollify wilderness opponents and expedite wilderness legislation.

Agency wilderness stewardship has also faltered. Many agency bureaucrats today fail to understand the Wilderness Act; or, they simply initiate inappropriate activities in Wilderness, perhaps hoping that no one will notice. That's why Wilderness Watch frequently finds itself litigating illegal construction projects, water diversions, expansion of aircraft landings and motorboat use, so-called fuel reduction projects, predator control, violations by pack-stock operators, the use of motorized equipment for trail and other maintenance projects, plus many other insults to the wilderness idea.

Another disturbing trend: conservation groups de-emphasizing wilderness. Some have even removed the word "wilderness" from their name. In de-emphasizing wilderness, "collaboration" has become a huge problem. These groups make deals with anti-wilderness organizations to minimize proposed Wilderness acreages—leading to truncated, edge-dominated "Wilderness" that fails to protect habitat. For example, near my home, three prominent so-called "conservation" groups have joined mountain bikers and snowmobilers to oppose wilderness designation for a large portion of the Gallatin Range, instead promoting alternatives that would allow mechanized travel and even logging and road construction under some circumstances.

To add insult, there's a relatively new narrative out there that denies the very existence of wilderness, allegedly because as the "Anthropocene" era unfolds, humans have impacted the entire planet; so "pristine" nature no longer exists. Think climate change and air pollution. But these people fail to understand that wilderness isn't about "pristine". It's about wild. The Wilderness Act defines wilderness as "*untrammeled*", meaning "uncontrolled" or "unregulated". In other words, wild. I would love to drop those who perpetuate this myth into the middle of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to see if they'd still deny the existence of wilderness!

Others proclaim that the very idea of wilderness is somehow racist and inequitable. While the inequities in our society can play out in a million different ways, including access to wilderness, wilderness itself is entirely egalitarian. And wilderness designation—more than any other land classification—casts its net of equity to wild nature itself, protecting the autonomy of "*earth and its community of life*" (from the Wilderness Act, Section 2-c).

Unfortunately, the future of wildness is tenuous, at best. I have no crystal ball, but it's obvious to me that it will become increasingly important for society to understand that new wilderness designations and the fight to keep wilderness wild are fundamental to efforts aimed at counteracting the biodiversity crisis. Also, wilderness will become increasingly essential for allowing wild species to migrate in response to climate change (and wilderness habitats generally store rather than release carbon). We will also face an increasing number of ill-considered heavy-handed plans to manipulate wilderness vegetation in response to climate change.

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In addition, humanity's footprint will continue to expand across the planet; thus, protecting wild nature will become increasingly urgent. Wilderness isn't the only way to protect nature; national parks, monuments and wildlife refuges also play an important role. But in the United States, Wilderness is our ultimate land protection designation, the top dog, ultimately the yardstick by which we measure the health of all other landscapes—but only if we keep Wilderness truly wild. Furthermore, attacks on the wilderness concept will continue, so it will become increasingly crucial for conservationists to forcibly counter these ill-conceived notions. Also, future conservation efforts must be bold, not

meek, and promote big, wild, interconnected Wilderness. And we must be vigilant in squelching opposition to and compromise of our quest to keep designated Wilderness wild.

To be effective, an advocacy organization must focus upon its primary mission. Please support groups that really focus on protecting the wilds—in deed, not just in name. Wilderness and all of its dependent life need our help, now, more than ever. As I see it, Wilderness may be the greatest American idea since democracy, which nowadays is also threatened. Let's not lose either! As the NWPS turns 60, I can think of no better gift to future generations than the gift of big, wild, natural, uncompromised, untrammeled, wildlife-rich Wilderness. Our nation made that commitment 60 years ago, and as an uncertain future unfolds, it is more important than ever that we continue to defend that commitment. 🌿

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