



Briefing Statement

BUREAU: Fish and Wildlife Service

ISSUE: New FWS Committee Working to Preserve Wilderness Character

REFUGES: All Refuges with Wilderness Resources

DATE: March 31, 2011

Introduction and Background: The newly established Fish and Wildlife Service Wilderness Character Monitoring Committee (Committee) is working to initiate wilderness character monitoring on refuges with wilderness resources across the nation, and eventually develop planning and management tools to foster wilderness stewardship throughout the NWRS. The Committee has been established for the primary purpose of providing focus and support for inventory and monitoring of wilderness character in NWRS wilderness by ensuring that such inventory and monitoring is:

- Purposeful, practical, cost-effective, and responds to priority information needs
- Integrated across all appropriate disciplines and geographic scales

This primary purpose is achieved by developing a national strategy for inventory and monitoring wilderness character that integrates data collected from individual wilderness areas within the NWRS. Further, the Committee will encourage and support the development of local monitoring programs and protocols that are fully integrated with this national strategy, the FWS inventory and monitoring strategy, and FWS planning processes.

Committee membership includes refuge managers, a refuge biologist, regional and national wilderness coordinators, and representatives of the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center, NWRS Natural Resource Program Center, and Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute (chair). The Committee is collaborating with NWRS Inventory and Monitoring (I & M) Program staff of the Natural Resource Program Center, and with the National Park Service (NPS) Inventory and Monitoring Program to develop user guides, templates, examples, database applications, and other tools. The Committee will focus its efforts on developing tools and processes that are consistent with the 2008 report *Keeping it Wild: An Interagency Strategy to Monitor Trends in Wilderness Character Across the National Wilderness Preservation System* (USFS General Technical Report). The goal of this effort is to assist refuges in effectively monitoring wilderness character, with the results used to inform wilderness stewardship decisions to help preserve this valuable resource for future generations.

Why Preserve Wilderness Character?

1. Preserving wilderness character improves the effectiveness of refuge wilderness

stewardship. With the publication of *Keeping it Wild*, agency staff now have a consistent definition of wilderness character that is tangible and directly links agency stewardship to the requirements of wilderness legislation and agency policy, and a set of tools to:

- Assess the condition and trend of those aspects of wilderness character over time and as conditions and staff change
- Use a holistic approach to addressing wilderness character in comprehensive conservation plans, wilderness stewardship plans, and other implementation plans
- Evaluate the consequences of decisions and proposed actions for environmental compliance, science activities inside wilderness, and minimum requirements analysis

The richest values of wilderness lie not in the days of Danielle Boone, nor even in the present, but rather in the future.

—Aldo Leopold

- Improve internal communication among staff and external communication with the public
- 2. Preserving wilderness character allows defensible stewardship decisions.** The tools described in *Keeping it Wild* provide refuge staff with a comprehensive and systematic approach for evaluating the impacts of proposed actions on wilderness character, and assessing how wilderness character is changing over time. Using these evaluation tools increases the likelihood of successfully defending against litigation charging that the FWS has not evaluated the effects of proposed actions and decisions on preserving wilderness character.
 - 3. Preserving wilderness character is our mission, by law and policy.** The Wilderness Act and NWRS policy both mandate the proactive preservation of wilderness character:

Section 2(a) of the Wilderness Act of 1964 states that wilderness areas “shall be administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, *and so as to provide for the protection of these areas, the preservation of their wilderness character...*” (emphasis added).

USFWS Wilderness Policy 610 FW 1.12 B states, “Wilderness purposes are ‘within and supplemental’ to refuge establishing purposes. They become additional purposes of the area within the refuge designated as wilderness. As we carry out individual refuge establishing purpose(s), the Administration Act purposes, the Refuge System mission and goals, and the Service’s mission in areas designated as wilderness, we do so in a way that *preserves wilderness character*” (emphasis added).
 - 4. Preserving wilderness character demonstrates FWS leadership in wilderness stewardship across the National Wilderness Preservation System.** The NWRS manages approximately 18%, or nearly 21 million acres of the 109 million acre National Wilderness Preservation System, in coordination with the Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and Forest Service. The FWS has the opportunity to embrace its wilderness heritage and positively affect the entire National Wilderness Preservation System by demonstrating its commitment to preserving wilderness character.

Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life.

—John Muir

What is Wilderness Character?

The publication *Keeping it Wild* defines wilderness character based on the statutory language of the 1964 Wilderness Act in terms of four qualities of wilderness character that are tangible and directly link agency stewardship to the mandates of law and policy. These four qualities of wilderness character are:

- **Untrammelled** – wilderness is essentially unhindered and free from the *actions* of modern human control or manipulation
- **Natural** – wilderness ecological systems are substantially free from the *effects* of modern civilization.
- **Undeveloped** – wilderness retains its primeval character and influence, and is essentially without permanent improvement or modern human occupation
- **Solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation** – wilderness provides outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation

For more information, see *Keeping it Wild: An Interagency Strategy to Monitor Trends in Wilderness Character Across the National Wilderness Preservation System*. This and other documents on wilderness character are available on wilderness.net at: <http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=toolboxes&sec=WC>

What's Next?

The Committee will begin implementation of a nationally consistent approach to describe and assess trends in wilderness character in the NWRS. As a first step, some wilderness refuges are participating in a wilderness character monitoring pilot program during 2011. Several refuges have already volunteered to be part of this exciting opportunity. The Wilderness Character Monitoring pilot will serve several purposes:

- foster new relationships between the I & M Initiative and refuges
- promote youth involvement in the America's Great Outdoors Initiative
- give wilderness refuge managers new tools to better steward their wilderness areas

In spring 2011, ten Wilderness Fellow (WF) interns will be recruited and selected by the Committee to assess wilderness character at designated and proposed NWRS wilderness areas. Funding to hire WF interns will be provided by the I & M Initiative, and will be accomplished in association with a partner organization such as the Student Conservation Association, or the National Council on Science and the Environment. These Wilderness Fellows will be hired for a six month period beginning June 2011. The Committee will communicate and coordinate with refuge managers participating in the pilot program to place WF interns in compatible locations. The WF interns will receive the necessary training on wilderness character monitoring from Committee members prior to arriving at their assigned wilderness refuge. Required DOI training, and training unique to specific refuge operations (such as bear safety, ATV training) will be the responsibility of the refuge. Once the WF interns are trained, they will be dispatched to their assigned wilderness refuge office to begin their work. WF interns who complete their work at one refuge may move on to another wilderness area.

Wilderness character monitoring data is expected to be derived from existing information available at the refuge headquarters, or through other sources, without the need for gathering new field data. However, providing a quality work experience is a fundamental component of the Intern program, and participating refuges are encouraged to include the WF interns in field activities and other refuge work as appropriate.

The WF interns will be responsible for the majority of the wilderness character monitoring activities, and will be expected to coordinate with refuge and regional I & M staffs to determine which measures of wilderness character to evaluate. Additional support will be provided by regional wilderness coordinators and the Committee. Input for some measures will consist of the professional judgment of seasoned refuge staff members. Flexibility and adaptability by all will be key to making this pilot program a success.

Direct supervision of the WF interns will be through the on-site refuge manager or their designee. Refuge managers will be responsible for supplying housing, work spaces, computer access, and logistical support. Close coordination with refuge staff will be essential to ensure that the end product has the support and ownership of refuge staff members. The WF interns' primary mission is to establish a wilderness character baseline. From this baseline, periodic monitoring (such as once every three years) will provide identifiable trends in wilderness character and allow refuge managers to better identify problems and successes concerning stewardship of their wilderness areas. Over the long-term, wilderness character monitoring will contribute to improved wilderness stewardship by informing refuge planning and stewardship decisions, and toward preserving wilderness resources across the NWRS.

Contacts:

- Nancy Roeper, FWS National Wilderness Coordinator, 703.358.2389
- Karen Lindsey, FWS representative, Carhart National Wilderness Training Center, 406.243.4627

DRAFT – April 2011

- Peter Landres, Ecologist, Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, 406.542.4189