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Wilderness Fellows: preserving wilderness character and engaging youth in federal land management

One hundred million acres of designated wilderness provide the greatest degree of conservation protection in the United States. The 1964 Wilderness Act, all subsequent federal wilderness legislation, and the policies of the four federal agencies (BLM, FS, FWS, and NPS) charged with administering this land mandate preserving the “wilderness character” of these lands.

The problem is that there is no definition or guidance for what wilderness character is and how to preserve it. As a consequence, federal land managers are uncertain and unable to fulfill this mandate. To solve this problem, an interagency team in 2008, led by the Rocky Mountain Research Station’s Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, developed definitions and strategies to understand what wilderness character is and how to assess whether agencies are preserving wilderness character.

To implement this strategy, the Leopold Institute is leading a new effort to build a Wilderness Fellows program to help the agencies fulfill this mandate. The Wilderness Fellows program is vitally important for several reasons: 1) it provides an opportunity to engage a diversity of undergraduate and graduate-level students who are keenly interested in careers in federal land management; these are the people who will become the next generation of federal land managers. 2) the Wilderness Fellows program is fostering an unprecedented degree of federal interagency cooperation and coordination as the

Agencies work together to build this program and provide training. 3) the wilderness Fellows, by working directly with management staff at field stations, help managers understand what wilderness character is and develop a baseline assessment to track trends in wilderness character over time. 4) a direct consequence of the baseline assessment is that the federal agencies, for the first time, will have an objective, comprehensive, and transparent way to evaluate their accomplishment in fulfilling the Congressional mandate and agency policies to preserve wilderness character.

Expected Outcomes

- Increased interagency cooperation that will improve cost-efficiency
- Improved federal stewardship of wilderness and similarly protected conservation areas and the economic value these areas provide to surrounding communities
- Improved accountability for wilderness stewardship, leading to improved transparency and better communication between federal land managers and the public
- New opportunities for diverse youth to learn about opportunities and careers in federal land managing agencies

Partners and Collaborators

- USDA Forest Service
- DOI: BLM, Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service
- Alaska XXXXXXXX
- Student Conservation Association
- Universities