

For the Permanent Good of the Whole People

By Ed Zahniser

A talk to the Ninth Annual Wilderness Rangers Training Workshop
Aspen, Colorado, May 2001

The history of the passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act is commonly taken to be an eight-year legislative struggle. The first Wilderness Bills were introduced in Congress in 1956, in the House of Representatives by John P. Saylor of Pennsylvania and in the Senate by Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota. The Wilderness Act was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson on September 3, 1964. My mother, Alice Zahniser, who also will speak to you this afternoon, stood at the White House for the signing, and President Johnson gave her a pen he used. All I ever got from President Johnson was a letter telling me to appear for induction into the U.S. Army.

What I would like to offer you is not an eight-year legislative history, but a deeper glimpse of Wilderness Act history. I would like to offer you a few touchstones of the history of the American wilderness imagination. I want to do this because I believe that, as a wilderness ranger in 2001, you have actually been imagined onto the land. You have been projected onto the land by the wilderness imagination of a great cloud of witnesses that has come before you. You have been projected into the wilderness by the imagination of a great cloud of witnesses that not only has come before you, but, I believe, also goes before you as you allow the wilderness to accept you into itself this summer. This is why I feel so honored to be here with you. Yours is a journey this summer most rare in our culture.

The history of the realization of a Wilderness Act is really a 100-year struggle, from 1864 to 1964. Two events in 1864 begin a history of the Wilderness Act. The first event is President Abraham Lincoln's taking time away from the prosecution of the Civil War to sign an act ceding certain federal public domain lands of Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Big Trees—Giant Sequoia trees—to the state of California as public parklands.

The other event is the publication of George Perkins Marsh's book Man and Nature. This is the book that historian and planner Lewis Mumford, in the mid-20th century, deemed the fountainhead of the American conservation movement. The subtitle to Marsh's book is "The Earth as Modified by Human Action." The Earth as Modified by Human Action. The verb form of that word, to modify, makes it into the opening paragraphs of the Wilderness Act. This was no accident. My father, Howard Zahniser, the chief architect of the 1964 Wilderness Act, was a keen student of the beginnings of American concern for wilderness. Zannie, as he was known by friends and associates, knew to begin at the beginning, and we should too.

What the Vermont-born George Perkins Marsh achieved in his great work Man and Nature was a historical synthesis of global assaults on forests by humankind. The book is still in print today. It has never been out of print. It went through something like seven printings by about 1873. Marsh wrote it in Italy, where President Lincoln had posted him as a diplomat. Marsh had witnessed the destruction of Vermont's forests in his own lifetime. But it was Marsh's travels in the Mediterranean Basin that enabled him, gradually, to see the potential disaster in America's wanton destruction of our forests. But Marsh's awakening was not instant insight. It was gradual.

In 1856, Marsh and his wife had traveled in North Africa, on the southern side of the Mediterranean Basin. Marsh had been sent to North Africa by Jefferson Davis, who was U.S. Secretary of War then. Ironically, as Marsh was writing Man and Nature, Jefferson Davis was president of the Confederate States of America.

Jefferson Davis had asked Marsh to study the camel, which the U.S. Army was interested in using to fight American Indians in the Southwest. In North Africa, Marsh realized that many desert areas he and his wife traversed had once been the sites of great civilizations founded on great forests that harbored elephants, not camels.

But it did not hit Marsh full-face just then. In fact, Marsh's 1856 book, The Camel, opens with the prevailing notion of that time, which was that humans were not capable of significant impacts on God's creation. But then Marsh was posted to Italy by Abraham Lincoln. His travels there convinced him that the formerly great civilizations of the northern Mediterranean Basin, such as Greece, had also declined when their forests were cut down, just as Marsh had witnessed the forests of his home state of Vermont devastated. So, the subtitle of Marsh's 1864 book Man and Nature, "The Earth as Modified by Human Action," was both actually and metaphorically a watershed event for Marsh's thinking. Forests were keepers of watersheds.

The text of the Wilderness Act begins: "An Act / To establish a National Wilderness Preservation System for the permanent good of the whole people, and for other purposes. Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled." And the text quickly moves to the statement of policy, Section 2 (a) "In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, 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."

Hear those phrases "does not occupy and modify all areas . . . leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition . . . ?"

In its broadest sweep, the Wilderness Act is a statement of social ethics. It is about restraint and humility. It is about heeding this warning about forest values George Perkins Marsh articulated 100 years earlier, in 1864. The Wilderness Act is about restraint and humility for what we do not know about the land organism . . . about which Aldo Leopold wrote, as I'm sure Buddy Huffaker of the Aldo Leopold Foundation will share with us this week. Restraint and humility for what we do not know about the land organism.

As acid rain, acidic deposition, has forced us to understand soil relationships, we find in soils the same spiralling downward of complexity that the Hubble space telescope finds spiraling outward as the complexity of the universe or multiverse. Tachyons, which may be the same as neutrinos, for example, have a mass that is imaginary. Isn't that luscious science?

And what about these opening lines? "An Act / To establish a National Wilderness Preservation System for the permanent good of the whole people . . ." For the permanent good of the whole people.

I commend to your repeated close reading the text of the Wilderness Act. It makes its own best case for the wilderness stewardship and education entrusted to you on the land this summer.

I have belabored this conservation history and the work of George Perkins Marsh — this 100-year history of the realization of a Wilderness Act — to show that wilderness preservation was not a new idea in the 1950s. Wilderness preservation as a vision for the future of federal public lands has been around a long time.

Directly across Lake Champlain from the Vermont of George Perkins Marsh, the Adirondack Mountains region of New York State testifies to Americans' long-standing concern for wildlands. In 1872, the people of New York State began to move to create an Adirondack State Park. Their motivation is not difficult to discern. In 1871, New Yorkers suddenly found themselves net importers of wood fiber for the first time ever. Heeding Marsh's warnings in Man and Nature, New Yorkers, in 1872, moved to protect their remaining forests. New Yorkers, in 1872, moved to protect the watershed that supplied the Erie Canal with water.

Then, in 1885, New Yorkers created, on the state-owned lands of the Adirondack and Catskill state parks, the State Forest Preserve lands. And then, in 1894, New Yorkers inserted into their state Constitution the so-called “forever wild” clause. The clause says that those forest preserve lands will be kept “forever as wild forest lands.”

One voting member of that 1894 Constitutional Convention was a lawyer, Louis Marshall. Louis Marshall was a great champion of Jewish civil liberties, immigrant rights, and the rights of all minorities. And Louis Marshall led the floor fight at the 1915 New York State Constitutional Convention that stopped a move to gut the “forever wild” clause. In wilderness preservation history, Louis Marshall is also known as the father of Robert Marshall, the indefatigable Bob Marshall who was to labor within the U.S. Forest Service to protect forest wilderness. We are most fortunate to have Bob Marshall's nephew Roger Marshall here this week. Roger's father George Marshall was the very first person to whom my father Howard Zahniser sent the very first draft of a Wilderness Bill.

So, your agency's own Bob Marshall, who would also organize The Wilderness Society, was a second-generation wilderness advocate. Wilderness preservation has been around a long time. The roots of Wilderness Act history go deep.

I expect that my mother, Alice Zahniser, will tell you how much the Adirondacks influenced my father and our family. She will begin her annual summer stay there in July. And Bob Marshall and his parents and siblings cut their wilderness eye-teeth in the Adirondacks.

The Adirondacks and Catskills still preserve, in their “forever wild” lands of the state forest preserve, the wildlands-protection impetus that led to the creation of Forest Reserves on the federal public domain lands. However, the Forest Reserves, which were true reserves, in which logging, mining, grazing, and homesteading were prohibited, were subsequently redesignated as national forests open to logging, mining, and grazing.

So New Yorkers, in a sense, were able to make stick, in their own backyard, a wildlands preservation impulse that conservationists like John Muir and Robert Underwood Johnson could not make stick on the federal public lands. In an address to

members of the New York State legislature in the 1950s, my father called the Adirondack and Catskill forest preserve “Where Wilderness Preservation Began.”

I hope you will tuck this bit of Wilderness Act history into your mental backpack for your all-important wilderness rangers work this summer. The Wilderness Act is for the permanent good of the whole people. Isn't that wonderful? That's the Congress of the United States speaking. The House vote on the Wilderness Act was 373 to 1. The lone dissenting vote was cast by a member from Texas.

I mentioned that the Wilderness Act is an ethical statement about our human relations with what Aldo Leopold called the land organism. In fact, wilderness has a long, long tradition in Judeo Christian thought, of being prophetic of human culture. By “prophetic” I do not mean predicting the future. Prophetic, rather, means a calling back to fundamental, right relationships. Wilderness has been the location for calling people back to right relationship both with the rest of the human community and with God. The wilderness sojourn of the Hebrew people fleeing 400 years of slavery in Egypt under the Pharaoh is reported in the Hebrew Scriptures' Book of Exodus.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says that the wilderness experience of the Hebrew people, as codified in their scriptures, furnished the building blocks of their national identity. The wilderness experience gave them their laws. The wilderness experience gave them the name of God. Other scholars echo Brueggemann's assessment. As the Biblical scholar Ulrich Mauser reads the New Testament Gospel of Mark, the ministry of Jesus embodies a new Exodus wilderness experience. In Mauser's reading of Mark's Gospel, Jesus of Nazareth works out highlights of his ministry in the wilderness, atop mountains, or on or by the sea.

In the language of modern psychology, Jesus works out highlights of his ministry in these natural settings known to produce the diminutive effect. These are wild settings that, like Gothic cathedrals, put us in spatial perspectives that impress on us our proper scale in the universal scheme of things.

Wilderness experience calls us back to what my father described as a sense of dependence and interdependence as well as independence. Wilderness experience calls us back to a right relationship with what my father called the whole community of life on earth that derives its existence from the sun. Wilderness experience calls us back to the realization that, as my father wrote, we prosper only as the whole community of life prospers.

Novelist Andrew Lytle writes that prophets do not come from the city promising riches and wearing store-bought clothes. No, prophets have always come from the wilderness, stinking of goats . . . and telling of a different sort of treasure. Wendell Berry writes that “If change is to come, it will come from the margins. . . . It was the desert, not the temple, that gave us the prophets.” And in much original Hebrew scripture the words for desert and wilderness are the same word.

This prophetic role of wilderness experience — how wilderness calls us back to right relationship, to right living, to social justice — this prophetic role of wilderness also figures strongly in the history of the Wilderness Act.

To begin at the beginning of this important aspect of Wilderness Act history, we must step back, as my father did, we must step back before George Perkins Marsh and 1864, back to the 1830s, back to the era of the Transcendentalist reformers. We must step

back to the Transcendentalists Margaret Sarah Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau.

Zahnie was a lifelong student of Emerson and Thoreau. He served a one-year honorary term as president of the Thoreau Society from 1956 to 1957. One of my father's public school teachers had her students memorize an Emerson quotation every week. My father's interest eventually shifted more to Thoreau, who has since perhaps eclipsed his friend and mentor Emerson in the popular imagination. It was of course Thoreau who, in his 1862 essay on "Walking," inscribed the Zen koan-like rallying cry of conservation that ". . . in Wildness is the preservation of the World."

In his book of American scripture, Walden, in his posthumous books Cape Cod and The Maine Woods, and in his millionous well polished words of Journals, Thoreau meditates — as perhaps no one else has — on the utter necessity of wildness. Thoreau's essay "Walking" actually combines two lyceum lectures he gave in the 1850s, one titled "The Wild," and one "Walking." Both lectures were drawn from Thoreau's journals.

And isn't it intriguing how Thoreau does not say we preserve wildness. He says wildness preserves the world? And for Thoreau, who read French, German, Latin, and Greek, this word world is actually the Greek word kosmos, meaning not only world but also beauty, pattern, order. . . . in Wildness is the preservation of the World, Beauty, Pattern, Order.

Until the recent resurgence in women's studies, Margaret Sarah Fuller was far less known than Emerson and Thoreau. But many now credit Fuller as the greatest of Transcendentalist thinkers. (She was the great aunt, by the way, of R. Buckminster "Bucky" Fuller.) Many consider Margaret Fuller's book Woman in the Nineteenth Century to be, still, the best statement on that subject. She edited the Transcendentalist magazine The Dial. She was the first female book reviewer for a New York newspaper, and she was a thorough-going reformer. Fuller even went to Europe to take part in the Italian revolution. She died tragically, early, in a ship wreck just off the U.S. east coast on her way back to America. Emerson asked Thoreau to go search for her body and personal effects. None were found.

Margaret Fuller is important to our Wilderness Act history because her reformist agenda in the 1840s has an uncanny, almost one-to-one correspondence with the legislative agenda of Hubert H. Humphrey in the 1950s. Fuller advocated American Indian rights, ending slavery, women's suffrage, women's rights, education reform, rehabilitation of women prisoners, and more. Her Transcendentalist reform agenda and Senator Humphrey's legislative agenda, of which the Wilderness Act was one important element, show that wilderness is not at the periphery of society. Wilderness is a core concern of a truly whole society, holistically seen.

Fuller's and Humphrey's similar agendas round out the truth of Thoreau's assertion that ". . . in wildness is the preservation of the World." The Wilderness Act was part of a large legislative package backed by Senator Humphrey that included the National Defense Education Loan Act, Voting Rights Act and the landmark Civil Rights Act. Wilderness and wildness are not at the periphery of a truly great society. They are at its core.

It is also not well known that Bob Marshall not only fought for access to wilderness as a minority right. Bob Marshall also fought for a fair shake for labor and other social justice issues. On Marshall's death in 1939, one-third of his estate effectively

endowed the Wilderness Society but two-thirds went to advocate labor and other social justice issues.

So you see the truth of that declaration at the opening of the Wilderness Act, that the Wilderness Act is construed by Congress to be “for the permanent good of the whole people. . .” by a House vote of 373 to 1.

In fact, Howard Zahniser was propelled from a secure job with the federal government into full-time work for wilderness in part by his grave disillusionment over the use of atomic bombs on Japan. If atomic bombs were the culmination of industrial technology, surely we must find a way to relearn the great lesson of our kinship with all life. Surely we must find some better way to express our true role in the whole community of life on earth that derives its existence from the Sun.

Wilderness and wildness are integral to what Wendell Berry calls the circumference of mystery. Wilderness and wildness are integral to what Denise Levertov calls the Great Web. Wilderness and wildness are integral to what the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. calls our inescapable network of mutuality. Wilderness and wildness are integral to what God describes to Job as the “circle on the face of the deep.” Wilderness and wildness are integral to the bio-sphere, to that circle of life, which is also this circle of life, our circle of life. Life.

The prophetic call of wilderness is not to escape the world. The prophetic call of wilderness is to encounter the world’s essence, the Earth’s immortal genius, the planetary intelligence. Wilderness calls us to renewed kinship with all of life. We humans will extend ethical regard to the whole community of life on Earth only as we feel that we are a part of that community. In Aldo Leopold’s words, we will enlarge the boundaries of the community, we will live out a land ethic, only as we feel that we are part of that community. By securing a national policy of restraint and humility toward natural conditions and wilderness character, the Wilderness Act has taken us one hugely significant sociopolitical step toward instituting a land ethic, toward enlarging, in humility, the boundaries of the community.

Ralph Swain brought us all together here on purpose—Buddy Huffaker for the Leopold family, Bill Carhart, Roger Marshall, Alice Zahniser. We who are blood family of the American wilderness imagination can glory in seeing the baton pass to you in the very wilderness itself. And you who now go forth as rangers in the larger wilderness family, you can grasp, in a very physical sense, how spiritually connected you are to this great cloud of witnesses that is the American wilderness imagination. You are now this legacy. And so I challenge you this week; I challenge you this summer: Go forth. Go forth into the wilderness. Do good. Tell the stories. And bring back a different sort of treasure . . . for the permanent good of the whole people.