

Historical Context for the Wilderness Conservation Concept

The concept of protecting and maintaining wild lands for the enjoyment of future generations has been evolving for decades. In the United States the intensity of the discussion reached a high point in the mid-20th century. Expansion of the country's human population and settlement, extensive modification of lands for habitation and resource extraction, and the disappearance of the American frontier influenced a number of visionaries to advocate for the protection of representative samples of the Nation's remaining large tracts of wild land.

For more information visit **What is Wilderness –When did the idea of wilderness come about?** at: <http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=timeline>

An excellent discussion of the wilderness preservation idea is contained in Roderick Nash's Wilderness and the American Mind.

To view a bibliography and list of wilderness authors visit: **What is Wilderness - Who else has written about wilderness?** at: <http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=bibliography>

The Wilderness Act of 1964

A milepost in this public debate was the passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964. This act provides a statutory basis for wilderness management. This law is arguably one of the most visionary and controversial pieces of legislation to be enacted. It took eight years of debate, 16 public hearings, and 66 different re-writes of the bill before passage almost unanimously by Congress. The act provides a clear statement of Congressional policy and definition for wilderness areas as designated by Congress:

—“In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanism, does not occupy and modify all areas of 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 Congress to assure the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.” Sec. 2(a)

—“For this purpose there is hereby established a National Wilderness Preservation System to be composed of Federally owned areas designated by Congress as ‘wilderness areas,’ and these 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, and for

gathering and dissemination of information regarding their use and enjoyment as wilderness...” Sec. 2(a)

—“A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” Sec. 2(c)

—“An area of undeveloped federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or habitation, and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with man’s imprint substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; (3) has at least 5,000 acres of land or is of a size to make practicable its preservation; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.” Sec. 2(c)

These excerpts from the '64 Wilderness Act are the essence of the legal definition of “wilderness.” Additional acts of Congress have added more acreage to the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) and have modified the original direction somewhat through innumerable special provisions.

The legal definition of “wilderness” is found in The Wilderness Act of 1964. The text of the '64 act can be found at:

<http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=legisact>

An excellent discussion of The Wilderness Act is found in chapter 4 of Wilderness Management, Stewardship and Protection of Resources and Values, 3rd edition, by Hendee and Dawson.

Wilderness in the U.S. and in the National Forest System

In 2004, a survey (USDA National Resources Inventory) indicated that designated wilderness represented about 4.7% of all land in the U.S. but only 2.2% of all lands outside of Alaska. By comparison about 6.1% of all land outside of Alaska is considered ‘developed’. Designated wilderness makes up about 20% of all lands in the national forest system.

Current facts and figures on the amount of wilderness in the NWPS and the number of areas administered by each agency and additional information can be found in **What is Wilderness - Where are wilderness areas found?** at:

<http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=fastFacts>