



## Wilderness Act of 1964

THE WILDERNESS ACT of 1964 established the National Wilderness Preservation System in the United States, now comprising more than 680 units with a total of 106 million acres (42.8 million hectares). Federal lands protected under the Wilderness Act are defined 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.” Land designated by the U.S. Congress as wilderness areas are subjected to strict management regimes to provide the utmost protection for natural areas and the biological diversity they support. In recognizing the intrinsic value of ecosystems and their many components, Roderick Nash states that “[W]ilderness is not *for* humans at all, and wilderness preservation testifies to the human capacity for restraint.”

The Wilderness Act excludes from those public lands designated as wilderness areas, such items as automobiles, motorcycles, bicycles, hang gliders, motorboats, and activities such as road and building construction. The act also excludes certain types of commercial activity such as logging and mining (the latter after 1984) but permits livestock grazing in certain locations. Lands protected under the Wilderness Act are usually at least 5,000 acres (2,023 hectares) and present recreational activities that offer “outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation.”

Howard Zahnister, executive director of the Wilderness Society, and David Brower from the Sierra Club were two of the early advocates during the 1950s calling for a wilderness bill that would provide permanent Congressional protection for federal public lands. Zahnister eventually authored the Wilderness Act of 1964 out of concern that the United States lacked a comprehensive, permanent, and legally binding system to protect wilderness areas, thus leaving large tracts of public lands open to degradation: “Let us be done with a wilderness preservation program made up of a sequence of overlapping emergencies, threats, and defense campaigns.”

Democratic Senator Hubert Humphrey from Minnesota introduced Zahnister’s wilderness bill into Congress in 1956. Due to proposed restrictions on commercial resource extraction in wilderness ar-

reas, the original wilderness bill was heavily opposed by loggers, miners, and ranchers, as well as by U.S. federal agencies including the Forest Service and the National Park Service. The act was passed eight years later, though Zahnister died a few months before its signing. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Act on September 3, 1964, with 54 wilderness areas named (9.1 million acres [3.6 million hectares]) in 13 states.

The Wilderness Act is unique in that it represented an effort on the part of the conservation community as well as the U.S. Congress to preserve biological diversity, but also embodied, as Nash describes, the notion of wilderness preservation as a radical act: “It is indeed subversive to the forces that have accelerated modern civilization to power but now threaten its continuation: Materialism, utilitarianism, growth, domination, hierarchy, exploitation.”

Wilderness Areas are managed by four federal agencies: the Bureau of Land Management, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Forest Service, and the National Park Service. The first unofficial wilderness area was the 558,065-acre (225,841-hectare) Gila Wilderness in the Gila National Forest in New Mexico, created in June 1924 at the urging of conservation pioneer Aldo Leopold. The Gila Wilderness later received permanent protection under the Wilderness Act. There are now a total of 680 Wilderness Areas in the United States, the smallest being Pelican Island in Florida (6 acres [2 hectares]) and the largest being Wrangell–Saint Elias, in Alaska (9,078,675 acres [3,674,009 hectares]). The largest wilderness complex in the contiguous United States is the Frank Church–River of No Return and Gospel-Hump Wildernesses, Idaho (2,572,553 acres [1,041,075 hectares]).

States with the most Wilderness Areas include California (130 units), Arizona (90 units), Nevada (56 units), Alaska (48 units), and Colorado (41 units). States lacking lands with wilderness protection are Connecticut, Delaware, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, and Rhode Island. Of the entire United States, 4.71 percent—about the size of California—is protected as Wilderness Areas; 54 percent of Wilderness Areas are found in Alaska, and only 2.58 percent of the continental United States is protected in this form.

Citi  
fecting  
under  
citizen  
plans  
nonpr  
ico W  
South  
dernes  
advoca  
ness p

The  
contin  
ness A  
wilder  
grante  
to 100  
Moun

SEE A  
Preserv  
Ecolog

BIBLIO  
and Jo  
(Found  
Wolke  
Nash,  
vation  
“The  
Law,”  
Squilla  
derson  
dernes  
dernes

Wil

THE  
ronm  
with  
nomi  
to ac





Citizens have the ability to be influential in affecting which lands are designated for protection under the Wilderness Act by creating their own citizen wilderness proposals and submitting these plans to members of Congress. Citizen-supported nonprofit organizations such as the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, the Sky Island Alliance, Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, and the Wilderness Society are just a few of many wilderness advocacy groups that work for increased wilderness protection on public lands.

The National Wilderness Preservation System continues to grow. The Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance presented the most recent successful wilderness proposal when in 2006 legislation was granted providing lasting wilderness protection to 100,000 acres (40,469 hectares) in the Cedar Mountains of Utah.

SEE ALSO: Biodiversity; Conservation; Leopold, Aldo; Preservation; Public Land Management; Restoration Ecology; Wilderness; Wilderness Society.

BIBLIOGRAPHY. George Coggins, Charles Wilkinson, and John Leshy, *Federal Public Land and Resources Law* (Foundation Press, 1993); Dave Foreman and Howie Wolke, *The Big Outside* (Harmony 1992); Roderick Nash, *American Environmentalism: Readings in Conservation History* (McGraw-Hill, 1990); William Rodgers, "The Seven Statutory Wonders of U.S. Environmental Law," in Robert Fischman, Maxine Lipeles, and Mark Squillace, eds., *An Environmental Law Anthology* (Anderson Publishing Company, 1996); Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, [www.suwa.org](http://www.suwa.org) (cited April 2006); Wilderness.net, [www.wilderness.net](http://www.wilderness.net) (cited April 2006).

ANDREW J. SCHNELLER  
INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

## Wilderness Society

THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY is a nonprofit environmental organization based in Washington, D.C., with 10 U.S. regional offices. Through science, economic analysis, advocacy, and education, it works to achieve wilderness designation on federal lands.

Since its founding in 1935, it has helped add 105 million acres (42.4 million hectares) to the National Wilderness Preservation System.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 was written by former society president Howard Zahniser and signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson. The act defined wilderness 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." The act enables Congress to set aside select units in national forests, parks, wildlife refuges, and other federal lands as areas to be kept permanently unchanged by humans, meaning no roads, mechanized vehicles, resource extraction, or other significant impacts. To date, 106,619,208 acres (43,147,262 hectares) of land have been added to the National Wilderness Preservation System and the Wilderness Society is striving to protect an additional 100 million acres (40.4 million hectares).

The story of the society's founding is that foresters and friends Bob Marshall, Benton Mackaye, Bernard Frank, and Harvey Broome were in a heated debate over how to best save America's wilderness as they drove across the rolling hills of Tennessee. The men got out of the car, scrambled up an embankment, and argued over the philosophy and definition of the new organization that they eventually called the Wilderness Society.

The Wilderness Society's work is guided by a "land ethic," a philosophy of the relationship between people and the land based on the work of Aldo Leopold, one of the society's founding members. Leopold, who believed in preserving the integrity, stability, and beauty of ecosystems, envisioned that the society would help form the cornerstone for the movement needed to save America's vanishing wilderness.

Public support for wilderness has fluctuated over the past century. However, wilderness will always have an unmistakable lure to the human psyche because it provides release for our basic need for creativity, self-sufficiency, and freedom, all that civilization precludes. In Roderick Nash's classic *Wilderness and the American Mind*, he suggests that wilderness itself is a large part of American identity. Wilderness provides an escape from the noise and pollution of urban areas and opportunities for spiritual renewal. Environmentally, tracts