

Wilderness At 60: A Brief Overview

By Howie Wolke

On September 3, 1964, humanity's unrelenting quest to tame, civilize, industrialize, and obliterate wild nature crashed into the Wilderness Act, signed into law by President Johnson on that momentous day. This visionary legislation—written primarily by the late Howard Zahniser of the Wilderness Society—created a federal policy to secure for the American people “an enduring resource of wilderness”. Under this law, Wilderness areas must remain “unimpaired” and be administered “for the preservation of their wilderness character”. Considering humanity's history, this was a revolutionary moment.

Sixty years have now passed since the birth of the National Wilderness Preservation System. During this time, our perception of wilderness has expanded from a focus on primitive recreation and spectacular geology (“monumentalism”) to a broader view of wilderness in maintaining biodiversity, evolutionary processes and wildlife habitat. In other words, ecosystem conservation is now recognized as fundamental to wilderness. This does not negate the importance of recreation or solitude, but it illustrates the evolution of the wilderness idea from anthropocentrism to a more biocentric emphasis.

There've been other positive trends, too. Since 1964, the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS)

has grown from 9.1 million to nearly 112 million acres (about half that acreage is in Alaska), a formidable accomplishment. In addition, large carnivore populations have resurged in many western Wilderness areas. Ecologists consider large carnivores to be “keystone species”, essential for ecosystem health.



Gros Ventre Wilderness, WY by Howie Wolke

of development, with corresponding biodiversity losses. Conservation biologists have taught us that Wilderness areas and other nature reserves should be big, interconnected, and include all representative habitats of a given area.

“Special Provisions” added to wilderness bills are a long-standing problem. Special provisions weaken the Wilderness Act, diminish the meaning of “Wilderness,” and complicate management by allowing uses in Wilderness otherwise prohibited by law. Expanded grazing rights, allowances for mechanized travel, and the construction of

On the other hand, wilderness in the 21st century faces many challenges. For example, early wilderness visionaries could not have foreseen the impacts of climate change, nor would they likely have anticipated the extent of the spread of invasive exotic species. Also, with continued human population growth, many Wilderness areas, parks, and wildlife refuges have become isolated habitat islands in a sea

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"The wilderness that has come to us out of the eternity of the past, we have the boldness to project into the eternity of the future."

— Howard Zahniser, Wilderness Act author

Bureau of Land Management

Executive Director's Message



Milestones are checkpoints that help measure progress.

This year is the 60th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, signed into law on September 3, 1964 by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

When the ink was dry, a National Wilderness Preservation System of 54 "original" Wildernesses was established on 9.1 million acres in 13 states, and a national commitment to ensuring that in some areas wild nature would reign was enshrined in law. Today, America's Wilderness System includes over 800 Wilderness areas covering more than 111 million acres in 44 states and Puerto Rico. And it's rightfully viewed as a world model for safeguarding wild nature.

2024 also marks Wilderness Watch's 35th year advocating to ensure our nation's unparalleled Wilderness endures into the eternity of the future. What started with a meeting of three people in a cafe in Missoula, upset about the Forest Service allowing the proliferation of illegal outfitter caches and developments in the River of No Return Wilderness, has grown into the leading national citizen voice working to secure the long-term protection of every Wilderness in the system and the integrity of the Wilderness Act itself. Many of you have been with us from the start, while thousands more have joined along the way. Thank you! All of you are crucial to our successful protection and defense of Wilderness and the ideals it represents.

What sets Wilderness Watch apart is that we remain the only organization whose sole focus is the preservation and proper stewardship of lands and rivers in the Wilderness System. We remain steadfast in defense of the places and values the Wilderness Act sought to preserve: wild landscapes where wild nature reigns, secure homes for plants and animals, places humans visit but don't control. Just as it took extraordinary perseverance and people power to pass the Wilderness Act, it takes eternal citizen vigilance to ensure that the Wilderness System endures.

This year, as we commemorate these two milestones, we'll be celebrating the wonderful benefits Wilderness provides—wild landscapes where wild nature reigns and where we humans can connect to the primeval Earth from whence we came—while also shining a bright light on the many threats Wilderness faces. The threats to Wilderness and its wildlife know no bounds, but neither does our resolve to confront them.

Together, with you at our side, we will ensure that Wilderness is projected into the eternity of the future. 🌿

—George Nickas

—George Nickas



WILDERNESS WATCH
Keeping Wilderness Wild

The *Wilderness Watcher* is the quarterly newsletter of Wilderness Watch, America's leading conservation organization dedicated solely to protecting the lands and waters in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

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artificial water developments are just three examples. Some conservation groups endorse such provisions in a misguided attempt to mollify wilderness opponents and expedite wilderness legislation.

Agency wilderness stewardship has also faltered. Many agency bureaucrats today fail to understand the Wilderness Act; or, they simply initiate inappropriate activities in Wilderness, perhaps hoping that no one will notice. That's why Wilderness Watch frequently finds itself litigating illegal construction projects, water diversions, expansion of aircraft landings and motorboat use, so-called fuel reduction projects, predator control, violations by pack-stock operators, the use of motorized equipment for trail and other maintenance projects, plus many other insults to the wilderness idea.

Another disturbing trend: conservation groups de-emphasizing wilderness. Some have even removed the word "wilderness" from their name. In de-emphasizing wilderness, "collaboration" has become a huge problem. These groups make deals with anti-wilderness organizations to minimize proposed Wilderness acreages—leading to truncated, edge-dominated "Wilderness" that fails to protect

habitat. For example, near my home, three prominent so-called "conservation" groups have joined mountain bikers and snowmobilers to oppose wilderness designation for a large portion of the Gallatin Range, instead promoting alternatives that would allow mechanized travel and even logging and road construction under some circumstances.

To add insult, there's a relatively new narrative out there that denies the very existence of wilderness, allegedly because as the "Anthropocene" era unfolds, humans have impacted the entire planet; so "pristine" nature no longer exists. Think climate change and air pollution. But these people fail to understand that wilderness isn't about "pristine". It's about wild. The Wilderness Act defines wilderness as "*untrammled*", meaning "uncontrolled" or "unregulated". In other words, wild. I would love to drop those who perpetuate this myth into the middle of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge to see if they'd still deny the existence of wilderness!

Others proclaim that the very idea of wilderness is somehow racist and inequitable. While the inequities in our society can play out in a million different ways, including access to wilderness, wilderness itself is entirely egalitarian. And wilderness designation—more than any other land classification—casts its net of equity to wild nature itself, protecting the autonomy of "*earth and its community of life*" (from the Wilderness Act, Section 2-c).

Unfortunately, the future of wildness is tenuous, at best. I have no crystal ball, but it's obvious to me that it will become increasingly important for society to understand that new wilderness designations and the fight to keep wilderness wild are fundamental to efforts aimed at counteracting the biodiversity crisis. Also, wilderness will become increasingly essential for allowing wild species to migrate in response to climate change (and wilderness habitats generally store rather than release carbon). We will also face an increasing number of ill-considered heavy-handed plans to manipulate wilderness vegetation in response to climate change.

Wilderness is our ultimate land protection designation, the top dog, ultimately the yardstick by which we measure the health of all other landscapes—but only if we keep Wilderness truly wild.

In addition, humanity's footprint will continue to expand across the planet; thus, protecting wild nature will become increasingly urgent. Wilderness isn't the only way to protect nature; national parks, monuments and wildlife refuges also play an important role. But in the United States, Wilderness is our ultimate land protection designation, the top dog, ultimately the yardstick by which we measure the health of all other landscapes—but only if we keep Wilderness truly wild. Furthermore, attacks on the wilderness concept will continue, so it will become increasingly crucial for conservationists to forcibly counter these ill-conceived notions. Also, future conservation efforts must be bold, not

meeek, and promote big, wild, interconnected Wilderness. And we must be vigilant in squelching opposition to and compromise of our quest to keep designated Wilderness wild.

To be effective, an advocacy organization must focus upon its primary mission. Please support groups that really focus on protecting the wilds—in deed, not just in name. Wilderness and all of its dependent life need our help, now, more than ever. As I see it, Wilderness may be the greatest American idea since democracy, which nowadays is also threatened. Let's not lose either! As the NWPS turns 60, I can think of no better gift to future generations than the gift of big, wild, natural, uncompromised, untrammled, wildlife-rich Wilderness. Our nation made that commitment 60 years ago, and as an uncertain future unfolds, it is more important than ever that we continue to defend that commitment. 🌿

Howie Wolke has been a wilderness proponent in the West since 1975 and has been on the Wilderness Watch Board of Directors for much of the last two decades. He has twice been the organization's President and is a retired wilderness guide and outfitter. He lives in Montana just north of Yellowstone National Park with his wife, Marilyn Olsen, and their four-legged fellow hiker, Rio the dog.

On the Watch

Prioritize quiet in the Boundary Waters

The Forest Service (FS) needs to stand on the side of wilderness preservation rather than continuing to allow the proliferation of commercial, motorized towboat use in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) in Minnesota. In December 2023, Wilderness Watch again advocated for the nation's only canoe-country Wilderness during the latest public comment period on towboat operations management.

Political compromise prevented Congress from fully outlawing motorboats when the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness Act passed in 1978, but the law placed strict limits on motorboat use in the Wilderness.

Despite such limits, the FS has allowed commercial, motorized towboat use to increase over the years.

Commercial, motorized towboat services degrade wilderness conditions and other people's experience of the Wilderness, and they also disturb wildlife. Their use in the BWCAW needs to be eliminated or, at the very least, significantly reduced.

Motorized towboats create bottlenecks at entry points into the Wilderness, and they give an unfair advantage to those who are able to afford them. Not only that, but people visiting other Wildernesses can't hire a motor vehicle to haul them and their gear from the trailhead deep into the Wilderness, and the Boundary Waters shouldn't be any different.

It is easy enough to reach various destinations in the BWCAW without a motorized towboat, and this Wilderness is already one of the most heavily visited in the country. Moreover, ease, speed, and convenience are not what a wilderness experience is about.

Our February 2023 litigation challenging commercial, motorized towboat use remains active. We'll keep you posted.



Ambler Road threatens Gates of the Arctic

The Biden administration has released a Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement (SEIS) for the proposed Ambler Road through Alaska's Brooks Range and some of the wildest country on the continent. The road would facilitate huge mining operations that would benefit a private Canadian company at the expense of Wilderness and wildlife.



The project was approved in 2020 during the Trump administration, but in February 2022, the Biden administration suspended the road's right-of-way and announced a new environmental review to replace the Trump administration's insufficient and faulty review.

The proposed 211-mile Am-

bler Road would stretch west from the Dalton Highway (previously known as the pipeline haul road) to the mining claims, crossing Gates of the Arctic National Preserve and the Kobuk Wild and Scenic River, which are part of the largest remaining roadless area in the country. The road would also cross nearly 3,000 streams, 11 major rivers, 1,700 acres of wetlands, and major caribou migration routes. It would bisect a wide swath of the southern Brooks Range, which is home to grizzly bears, wolves, Dall sheep, moose, wolverines, and three caribou herds.

Wildernesses in Alaska, even those as large as Gates of the Arctic, derive much of their extraordinary values from the expansive wildlands surrounding them, which are critical to maintaining the integrity of these great places. If built, the Ambler Road would undoubtedly lead to more use and motorized intrusions into the Wilderness, and road noise, dust, and vehicle headlights at night would degrade the area's wild character.

Wilderness Watch is advocating for the only acceptable alternative in the Draft SEIS—the No Action Alternative. Under this alternative, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) would not issue a right-of-way and the Ambler Road would not be permitted by the BLM. 🍷

On the Watch

Over 842,448 acres of Wilderness at stake

Wilderness Watch is urging the Forest Service to spare Wilderness from its misguided burning and cutting plans for the Sequoia and Sierra National Forests in California. The 2.4 million-acre project area includes all 842,448 acres of Wildernesses in both national forests—the Ansel Adams, Dinkey Lakes, John Muir, Kaiser, Kiavah, Monarch, South Sierra, Dome Land, Jennie Lakes, and Golden Trout Wildernesses.

Fire plays an important ecological role in these Wildernesses. But, the project's proposal to cut down "undesirable" trees and burn forests based on human wishes and desires is the antithesis of Wilderness and entirely inconsistent with the letter and spirit of the Wilderness Act. Rather than invade Wilderness to try to manipulate and shape it to managers' likings, the Forest Service should instead allow natural, lightning-caused fire to determine conditions in Wilderness on the Sequoia and Sierra National Forests. 🌿

Fixed anchors don't belong in Wilderness

Wilderness Watch is urging the National Park Service (NPS) and the Forest Service (FS) to revise their proposed policies governing rock climbing in Wilderness. Regrettably, the new proposed policies elevate recreation above wilderness protection by attempting to legalize the use of fixed anchors in Wilderness.

Permanent fixed climbing anchors, like bolts and pitons permanently pounded into Wilderness rock faces, deface Wilderness and diminish an area's wild character. These lasting signs of human development also attract and concentrate future climbing use—at great expense to native plants and animals for whom Wilderness is often a last refuge.

Permanent fixed anchor use and maintenance in Wilderness has always been prohibited by the Wilderness Act's ban on installations. We are urging the agencies to uphold the Wilderness Act and keep fixed anchors out of Wilderness. We reminded the NPS and FS that their primary duty is to

protect Wilderness in its natural, untrammelled state, and that they have no duty to develop Wilderness to provide any type of recreation.

Fewer people may climb certain routes in Wilderness if they don't have fixed bolts or other permanently-installed protection, but natural limits on use is not a bad thing when it comes to wilderness protection, particularly with the recent explosion of outdoor recreation uses in Wilderness.



We pointed out that, at the very least, any specific proposals for permanent fixed anchor installations in Wilderness must be subjected to public notice and an opportunity for public comment pursuant to the National Environmental Policy Act. 🌿

Mountain lion study fails the test

Wilderness Watch is concerned about a mountain lion study in the Clover Mountains and Delamar Mountains Wildernesses in Nevada, for which the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) recently prepared a woefully inadequate environmental assessment (EA). While the project doesn't include prohibited uses such as motor vehicles or aircraft, it does include trail cameras, which are installations prohibited by the Wilderness Act.

The EA fails to prove that either the project or the trail cameras are the minimum necessary to protect either area as Wilderness, which is required by the Wilderness Act for exceptions to the law. In addition, the Environmental Assessment (EA) implies the information gleaned may well lead to management interventions by the Nevada Department of Wildlife. Those interventions are also likely to have impacts on the areas' wild character and create potential conflicts with wilderness preservation. Those potential actions should have been described and analyzed in the EA.

Conducting research is a valid purpose of Wilderness, but authorizing an exception to the law requires more than the EA provided. 🌿

Wilderness in Congress

Wilderness Watch follows the sausage-making process of federal legislation to champion the good bills and to fight the bad ones. Bad wilderness bills erode the Wilderness Act and undermine protection for individual Wildernesses.

A bad wilderness bill can weaken the Wilderness Act outright or, with confusing language, lead to judicial interpretation that weakens the Act. For example, Rep. Westerman (R-AR) introduced the EXPLORE Act (Expanding Public Lands Outdoor Recreation Experiences Act, H.R.6492), which combines the Connect Our Parks Act (Fall/Winter 2023 *Watcher*) with the Protect America's Rock Climbing Act (Summer 2023 *Watcher*). In addition to amending the Wilderness Act to allow fixed climbing anchors—now prohibited installations—other ambiguous language could lead to a judge interpreting that commercial filming is acceptable in Wilderness, or that increased recreation permissibly trumps wilderness character.

A bad wilderness bill can geographically gerrymander Wilderness. In S.2990, Sen. Braun (R-IN) proposed to add 15,300 acres to the Charles C. Deam Wil-

derness in Indiana. The proposal, however, finesses boundaries so roads and trails that crisscross proposed Wilderness are carved from the technical Wilderness designation. Gerrymandering Wilderness boundaries around roads and trails prevents the Act from applying and allows the area's current motorized and mechanized use to continue.

Finally, a bad wilderness bill can flat-out excuse an individual Wilderness from the Act's prohibitions. Sen. Braun's bill also allows unspecified prohibited infrastructure within proposed Wilderness, permitting its maintenance and access for telephone, utility, and pipeline companies; the Boy Scouts; and the Indiana Department of Natural Resources. Additionally, Sen. Wyden (D-OR) has introduced the Malheur Community Empowerment for the Owyhee Act, S.1890, which proposes 29 Wildernesses (over one million acres), but allows federal and state officials to use motorized vehicles and aircraft in Wilderness to conduct "necessary" wildlife management activities.

View a complete listing of wilderness bills in Congress: wildernesswatch.org. 🐾

Welcome new WW staff member, Katie!

We're excited to have Katie Bilodeau join our staff as our Legislative Director and Policy Analyst.

Katie grew up in Cheyenne, Wyoming, where she formatively intersected with public lands hiking and camping at Vedauwoo (pronounced "Veedavoo") in the Medicine Bow National Forest. In high school, a week-long experience at the Whiskey Mountain Conservation Camp in Dubois, Wyoming, further nurtured her love of the natural world.



Katie received her B.A. in Japanese from the University of Notre Dame. She taught in Japan and worked for a cultural nonprofit in Denver, Colorado, before returning to school for her master of science and law degrees from the University of Idaho in Moscow, Idaho. After graduating, she clerked for an Idaho judge, interned with Wilderness Watch, and represented environmental and veteran clients in court. In 2018, Friends of the Clearwater hired Katie as a staff attorney. For the next five years, she was the wildlands gadfly to the U.S. Forest Service for the four-million-acre Nez Perce and Clearwater National Forests in north-central Idaho.

In 2023, Katie moved to D.C. with her husband, who accepted a rotating position with the National Science Foundation. She's been known to snorkel in Idaho's freezing mountain creeks for good underwater pictures of Kokanee salmon and likes playing Irish tunes on her violin in jam sessions. 🐾

Wilderness in the Courts

Wilderness Watch kicked off the new year with important happenings in federal court.

First, on January 2, backed by about a dozen other conservation organizations, we submitted an amicus brief to the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in an important case regarding the practice of intentional predator killing in Wilderness areas. “Wildlife Services,” an obscure arm of the Department of Agriculture, slaughters hundreds of thousands of native animals every year—particularly predators like coyotes, mountain lions, and wolves—at the behest of ranchers across the West. The practice is wholly incompatible with Wilderness preservation and the protections provided to these areas by law, and after Wildlife Services recently reauthorized its “predator damage control” program in Nevada, including in designated Wilderness areas, our friends at WildEarth Guardians and Western Watersheds Project brought the government to court, where their appeal now sits before the Ninth Circuit. We submitted additional briefing to the

court explaining the historical and legal context of the issue and why the antiquated practice of lethal “predator control” has no place in these special protected areas under contemporary law.

Second, on January 4, Wilderness Watch appeared in court in Boise alongside our coalition of plaintiff groups challenging Idaho’s recreational wolf trapping and snaring program.

At this important hearing on the merits of the case, our argument focused on the dangerous potential for Idaho’s changed trapping regulations to result in the killing and injury of threatened grizzly bears. We’ve asked the court to restrict Idaho’s trapping scheme where grizzly bears are likely

present, and we’ve pointed to a recent ruling by a federal district court judge in Montana, which already clawed back that state’s wolf trapping rules for similar reasons.

At our website (wildernesswatch.org), you can learn further about these developing cases and find links to the filed documents to read more. 🐾



Coyote by Sam Parks

Mark your calendar for these Wilderness Watch events:

The Great Bear Spring Gathering, *Save the Griz!*

May 17-19 at Lubrecht Experimental Forest, University of Montana
Greenough, Montana

Wilderness Act 60th Anniversary Celebration, *A grassroots gathering*

September 13-15 at Wilderness Gateway Campground
Nez Perce-Clearwater National Forests, Idaho

More information to follow or contact Brett Haverstick: breth@wildernesswatch.org



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We've come a long way in 35 years!

By Brett Haverstick

In 1989, Wilderness Watch was formed by three wilderness advocates over a cup of coffee in Missoula, Montana. They were concerned with federal agency proposals for Wilderness that ignored the legal mandates of the Wilderness Act. The rest is history, as they say.



Today, Wilderness Watch's mission is still the same. We track administrative proposals that will harm Wilderness and its wildlife. We march into the courtroom if we deem a proposal to be illegal and potentially precedent-setting. And we follow legislation in Congress that may harm or benefit Wilderness. We are always on the "watch."

For the past 35 years, the dedication of our members and supporters hasn't changed either. For over three decades, you've responded to our calls-for-action with phone calls, letters, and emails to decision makers. You've also alerted us to threats to Wilderness that we may not have been aware of! And you have generously contributed the financial support that keeps the lights on—and in turn, keeps Wilderness wild. It's been a team effort the whole way. Thank you!

This year also marks the 60th anniversary of the Wilderness Act. Anniversaries tend to be celebratory in nature, afford the opportunity to reflect on the journey, and strengthen one's resolve and

commitment. While the National Wilderness Preservation System has expanded over the decades, there's still much progress to be made in allowing wildness to be the defining characteristic of Wilderness.

At numerous 60th anniversary events throughout the year, we will advocate for the Wilderness Act's original ideal to be fully realized—wild landscapes where wild nature reigns. We're also organizing a grassroots gathering September 13-15 at the Wilderness Gateway Campground along the banks of the Lochsa River in Idaho. Circle your calendars, and stay tuned for details.

It's going to be an action-packed year, and we're grateful that you're with us. Thanks for being a big reason why Wilderness Watch continues to be America's leading organization solely dedicated to the preservation and proper stewardship of our irreplaceable Wildernesses. 🍄

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