



WILDERNESS WATCHER

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Betraying the Promise

In 1999 the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service published its vision for the future in a report titled, “Fulfilling the Promise.” The agency established a goal to become “a leader in wilderness preservation.” It was a bold statement for an agency that had only one wilderness specialist working in the field. The report went on, “Wilderness on refuges deepens and broadens our perspective of the refuge landscape, compelling our thought beyond managing it as habitat for wildlife species.” But the report also acknowledged that many wildlife refuge managers “have difficulty incorporating even the physical standards of wilderness into the traditional paradigms of refuge management. Fewer managers are trained to assess and protect the psychological, symbolic, and spiritual meanings wilderness offers.”

Yet the Service was right to believe the National Wildlife Refuge System could become the standard bearer for good wilderness stewardship. The purpose of wildlife refuges ever since President Teddy Roosevelt established the first one at Pelican Island in 1903 has been to protect wildlife. What could be more compati-



Izembek National Wildlife Refuge, AK
Photo courtesy of US Fish and Wildlife Service

ble than wildlife protection and wilderness stewardship? Refuge managers have not only the Wilderness Act to lean on, but also their responsibility to put wildlife first when recreational or other uses threaten to harm the animals or their homes. Moreover, most wildlife refuge Wildernesses are free of many of the non-conforming “multiple uses” that complicate stewardship on national forest or BLM-administered lands. Wildlife refuge managers have always been in a place to put wildlife and wilderness protection first.

And the Service has something else going for it—a wilderness land base second to none. There are over 20 million acres of designated Wilderness in the National Wildlife Refuge System, and nearly 60 million additional acres, 90 percent of it in Alaska, that qualify for Wilderness designation. The Arctic NWR alone has eight million acres of designated Wilderness and nearly 12 million acres of potential Wilderness—20 million

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contiguous acres of some of the most pristine wildlands left on the planet.

The Service's remarkable Wilderness isn't confined to Alaska. The 700,000 Cabeza-Prieta in Arizona and the 350,000-acre Okefenokee in Georgia are two of the

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largest Wildernesses in the Lower 48. They bring an incredible diversity of arid Sonoran desert and "prairie" swamplands to the National Wilderness Preservation System. Each of the refuge system's 75 Wildernesses is a rich and valuable nature reserve.

Yet despite the potential for excellence, wilderness stewardship on wildlife refuges suffers from a "management" culture largely at odds with the concept of untrammelled Wilderness "retaining its primeval character and influence... protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions." While all federal agencies have confronted this challenge, which explains in part their lack of support for the original wilderness bill, the timber, mining, and grazing interests in the Forest Service and BLM have come to accept, albeit grudgingly, that some areas would have to be left alone.

Wildlife managers, on the other hand, have felt no such constraints. Their paradigm generally treats nature as a producer of crops—the "crop" being wildlife. State and federal wildlife agencies have not adopted the wilderness ideal. To their eyes, wilderness stewardship doesn't work because it doesn't allow habitat manipulation to favor preferred game species and it restricts motorized hunter access.

That's what was so remarkable about the Service's sincere pronouncement in 1999 that it would become a leader in wilderness stewardship. And it got off to a great start. The agency brought together its leading wilderness staff to completely rewrite its anemic 1980-era wilderness policies. In January 2001, the Service released its draft proposal that, while not without its shortcomings, contained a number of positive, groundbreaking statements and guidance. The policy plainly acknowledged that the unique challenge of wilderness management is to preserve

both the tangible and intangible aspects of Wilderness. It included an eloquent definition of wilderness character, heretofore undefined in federal wilderness policy, and a number of thoughtful messages on how to preserve that character. It placed an emphasis on the need for humility and restraint when engaged in management activities, and it put preservation of wilderness character at the head of all stewardship decisions. It defined solitude such that

managers could easily grasp that protecting solitude involved far more than just limiting the number of visitors.

The public responded with overwhelming support. More than 4,100 people sent comments on the draft policy. The Service extended the comment period twice to appease wilderness opponents, particularly a number of state fish and wildlife agencies, yet in the end almost all of the comments supported the pro-wilderness direction in the new policy. In fact, most of the comments urged the Service to include additional strengthening provisions. The response both surprised and heartened the Service's wilderness policy team.

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Okefenokee Swamp National Wildlife Refuge
Photo by George Gentry

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The good news was short lived, however. By the middle of 2001, Bush administration political appointees dismissed the Service's wilderness team and brought in state fish and game officials from five states to rewrite the policies. These were the very officials who complained the draft policy was too favored toward wilderness protection. For the next

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several years the state officials and their allies in the Service worked over the policy, tweaking provision after provision. The end result is lamentable. For example, it will now be okay to trammel Wilderness so long as managers don't permanently trammel it. Permanent roads will be banned, but *retained*, temporary roads will not. Commercial enterprise will remain illegal, but "refuge management economic activities" will not. Human-built structures will be seen as impairing solitude, but only if they are unnecessary structures, and so on. Most unfortunately, the policy was modified to encourage recreational snowmachine and motorboat use in Wildernesses in Alaska.

The new policy also exempted wildlife refuges in Alaska from further wilderness review. This means that over 50 million acres of potential wilderness will not be studied for wilderness designation nor will they be eligible for interim protection as "proposed wilderness" in refuge management plans.

With so many changes to the draft policy, Wilderness Watch and others urged the Service to provide an opportunity for public review and comment before the policies became final. Not only did the initial comment period show a high degree of public interest, but also the Service's own policies state that any substantive change should undergo further public review. But it was not to be. On November 17, 2008, 64 days before President Bush left the White House, the Service released its emasculated policies in final form. There would be no public review.

Wilderness Watch has urged the Obama Administration to rescind the policy and provide an opportunity for public comment on the proposal. Our request was part of a package of recommendations submitted to President Obama's transition team. The package was endorsed by nearly 100 local, regional, and national organizations. We are also preparing a letter and analysis for the incoming leaders of the FWS urging them to open the policy to public review.

Time will tell if the Service's new leaders are committed to "fulfilling the promise" of becoming a leader in wilderness stewardship or whether policies written with the anti-wilderness bias of the Bush administration and state wildlife managers will be good enough for the agency's new leaders. One thing's for certain, the policies as written leave a mighty gap between the "promise" and reality. ☹️

—By George Nickas, Executive Director