

## *The "Protect America's Rock Climbing Act" is an Imminent Threat to Wilderness*

By Dana Johnson

There are relentless pressures on the natural world at this moment, and right now, Congress has its attention on a bill that would compound those pressures in our most protected places. The boldly named "Protect America's Rock Climbing Act" ("PARC Act," H.R. 1380) will allow sport climbers to drill permanent metal anchors into Wilderness mountainsides and cliffs, leaving visual evidence of human development and undoubtedly drawing more climbers to sensitive and remote locations. And the bill will weaken the landmark 1964 Wilderness Act—America's most protective environmental law—to appease the climbing preferences of a small but vocal group of recreationists. It is the proverbial crack in the Wilderness Act's armor and a harbinger of what's to come. Wilderness Watch, along with dozens of other conservation groups, has written Congress to oppose the bill and protect the tiny bit of wild we've allowed to remain.

Given the appalling squeeze we've put on the natural world, we must start shamelessly prioritizing something other than ourselves. We don't often think of it as such, but recreation is consumptive. It consumes the diminishing

resource of space. And with less than three percent of land within the Lower 48 protected as Wilderness, that space is in short supply. Meanwhile, stressors on the natural world—climate change, habitat loss, intolerance, indifference—are increasing. Many of our animal counterparts simply can't withstand the pressure, and a startling number have made their untimely departure to the world of extinction.

In a group discussion with the Forest Service about recreation overuse in a popular Wilderness, I recently heard a Tribal representative call the skyrocketing recreation trend "alarming," noting bluntly that wildlife has nowhere left to go. With every "user group" demand, the refuge grows smaller.

The issue is coming to a head. Even

though there are ample bolted routes outside of Wilderness, the Access Fund—the group behind the PARC Act—wants more. Fixed (i.e. permanent) climbing anchors are installations prohibited by the Wilderness Act, but the PARC Act directs federal agencies to allow their use in Wilderness. It's a backdoor approach to statutory amendment that even the Forest Service and Department of Interior oppose. In



Leon Werdinger Photography

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# President's Message

## Keeping Agencies Honest



**T**hreats to Wilderness come in many forms. External threats that compromise Wilderness quickly trigger alarm bells and grab headlines. For example, you'll read in this newsletter about the proposals for a mine near Okefenokee and a road through the Izembek Wilderness. Wilderness Watch's work to eliminate these types of threats usually requires a legal or legislative remedy.

However, a more common and insidious type of threat at the more local level are the ill-advised decisions sometimes made by field level officials in our land management agencies that can damage a Wilderness, set a bad precedent, and lower the standards. These threats often fly under the radar. Land managers have significant authority to make decisions and develop policies impacting Wilderness on important issues such as commercial outfitter permits, dams, cattle grazing, and predators, to name a few.

Land managers, advancing through the ranks from field positions (timber, range, wild-life, fire) find themselves elevated to positions requiring an interdisciplinary breadth and complexity of decision-making skills. Suddenly and without much training, they must navigate under intense community pressures. They are expected to work with hostile county commissioners and in partnerships that can include people or organizations with narrow self-interest (e.g., commercial outfitters that provide pack support for trail crews focused on their camp access needs). Add to this mixture the peer pressure within any organization to support "the team" of co-workers, even when that means going down an ill-advised path. Backbone is hard to build and seldom rewarded.

And agency advancement sometimes creates perverse incentives. One retired land manager put it to me this way: "To a significant degree, the way land managers advance in the bureaucracy is like natural selection. Those who don't rock the boat and keep a lid on things survive and advance through the ranks faster and farther than those who may challenge the status quo or take on powerful special interests."

That's not to say that there aren't plenty of field level managers pushing back on schemes to impact Wilderness who are passionate and dedicated to the Wildernesses for which they have responsibility. We are inspired by their principled dedication and efforts to uphold and protect our special places. Wilderness Watch has naturally developed a close relationship with many of these folks who often serve as our eyes and ears to any mischief afoot within an agency. Our early intervention often eliminates a potential problem before it gains traction. And good supervisors in difficult positions are often grateful for the pressure Wilderness Watch wields with higher ups. We can provide the backbone required.

In 1989, retired US Forest Service wilderness program leader Bill Worf and two others established Wilderness Watch specifically to be a watchdog, recognizing these very real agency and human dynamics—confrontation when necessary and support for managers' courageous acts to uphold the Wilderness ideal. Bill realized then, as is still true today, that most of the large environmental organizations don't focus on the field level, putting their emphasis on the more headline grabbing issues instead.

Our work to monitor the numerous decisions from the field level to the national level puts Wilderness Watch in a unique and very effective position to preserve these places we treasure. Thank you for your generous support to realize our unique mission and thereby preserve the integrity of our National Wilderness Preservation System. 🐾

—Mark Peterson

*Mark Peterson is a former director for the National Parks Conservation Association, the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute, and the National Audubon Society.*



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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P.O. Box 9175  
Missoula, MT 59807  
406.542.2048  
wild@wildernesswatch.org  
www.wildernesswatch.org

a hearing on the bill, the Forest Service stated that “creating new definitions for allowable uses in wilderness areas, as [the PARC Act] would do, has the practical effect of amending the Wilderness Act, which could have serious and harmful consequences for the management of wilderness areas across the nation.”

Due in large part to Wilderness designation, we still have a few largely untrammelled, wild pockets left—landscapes protected from our tech-enhanced conquest to consume physical space. When it passed in 1964, the Wilderness Act marked an unusual gesture of restraint in an era of escalating entitlement. To assure that an increasing population “[did] not occupy and modify all areas within the United States,” it prohibited commercial enterprise, roads, motorized and mechanized uses, aircraft landings, and installations and structures in Wilderness. Wilderness is the last refuge—a small space left alone. Because of this, Wilderness provides some of the best habitat left for plants and animals trying to eke out an existence alongside humans.

But the refuge is always under attack, sometimes intentionally, other times out of blindness. Restraint is slippery when you can’t see what you’re losing. Researchers describe this shifting baseline as “a persistent downgrading of perceived ‘normal’ environmental conditions with every sequential generation, leading to under-estimation of the true magnitude of long-term environmental change[.]” We can’t see the ratchet-effect and appreciate just how small the refuge has become.

Whether out of malice, indifference, or ignorance, the PARC Act is sending a loud message: that recreation interests are more important than Wilderness preservation. And what’s coming is clear. Some mountain bikers, led by the Sustainable Trails Coalition, have already introduced legislation to exempt mountain bikes from the prohibition on mechanized travel in Wilderness. Trail runners want exemptions from the ban on commercial trail racing. Drone pilots and hang-gliders want their aircraft exempted. Recreational pilots want to “bag” challenging landing sites in Wilderness. The list is long.

What’s more confounding about the PARC Act is climbing is already allowed in Wilderness. This bill is simply about using fixed bolts to climb as opposed to using removable protection. Discussing the bill, a recent article in the *Salt Lake Tribune* goes so far as to state that “a ban on anchors would be tantamount to a ban on climbing in wilderness areas.” But even climbers are pushing back on the hyperbole. George Ochenski, known for his decades of first ascents in Wilderness without bolts, calls this position “Total bullshit.” He argues that bolting routes “is bringing ‘sport

climbing’ into the wilderness—and it belongs in the gym or on non-wilderness rocks.”

Ochenski is not alone. Many climbers have been advocating for a marriage of climbing and wilderness ethics for decades. In *Chouinard Equipment’s* first catalog, legendary climbers Yvon Chouinard and Tom Frost called for a preservation of the “vertical wilderness” that comes from “the exercise of moral restraint and individual responsibility.”

As someone who loves Wilderness, trail running, backpacking, and running rivers, I understand the allure of merging passion for the wild with a passion for adventure and reprieve. But I’m also understanding, more and more, that the flip side of this freedom is responsibility. I recall recently floating a remote river in Idaho during a big fire year—the sky was orange, thick with smoke, the hillsides smoldering and covered with fire retardant. Planes circled overhead, the river and beaches loaded with rafts, and I noticed something unsettling. Bighorn sheep and deer, pushed away by fire from the more secluded side drainages, were trying to get to the river to drink. They

would cautiously approach the water waiting for a break in the planes and rafts, oftentimes retreating, sometimes with little ones in tow. I could see how stressed and tired they were, and I carry their faces with me now.

And I carry the face of the startled black bear my colleague and I encountered on a trail in the River of No Return Wilderness. We were there investigating a proliferation of private aircraft traffic along Big Creek—an otherwise remote Wilderness drainage—where recreational pilots practice touch and go landings at remote meadows along the creek, sometimes toting in coolers for a mid-day picnic. Planes buzzing overhead, we startled the young bear just before meeting two other hikers who were “fast and light” hiking from the Big Creek trailhead to a lodge 30 miles downstream, deep in the Middle Fork drainage of the Wilderness. They planned on having breakfast at the lodge and then hopping a private plane back to McCall. I’m sure the bear would agree, the largest Wilderness in the lower 48 felt impossibly small that day.

I’m struggling with my own presence in these places and trying to envision a future where we have the peace and connection one finds in Wilderness—the real world—without the consequence attached. One thing is abundantly clear though—the last thing the natural world needs right now is less protection. The Wilderness Act doesn’t need more exceptions. Wilderness, and all those who depend upon it for survival, needs our restraint now more than ever. 🍄

*Dana Johnson is Wilderness Watch’s policy director.*

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# On the Watch

## Protect trailless Wilderness in NH and ME

**W**ilderness Watch and Standing Trees are urging the Forest Service (FS) to reconsider its proposal to amend its Forest Plan in regards to Wilderness trail management in the White Mountain National Forest (WMNF) in New Hampshire and Maine. The agency is trying to do the right thing by addressing trail issues in Wilderness, but a better approach would be to consider Wilderness trail relocations on an individual basis so as to allow for better analysis of impacts to Wilderness.

Six Wildernesses cover nearly 150,000 acres in the WMNF, the Pemigewasset, Great Gulf, Presidential Range-Dry River, Wild River, Sandwich Range, and Caribou-Speckled Mountain, and they are home to moose, black bears, Canada lynx, fishers, peregrine falcons, bobcats, and other native wildlife.

There are trailless zones in Wilderness in the WMNF, and the current Forest Plan requires wilderness trails to stay out of these trailless zones and instead stay within designated trail corridors. The FS proposes to amend its Forest Plan to allow trail relocations outside of established trail corridors. Doing so could weaken protections for trailless areas, which are good for plants and wildlife, keep Wilderness from being overrun by humans, and offer a truly primitive experience.

The FS is proposing to use a Categorical Exclusion (CE) to amend its Forest Plan, which limits environmental analysis and public input and potentially sets a bad precedent. We'll continue to urge the FS to drop this proposal, but if the agency pursues a Forest Plan amendment, it needs to complete rigorous analysis and gather public feedback. 🐾

## Respect Wilderness in the North Cascades

**W**ilderness Watch is urging the National Park Service (NPS) to adopt wilderness-compatible alternatives for its plan to reroute a trail plus relocate/build additional campsites in the Stephen Mather Wilderness within North Cascades National Park in Washington. This rugged Wilderness spans more than 638,000

acres and provides important habitat for native species like wolverine, cougar, lynx, black bear, and less common grizzly bears and wolves.

In its *Backcountry Camp Modifications in North Cascades National Park Environmental Assessment*, the NPS proposes to reroute 2,400 feet of the Brush Creek Trail and relocate the Graybeal Hiker and Stock Camps (all in Wilderness), following a fire. NPS also proposes to build campsites in the Park's southern end (one in Wilderness and one on the boundary) in response to increased recreational demand.

The proposal includes helicopters, chainsaws, and other motorized equipment. WW is urging the NPS to adhere to the Wilderness Act, as well as its own

Wilderness regulations, and utilize traditional tools and skills instead. And we're urging the agency to complete an Environmental Impact Statement that includes a wilderness-compatible alternative that first considers whether trail rerouting and campsite construction are even necessary. 🐾

## Improve Glacier Bay plan

**W**ilderness Watch is urging the National Park Service (NPS) to strengthen its new draft Backcountry and Wilderness Management Plan and environmental assessment (EA) for the 2.6 million-acre Glacier Bay Wilderness in Alaska. This is one of the wildest places in the entire National Wilderness Preservation System, with rugged mountains, dynamic glaciers, temperate rainforest, wild coastlines, and sheltered fjords.

The draft Plan and EA have many good components, but, unfortunately, also disregard the Wilderness Act. WW is urging the NPS to drop the following proposals: a less-protected "Shoreline Access Zone" which would allow development for communication and research installations plus new trails and campsites; a new VHF radio tower and up to 10 repeater towers; more commercial activities such as mountaineering; flying and landing helicopters; and allowing almost any research, including that which "requires exceptions for Wilderness Act, section 4c prohibited uses." 🐾



# On the Watch

## Wilderness be undammed

**T**he City of Missoula is proposing to breach the 15-foot-high earthen dam it owns on McKinley Lake in the Rattlesnake Wilderness in Montana since it's in poor condition and no longer used for its original purposes of downstream irrigation and municipal use. Removing the dam is a great idea. But it is also important to the integrity of Wilderness how the work gets done.

The city is leaning toward airlifting or driving heavy equipment into the Wilderness, but this isn't necessary. It's entirely possible to access the site on foot or horseback and use traditional, non-motorized tools. The dam was built without motorized equipment, and much larger projects have been accomplished without modern machinery.

Wilderness Watch is advocating that the dam be removed in a wilderness-compatible way, without motors and heavy machinery. Since this is a "pilot project" that will set the tone for how dams on seven other lakes in this Wilderness are breached or removed, alternatives to motorized equipment need to be thoroughly analyzed and implemented. 🌿

## Preserve Arctic grayling and Wilderness

**T**he U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) has a proposal to supposedly help Arctic grayling—a species of freshwater fish in the salmon family—in Montana, but which will seriously degrade the Red Rock Lakes Wilderness. Wilderness Watch is urging the agency to consider wilderness-compatible alternatives instead.

In recent years, the grayling population in the Wilderness has significantly declined due to an undetermined cause. One theory is that low wintertime oxygen levels in Upper Red Rock Lake, which is wholly within the Wilderness, is resulting in many fish dying, though no actual evidence supports the theory. Still, the FWS, in conjunction with MT Fish, Wildlife, and Parks and Trout Unlimited, is proposing to build an aeration system for the lake that requires building a pipeline and powerline and installing other motorized equipment in the Wilderness to pump oxygen into the lake.

Wilderness Watch supports efforts to protect grayling, but has suggested other causes—such as too much cattle grazing in the refuge or the impact from anglers wading through spawning beds and hooking grayling, which a former refuge manager has pointed to as the likely cause—need to be investigated and, if necessary, ended rather than take actions that violate the Wilderness Act. Effective long-term solutions require dealing with the causes of degradation, not putting the proverbial canary—or in this case, the grayling—on oxygen. 🌿

## Proposed rule to overturn cruel killing in AK

**T**he National Park Service (NPS) has released a new draft rule for governing hunting on the 19 million acres of National Preserves in Alaska, including eight-plus million acres of Wilderness. Wilderness Watch is urging several improvements to the generally good rule, which would overturn a Trump-era rule challenged by Wilderness Watch and several allies in court.

The NPS rightly banned controversial hunting practices on National Preserves in AK in 2015, codifying into law its long-

standing position against killing predators to increase prey populations. But, Trump's Interior Department rolled back the 2015 protective rule with its own rule in May 2020, which defers to state regulation allowing many egregious hunting practices: killing bears and wolves (and their young) in dens; baiting bears with human food and hunting them with dogs; shooting caribou from boats or shore as they cross water; and expansive trapping practices.

The NPS's new proposed rule would overturn these cruel practices, prohibit predator killing aimed at increasing prey species, and set some limits on trapping. Wilderness Watch is encouraging the NPS to also make sure that exceptions applied to subsistence uses are tailored to each conservation unit or region, where local rural Native hunters had traditionally and historically used such practices; to prohibit wolves and coyotes from being killed from early March through early August, to avoid denning season; and to use the federal determination found in ANILCA for what qualifies as "subsistence uses" rather than Alaska's more lax definition. 🌿

*On the Watch continued on page 6*





## Wilderness in the Courts

In the Spring *Watcher*, we reported the launch of a new lawsuit over the Forest Service's failure to rein in commercial motorized shuttle boats ("towboats") in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Minnesota. Activity picked up on that docket this Spring. We filed for a preliminary injunction, requesting that the court make the Forest Service impose limits while our litigation plays out. Otherwise, we noted, additional seasons of motorized mismanagement will deprive Boundary Waters visitors of the more protected wilderness integrity the law guarantees, and increasing and entrenched towboat traffic will continue complicating corrective action.

We presented oral argument in March, and we expect a ruling soon. Watch for updates as we press forward on this case!

On the Alaska Peninsula, our years-long saga of fighting to protect the Izembek Wilderness from a scheme to cut a road

through it by exchanging away federal public lands continues in its twists and turns. In 2021, the Trump administration appealed our 2020 District Court win to the Ninth Circuit, and the Biden administration continued the appeal. In 2022, a Ninth Circuit panel issued a damaging misinterpretation of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, but we were granted a rehearing. We also continued to push the Biden administration to correct course; its legal defense of this bad, Trump-era land exchange has always been a dangerous gamble.

In March, Interior Secretary Haaland finally stepped up and rescinded the land exchange that would have led to a road right through the heart of the fragile Izembek Wilderness. Now, we're working to get the legal case dismissed before any further damage to federal conservation law in Alaska is done. And, we'll be ready to keep fighting any new attempts to build the road. 🌿

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## Welcome new WW staff member, Matthew!



We're excited to have **Matthew Koehler** join our staff as our media director! Matthew brings nearly 30 years of experience working to defend public lands, Wilderness, and wildlife.

Matthew grew up in Elkhart Lake, Wisconsin. His love for nature came from his parents and time the family spent hiking, canoeing, cross-country skiing, and camping on public lands. He moved to Missoula in 1995 after graduating from the University of Wisconsin-Parkside with a history degree. His wife, Jeanette Russell, is even a former Forest Service wilderness ranger, and they have been Wilderness Watch members for years.

Matthew is also the former executive director of the WildWest Institute and former communications director of the National Forest Protection Alliance. He was invited to give expert testimony before the U.S. Senate twice, including against a massive public lands logging bill that would have

released protected Wilderness Study Areas for development.

Voted "best activist" by the Missoula Independent in 2007 and awarded the Fund for Wild Nature's "grassroots activist of the year" in 2010, Matthew enjoys growing garlic, native landscaping, spending time in nature, the game of golf, and an occasional old fashioned. Welcome aboard, Matthew! 🌿

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## On the Watch (continued from page 5)

### GA must reject mine threatening Okefenokee

Wilderness Watch has joined 40 other organizations in urging the Georgia Environmental Protection Division to reject the proposed Twin Pines Minerals mine threatening the Okefenokee Wilderness and National Wildlife Refuge. Okefenokee is one of the world's largest intact blackwater swamps, a Wetland of International Importance, and a International Dark Sky Park. The 354,000-acre Wilderness covers almost 90 percent of the refuge, making it one of the East's largest Wilderness areas.

Water is critical to the well-being of this unique Wilderness. The proposed 8,000-acre mine would impact thousands of acres of wetlands and harm Wilderness values such as solitude, silence, and remoteness, due to the close proximity of industrial mining activity and associated development.

Unfortunately, the proposed Twin Pines mine is no longer under federal oversight and not subject to extensive federal environmental analysis. 🌿

# The Wilderness Movement Needs Everyone

By Gavin Hoiosen



The future of wilderness lies in our ability to preserve the wild character of existing Wilderness areas as well as to protect wildlands that currently lack Wilderness designation. Because the opposition to wilderness is both well-funded and quite large, the wilderness movement needs to build the biggest team possible in

its pursuit of protecting the future of wilderness. This means that people from all sorts of backgrounds, skill sets, and interests are needed within the wilderness movement.

One of the perceived challenges for someone who wants to engage in conservation is that you must have technical knowledge or extensive experience in the field to do so. This is not necessarily true. Yes, the wilderness movement needs people like biologists and ecologists, environmental attorneys and policy analysts, but it also needs creatives like writers and artists, as well as organizers, advocates, and educators. If you want to join the wilderness movement, the most important qualification to have is the belief in the sanctity of wilderness and that you care deeply about protecting wild places and their inhabitants.

I came to the wilderness movement via an unconventional path. I don't have any environmentally-focused schooling or technical training in the field of conservation. I recently completed my undergraduate degree in Kinesiology and was planning to go on to grad school to pursue a Ph.D. in Exercise Physiology. My studies and research focused on understanding the mechanisms of endurance and how the use of psychological strategies during a bout of exercise

could increase a person's performance by delaying the onset of exercise-induced fatigue. This was extremely fascinating, and I enjoyed what I was doing, but I began to feel a sort of tension. I have long been interested in the natural world and learning about environmental issues, however, the more I read the more I became dismayed at the state of the world. I had a hard time convincing myself that what I was studying in school really mattered in comparison to the environmental crises that we face. When I realized that my convictions did not match the path I was on, I decided that I needed to find a new one. This is quite unnerving if you are a plan-centered person like myself. I faced an unknown future with no plan to guide me.

Outside of my old networks and a field in which I was familiar, I began cold-emailing conservation organizations to see if any of them would offer me an internship. For some unknowable reason, Wilderness Watch graciously decided to give me a chance at an internship. This experience has been very impactful. I have gained a greater understanding and appreciation for Wilderness under the helpful guidance of the team at Wilderness Watch. There is still much uncertainty for what the future holds for me. I do not know what is next, but I do believe I am on the right path, and I am glad to have decided to pivot my life.

We are living through unprecedented times in our world's history. Our climate is warming rapidly, plant and wildlife species are going extinct at record rates, and Earth's resources are being consumed in unimaginable proportions by a global population that has exceeded eight billion. Preserving wilderness can be a part of the solution to the crises we face. Wilderness protects key habitat for plant and animal species, and important carbon stores like mature and old-growth forests, and it shows that we have restraint in our consumption of Earth's resources. It is up to us to decide the future of wilderness. There is hope, but hope requires action. The wilderness movement needs you. It needs your passion, your determination, and your willingness to fight a lopsided battle. It needs you to leverage your skills, your networks, and your resources. I have decided to dedicate my life to protecting the future of wilderness. Will you dedicate a part of yours? 🌿

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## Note from the editor:

Thanks to the generosity of the WW board and staff, I will be on sabbatical until mid-September, and therefore, we will not be publishing a Fall newsletter this year. Our Winter newsletter will arrive at its regular time with a lot to update you on. In the meantime, please follow us on our social media channels, keep an eye out for our action alerts and email updates, and visit our website. Thank you for understanding, and have a great summer! 🌿

—Dawn Serra



**WILDERNESS WATCH**  
*Keeping Wilderness Wild*

**Wilderness Watch**  
P.O. Box 9175  
Missoula, MT 59807  
p: (406) 542-2048

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## *You've been with us the whole way!*

**By Brett Haverstick**

**A**s you have read in this newsletter, we are again challenging unlawful commercial, motorized towboat use in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW). In 2015, we filed our initial lawsuit in federal district court to force the Forest Service to comply with its own plans and regulations limiting commercial towboat use. Because the agency knew our complaint was strong, we reached an out-of-court settlement agreement, in which the agency promised to accurately assess and apply the legal standards for how many towboats should be allowed. Fast forward to this year, and we were forced to file a second lawsuit because the Forest Service has failed to live up to the settlement agreement or reign in commercial towboat use in the BWCAW.



Protecting the BWCAW is just one of hundreds of issues that we've been engaged in over the decades. While some threats to Wilderness take longer than others to resolve, we know that we can count on you to keep fighting with us.

Please look for our summer fundraising letter in the mail, and consider making a generous donation so that we can keep the pressure on. Thank you for being with us every step of the way! 🍷