

Escaping the Confines of Civilization

We needed the Wilderness Act in 1964 and still need it today

by NANCY ROEPER | The National Wilderness Preservation System turns 50 this year, significantly younger than three other federal systems of lands and waters that begin providing varying levels of protection before 1964. So why did the United States need to create a new national system, composed of elements from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service?

Proponents of wilderness in the early 1900s saw changes throughout the nation's wild lands that were altering the land's nature. National parks focused on building roads, hotels and visitor centers to encourage tourism via automobile. National forests were building roads to facilitate large-scale logging. Huge dams were going up on major Western rivers for energy production. The Service's National Wildlife Refuge System was focused on creating waterfowl and game habitat, often through major ecological intervention.

Key wilderness supporters such as Aldo Leopold, Arthur Carhart, Bob Marshall, Olaus and Mardy Murie, and Howard Zahniser recognized a need to preserve lands in their natural and wild form to balance this utilitarianism. They recognized the benefits of the undeveloped and wild nature of rapidly disappearing places such as the headwaters of the Gila River in New Mexico, Trappers Lake in Colorado and vast expanses of the Arctic in Alaska.

Advocates longed for permanent protection as they feared people might tire of the need to fight repeatedly to

protect valuable places. As Zahniser said, "Let's try to be done with a wilderness preservation program made up of a sequence of overlapping emergencies, threats and defense campaigns! Let's make a concerted effort for a positive program that will establish an enduring system of areas where we can be at peace and not forever feel that the wilderness is a battleground."

Leopold felt much the same way: "Let no man think that because a few foresters have tentatively formulated a wilderness policy that the preservation of wilderness is assured."

The U.S. Biological Survey, which became the Fish and Wildlife Service, bred some of the most passionate proponents of wilderness protection. Olaus Murie was a wildlife biologist for about 25 years. He and his wife, Mardy, worked tirelessly to protect Alaska's Brooks Range and the Sheenjek River. Zahniser was a writer and editor with the Service's forerunner for 10 years.

But it wasn't until he became executive director of The Wilderness Society that Zahniser began his tireless battle to pass legislation. He wrote the first draft of the

Wilderness Act in 1956 and over nine years, shepherded it through 18 public hearings and 65 rewrites. Congress finally passed and President Johnson signed the Wilderness Act on September 3, 1964.

No Refuge System wilderness was designated by the Wilderness Act. Instead, the law gave the three agencies 10 years to review their lands and make wilderness recommendations. However, at public demand, Congress designated wilderness at Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge in New Jersey only four years later in 1968—the first wilderness designated for the Refuge System and the Department of the Interior (See "Great Swamp: Interior's First Wilderness" p. 19).

Since then, Congress has designated wilderness on 62 additional refuges and one fish hatchery. There are also almost 2 million additional acres of Refuge System lands proposed as wilderness in the 1970s; Congress has neither designated the lands as wilderness nor released them from further wilderness consideration. As a result, the Service manages about 22 million acres of designated and proposed wilderness in accordance with the provisions of the Wilderness Act.

What are the consequences of wilderness designation in the Refuge System? In essence, wilderness areas have dual citizenship: They are members of the Refuge System and of the National Wilderness Preservation System. As the Refuge System manages

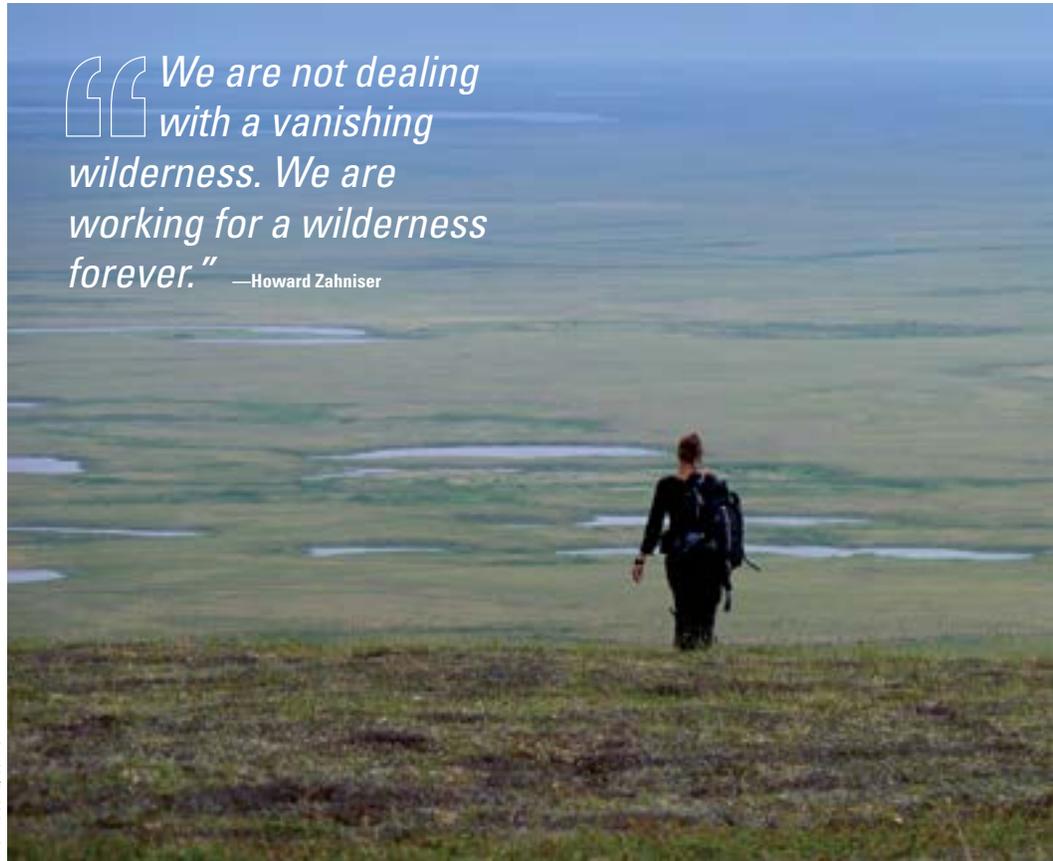
“We are not dealing with a vanishing wilderness. We are working for a wilderness forever.” —Howard Zahniser

these areas to achieve the wildlife conservation purposes for which they were established, the Service does it in ways that keep them primarily natural, undeveloped and wild, or as Howard Zahniser explained, “exhibiting the free play of natural forces.”

Managers use temporary roads, motorized equipment and vehicles, mechanical transport, structures and the landing of aircraft sparingly, and only when their use has been carefully evaluated and determined to be the minimum requirement for managing the area to preserve its wilderness character.

Use and enjoyment of wilderness is another important principle of the Wilderness Act, which identifies outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation as a key descriptor of wilderness character. The Service encourages visitors to hunt, fish, observe and photograph wildlife, and engage in other activities as long as those activities are non-motorized, non-mechanized and compatible with wilderness preservation. Wilderness areas can also be great for snowshoeing, kayaking and camping.

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The “dual citizenship” aspect of wilderness allows Refuge System staff to take advantage of the wilderness training, information and education offered by the interagency Arthur Carhart Wilderness Training Center and wilderness research, monitoring and scientific knowledge amassed by the interagency Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute. Coordinated training, education and research means all four agencies that manage wilderness—now including the Bureau of Land Management—do so in a coordinated manner to protect a single Wilderness System.

As he so often did, Howard Zahniser summed up the strength of a single National Wilderness Preservation System: “Working to preserve in perpetuity is a great inspiration. We are not fighting a rear-guard action, we are facing a frontier. We are not slowing down a force that inevitably will destroy all the wilderness there is. We are generating another force, never to be wholly spent, that, renewed generation after generation, will be always effective in preserving wilderness. We are not fighting progress. We are making it. We are not dealing with a vanishing wilderness. We are working for a wilderness forever.”



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My passion for wilderness began at an early age. I grew up exploring nearby fields, woods and swamps without my parents worrying about my safety. Growing up on Long Island, I found these relatively small areas constituted my own personal wilderness. I knew the best hiding places, trees to climb, blackberry patches and spots to catch pollywogs. From that beginning, I just scaled up to feel connected to truly undeveloped and wild areas as I camped and backpacked during graduate school. But it wasn't until I began my current position and my book learning about wilderness that I realized that some of my trips had been to areas that were Designated Wilderness. I now know that the exhilaration I felt in these places resulted not only from the

incredible scenery, unexpected wildlife encounters and the exertion of transporting oneself with necessary food and shelter, but also from the feeling that I had escaped the confines of civilization; I could be wild! Even if only temporarily. I want future generations to experience that feeling.

During this 50th anniversary year, I look forward to the Service continuing and expanding upon its proud heritage of wilderness stewardship to preserve the special lands and waters that the American people have entrusted to it. □

NANCY ROEPER, National Wilderness Coordinator,
National Wildlife Refuge System, Headquarters

Left: Andreafsky Wilderness, at Yukon Delta National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. **Above:** President Johnson Signs the Wilderness Act.