

Untrammeled

On its 50th anniversary, a look at the historical forces that forged the Wilderness Act, and what wildlands mean to us today. **BY HAL HERRING**



For a few years at the end of the 1980s, I managed a small ranch west of Stevensville, in the shadow of the mighty Bitterroot Mountains. Our irrigation water came from North Kootenai Creek, by way of an old and oft-plugged headgate a half mile up the canyon above the ranch. A trail ran beside the creek, which varied by season from a knee-deep pour of water as clear as mountain air—a luxurious place to lie down in the noon heat of summer—to a frothing monster that could and did take the lives of children and grownups alike during years of heavy snowmelt.

My life was smaller then, circumscribed by the six-days-a-week commitment to the ranch, but it was huge, almost boundless, in another way. On Sundays, or when haying was done and the irrigating work not yet resumed, I would follow the trail beyond the headgate, threading the shoulder-high thimbleberry bushes in the shade of the mighty cliffs, watching the dippers flit back and forth in the shafts of sunlight falling to the creek, and simply walk west. The drainage—one of the dozens of colossal U-shaped glacier scours that carve the range from west to east—yawned endless, bound by the black fortress cliffs and towers to the north, the vast tongues of gray talus tumbling beneath them. Ancient fire-scarred ponderosa pines cast their scent of vanilla from sun-heated bark, and raspberries, currants, and serviceberries grew in verdant thickets wherever there was enough light. After 4 miles or so, you passed the wooden sign that marked the border of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, and the trail became a bit narrower, the landscape even more overwhelming. The Kootenai Lakes lay another 5 miles in, an alpine world of fierce cirques and sodden, melt-saturated meadows carpeted with a hallucinatory blend of blooming wildflowers. This was summer elk country, and mountain goat country, along with marmots, black bears, moose, and an occasional big mule deer stalking the subalpine firs and whitebark pines, alone and wary. This was, to me, solitude writ large, self-reliance,

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adventure, freedom. It was Wilderness, with a capital W, a place far apart from that crowded world where the concerns of mankind overwhelmed every other sound and almost every thought.

Over the next 15 years or so, I spent some part of each year in different parts of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, hunting, snowshoeing and skiing, fishing, and wandering aimless as a spiderweb on the wind, in fair weather and foul. A few times I crossed the mountains all the way to the Selway River in Idaho, where I slept nights in the white sand carried there by snowmelt floods, caught rubber boas on the trail and dodged rattlers in the scree, ate blue grouse and cutthroats and suckers cooked on tiny fire pits gouged out of the river gravels. I was caught in a forest fire, benighted by cliffs and blizzards, and humbled by exhaustion, heat, and cold, and by the profound and ancient truth that here you were truly on your own, to exult or despair according to your abilities and tenacity.

I look back on those days and weeks now and am astonished how powerful those experiences were, how a wild place like that can inhabit you, become a part of who you are, forever.

“MAN HIMSELF A VISITOR”

The Wilderness Act was passed in 1964, 50 years ago, the same year I was born. I and the millions of Americans born that year and since have never known an America without

a designated wilderness, from the 5.5-acre Pelican Island in northern Florida to the Selway-Bitterroot to the sprawling 9 million acres of glacier, alpine forest, and raging rivers in Alaska’s Wrangell-Saint Elias. The United States is home to over 109 million acres of designated wilderness (53 percent in Alaska) scattered across 44 states and Puerto Rico. That’s a lot of room to roam and experience some of the last landscapes on our planet not dedicated solely to the material progress of mankind. The Wilderness Act itself may say it best: “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized 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....”

On a planet of over seven billion human souls (more than double the population in 1964), and at a time when industrialization and agricultural conversion have, while raising living standards for countless millions of people, transformed an estimated half of the entire surface of the planet, Americans have set aside almost 5 percent of their lands as wilderness, a choice that is utterly unique in



BOUNDARY SIGN, CABINET MOUNTAINS WILDERNESS. PHOTO BY STEVE GNAM.

the world. To understand that choice is a life’s work of scholarship, a time machine flight through our history and beyond to the oldest notions that spiritual truths and meaning could best be sought far from the distractions and fleshpots of the settled places. The Israelites sought and found wisdom during their 40 years’ sojourn in the deserts, Shinto Buddhism in Japan celebrated wild nature in a way that Europeans never did, and the Chinese of the 5th century

revered wilderness as the resting place for the human spirit exhausted by man’s endeavors and wrote some of the world’s most beautiful poetry in homage to it.

By contrast, until the late 19th century, wilderness in America was viewed as desolation, its mere existence an illness to be quickly cured with axe, rifle, and plow.

And yet, no designated wilderness areas exist in Israel today, none in China, and only one, closed to public access and consisting of fewer than 14,000 acres, in Japan. It was Americans who would lead the world in protecting wild country and making it available to anyone seeking adventure or solace.

Why, within the span of just two generations, did a people who once feared and reviled wilderness begin to value it so much that they protected more wild lands than any other nation in history? Part of the answer lies in our love of America’s creation story—of the pioneering men, women, and children venturing into the unknown, of the ruggedly independent fur trappers, of Daniel Boone, Lewis and Clark, Jim Bridger, and John Colter, and the Native Americans they lived with and often fought. Our bookshelves sag under the weight of stories about brave frontiersmen and -women, forged like the hardest steel by the howling dangers of the wildest country. This is the literature and the history that produced John Muir, wandering the high Sierras alone, and Henry David Thoreau in his simple cabin in Concord, writing about Maine’s unconquered Mount Katahdin. This is the history that inspired the influential historian Frederick Jackson Turner, who, in 1893, set off a blazing debate with his “Frontier Thesis” by writing that “American democracy was born of no theorist’s dream; it was not carried in the...Mayflower to Plymouth. It came out of the American forest, and it gained new strength each time it touched a new frontier.” Turner, like many of his contemporaries, including Theodore Roosevelt, worried that the closing of the American frontier, with its demands for both cooperation and strong, pragmatic individualism, would pose a direct threat to the future of democracy. Roderick Nash, in his classic study *Wilderness and the American Mind*, wrote

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LITTLE ROCK CREEK, BELOW EL CAPITAN MOUNTAIN IN THE SELWAY-BITTERROOT WILDERNESS. PHOTO BY JOHN LAMBING.



BLACK MOUNTAIN AND PINE CREEK ABOVE PINE CREEK LAKE IN THE ABSAROKA-BEARTOOTH WILDERNESS. PHOTO BY DOUGLAS ROANE.

Montana awaits new wilderness designation

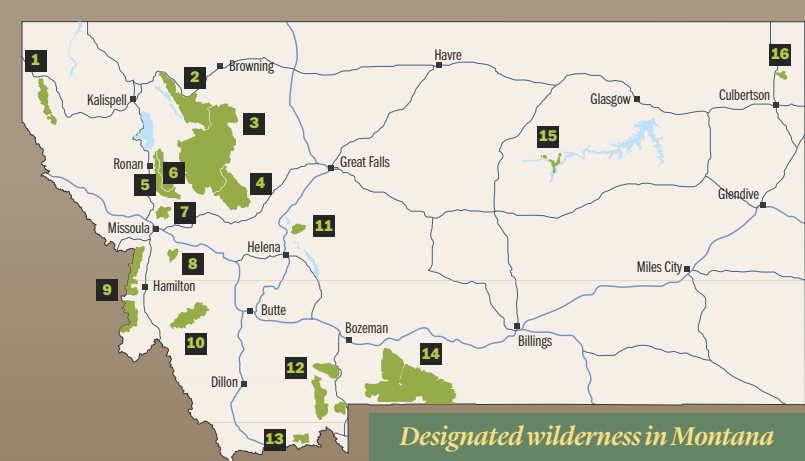
Montana's last new wilderness designation came in 1983, when Congress authorized the Lee Metcalf Wilderness along the Madison Range southwest of Bozeman. That brought Montana's total acreage of wilderness to 3.4 million acres, or 3.7 percent of the state's total land base.

conservation management area that allows motorized access, mountain biking, and other current uses. When Senator Baucus retired from Congress last winter, the bill lost its most powerful proponent. Tester and interim Senator John Walsh have declared their support for the

A wilderness area is free of roads, retains its primeval character, and is protected and managed in ways that preserve its natural condition. The areas are widely used by hikers, hunters, anglers, backpackers, and horseback riders.

Montana also contains 6.4 million acres of U.S. Forest Service and BLM Inventoried Roadless Areas that, with Congressional approval, could qualify as wilderness. About one-third of these holdings have regularly been proposed for designation since 1983.

Two bills before Congress would add wilderness to Montana. One is Senator Jon Tester's Forest Jobs and Recreation Act. It mandates harvest or thinning of 100,000 acres of timber over 15 years while adding 637,000 acres of new wilderness and 360,000 acres of recreation areas allowing some motorized or commercial use.





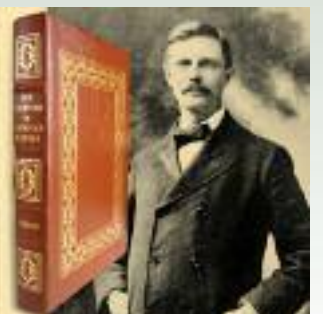




Designated wilderness in Montana

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|----------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1 Cabinet Mountains | 7 Rattlesnake | 12 Lee Metcalf |
| 2 Great Bear | 8 Welcome Creek | 13 Red Rock Lakes |
| 3 Bob Marshall | 9 Selway-Bitterroot | 14 Absaroka-Beartooth |
| 4 Scapegoat | 10 Anaconda Pintler | 15 UL Bend |
| 5 Mission Mountains Tribal | 11 Gates of the Mountains | 16 Medicine Lake |
| 6 Mission Mountains | | |

The other bill, co-sponsored by Senator Tester and former Senator Max Baucus, is the Rocky Mountain Front Heritage Act. It would add 67,000 acres to the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex while designating 208,000 acres along the Rocky Mountain Front as a

act, but they lack Baucus's seniority. Both bills received bipartisan support from the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, clearing a path for the full Senate to consider them. However, success remains far from certain. The two Montana bills are among 26 wilderness bills awaiting action in Congress.
—Tom Dickson

NOTIONS OF WILDERNESS

<p>1784: Daniel Boone's "autobiography" (mostly written by another Kentuckian) condemns wild country but also praises the scenery of nature.</p> <p>1760s</p>  <p>For two centuries the New World's "howling" wilderness was seen only as an oppressive wasteland in need of taming by frontiersmen like Daniel Boone and then settlement by pioneers and farmers.</p>	<p>1854: Henry David Thoreau writes <i>Walden</i>, a reflection on simple living in natural surroundings.</p> <p>1872: Yellowstone National Park Act passes.</p> <p>1860s and '70s</p>  <p>Outright hostility toward wilderness began to soften as Romantic painters like Thomas Moran depicted unspoiled nature not as godless deserts but as awe-inspiring expressions of divinity.</p>	<p>1890: U.S. Census reports that the nation contains no more uninhabited areas, signaling to many the end of America's frontier era.</p> <p>1892: Sierra Club founded. John Muir is named president.</p> <p>1903: Part of a growing natural history literary genre, Jack London's <i>Call of the Wild</i> is published to popular acclaim.</p> <p>1890s</p>  <p>In his "Frontier Thesis," historian Frederick Jackson Turner argues that taming and interaction with wilderness were essential in forming the unique American character and democracy.</p>	<p>1906: Antiquities Act passes, allowing the government to restrict certain uses on federal lands.</p> <p>1913: Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite is dammed. Though a loss for preservation, it helped galvanize the movement.</p> <p>1935: The Wilderness Society is founded by Bob Marshall, Aldo Leopold, and others to advocate for wilderness protection.</p> <p>1949: A year after his death, Leopold's <i>A Sand County Almanac</i> is published, clarifying his "land ethic" and principles of ecology.</p> <p>1955: Wilderness advocates avenge Hetch Hetchy by defeating the proposed Echo Park Dam at Dinosaur National Monument.</p> <p>1900s and '10s</p>  <p>The Industrial Revolution, urban life, and an increasingly mechanized society pushed people farther and farther from their agrarian roots. A growing number began to seek out natural lands as places of solace and restoration.</p>	<p>1913: Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite is dammed. Though a loss for preservation, it helped galvanize the movement.</p> <p>1935: The Wilderness Society is founded by Bob Marshall, Aldo Leopold, and others to advocate for wilderness protection.</p> <p>1949: A year after his death, Leopold's <i>A Sand County Almanac</i> is published, clarifying his "land ethic" and principles of ecology.</p> <p>1955: Wilderness advocates avenge Hetch Hetchy by defeating the proposed Echo Park Dam at Dinosaur National Monument.</p> <p>1920s and '30s</p>  <p>Born of a wealthy New York family, Bob Marshall argued persuasively throughout the 1930s—until his untimely death at age 38—to have portions of the national forest system designated as roadless areas.</p>	<p>1949: A year after his death, Leopold's <i>A Sand County Almanac</i> is published, clarifying his "land ethic" and principles of ecology.</p> <p>1955: Wilderness advocates avenge Hetch Hetchy by defeating the proposed Echo Park Dam at Dinosaur National Monument.</p> <p>1930s and '40s</p>  <p>Ansel Adams and other artists brought to the public's attention the grandeur of Yosemite, the Sierras, and other untamed lands, reinforcing growing sentiment for protecting the nation's remaining wilderness areas.</p>	<p>1955: Wilderness advocates avenge Hetch Hetchy by defeating the proposed Echo Park Dam at Dinosaur National Monument.</p> <p>1950s</p>  <p>Facing suburban sprawl and the threat of nuclear annihilation in the 1950s and '60s, a growing number of Americans turned to wilderness as places to escape and recreate.</p>
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of the 1890s, “With a considerable sense of shock, Americans...realized that many of the forces which had shaped their national character were disappearing.”

The first half of the 20th century would do nothing—this is an understatement—to dispel those worries. Forests continued to fall, entire rivers were rerouted or drained for economic development, the dust from what was once the Great American Prairie blotted out the sun and stained the streets of New York City. But a conservation ethic began to flower, too, in response to those disasters and excesses. It would take time—and more trouble—for that to come to full bloom.

When the American economy began to take off after World War II, a nation of outdoor people suddenly found themselves with the time and mobility to take to their woods and fields and rivers. The automobile was king, and the country was in motion, with bountiful natural wonders to see and experience. But there was plenty to see that was disturbing, too.

It was a time of roaring factories, increasing pollution, and urban and suburban sprawl that devoured the rural landscapes cherished, if taken for granted, by many Americans. Over it all hung the threat of the Cold War. For wilderness historian Rick Potts, who spent a 35-year career managing wilderness areas in the West, this complex intersection of Amer-

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ican history, a booming economy, and the Cold War explains a lot about how the 1964 Wilderness Act came about. “When you read Roderick Nash, he says that in order to understand why you need wilderness, you first have to have civilization,” Potts says. “Well, we had plenty of civilization by the mid-1950s. At that same time, we had two civilizations that hated each other, both of which had the power to actually destroy the planet.” A natural American reaction to both a bustling, growing nation and the threat of nuclear annihilation, Potts says, was to seek solitude and peace in our last remaining wilderness areas, and to make sure they endured.

AS FREE AS JIM BRIDGER

And endure they have. Even as the population of the United States has, like that of the world, more than doubled over the past half century, we’ve held on to some of the wildest landscapes left on the planet. The solitude and peace that our parents and

grandparents sought and found in the American wilderness is just as plentiful now as it was in 1964. The self-reliance that Turner and Roosevelt worried that we would lose is still highly valued, and those of us who venture into wildernesses still have it. At a time when accessing big game on private land is becoming increasingly difficult, a hunting license, some time, and boot leather are all that’s required to reach trophy elk and mule deer country where we can roam and camp at will, almost as free as Jim Bridger or Daniel Boone. Fantastic fishing, backpacking, wildlife watching, and more exist only a few miles from wilderness area trailheads. It’s as good as it has ever been, there for anyone who will simply walk to reach it. Those with the will to do so can enter a world of raging rivers, snow-fed wildflower meadows, vast and ancient forests, yawning desert canyons—a world of peace and solitude and indisputable danger, where wolves howl, grizzly bears brawl over mates, and

one false step can easily be your last. What other nation on earth can boast of such abundant access to so much liberty? What other nation on earth would even come up with that idea, much less pass a law like the Wilderness Act?

It’s been some time since I last saw the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, though I’ve been lucky enough to hunt or fish or just wander all over Montana, from the Anaconda Pintler and the Absaroka-Beartooth to the Scapegoat, which is closest to where we live now. My wife and I have fed our son and

daughter on the cutthroats and elk of the Bob Marshall, the huckleberries of the Great Burn (proposed wilderness), and the pure wild freedom of the mountains in those and other wild areas. Both son and daughter are on the very brink of being able to walk us into the ground, to leave us behind in their own hunting and seeking. They’ll be self-reliant and strong, as wilderness requires.

The decades to come will challenge those of us who love wilderness, as this country’s population expands and the short-sighted few demonstrate a shameless willingness to sell

our birthright, won by the vision and hard work of Americans who came before us. But if the past is any guide, the United States will never go down that ugly path. Instead, we will cherish the gift of America’s wilderness, nurture it where needed, and expand it where possible and practical. In that likely future, my children, and their children and countless others of those generations, from all over the world, will celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, on some whitewater creek, in some far valley, to the music of bugling elk and screeching gray jays. 🐾



RED BUTTE, THE CHINESE WALL, AND SWAN PEAK SEEN FROM PRAIRIE REEF LOOKOUT IN THE BOB MARSHALL WILDERNESS. PHOTO BY DEE LINNELL BLANK.

1956: Sigurd Olsen publishes *The Singing Wilderness*, popularizing the wild canoe country along the Minnesota-Ontario border. 1964: Wilderness Act passed. 1976: National Forest Management Act passed. 1980: Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act passed, adding 56 million acres of wilderness to the system. 1983: Lee Metcalf Wilderness added to southwestern Montana. 2009: Omnibus Public Land Management Act passed. 2014: 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act.

1950s and '60s

1970s and '80s

1990s and '00s

TODAY



Pennsylvanian Howard Zahniser, head of The Wilderness Society for 20 years, was the main proponent of the Wilderness Act, which he first wrote in 1956.



After nine congressional hearings, 6,000 pages of public testimony, and 66 revisions, the Wilderness Act is signed by President Johnson on September 3, 1964.



The Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009 added two million acres to the National Wilderness Preservation System, mostly in Idaho, Oregon, and California.



Many Montanans support designation of new wilderness in Montana. Currently two bills are before Congress that would add the first new wilderness acreage to the state since 1983.

Join the MWA's September Celebration

Throughout 2014, the Montana Wilderness Association is celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act at dozens of sites across the state. The festivities culminate in a celebration in Seeley Lake on September 5–7.

The free event, open to the public, includes hikes, tours, activities, speakers, and entertainment. The Mission Mountain Wood Band will play on the night of Saturday, September 6, in the park near Lindsey's Prime Steak House. All ages are welcome.

Throughout the weekend, guides will lead hikes to nearby Morrell Creek, Girard Grove, Glacier Lake, Crescent and Heart Lakes, Crystal Lake, Lake Dinah, Sunday Mountain, Rumble Lakes, and more.

The event also includes free tours of Pyramid Mountain Lumber, a look at the U.S. Forest Service's Nine Mile pack string, a special viewing of the Forest Service's movie *Untrammelled*, and songs and stories from "Montana's Blackfeet Troubadour," Jack Gladstone.

For more information, visit the Montana Wilderness Association website at wildmontana.org or contact Laura Parr at lparr@wildmontana.org or (406) 443-7350 ext. 110.

