

## **Protecting America's Pristine Wildlands**

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It's a pleasure to be here today to speak to you. I'd like to thank Bill Meadows for inviting me. I commend the Wilderness Society for providing this opportunity for a dialogue about protecting our Nation's few remaining pristine areas.

Aldo Leopold once said, "Wilderness is a resource which can shrink but not grow." Today, we have the technical means to create almost any landscape. We can turn wilderness into timberland, timberland into farmland, and farmland into a shopping mall. And, as 60 years of successful restoration of cutover forests and farmed-out croplands in the Great Lakes and Southern States demonstrate, we can even restore a forest ecosystem. We can use the restored wildland for recreation, for science, for wildlife. But, as Aldo Leopold knew, we might never again use the land for wilderness, not within our lifetimes, not even within the lifetimes of our great-great-grandchildren.

Why? Because when we begin to put permanent features on the land, features such as roads and buildings, we change the character of the land. We begin to tame it; to shape the land to our liking, to make it do our bidding. And what was there before—that ineffable wildness that is beyond our control, where we are but visitors—might be gone forever. The land is complex—so complex that we are only beginning to understand all its components and their interrelationships. It's difficult to restore what we don't fully understand—the original wilderness, a condition we didn't create. And even if we could restore the land to its original condition, after we've found other uses for the land, it's very difficult to find the will to restore its wildness.

That's why we need to protect our remaining lands without roads and other development. Where are we today, and where do we need to go? I'd like to highlight a few of our achievements in the wilderness movement, then look to the challenges ahead.

### **Wilderness Accomplishments**

The writer A.Q. Mowbray once said, "The measure of a modern industrialized nation can be taken by observing the quality of its works in the two extremes of its environment—cities and wilderness." We are here partly to take stock of one of those measures—wilderness. How has our Nation fared?

In four centuries, we have lost most of the original American wilderness. We have actually paved more acreage in this country than we have designated as wilderness! The love of wilderness and the tragedy of its loss are common threads in early American literature. Both are driving themes in James Fenimore Cooper's famous *Leatherstocking Tales*, for example. Henry David Thoreau is famous for his wildland walks through the Massachusetts countryside. The solitude he found was balsam for his soul. "In wildness is the preservation of the world," he proclaimed.

In 1860, the artist Frederick Edwin Church painted the masterpiece “Twilight in the Wilderness.” He inspired a generation of artists in the so-called Hudson School to celebrate the sublime beauty of the American landscape in their paintings. Thoreau’s book *The Maine Woods*, published in 1864, called for establishing “national preserves” in virgin forests, “not for idle sport or food, but for inspiration and our own true re-creation.” George Perkins Marsh, in his 1874 book *The Earth as Modified by Human Nature*, gave the first systematic analysis of the human impact on the environment. The book laid the foundation for the modern conservation movement.

Despite early calls for wilderness conservation, the rate of wilderness loss accelerated with the expanding frontier. In 1909—less than a century ago—Aldo Leopold could still rejoice in experiencing, as he put it, “wild country to be in” out West, where “there were grizzlies in every major mountain mass.” That’s no longer true in the lower 48 States. Leopold well understood the threat to our remaining wilderness areas—the “blank spots on the map,” as he called them. He worked tirelessly to exclude roads and grazing use permits from the Gila River headwaters. His efforts paid off—in 1924, the first wilderness was designated, the Gila Wilderness on the Gila National Forest.

At about the same time, Arthur Carhart—another Forest Service employee—was also working for wilderness protection. In 1926, partly thanks to his efforts, another area was designated for special protection. Today, we know it as the Boundary Waters Canoe Area on the Superior National Forest. That same year, in 1926, Forest Service Chief William Greeley initiated the first inventory of roadless areas. The inventory was limited to areas larger than 230,400 acres. The Forest Service identified 74 such tracts, totaling 55 million acres.

By the 1930’s, the wilderness movement was off the ground. But Forest Service regulations for designating and managing wilderness areas remained weak until 1939. That’s when Bob Marshall—yet another Forest Service employee—drafted much tougher regulations for protecting wilderness areas.

Aldo Leopold and Bob Marshall, joined by a few others, founded the Wilderness Society in 1935. By 1964, with support from the society, the Forest Service had set aside 9 million acres of wilderness. But there was something missing: a common standard of wilderness management. Also, because wilderness designations received only administrative protections, the next administration could reverse them. Wilderness was far from secure.

In the 1940’s and 1950’s, roads were needed to penetrate America’s last remaining wildlands for timber supply to support our troops during World War II and, later, to help realize the American postwar dream of owning a single-family home. Millions of acres of wilderness were lost. But people like Howard Zahniser led a movement to give wilderness permanent protection through an act of Congress. The wilderness movement laid the foundations for wilderness as we know it today. In 1964, the Wilderness Act created the National Wilderness Preservation System. As Congress so poetically proclaimed in the memorable words of Howard Zahniser, principle author of the Wilderness Act, a wilderness is “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”

Leopold, Marshall, Carhart, Zahniser—we are privileged to enjoy the benefits of their foresight.

Of all of the natural resource management laws, the Wilderness Act remains my personal favorite. It has a soul, an essence of hope, a simplicity and sense of connection. Unlike the jargon-filled tomes of most laws, the Wilderness Act says in a very few words that what we have today is worth preserving for future generations. That in a world of compromises, insincere gestures, and half measures, there are lands and waters where we will not allow expediency to override conviction.

Since 1964, the National Wilderness Preservation System has grown from 9 to 105 million acres. Today, we have more than 650 wilderness areas in 46 States—thanks to the visionaries who still inspire us, and thanks also to your hard work! Without you, their vision would never have become a reality—without the many agencies, private citizens, and organizations whose contributions to wilderness protection have been so vital over the years.

### **Wilderness Advocates**

In spite of our many gains, I remain concerned about the future of wilderness. We live in a society dominated by high-tech gadgetry that makes our lives easier, even as we are further removed from our wilderness heritage. In a world of technological innovations that know no bounds, who will speak for the wild places—for the natural landscapes that yearly give way to parking lots, urban sprawl, our insatiable consumption of natural resources, and other indicators of what too many view as “progress.”

So as not to appear to lecture you, I will speak to the Forest Service. Too often, from 1950 onward, we allowed our commitment to multiple use—a commitment that has helped fulfill the American dream of home ownership—to imply that we couldn’t be “for” wilderness without being “against” multiple use. Many accused us of only arguing for the protection of “rock and ice” as wilderness, leaving the prairie, old growth, and other more “productive” ecosystems open to development.

Happily, I see that trend changing. In North Dakota, for example, in the draft grasslands plan for the Little Missouri Grassland, Regional Forester Dale Bosworth and Grasslands Supervisor Larry Dawson recommended that 22,000 acres be designated as wilderness—the first national grasslands wilderness ever to be proposed by the Forest Service.

Dozens of other Forest Service wilderness advocates have my highest respect and admiration for their wilderness ethic and leadership. The word “advocate” has fallen out of fashion as a term for describing Forest Service employees—we spend so much time seeking to balance advocacy positions on so many issues. But when it comes to wilderness, I expect us to serve as the leaders, the stewards of the wilderness resource—developing proposals for new wilderness and advocating the management of existing wilderness.

In a society that prides itself on recognizing no limits to development, it takes courage and conviction to simply say, “Enough. This land is okay as it is. In fact, it is essential that it remain unchanged except through the hand of Mother Nature.”

I have been working with my staff to determine how best to enhance and reinvigorate our commitment to the wilderness resource. Our draft wilderness strategy is a start. I have also considered creating a new staff that would focus on management of wilderness and other special areas. This would make clear our commitment to the wilderness resource and demonstrate that wilderness provides much more than recreation opportunities. There are good arguments for such a shift, certainly any resource that comprises nearly 20 percent of the National Forest System merits special attention.

At the same time, I am impressed by the commitment to the wilderness resource on the part of Denny Bschor and Jim Furnish, our wilderness and recreation leaders in the Forest Service's Washington Office. I intend to make a decision in the next few months, but first I want to hear from you, from our wilderness rangers, and from the many other wilderness advocates in the Forest Service. Regardless of its organizational orientation, however, wilderness—and targeting more funds to hire more wilderness rangers—remain among my highest priorities.

### **Wilderness Values**

Today, the National Wilderness Preservation System accounts for about 5 percent of the land area of the United States. That might not sound like much, and in fact it's not nearly enough. But the scarcity of wilderness makes it all the more precious. We need what wilderness can give us.

Wilderness provides us with clean water and air. Wilderness provides habitats for plants and animals, including a refuge for endangered species; all too often, wilderness is their last, best hope for survival. Wilderness provides a reference for evaluating the effect of management activities on soil, water, air, and ecological processes. Wilderness provides solitude, a refuge from the noise and traffic that plague us in our daily lives. Wilderness provides scenic beauty, a place for quiet reflection on what it means to be alive. And let's not forget—wilderness provides economic benefits to communities through tourism and recreation, and to society at large through clean water and clean air.

But there's something else we need from wilderness, something only it can give, something that makes it unique: Wilderness is key to our cultural heritage. Other, older peoples have their ancient myths and traditions, their glorious architectures, their classical literatures. We have our wilderness. Wilderness is part of the American spirit, the American character, the American legacy. It's part of who we are as a people. The writer Wallace Stegner put it well: "We need wilderness preserved," he said, "...because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed. The reminder and the reassurance that it is still there is good for our spiritual health even if we never once in 10 years set foot in it."

### **Challenges Ahead**

What can we do today to protect our remaining pristine areas? We at the Forest Service are making a start. Here's some of what we're doing:

- Wilderness protection requires planning. In revising our forest plans, we must specifically look for areas suitable for wilderness designation. Eighteen percent of the National Forest

System is already wilderness; we must consider more. We need millions of additional acres of wilderness. In particular, we need to extend wilderness protection to lower elevation ecosystems—to bottomlands, to prairie, to karst, to old growth.

- We can't plan for wilderness protection without first knowing what's out there. The latest technology can help. We just released a wilderness database application called Infra-WILD. Using Infra-WILD, wilderness managers have everything they need at their fingertips—information on land history, recreational use, grazing use, and much more.
- Wilderness should be consistently managed across jurisdictional boundaries. We are making steady progress toward our goal of a seamless national wilderness management.
  - Working with leaders from the Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Dr. Perry Brown has formed a panel to assess the National Wilderness Preservation System. Dr. Brown's panel has met twice and is preparing a report on the status of wilderness management under different Federal jurisdictions. The report is due in January 2001.
  - In May 2000, we held a Wilderness Summit in Washington, DC, to discuss a range of wilderness issues. More than 100 attended from various agencies and organizations. Their comments and concerns will be reflected in the Brown panel report.
  - We established the Interagency Wilderness Policy Council, including senior leadership from the Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and USGS Biological Resources Division. The council met at the Wilderness Summit and is preparing a blueprint for consistent wilderness management across jurisdictional boundaries. Based on the recommendations in the Brown panel report, the council will modify and implement the blueprint.
- Wilderness protection happens on the ground, at the local level. Last year, I formed a Wilderness Advisory Group of employees at every level and from every region. This group of 10 members informs and advises me on how to build a solid, interdisciplinary wilderness program that is effective in the field and connects with the American people. The group played a key role in developing our wilderness agenda, called "Thinking Like a Mountain." The draft agenda formulates strategies for addressing key areas of wilderness management. Because so many here and across the country played such an integral role in the helping to establish our wilderness system, I am asking for your help in improving and finalizing, our, your, wilderness agenda. After the agenda is reviewed and adopted, the Wilderness Advisory Group will help put it into action.
- Wilderness provides a baseline for determining our Nation's environmental health. We are integrating wilderness monitoring into our long-term surveys, such as our Forest Inventory and Analysis program. We are also forming a wilderness monitoring committee under the guidance of Dr. Peter Landres of the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Institute.
- Wilderness is an American endowment. It along with all other public lands are part of your birthright as citizens. The American people are welcome in their wilderness—but we must all recognize the benefits of wilderness and enjoy the land consistent with wilderness values. We put together a task force of wilderness managers and researchers to develop our strategy for wilderness recreation as part of our draft wilderness agenda, "Thinking Like a Mountain." Our objective is to help people enrich their lives, find inspiration, and discover wonder in

their wilderness areas. If we are to maintain wilderness values, we must also protect it from overuse. Maintaining the character and integrity of the wilderness resource is an essential component of our draft agenda.

Much work remains. Too often, we focus exclusively on how to add more wilderness to the system. We forget the difficulties we face in managing the wilderness we already have. The management challenges are daunting—air quality, water quality, recreation use, invasive species, fire management—the list goes on and on. I know you will continue to advocate the proposal of additional wilderness, and so will we. But with notable exceptions, such as former Forest Service employee Bill Worf, too few focus on the challenges of managing the existing wilderness system. I am asking for your commitment to help us maintain the high wilderness standards we have set for ourselves.

Today, more vigilance than ever is needed. We are entering times that will truly test our ability to protect America's wilderness. In the next few decades, America's growing population will spread even farther into the wildland/urban interface. What will that mean for America's wilderness? Consider: Forest fragmentation has doubled in 16 years, partly because 7,000 acres of open space are lost every day. People are demanding more and more space to live in, to work in, to play in. Unless we begin to do something now, we could see our most vulnerable lands—our wildlands—gradually eroded away.

That's why we are acting now to increase protection for our last remaining roadless areas on our national forests and grasslands. These lands comprise some 43 million acres in our lower 48 States, about 22 percent of the land in our National Forest System. Although many roadless areas might never qualify for full wilderness protection, they supply some of our cleanest water in largely undisturbed landscapes of scenic splendor. As refuges for rare and endangered species, they form important biological reserves. They provide abundant recreation opportunities in settings similar to wilderness—opportunities that are easier to manage than actual wilderness recreation. They are a precious national resource that we must not—and, as long as I am on this watch, will not—lose.

Theodore Roosevelt once stood on the rim of the Grand Canyon and said, "Leave it as it is. The ages have been at work on it and man can only mar it." The same can be said about every remaining acre of American wilderness. Our challenge is to lead in the way that Roosevelt, Leopold, Marshall, Zahniser, and so many of our wilderness rangers have led and still lead. These men and women help inspire in us all the awe and reverence, the love for the land—the feelings that alone can ensure the conservation of our wildland heritage.