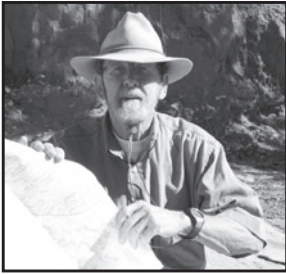


# A Letter to my Friends in Wilderness

By George Duffy

*Ed. Note: George Duffy, long-time wilderness ranger, steward and activist, was recently diagnosed with Mantle Cell Lymphoma, and told he has but a few months to live. He penned this letter which he generously shared with Wilderness Watch and many of his friends and colleagues.*



As my life comes to a close, I feel compelled to express my gratitude to those of you who have journeyed

together with me in wilderness and contributed to my understanding of wilderness and subsequently of myself.

I hope you will indulge me a few moments as I try to share with you what I have learned on our journey together.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 marked a turning point in America's attitude toward wild places. It was an acknowledgement that wild places were not only coming under the plow and the paving machines, but that their loss by such means was accelerating and would soon lead to a society impoverished by the loss of the fundamental relationship between humans and the lands which defined them.

The language of the Act is like few other laws we have enacted. It reads more like poetry than law and evokes an emotional response which invites introspection and envisioning of a future expressive of our concern for restraint and accommodation of other life forms.

This, in contrast to a precise formulaic law, was the genius of the Act's principle author, Howard Zahnizer.

He fixed the concept of wilderness in our minds rather than just in law or on a piece of real estate and compelled us to look for and understand the characteristics of wilderness in our lives as well as in our landscapes.

The Wilderness Act will challenge and enrich scholars, legal experts, wilderness managers, and wilderness advocates for as long as there is wilderness.

We can only hope that the spirit which created this awareness of our place in the

natural order prevails in our thinking.

For, as Joseph Wood Krutch said, "Wilderness is the permanent home of the human spirit."

Upon passage of the Wilderness Act, the Forest Service developed management policy and direction to administer this new National Wilderness Preservation System — Forest Service Manual Section 2320. It consisted of 34 pages. Today it is 55 pages and in the process of being revised.

When you hold that Forest Service Manual Section 2320 in your hands, you hold a precious symbol of the Forest Service's commitment to America's wilderness — one which is being challenged by all manner of argument.

Within the agency, there are those who are impatient with the idea of the minimum tool and craft arguments to justify the use of chain saws, trail machines, jackhammers, helicopters, and other expedients for the sake of convenience or economy.

There are those who are wedded to the idea of mitigating the challenges of wilderness by constructing improvements, identifying and removing hazards, writing detailed guidebooks, and publishing detailed maps.

There are those who feel that the existing definition of wilderness may be inappropriate to an evolving social conscience rooted in technology, urbanization and speed and that management must be modified to reflect those changing social values.

There are those who feel that human intervention in natural processes within wilderness is necessary when those processes don't fit their perceptions of what is natural.

There are those who hold an anthropocentric rather than biocentric view of wilderness and accordingly suggest that accommodation for human use,

rather than preserving an untrammeled wilderness resource, be the paramount consideration when shaping wilderness policy.

Outside the agencies, there are those who, in their eagerness to see more public lands gain the protection of wilderness, have agreed to legislative provisions which compromise the wilderness quality of the very lands they wish to preserve as wilderness.

There are those who think of wilderness as beautiful landscapes or wildlife sanctuaries or recreation areas rather than as places which integrate the enduring physical, biological, and spiritual dynamics of an untrammled part of the earth.

The authors of the Wilderness Act held no such views.

They were keenly aware that there were but few remnants of the landscapes which had shaped the American character and they wanted to ensure that these were preserved in the condition of wilderness which confronted and influenced our early pioneers.

They knew that wilderness had to remain a point of reference in both our natural and cultural histories, an enduring benchmark for our journey through time and space, unchanged by human intervention and subject only to natural forces.

They knew that wilderness was an indispensable part of our humanness and was critical to our understanding our place in the universe.

Today, the American public can be grateful that you have been vigilant and stood shoulder to shoulder with the dedicated group of wilderness advocates both within and outside the public land management agencies to assure that these challenges to wilderness are being resolved in favor of the philosophy so well articulated in the Wilderness Act.

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You are the stewards of America's wilderness and I want to speak to you of stewardship.

Webster's Dictionary defines a steward as: "One called to exercise responsible care over the possessions entrusted to him (her)" and "one who manages another's property."

I am extremely grateful to you for having chosen to be stewards of these lands. You have assumed a sacred trust, to be executed with reverence, humility, and a profound sense of responsibility.

You are not engaged in a business or delivering a product or providing a service or producing a commodity.

You are engaged in no less than preserving the nation's precious remaining repositories of wildness and guarding the permanent home of our human spirit.

Over the years, I have watched as the growth and complexity of the National Wilderness Preservation System have presented you with new stewardship challenges.

You have met those challenges with care and deliberation and resolved them with uncanny respect for the language and intent of the Wilderness Act.

Today, you can be proud that since the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964, which designated 9 million acres of Forest Service land as wilderness, the people of the United States have respected your stewardship and repeatedly petitioned the Congress to entrust to you the care of more wilderness areas. Their efforts have placed more than 109 million acres in your care.

You can be proud that the federal land management agencies have created the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center to provide training in wilderness philosophy and wilderness stewardship for federal employees.

You can be proud that the federal land management agencies have created the Aldo Leopold National Wilderness Research Center to conduct social and biological research to support and improve wilderness stewardship.

And you can be proud of your role in preserving that "enduring resource of wilderness" envisioned by the authors of the Wilderness Act.

As you enter another year of wilderness stewardship, please be as caring of yourselves as you are for wilderness.

Take the time to open yourselves fully to the dynamics of wild landscapes and their affects on your mind, body and spirit. Share your passions with your colleagues and the earth. Become fully alive.

These days you share with wildness are gifts you will treasure forever.

My fondest memories are of those times when nature's influences were most keenly felt:

Being picked up by a gusty ridge top wind and pitched through the air like a rag doll.

Huddled on the lee of a rocky summit during a storm and feeling hypothermia trying to rob me of my abilities.

Being carried along in the tumbling whiteness of an avalanche.

Walking out of the snow and ice of high mountains and again smelling the green of the earth.

Lying in a sunny meadow and sensing that all the spirits there were filling my being with strengths unknown and unknowable.

Sensing the unseen presence of the others in the landscape.

Feeling a timeless wisdom trying to order my thoughts to wholeness.

For most of us, our connection with wilderness is commonly understood to be primarily rooted in the cultural and aesthetic responses which evolved from the experiences of early explorers and settlers on the new landscapes of America.

We have recently discovered, however, that the underlying basis for our responses to wilderness goes deeper, much deeper.

Going to the wilderness is going home.

Anthropologists and others have been suggesting for a long time that we are still the wild creatures we were in the Pleistocene. We haven't changed. Only our circumstances have changed.

Paul Shepard, perhaps the most insightful scholar of the history and evolution of human ecology has written: "The discovery of the DNA by Watson and Crick was hailed for its implications for human health and well being. Soon it is expected we will be able to create the perfect banana or the perfect cow and clone it forever. We may soon be able to change the order of genes in our chromosomes to make us taller, thinner, stronger — maybe even less maladapted to our current circumstances."

But more importantly, the mapping of the human genome confirmed that, genetically, we are still wild Pleistocene creatures.

Finally, an answer as to why we feel so at home in wilderness.

Shepard declared that: "The home of our wildness is both etymologically and biologically wilderness."

Although we may define ourselves in terms of culture and language and so on, it is evident that the context of our being now, as in the past, is wilderness — an environment lacking domestic plants and animals entirely, and to which, one might say, our genes look expectantly for those circumstances which are their optimal ambience."

"The time is coming," he said, "to understand the wilderness in its significance, not as adjunct to the affluent traveler, to an educated, esthetic, appreciative class, or to thinking of nature as a Noah's Ark in all of its forms, but as the social and ecological mold of humanity itself, which is fundamental to our species."

To understand the significance of wilderness, we must take the time to separate culture from biology, learning from instinct, and to search deep

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within for those ancient gifts which truly inform our humanness.

I have but one request of you. Go. Find yourself in the wilderness. Be at home.

Let your genes once again find expression in the world that defined them.

Rejoice in your humanness.

You are a genetic library of gifts informed by centuries of life in wilderness.

Gifts from the experiences of antecedent creatures — ichthyian, reptilian, and mammalian which lie still in your brainstem.

Gifts from the struggles of the naked ape with neither fang nor claw who was able, not only to survive, but to adapt and flourish — simply and elegantly — in wild landscapes.

When we first walk into wilderness, we feel like alien creatures, intruding into the unknown, but if we stay a while, usually about a week, and pay attention to ourselves, those gifts become apparent.

We become aware that our eyes see better. We can pick things out in the landscape more keenly. We can measure distance more accurately, and shape, color, and contrast are vividly apparent.

Our noses discriminate and identify the odors on the wind. The smell of a bighorn is a lot different than that of a bear. There is a marsh upwind.

The sounds we heard on our first day came from a general direction but now our binaural senses are so keen we can almost pinpoint the source and distance of a sound and identify it.

The awkwardness we first felt when moving over broken ground has been replaced by a fluid economical rhythm of movement that seems almost effortless.

Our spine flexes, gathering and releasing energy. Our pelvis tilts, our center of gravity is keenly felt, and we are again those confident primal animals on the landscape.

We sense our relationships with the other creatures with whom we share these landscapes, relationships which reaffirm our humble role as members of the vast community of life.

These are not new skills learned, they are ancient abilities recalled — pulled from the shelves of that genetic library deep within our being.

As we peer into campfire flames, the comfort of thousands of fires, in thousands of caves, over thousands of years, warm us from the inside as well from the outside.

The diminuendo of the Canyon wren and the raucous scolding of the Stellar's jay invite our hearts to sing.

The warmth of the sun and the snap of the cold affirm that we are alive, and vulnerable.

The mountains, the deserts, the storms

and the rivers challenge our cunning and demand our respect.

The vastness of the landscape humbles and fixes us in scale.

As we lie on the earth in the evening, the march of Orion across the heavens fixes us in time.

We are still those Pleistocene creatures — at home and full of the wonder of being.

This is the wildness in our genes, found manifest in a simple, bipedal hominid, surrounded by a peace that transcends time, and in a place we shall always need — wilderness.

Thank you.  
George Duffy, Wilderness Ranger  
(Retired), Mountainair, New Mexico

*George was raised on a subsistence farm in the shadow of the Adirondack Mountains in New York State. His early years were spent close to the earth forming a lifelong passion for things wild and free. After service in the Navy, George attended college under the GI Bill and explored majors from engineering to environmental studies, finally leaving Pitzer College after being mentored by Paul Shepard who helped him define the wilderness ethic that would shape his work. George served the U.S. Forest Service from 1986 to 2003, first as a firefighter and then as Wilderness Ranger, and Wilderness Program Manager. Throughout his life he has been an avid mountaineer and mountain rescue team member. George was a member of the first Region 5 Wilderness Excellence Team and later selected as the Region 5 representative on the Chief's National Wilderness Advisory Group. He lives in Mountainair, New Mexico, with his life mate Linda Filippi.*

