

For a United States Wilderness Service

— *By Michael Frome, PhD*

Wilderness is at the heart of our environment, as at the heart of our nation, as clearly manifest in the Wilderness Act of 1964. Unfortunately, the public has been led to believe by Congress, the federal agencies and national conservation organizations that once an area is designated as Wilderness, everything will be fine. In actual practice things don't work that way, except in news releases. Over the years I have been to Wildernesses all across this country, but I haven't seen a single one managed as it should be in fulfillment of the letter or spirit of the Wilderness Act.

I've seen Wildernesses in terrible condition, abused and degraded, often as not by uncontrolled and inappropriate recreation, getting worse rather than better, staffed by inadequate personnel inadequately trained. What's the point in establishing a Wilderness with a sensible boundary if it's not to be wild on the inside? If you ask me, the shabby state of our Wilderness today is not a reflection of good forestry, good park practice, good wildlife management, good rangeland management, or good resource education.

Yes, there are able people at work, but they do their best against heavy odds. Plenty of agency personnel are geared for commodity production — timber, forage, minerals, oil and gas - and I have no quarrel with that. But the attention agencies pay to Wilderness is minuscule and holds little meaning. That holds equally for the National Park Service as for the other agencies. Though allegedly free of commodity pressures, park personnel are concentrated where crowds and commercial concessionaires are located, while wild country is neglected.

Now is the time for a serious new beginning that evokes life and breath into the National Wilderness Preservation System. We need to go beyond the chronic tokenism and to cut across agency borders by establishing a new agency, to be called the United States Wilderness Service. Let it be noted that no agency is responsible for a coordinated approach, or to project Wilderness preservation beyond the scope of federal lands, though people everywhere crave to save the remaining primeval fragments. Since we pay people in government to serve mining, grazing, timber and other interests of commodity production, why not underwrite a cadre of men and women mandated to fulfill the public's Wilderness cause?

The Wilderness Service would undertake many missions now unmet, which the agencies are either unwilling to perform or incapable of performing.

It would prepare and publish a periodic inventory of the Wilderness now reserved and survey opportunities to protect additional units by all levels of government.

It would delineate the diverse values of Wilderness, of specific ecological types, show how they can be saved, and report on threats to them.

The Wilderness Act has furnished the technique for preservation of large tracts of federal land. Some states have developed their own initiatives from that foundation. Now there is

need to identify and to provide firm statutory protection for smaller tracts in urban areas still relatively untouched. Determining how this can best be done would be another function of the Wilderness Service.

The agency would be deeply involved in research covering ecology, economics, utilization and human impact. Federal resource agencies have conducted some studies in these fields, but they cannot yield an ultimate understanding because their approach is too narrowly directed and the efforts of their few Wilderness-oriented personnel are circumscribed.

One subject demanding study and interpretation involves natural fire, the wild force of nature. Too often the definition of fire suppression and fire use objectives within Wilderness has been abdicated to fire managers. Determining how much fire can and should be allowed in a valid preservation system is a major challenge requiring extensive research and dialogue beyond current bureaucracy and politics.

The Wilderness Service would also try to assess how much human use an area can absorb without being destroyed. The population explosion has come to the Wilderness, and with serious impacts of hiking and camping on alpine flora, and of pack animals on meadows, trails and campsites; of garbage disposal and its effects on the ecosystem; and disposal of human waste.

Determining carrying capacity may be the simplest aspect of use. How to impart to the visitor the sense of what Wilderness is all about is a deeper issue. The federal agencies do not do this, or do it poorly at most. How to use Wilderness as an educational document, as well as a recreational resource, so that Americans respect and appreciate the natural world around them would be a major focal point of the Wilderness Service.

The new agency should not administer land, but constructively evaluate the administration of Wilderness by the public land management agencies. It should be established by Congress as an independent agency, like the National Transportation Safety Board. The sooner that legislation can be introduced and congressional hearings conducted the sooner the condition of Wilderness will receive the attention it deserves and desperately needs.

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