

Recreation Threatens to Overwhelm the Wild

by Gary Macfarlane and Kevin Proescholdt

Some people believe that human recreation is the most important use or value of Wilderness. Congress passed the Wilderness Act, they argue, for the “use and enjoyment” of Wilderness by present and future generations. And many of us thoroughly enjoy our recreational experiences in units of the National Wilderness Preservation System.

While recreation is indeed identified as one of the public purposes of Wilderness in the Wilderness Act, the Act’s “prime directive” is to preserve the wilderness character of the Wilderness areas so designated. Recreation in Wilderness can be accommodated, of course, but only if it can occur while not interfering with preserving wilderness character.

Far from merely accommodating recreation where it does not degrade wilderness character, the National Wilderness Preservation System today is threatened by an onslaught of recreation, sometimes referred to as “industrial recreation” or “wreckreation”,

that threatens to overwhelm Wilderness with too much human recreation and associated impacts and abuse caused by overuse.

Many wilderness advocates, scientists, and public land managers have long recognized the threat that excessive recreational use poses for wilderness. Howard Zahniser, the 1964 Wilderness Act’s author, warned more than 50 years ago that wilderness can be threatened “from development for recreation.” He emphasized the need for humility and restraint in our dealing with wilderness. The 1978 edition of *Wilderness Management*, the definitive professional tome on wilderness management,

summed it up: “There is a real danger of loving wilderness to death.”

The Wilderness Act itself warned of overuse. It stated “that an increasing population” could destroy all wildlands. Hence the need for the act. The U.S. population is 137 million people more than it was in 1964, and world population has

more than doubled. Given the increased population, it’s not surprising to see corresponding pressure and impacts from recreational activities.

And we are witnessing the increased recreational demand, and seeing that recreational demands can inappropriately drive agency decisions on wilderness management. Take for example a small, fragile and unique rock formation in the Paria Canyon-Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness. This remote area straddling the Arizona/Utah border is managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). The agency is now



Paria Canyon-Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness, The Wave.

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President's Message



Some opportunities to have our voices heard occur regularly every four years. Others are less expected, yet we recognize them right away and are quick to take advantage of them. But sometimes we don't even realize that we missed an opportunity until it is too late.

Some of the most important choices we can make have begun to appear with disturbing frequency. They may not be as consequential as our election cycle, or maybe they are. For over 30 years Wilderness Watch has worked to keep people aware of and engaged in efforts to protect Wilderness. The amount of those lands has increased, but their value has also, to individuals and communities. And I would say that their value has increased much more than the number of acres added to our wilderness system. Along with a growing realization of how important these specially designated public lands are is the realization of the growing challenges in keeping them protected and treated as stated in the Wilderness Act of 1964.

Since the first 54 Wildernesses were designated in 1964 (with 9 million acres in 13 states), Wilderness has endured poor management practices, uninformed or special interest politics, and inappropriate commercial and recreational activities. Issues that Wilderness Watch is currently addressing and seeking solutions to in our National Wilderness Preservation System include livestock grazing, motorized intrusions, predator control, mining, border wall construction, and the huge influx of recreational visits overwhelming Wilderness and wildlife. How to keep up with these system-wide and localized issues? What are the opportunities that will allow us to correct these wrongs?

By following Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and other agency management proposals along with local, regional, state, and Federal legislation, Wilderness Watch provides comments to the managing and/or governing bodies, produces information for the public, and pursues legal options, if necessary, to thwart damaging and destructive actions. Wilderness Watch also provides citizens their opportunity to engage and help determine how our wilderness lands are treated.

In 2019, our members and supporters sent more than 500,000 letters and emails to Congress and agency officials on issues affecting Wilderness. We publish the quarterly Wilderness Watcher; an e-newsletter, the Guardian; and time-sensitive alerts that explain the policies or legislation being proposed and describe the reasons why these actions are acceptable or not according to the Wilderness Act. While we can give you facts and concerns, ultimately it is Wilderness Watch supporters and our readership who make the most significant contributions to protecting Wilderness, both existing and proposed. Thousands of us might respond to an alert, all based upon specific concerns or legal issues, but each of us has our own connection to the outdoors, to Wilderness, to desires to keep public lands in a condition that current and future generations will be able to appreciate and enjoy.

When I read a Wilderness Watch alert the first thing I do is find that piece of it that I relate to the most—maybe it is the wildlife at risk, a particular geographic area I visit, the assault by commercial exploitation, or the flagrant abuse of the law—but it is not difficult to find my words to object or support an action. Having the information gathered and presented to us clarifies and focuses why and how each of us can claim our right to give comments, to make our voices heard. How can 500,000 voices be ignored? Thank you, members and readers, for not letting these critical opportunities slip past without your voice. 🐾

—Louise Lasley



WILDERNESS WATCH
Keeping Wilderness Wild

The *Wilderness Watcher* is the quarterly newsletter of Wilderness Watch, America's leading conservation organization dedicated solely to protecting the lands and waters in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

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considering allowing 96 people per day to visit, which is more than a 400-percent increase from previous regulations. Due to the internet and other marketing of this Wilderness, including by BLM, that agency now claims the “increase in public demand dramatically underscores the need to consider increasing visitor access” to this part of the Wilderness. Really? Nearly a quarter of a million people wanted to visit the area in 2018. Does BLM seriously expect Wilderness can be maintained by allowing almost 100 people per day at one small, fragile feature? What ever happened to the management concern of loving wilderness to death?

In the Wildernesses of the Central Cascades in Oregon, the U.S. Forest Service (FS) has recently implemented a new visitor quota system to reign in recreational overuse. While some may say that the Forest Service could have avoided today’s high recreation levels by more pro-actively addressing visitor problems years ago, the current recreational overcrowding is still a problem today that needs to be addressed in some manner.

In the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Minnesota, the most heavily visited Wilderness in the nation, the Forest Service still allows motorized commercial towboats to drive into the canoe country to drop off canoeing parties deep within the Wilderness. Such use damages wilderness values, but the FS turned a blind eye to excessive towboat use until Wilderness Watch filed a lawsuit to get the agency to follow its own regulations limiting commercial towboat use in the Boundary Waters.

In the Yosemite Wilderness in California, scores of hikers at a time line up to climb up the backside of Half Dome. How can wilderness values like solitude and remoteness be preserved in the face of such swarms of people?

Wildlife too, is harmed by the lack of recreational restraints. It is not just motorized users, or even mechanized users, who displace and otherwise affect wildlife. Recent research suggests all types of trail recreation displace elk, including hikers and horseback riders (albeit less than mountain bikes and motorized vehicles). Other research documents an elk herd in and around Vail, Colo., whose numbers plummeted from 1,000 to about only 50 elk due to

trail-based recreation of all types. That herd could soon disappear altogether.

Even the sound of human voices affects wildlife, according to a study done by scientists in California. They found, “humans have supplanted large carnivores as apex predators in many systems, and similarly pervasive impacts may now result from fear of the human ‘super predator.’”

Decades ago, Aldo Leopold wrote that recreational development was not about building roads but “building receptivity into the still unlovely human mind.”

In spite of increased Wilderness use, there has been extensive hand-wringing by agency bureaucrats, politicians of both parties, and especially representatives of the recreation industry—even the nonmotorized segment which is often erroneously conflated with conservation interests.

They are worried about the future of outdoor recreation because of supposed declining interest by children. Of course, their answer is more marketing, access, commodification, outfitters, and fees. And more profiteering. Wilderness won’t likely be spared.

Recent bipartisan legislation to boost outfitting (and fees) on public land—going by innocuous terms such as “Recreation Not Red Tape” and “Simplifying Outdoor Access for Recreation”—portends a future of ever-increasing recreation on public lands pushed by the industry for which we all shall be charged and for which wildness, wildlife, and wilderness will all suffer greatly.

Decades ago, Aldo Leopold wrote that recreational development was not about building roads but “building receptivity into the still unlovely human mind.” His perceptive advice is still relevant today. For wilderness and all life forms in wild country to survive, we need humility and restraint in our wildland recreation. Indeed, those same qualities will be needed if we are to survive at all. ♪

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On the Watch

Fighter jet flights threaten multiple Wildernesses



U.S. Air Force Tech Sgt. Brian Ferguson

Wilderness Watch has been urging the U.S. Air Force to drop several proposals to expand military aircraft training over Wilderness. One proposal in the Owyhee Canyonlands of southwestern Idaho includes low-level flights by supersonic fighter jets known as F-15E Strike Eagles. Another proposal could send up to 10,000 F-16 fighter jet flights annually over the Gila and seven other Wildernesses in southern New Mexico.

There are more than half a million acres of Wilderness in the Owyhee Canyonlands—in the Pole Creek, North Fork Owyhee, Little Jacks Creek, Big Jacks Creek, Bruneau-Jarbidge Rivers, and Owyhee River Wildernesses. The area is important wildlife habitat for a variety of species, including greater sage-grouse, whose population is in steep decline mainly due to livestock grazing and mining. Bighorn sheep,

pronghorn, elk, cougars, badgers, river otters, raptors, rare snails, and threatened bull trout also live there.

An out-of-court settlement currently restricts low-level military overflights in most, but not all, of the Wildernesses in the Owyhee Canyonlands. However, it appears the military intends to abrogate the agreement and lift restrictions on low-level overflights in currently off-limits areas, despite the dubious legality of doing so.

Meanwhile, the Air Force is also proposing up to 10,000 F-16 fighter jet “sorties” a year over America’s first Wilderness—the Gila—and seven other Wildernesses in southern New Mexico—the Aldo Leopold, Apache Kid, Withington, Bosque del Apache, Sierra de las Uvas, Broad Canyon, and Robledo Wildernesses. It is also proposing to discharge 15,000 flares and 15,000 bundles of chaff annually.

Flares allegedly burn out far above ground level, but in documented cases of them being mistakenly released at low altitudes, they have reached the ground and ignited fires. Chaff bundles contain up to 5 million aluminum-coated glass fibers up to two inches long that settle to the earth after several hours of being airborne.

Such activity could shatter the area’s natural sounds, ruin the wilderness experience for visitors, and stress native wildlife.

The Air Force should follow Federal Aviation Administration guidelines to protect Wilderness by keeping overflights at least 2,000-feet above ground level, and use other, more appropriate locations for low-level flights by supersonic jets. In both the Owyhee and southern New Mexico proposals, the Air Force acknowledges its current airspace is adequate. 🐾

Citizen opposition could spare Cumberland Island



Jerome Walker

This past December, Camden County, Georgia announced an “indefinite” delay in the release of its final Environmental Impact Statement for its proposed commercial spaceport which would launch rockets over the Cumberland Island Wilderness, located just off the Georgia coast. In March 2019, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) released a draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) whose preferred alternative allows for 36 tests and 12 commercial rocket launches every year over the island’s north end—the location of the Wilderness.

Cumberland is the largest barrier island Wilderness in the East and a designated international biosphere reserve. Wilderness Watch has long opposed this rocket launching plan whose intrusion, noise, trash, and other impacts pose a major threat to the Cumberland Island Wilderness, and our members and supporters sent more than 50,000

emails urging decision-makers to reject Camden County’s ill-advised plan. We’ll keep you posted. 🐾

On the Watch (continued)

Nation's largest Wilderness Study Area deserves protection



Frank Kovalchek

At the end of October, Wilderness Watch filed a formal Objection to the new Final Land Management Plan for the Chugach National Forest in response to the Forest Service's seemingly intentional disregard for protecting the Nellie Juan-College Fiord Wilderness Study Area (WSA) that is part of the Chugach.

The Nellie Juan-College Fiord WSA in Alaska's western Prince William Sound is America's largest Wilderness Study Area, an ecological and scenic treasure of roughly 2 million acres of ancient rainforest, stunning mountains, sprawling glaciers, and meandering fiords laced with hundreds of remote islands. Not a single acre of Wilderness has been designated on the 5.4 million-acre Chugach National Forest, further elevating the importance of protecting the Nellie Juan-College Fiord WSA.

Unfortunately, the Final Land Management Plan for the Chugach fails abysmally to protect the wilderness character of the Nellie Juan-College Fiord WSA by:

- Downgrading protection for the WSA by protecting the undefined and meaningless standard of "presently existing character," rather than "presently existing wilderness character," which would allow never-ending degradation over time.
- Eliminating the use of the Minimum Requirements Analysis (MRA), a tool for protecting Wilderness. The MRA is supposed to analyze the impacts of management activities on an area's wilderness character, and although it's terribly weak and are often abused by the agencies, the MRA process is still better than nothing.
- Eliminating WSA protection for 100,000 acres of wilderness-quality lands that the federal government acquired as part of the settlement following the Exxon Valdez Oil Spill in 1989.
- Recommending only 1.4 million acres of the 2 million-acre WSA for Wilderness designation, when it should have recommended all qualifying lands in and adjacent to the WSA.
- Failing to protect Chugach National Forest roadless areas.

In January, Wilderness Watch participated in an objection resolution meeting with the Forest Service and later that month, the Forest Service responded to our Objection by denying nearly all of our concerns. The one silver lining is that the Forest Service will define the baseline character of the WSA within a year. Such a study will help conservationists hold the FS accountable for degradation of the WSA going forward, but of course will not measure the degradation that has occurred from 1980 until the present. 🐾

Okefenokee Wilderness spared from strip mine proposal, for now



US Fish and Wildlife Service

Facing significant public opposition and concerns from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Twin Pines Minerals of Alabama announced on February 10 that it was withdrawing its proposal for a massive, 12,000-acre titanium and zirconium strip mine on the eastern edge of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge in southern Georgia. The 354,000-acre Okefenokee Wilderness makes up almost 90 percent of the Refuge, and is one of the largest Wildernesses in the East. The Okefenokee Swamp is one of the world's largest intact blackwater swamp ecosystems, and provides important habitat for native wildlife such as black bears, American alligators, and red-cockaded woodpeckers.

Last September, Wilderness Watch members and supporters sent over 14,000 emails to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers urging them to reject the Twin Pines Minerals strip mine proposal. Unfortunately, Twin

Pines has said it's not abandoning the mining proposal and that a revised application is in the works. We'll need to stay vigilant to protect the Okefenokee Wilderness from this threat. 🐾

On the Watch continued on page 7

Wilderness in Congress

With the House of Representatives under the control of more wilderness-friendly Democratic hands, more action on wilderness bills has occurred there than in the Senate. Several wilderness or wilderness-related bills in Congress deserve mention. These bills include:

- **Voluntary Grazing Permit Retirement Act Introduced.** Rep. Adam Smith (D-WA) has introduced the Voluntary Grazing Permit Retirement Act (VGPR), HR 5737. The VGPR would provide federal public lands commercial grazing permit holders the option to relinquish their commercial grazing permits in exchange for market-based compensation paid by private parties. The managing federal agency would then be directed to permanently retire the associated commercial grazing allotment from any further commercial livestock grazing activity. This bill has the potential to eliminate livestock grazing and its harmful effects within Wildernesses as well as on other sensitive federal public lands. Wilderness Watch supports this bill as a part of our campaign to end commercial livestock grazing in the National Wilderness Preservation System. Look for more details about VGPR and other grazing-related issues in the next Watcher!

- **New Boundary Waters Bill.** On Jan. 14, Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN) introduced HR 5598, the Boundary Waters Wilderness Protection and Pollution Prevention Act. This bill would withdraw federal lands and minerals in the 234,328-acre Rainy River watershed in northeastern Minnesota from mineral exploration and development, to protect the 1.1 million-acre Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and Voyageurs National Park from mining pollution. The House Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources, part of the House Natural Resources Committee, held a hearing on this bill on Feb. 5. There is as yet no Senate companion bill for this important legislation.

- **"Clean" Wilderness Bills Advance.** On Jan. 6, S. 3076 passed the full U.S. Senate. This bill adds 1,000 acres to the Rough Mountain Wilderness on the George Washington National Forest in Virginia, plus creates a 4,600-acre Rich Hole potential wilderness addition on the same National Forest. The potential wilderness would be administratively transferred to full wilderness status upon completion of a watershed project that needs motorized and mechanized equipment. Virginia Senators Mark Warner (D) and Tim Kaine (D) pushed this bill in the previous Congress as well. This bill, an Agriculture Committee bill, supersedes S. 247 by Sen. Kaine, which made the same designations.

On February 12, HR 2642 (Kilmer, D-WA) passed the full House of Representatives as part of a broader package of wilderness bills. This bill would designate 14 new Wildernesses totaling 126,500 acres on the Olympic National Forest in Washington, plus one potential Wilderness of 5,346 acres, and 464 miles of Wild and Scenic Rivers.

S. 1382 (Murray, D-WA) is the companion bill in the Senate; the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee has not yet scheduled a hearing on this bill.

Both bills are free of the noxious special provisions found in so many other wilderness bills that weaken the protections for the Wildernesses they designate.

- **America's Red Rock Wilderness Act Reintroduced.** Sen. Richard Durbin (D-IL) and Rep. Alan Lowenthal (D-CA) have each reintroduced America's Red Rock Wilderness Act (ARRWA) in the 116th Congress as S. 3056 and HR 5775 respectively. The bills would designate more than 8 million acres of Wilderness in southern Utah.

In an interesting tit-for-tat after the introduction of Sen. Durbin's bill, Sen. Mitt Romney (R-UT) and Rep. Rob Bishop (R-UT) introduced S. 3075 and HR 5474 respectively, the Shawnee Wilderness Act. Their bills would designate 289,000 acres of Wilderness on the Shawnee National Forest in southern Illinois, apparently in retaliation for Sen. Durbin's leadership in introducing ARRWA over the many past Congresses. (It should also be noted that—even though neither Sen. Romney nor Rep. Bishop are known as strong wilderness supporters—the Shawnee Wilderness Act is free of damaging special provisions!) ☺

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Thank you!

The Bottomless Cup of Giving

By Jeff Smith



So much of what Wilderness Watch does arises out of immediate need. We must stop the baiting of bears in wilderness in Idaho and Wyoming, stop the new mines proposed upstream from the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Minnesota, stop the drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, and say no to helicopter flights, roads, dams, livestock grazing, and overcrowding in what seems like everywhere.

But we have also established a “Forever Wild” Endowment that focuses on the distant horizon. Donors can give specifically to this fund to preserve Wilderness for the long-term. It’s a perpetual gift to our organization and to Wilderness.

We preserve the principal of Forever Wild while using a portion of the earnings every year to support our work. It’s a bottomless cup of giving, year-in and year-out.

Our board of directors launched the endowment a little over a decade ago, and its balance has grown to over \$700,000, thanks to numerous donations and some very generous bequests. It’s a healthy stimulus for our entire organization.

Please let me know if you’re interested in a Forever Wild donation or a bequest. 🌿

On the Watch (continued from page 5)

Blows to mines threatening the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness

Two mines threatening America’s most visited Wilderness—the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness in Minnesota—face new setbacks. On January 13, the PolyMet Mine was dealt a blow by the MN Court of Appeals which reversed three permits, ordering the MN Department of Natural Resources to conduct additional review. The PolyMet Mine is an open-pit copper-nickel mine that could send polluted water northward into the Boundary Waters watershed, but would also more likely pollute the Saint Louis River and Lake Superior.

The federal spending bill (signed into law at the end of December) dealt a blow to the Twin Metals Mine, ordering a new study on the mine’s effects on the watershed. Twin Metals dwarfs PolyMet in size, and would be located all within the BWCAW watershed and nearly next door to the famed canoe country Wilderness. 🌿

Where walking in Wilderness is no longer free



Owen Jones via Flickr

People shouldn’t be charged for simply walking in the Wilderness, but that’s what the Forest Service will be doing in the Mount Jefferson, Mount Washington, and Three Sisters Wildernesses in the Oregon Cascades, starting this May. The agency announced in early February that a day permit would be \$1 and an overnight permit would be \$6, per person, per day. This is a decrease from the agency’s original proposal of \$4 to \$11 per person, per day—which the public strongly opposed.

The fees are tied to the agency’s limited-access permit system for the area. Wilderness Watch supports quotas to protect Wilderness areas from being over-run by people, but visitors should not have to pay a fee to visit Wildernesses which belong to us all. 🌿



WILDERNESS WATCH

Keeping Wilderness Wild

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Grizzlies returning to the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness



Grizzly, reportedly just north of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness boundary in Idaho. Photo obtained from US Fish and Wildlife Service

Over the past few years, grizzly bears have been making their way back to the Selway-Bitterroot Ecosystem along the Montana and Idaho border, an area that provides critical connectivity between the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem and Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem surrounding Glacier National Park.

Grizzlies will continue to make their way back to the vast, wild country of the Selway-Bitterroot, if we let them. But will they survive there? Unfortunately, national forests and Wildernesses on the Idaho side of the Selway-Bitterroot Ecosystem are littered with bait stations—literally garbage dumped in the woods—used by hunters to lure unsuspecting black bears so they can be shot.

Wilderness. The Forest Service once regulated bear baiting practices on national forests, but in the 1990s it delegated control to the states. At least eight grizzly bears have been shot and killed over bait piles in national forests in Idaho and Wyoming since 1995, including, in 2007, the first known grizzly to inhabit the Bitterroot in more than 50 years. At least two of the grizzlies confirmed to be roaming in the Selway-Bitterroot Ecosystem in recent months were photographed at bear baiting stations.

This ongoing death-trap for grizzlies is unacceptable. When the Forest Service changed its policy to allow state control of bear baiting practices, it did so under a legal agreement that any killing of grizzlies would require the agency to re-evaluate the program. Now, after multiple grizzly bear deaths, it's long past time for the Forest Service to prioritize protecting this threatened native species by ending state control of bait stations on federal public land. That's why Wilderness Watch, Western Watersheds Project and WildEarth Guardians filed a lawsuit in federal court to stop the killing of grizzly bears at bait stations. ♪