Wilderness areas have seen increasing incursions from the air this year, including illegal landings of aircraft, increasing agency use and reliance on helicopters for routine work, and low-flying and landing aircraft that destroy quiet and solitude.

The 1964 Wilderness Act prohibits the landing of aircraft in Wilderness. The airspace above designated Wilderness does not have any formal protection from low-flying aircraft, with the exception of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) in Minnesota. That area benefits from a 1949 executive order by President Harry Truman, who prohibited aircraft flying below 4,000 feet mean sea level, or about 2,000-2,500 feet above the ground. The Federal Aviation Administration has a general guideline encouraging pilots not to fly below 2,000 feet above designated Wildernesses, but that guideline is not in statute or enforceable.

In May of this year, two horsemen in the Bob Marshall Wilderness in Montana encountered a couple that had landed their helicopter on the South Fork of the Flathead River to do some fishing. The couple claimed that they were legal, since they had landed their helicopter on a sandbar below the high-water mark. The horsemen disagreed, the conversation turned heated, and the horsemen snapped a cell phone photo of the couple with their helicopter that they shared with the U.S. Forest Service. The couple was later identified as Sara and Samuel Schwerin of Bozeman, MT. The Forest Service appeared reluctant to follow up on the incident, despite pressure from Wilderness Watch and an on-line petition of over 13,000 signatures to issue stiff penalties for such blatant violations of Wilderness by this privileged couple. The couple did make a public apology through a public relations firm after they had been identified, making the new claim that they didn't know where they were when they landed. Even in cases where this could be true, it is always the pilot’s responsibility to know the location at all times. The Forest Service ultimately issued a $500 fine to Samuel Schwerin, which he paid, but that was just a slap on the wrist for someone with such wealth.

But the federal agencies that administer Wilderness are just as guilty of using helicopters in Wilderness for routine work. The Forest Service itself is a top offender. A case in point is the Forest Service’s recent decision allowing helicopter access to Canyon Lake in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness in Montana. There, the Forest Service is authorizing 32 helicopter flights to
Once again, the Wilderness Watcher informs us of multiple issues that need to be addressed in our Wilderness areas—proposed mining adjacent to the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, concerns about how a new Forest Plan could affect America’s first Wilderness, expanded hunting in the Cabeza Prieta and Kenai National Wildlife Refuges, detrimental bills currently being considered in Congress, plus dams, old buildings, and more.

But an eye and mind honed during this time of shelter-in-place, social distancing, and seemingly endless days and nights of constrained opportunities to “be normal”, might also notice the broad scope of geography that these protected lands cover—mountains, deserts, swamps, close to urban centers or in the middle of nowhere. And while the purpose of Wilderness Watch is to ensure that Wilderness is properly administered as directed by the Wilderness Act and other federal laws, this newsletter also illustrates the expanse and diversity of the National Wilderness Preservation System our country has put into place over many years. These diverse lands are available for our exploration, and provide solitude and escape from everyday life.

Solitude might not be on the top of our personal lists right now as a way of escaping this overwhelming world. We have been isolating and staying within homes and narrow neighborhood boundaries for months now. The reach of the pandemic is as vast as the borders of our country, as vast as the blue sphere we call Earth. And we are left to appreciate our Wildernesses and other public lands through memories and dreams for future trips. Being able to step outside and experience the pleasures of wild landscapes, birdsong, wildlife, and even wind and rain, can bring us into a place refreshing and beautiful even if only for its reflection of normalcy.

Even the Center for Disease Control recommends we spend time outdoors. While it’s worrying that the data shows that many Americans do not have easy access to such opportunities to visit our public lands, those that do may be fueling a growing and worrying impact.

Twice within the last couple of months I have visited regional public lands. I was surprised at how each of those trips made me feel. I did not realize how starved I was for the simple experience of being outside, camping and hiking, listening to all the sounds that accompany open spaces removed from traffic, hustle, and crowds. And I am not alone. Our parks and forests are being overwhelmed right now by people in as much need as I am for the outdoors.

Unfortunately, not everyone is holding these lands with the same high regard as our laws envisioned or is necessary for their continued sustainable existence. And just the sheer numbers of people visiting our public lands, stressing wildlife, leaving evidence of their visit in the form of trash and human waste, and otherwise crowding once quiet places, is painful to see.

This issue of the Wilderness Watcher details how some of our land management agencies have failed to uphold their responsibility to properly and legally steward Wilderness. Our cooped-up times can frustrate us. We should not have to consider ourselves among those who have failed in our role in protecting our Wildernesses. I think that right now, more than ever, we can recognize how important these lands are, the protection they need, how necessary they are to our wellbeing. We want to look toward a future where they are still wild, and where we will be able to enjoy the solitude they provide.

—Louise Lasley
Aircraft (continued from page 1)

haul equipment and materials for an irrigation company to repair a private dam in the Wilderness. This small dam, which was located at the stream outlet of a natural lake, was built decades ago without the use of motorized equipment. Horses and human muscle power did the work. When the dam was rebuilt in the early 2000s, the work was again largely done the same way. That’s how it’s supposed to be in Wilderness.

Once a proud defender of Wilderness, the Forest Service has largely abandoned its commitment to doing things the Wilderness way. It’s become cavalier in its approval of helicopter use in Wilderness and dismissive of the impacts of such intrusions, essentially sacrificing wilderness values and traditions for convenience, as evidenced not only at Canyon Lake, but also numerous others in the Bitterroot canyons. Helicopters are replacing the pack string, and chainsaws are replacing the crosscut.

And the Forest Service is not alone among the federal agencies in repeatedly choosing helicopters over wilderness values.

In the Daniel J. Evans Wilderness in Olympic National Park, the National Park Service (NPS) seems to be finally making the right decision to remove the old Enchanted Valley Chalet on the East Fork Quinault River. The chalet was constructed by a private entity, has never served a necessary purpose for wilderness protection, and is once again close to being undermined by the ever-moving river channel. After dragging the deteriorating building 100 feet away from the river in 2014 at a cost of well over $100,000, the river has now cut to within about five feet of the building once again. The NPS now proposes the right decision for Wilderness—to get rid of the building.

But, typical of the NPS, it proposes to use a massive number of helicopters to accomplish the task. The NPS plan calls for 99 helicopter flights to haul in hydraulic jacks and power tools, generators, scaffolding, tools, chainsaws, ladders, and more to dismantle the structure, then even more helicopter flights to haul out the tools, I-beams, and non-burnable materials like the chimney and stove.

Such a massive helicopter invasion is unnecessary, and would degrade the Wilderness. Helicopters weren’t used to build the chalet in 1930, and no doubt they aren’t needed to remove it. The Park Service should burn what is burnable and pack out the rest using horse, mule, or human power.

Yet another degradation of Wilderness from aircraft comes from the existence of remote airstrips within Wilderness. These airstrips bring noise and intrusions right to the ground deep within some Wildernesses. In Idaho, for example, some aircraft pilots and the State of Idaho are insisting the Forest Service repair and maintain four abandoned landing strips (meadows) in the Big Creek drainage. The Forest Service had plans to close them and restore the sites in accordance with the 1980 law that designated the area, but the agency has dragged its feet for 40 years, thanks to pressure from pilots and Idaho’s Republican Members of Congress. To make matters worse, the notoriously anti-wilderness State of Idaho is building new airstrips in that same region on holdings of state-owned land not subject to the federal Wilderness Act, which will only increase plane traffic to this remote Wilderness.

Aircraft use in Alaska presents a particular challenge that will be addressed at another time. Suffice it to say that while airplane use has been a common way to access much of the Alaskan wilderness and Congress made special provisions for airplanes in the 1980 law that designated Wilderness in the state, the proliferation of aircraft coupled with advancing aircraft technology threatens to profoundly degrade the wildest places left in North America.

Two bills have been introduced in Congress to address at least some of the problems posed by aircraft above and in Wilderness. Sen. Steve Daines (R-MT) introduced S. 4028 after the Schwerin’s illegal landing in the Bob Marshall Wilderness earlier this year. This bill would increase the maximum penalty for unauthorized landing of aircraft in designated Wildernesses in the National Forest System to $20,000 and/or six months of jail time. This bill has been referred to the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee.

Rep. Ed Case (D-HI) has also introduced HR 4547, the Safe and Quiet Skies Act, the best wilderness protection bill to be introduced in nearly three decades. This good bill holds out the promise of protecting natural sounds and quieter airspaces in designated Wildernesses and other natural areas. HR 4547 will prohibit air tours above National Parks, National Wildlife Refuges, and Wildernesses. The ban would extend to lands within a half-mile from the edges of these natural areas. Furthermore, HR 4547 would help protect natural sounds everywhere by imposing a minimum flight altitude—of 1,500 feet above ground—for commercial air tours wherever they are allowed.

Wilderness Watch will continue to fight to protect the National Wilderness Preservation System from intrusions by aircraft. The quiet, solitude, and wildness of these special areas deserve no less. ☮️

Kevin Proescholdt is the conservation director for Wilderness Watch.
**On the Watch**

**The Kenai should be a refuge for wildlife**

The Trump administration is proposing new regulations to open the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in Alaska to brown bear baiting, to eliminate federal restrictions on trapping, and to expand snowmobiling, mountain biking, and ATV use in a significant part of the Refuge.

The 1.9 million-acre Kenai National Wildlife Refuge is the most visited national wildlife refuge in Alaska, and includes the 1.3 million-acre Kenai Wilderness, a great diversity of wildlife, stunning scenery, and world-renowned salmon runs.

Wilderness Watch urged the Fish and Wildlife Service to drop its plan to cater to the agenda of trophy hunters and state wildlife managers by allowing brown bear baiting, to end trapping on the refuge rather than loosen restrictions, and to not expand the areas where snowmobiles, bikes, and ATVs are allowed, but instead maintain habitat security for wildlife and improve security where it is currently compromised.

The proposed rule makes a mockery of the area’s importance as a refuge for wildlife and has no place in wildlife management on the Kenai NWR or in the Kenai Wilderness. FWS instead needs to administer the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge for the conservation purposes for which it was established.

**Growing threat from e-bikes**

Wilderness Watch is opposing Bureau of Land Management (BLM), National Park Service (NPS), and Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) rulemaking to open up our federal public lands to electric bikes, or e-bikes. All trails open to bikes would now be open to these motorized bikes, and although individual managers can close individual trails to e-bike use, most will be loathe to do so. These rulemaking efforts are being made to implement Secretary of Interior David Bernhardt’s Secretarial Order from August 2019 on this topic.

Like all recreation, e-bikes displace wildlife. Because they travel farther and faster than hikers or equestrians, they can impact a much greater area in the same amount of time. They also have a very asymmetrical impact on foot travelers, who are often seeking a quiet, contemplative, non-motorized and non-mechanized experience and are disrupted by a machine racing by. But beyond these direct impacts to nature, a significant segment of the mountain biking community has become one of the most ardent opponents of wilderness designation and, more significantly, is pushing to open existing Wildernesses to bikes. That will presumably include e-bikes if they’re treated like non-motorized bikes on public lands.

The proposed rules have the potential to affect millions of acres of public land, and pose significant problems for wildlife, other trail users, and protected areas like Wilderness.
On the Watch (continued)

Protect America’s first Wilderness

The Forest Service (FS) should strengthen wilderness protections in its draft Gila National Forest plan revision rather than seek to weaken existing protections. Specifically, the FS should maintain untrammeled conditions, implement weed prevention measures (which have proven to be more effective than herbicides) instead of resorting to herbicides for weed control, permanently close vacant livestock grazing allotments, and require commercial outfitters to abide by group and stock size limits like every other wilderness visitor. The plan covers the Blue Range Wilderness, plus the Gila and Aldo Leopold Wildernesses in New Mexico, which were part of America’s first Wilderness.

Don’t flood the Holy Cross Wilderness

Wilderness Watch is opposing a proposal that would flood and destroy 500 acres of the Holy Cross Wilderness near Vail, Colorado, the end result of a proposed dam. The Holy Cross Wilderness is over 123,000 acres of rugged mountains, glacier-formed valleys, spruce-fir forests, cascading streams, and dozens of lakes, all above 8,500 feet.

In late June, we urged the FS to drop its proposal to issue a Special Use Permit (SUP) for the Whitney Creek Geotechnical Investigation Project. The purpose of this drilling project is to determine the feasibility of building a dam, though the agency is trying to pretend the drilling permit is separate from the intended damage to the Holy Cross Wilderness. In our comments, we asked the Forest Service to deny the request for the Special Use Permit, and to instruct the promoters of this project that they need to design a project that does not violate the Wilderness Act or other federal laws.

Taking the destructive route

Wilderness Watch is urging the National Park Service to drop its plan to land helicopters and use motorized equipment to remove a bridge and construct a trail and tent pads in the Stephen Mather Wilderness within North Cascades National Park in Washington. The Park Service is proposing to use helicopters and motorized tools to remove girders from a former bridge, to construct permanent tent pads, and to reroute 1,500 feet of trail, all while failing to analyze other alternatives. All of the proposed work can be easily be completed with human, horse, or mule power, and the Park Service can designate tent camping sites without constructing the permanent structures it is proposing. Even the bridge girders can be cut up and then removed by non-motorized means. The work, none of which is necessary to protect the Stephen Mather Wilderness, needs to be completed without degrading Wilderness.
Wilderness Watch is urging the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to drop its proposal to expand hunting in the 860,000-acre Cabeza Prieta National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) in southern Arizona. The refuge includes the 803,000-acre Cabeza Prieta Wilderness, the largest national wildlife refuge Wilderness outside Alaska. The proposed changes include:

- Allowing previously prohibited predator hunting—including mountain lions, badgers, coyotes, bobcats, gray foxes, kit foxes, ringtails, and spotted skunks—despite having no population estimates.
- A near doubling in visitor use and corresponding impacts to wildlife, solitude, and the desert’s fragile plants and soil.
- Year-round hunting for certain species, such as cottontail rabbits, two species of jackrabbits, and Eurasian collared doves. Expanded hunting season (241 days) for bobcats, ringtails, badgers, and kit and gray foxes.
- While the Fish and Wildlife Service documents are not explicitly clear, they lead one to believe the Service would allow motorized or mechanized access into Wilderness for bighorn sheep hunters, despite the Wilderness Act’s prohibition on such use.

Wildlife in the Cabeza Prieta NWR is already stressed by a myriad of problems such as ongoing drought in the southwest, long-term climate change, and President Trump’s border wall construction that is ripping apart the refuge’s southern border with Mexico and blocking critical wildlife migration routes. Now is not the time to further stress wildlife by increasing hunting and allowing more visitor use.

The Trump administration has dropped its proposal to reintroduce grizzly bears in the North Cascades of Washington state. Although Wilderness Watch was opposed to the reintroduction plan (which included helicopter use within Wilderness), we have and will continue to advocate for restoring healthy grizzly bear populations in the North Cascades in a way that protects and enhances the area’s wilderness character and that also minimizes the human handling and harassment of the bears. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, and the state of Washington can and should allow for and promote natural recovery of grizzlies, which would require working with British Columbia to protect grizzlies over a larger land base, and would provide for connectivity via protected habitat corridors. It would also include other measures to ensure that grizzlies are not killed by humans, regardless of what side of the border they are on and regardless of whether they are in national parks, Wilderness, or other public or private lands.
Massive prescribed fire plan includes the Powderhorn Wilderness

In June, Wilderness Watch joined others in submitting a formal Objection to a Bureau of Land Management (BLM) plan to conduct prescribed burns on up to 20,000 acres of public lands in southwestern Colorado over a 15-year period, including within the Powderhorn Wilderness and Wilderness Study Area. The 62,000-acre Powderhorn Wilderness is a high-elevation landscape that claims one of the largest unbroken expanses of alpine tundra in the Lower 48. The Powderhorn Wilderness Study Area (WSA) comprises another 51,000 acres of wilderness quality public lands.

The proposal describes a plethora of activities entirely incompatible with Wilderness, including helicopter landings, the use of chainsaws, and the application of drones to conduct prescribed burns in high-elevation spruce-fir forests. The project’s stated purpose, to “return timber stands to an earlier successional development stage,” does nothing to protect Wilderness, and such manipulation is entirely antithetical to the letter and spirit of the Wilderness Act. The BLM needs to drop its ill-conceived proposal to conduct prescribed burns in the Wilderness and WSA.

Restoring Wilderness in Olympic National Park

The National Park Service (NPS) has proposed to remove the Enchanted Valley Chalet from the Daniel J. Evans Wilderness in Olympic National Park in the state of Washington. While this is a good move on the part of the NPS, Wilderness Watch is encouraging the NPS to remove the old building in ways that protect the Wilderness and meet the ideals of the Wilderness Act, rather than its plan for 99 helicopter flights to haul in hydraulic jacks and power tools, generators, scaffolding, tools, chainsaws, ladders and more to dismantle the structure, then even more helicopter flights to haul out the tools, I-beams, and non-burnable materials like the chimney and stove.

Such a massive helicopter invasion is unnecessary, and would harm the wildness of this Wilderness. No doubt helicopters weren’t used to bring in the materials to build the chalet, and no doubt they aren’t needed to remove those same things. The Park Service should burn what is burnable and pack out the rest using horse, mule, or human power.

On the Watch (continued)
Another Victory for Izembek, Alaska

In our last issue, we told you we started a third round of litigation in a decades-long battle over the construction of a road through the heart of the fabled Izembek Wilderness. King Cove—an Aleut town on the far side of the Wilderness that is home to Peter Pan Seafoods cannery—has long pushed for a road to “link together two communities having one of the State’s premier fishing ports/harbors (including North America’s largest salmon cannery) in King Cove with one of the State’s premier airports at Cold Bay.” Previously, a court upheld then-Interior Secretary Sally Jewell’s decision to forgo this road construction due to “significant degradation of irreplaceable ecological resources” and because there are viable transportation alternatives for reaching King Cove. However, with a new administration, Interior did an about-face and ushered through a closed-door land exchange to facilitate the construction. We challenged that exchange in federal court and won. Interior then sealed another closed-door land exchange to push construction through. So, we sued again. And, on June 1, we won again. In both cases, the court found that Interior illegally disregarded its prior findings.

The latest court ruling is an important victory for the Izembek Wilderness—a wild and remote stretch of land where a quarter-million migratory birds—including nearly every Pacific black brant, Emperor goose, and Steller’s Eider in the world—congregate each fall. Izembek is known internationally as a Wetland of International Importance. It is home to massive brown bears, with as many as nine per mile lumbering through its streams during peak summer salmon runs. Later in the year, the bears retreat to their dens in the steep slopes of the world-renowned Joshua Green River Valley as nearly 7,000 caribou make their annual trek into the Wilderness, overwintering until spring takes them north once again to their calving grounds. Hundreds of sea otters swim with their young in the Lagoon, occasionally in the vicinity of migrating orcas, gray whales, and minke whales. Izembek is a hub of natural diversity and wilderness, protected in large part because of its seclusion and lack of surrounding development. We’ll never stop fighting to keep it that way.

Victory in the Owyhee River Wilderness, Idaho

In July, Wilderness Watch and Western Watersheds Project challenged the Bureau of Land Management’s (BLM) renewal of the Simplot Livestock Grazing Permit in and around the Owyhee River Wilderness. The allotment was failing to meet several standards for rangeland health under current usage, and the permit renewal would greatly exacerbate the degradation. Despite this, BLM authorized a three-fold increase in grazing from current use, the construction of new fencing, and motorized access for a range of routine activities, including herding and salt distribution. In addition to the harm that these activities pose to Wilderness, the area also contains nearly a quarter-million acres of rare, ecologically critical habitat for sage-grouse and high-value habitat for other native wildlife like pygmy rabbits, Columbia spotted frog, redband trout, bighorn sheep, pronghorn, and mule deer. We appealed BLM’s authorization before the Office of Hearings and Appeals and just received word that BLM is pulling the authorization and reassessing the permit. This appeal is part of our long-running commitment to protecting the unique wilderness landscapes of the Owyhee Canyonlands.

Fighting Bear Baiting in Idaho and Wyoming

In an ongoing lawsuit, Wilderness Watch, along with Western Watersheds Project, WildEarth Guardians, and Western Environmental Law Center, challenged bear baiting on National Forests in Idaho and Wyoming. While other states have banned bear baiting, Idaho and Wyoming continue to allow it, even in Wilderness. For decades, the Forest Service has allowed Idaho and Wyoming to regulate black bear baiting with the assumption that risks to threatened grizzly bears would be low and none would be killed. That has been far from the case. The syrup-laden junk food piles have, not surprisingly, attracted dispersing grizzly bears, including a male grizzly who was killed over a bait pile in the roadless Kelly Creek drainage just north of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness in Idaho. He was the first grizzly known to inhabit the area in over half a century. And he, unfortunately, has not been the only grizzly to meet an avoidable death over a bait pile.

In the last year, more grizzlies have been making their way to the Salmon-Selway-Bitterroot ecosystem in Idaho—one of the largest contiguous blocks of federal land in the Lower 48, that includes the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness, and the Gospel Hump Wilderness. The area provides some of the best grizzly habitat around and also provides an important linkage corridor connecting grizzlies in the Greater Yellowstone ecosystem with those in the Northern Continental Divide ecosystem. The Kelly Creek griz rekindled this ancient path and now, after decades of persecution and eradication, others are following. Our suit aims to help them along their way and is a complement to other lawsuits geared toward protecting the Great Bear, including a recent federal court victory blocking grizzly bears living in the Greater Yellowstone region from being delisted from Endangered Species Act protection.

Wilderness Watcher • Fall 2020
Let’s Keep Some Digital Blank Spaces on the Map

In an age of digital enclosure, the wilderness should remain free from connectivity

By Jason Mark

During this season of pandemic, I have felt, more than anything, a sense of claustrophobia. Like most everyone, I’ve also experienced fear, anxiety, and frustration. My dominant feeling during the months of sheltering in place, however, has been that of being trapped. I’ve wanted to get away, but with parks closed and trailhead parking lots locked, many of my usual escapes to the outdoors haven’t been as available.

The ideal of the away—a desire to preserve some natural areas as a retreat from civilization—has long been the backbeat to the rhythm of conservation. In his famous “wilderness letter,” the author and environmental activist Wallace Stegner wrote, “Even when I can’t get to the back country, the thought of [it] . . . is a positive consolation. The idea alone can sustain me.” When Stegner wrote those lines, in 1960, he was primarily concerned about the threat posed to wildlands by the bulldozer and the automobile. Today, the wilderness areas of our national parks face a new, distinctly 21st-century threat: the steady creep of cellphone connectivity and social media into the outdoors.

As Christopher Ketcham reports in “Wiring the Wilderness”, the National Park Service is permitting the construction of new cellphone towers in parks across the United States. During the few instances in which the Park Service has solicited public feedback on cell-site proposals, the reaction has been overwhelmingly negative. When staff at Yellowstone took public comments for a new cell tower, the majority of respondents were opposed, and some people “objected to any wireless coverage for visitor convenience.”

One of the signature virtues of the wilderness is that it serves as a bulwark against the industrial domination that characterizes so much of the planet. The borders of a wilderness are a wall against the chainsaw, the earthmover, the wheel in any form. But a cellphone signal easily vaults over that barrier. When it does, the newfound connectivity jeopardizes the experience of the wilderness as a place apart from civilization. A backwoods retreat is no getaway if you’re tempted to upload some selfies to Instagram (see Katie O’Reilly’s “Welcome to the Insta-Sphere”). When you can get a signal everywhere, there’ll be no more away. And we need the away more than ever in this age of digital enclosure in which Big Data tracks our every preference, purchase, and political opinion.

Maybe the concerns about connectivity in the wild are just the grumblings of curmudgeons. In hindsight, every generation’s gripes about technology can seem small-minded. When the first automobiles were allowed into Yosemite Valley in 1913, John Muir complained that the “blunt-nosed mechanical beetles . . . mingle their gas-breath with the breath of the pines and waterfalls.” Muir may have been mostly right—the midsummer traffic jams at many national parks are a disgrace of poor planning. There’s one crucial difference, however, between a car and a cellphone: While the first takes you to a wild place, the second lures you away from it once there.

It’s true that you can always leave your phone at the trailhead; or, if you use your device for the maps, the compass, or the camera, you can leave it in airplane mode. But the temptation to search for a signal will still be there. Which is precisely why the conservation movement should commit to defending wildlands from high-tech connectivity. Keeping the wild free from telecommunications follows on the same idea that has always guided preservation: We exercise collective restraint because we’re not very good at individual self-control. Just as an intact forest provides people with an opportunity to enjoy wild nature, a fully disconnected landscape affords the opportunity for unbroken solitude. So let’s keep some digital blank space on the map, places where we know we can—in good times and in bad—get away from it all.

Jason Mark is the editor of Sierra magazine and the author of Satellites in the High Country: Searching for the Wild in the Age of Man. This article appeared in the July/August 2020 edition of Sierra with the headline “Wired for Away.”
After 14-and-a-half years crewing the good ship Wilderness Watch, I’ve climbed those steep stairs to the ship’s deck for the last time. It’s been a privilege and an adventure.

Retirement. I’m surprised and I have a lot of mixed feelings about it. Am I old enough? What’s next? Death?

But I’m joyful to recapture my own time and to ease back into my own research and writing. I’ve got a big garden, an old “rancho deluxe” by the lake, and I’ve already taken up painting! (Carol says the first wall of the house looks really good.)

I was a brand-new teenager when America found its better self and established the National Wilderness Preservation System. It was as audacious an accomplishment as establishing the world’s first democracy, its first national park, our national forests, wildlife refuges, and thousands of public landscapes protected from commercial development. Our commonwealth.

It strikes me as I leave that culture is fragile. It’s a belonging, a sharing of common experience and expectations, an envelope that, in the best of times, secures us. We’ve never seen such a purposeful fragmenting of our culture as we’re seeing now: nameless federal troops attacking demonstrators, a leader who wants to call off an election and is actively disrupting mail-in ballots, and has botched controlling a pandemic that experts say will have killed half million Americans before the next inauguration.

It will be difficult to repair our culture. Beliefs, ideals, customs, and laws are being shattered. We are despondent and disorganized as powerful entities have wormed their way into federal agencies to take advantage of our shock in order to weaken environmental protections and plunder our Earth’s remaining natural resources.

We need anchors right now to hold us fast in this swirling chaos. Wilderness Watch is one of these. It’s lean and mean, tough, with years of experience, and this crew doesn’t back down. It picks battles carefully with an eye to strengthening the Wilderness System and reinforcing the Wilderness Act. Why? Because Wilderness Watch understands that our kids and grandkids—not to mention the wild critters—need wildlands.

I know I will be supporting Wilderness Watch for years to come. How about you?
Hi, my name is Brett Haverstick, and I am your new Membership and Development Director. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to work for Wilderness Watch (WW) and on behalf of our cherished National Wilderness Preservation System. In Wilderness we trust.

Prior to getting hired this summer, I served 10 years as the Education and Outreach Director for Friends of the Clearwater, a forest watch group based in Moscow, Idaho. I have a Masters in Natural Resources and a graduate certificate in Environmental Education from the University of Idaho, and a Bachelors in Parks & Recreation Management from Northern Arizona University. I was born and raised in New Jersey, which is also home to the 6,600-acre Brigantine Wilderness and the 3,600-acre Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge Wilderness. Parts of New Jersey are wild once you get off the Turnpike!

Besides learning all the new software, databases, foundations, spreadsheets, websites, social media channels, passwords, and the myriad of other things that come with this position, I want to get to know YOU. You are the most important thing to me because you make our organization go, you make our organization powerful, and your efforts ensure that Wilderness remains wild for present and future generations. There is no Wilderness Watch without you. We are in this together, and for the foreseeable future, we are going to have to out-work, out-organize, and out-maneuver everyone and everything that threatens the integrity and composition of the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Don't be afraid to pick up the phone, and tell me why you are a member of Wilderness Watch, or how we can do a better job of serving the needs of our membership. Don't be surprised if I call you and thank you for your recent donation, or call to ask how you are doing, and what issues affecting Wilderness you are most concerned with. You can reach me at bretth@wildernesswatch.org.

Lastly, I want to thank long-time Membership and Development Director Jeff Smith for training me with a smile and always offering words of wisdom, encouragement, and inspiration. I will never fill Jeff’s shoes—then again, Jeff wouldn't want me to do that. Instead, I’m going to work hard to find my voice in this one-of-a-kind organization. Thank you for having me, and let’s get to work.

Send us your stories

We’ve launched a new platform, called “Wilderness Experienced,” to share your story of a recent experience in one of our nation’s Wildernesses. Stories can focus on the virtues of Wilderness, including the opportunity for solitude, discovery, spiritual renewal, physical challenge, wildlife viewing, and more, or things you found troubling, that just didn't seem right in Wilderness and represent the challenges facing the National Wilderness Preservation System.

We suggest a length up to 750 words. Include one or two images from your trip, as well as an author photo. Wilderness Watch will review all submissions and reserves the right to decide which submissions get posted. Please send your story to info@wildernesswatch.org. Please do not submit travelogues or writing aimed at directing people to specific places in Wildernesses or trailheads. Thank you!

Check out Wilderness Experienced by visiting our website (wildernesswatch.org).
Wilderness in Congress


The House of Representatives passed the NDAA on July 21 with a package of wilderness bills it added to the NDAA earlier this year known as Preserving America’s Wilderness (PAW). This package includes:

- Colorado Wilderness Act—600,000 acres of new wilderness designations.
- Northwest California Wilderness, Recreation, and Working Forests Act—261,000 acres of new wilderness designations.
- Wild Olympics Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers Act—126,000 acres of new wilderness designations in Washington.
- Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy (CORE) Act—73,000 acres of new wilderness designations.
- San Gabriel Mountains, Foothills and Rivers Protection Act—31,000 acres of new wilderness designations in California.
- Central Coast Heritage Protection Act—250,000 acres of new wilderness designations in California.
- Desert National Wildlife Refuge amendment sponsored by Rep. Steven Horsford (D-NV) that protects the refuge from a proposed expansion of an Air Force bombing range.

While these potential new additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System look good on first blush, most of these bills are also larded up with harmful special provisions for the Wildernesses they would create, providing less protection than that provided for in the 1964 Wilderness Act. These special provisions include:

- Legalizing permanent fixed climbing anchors.
- Bad wildlife provisions that, among other things, authorize motor vehicles and aircraft for wildlife management.
- Allowing installation and maintenance of weather stations.
- Legalizing construction and maintenance of wildlife water structures (“guzzlers”).
- Allowing competitive equestrian and running events.
- Prohibiting buffer zones around Wilderness, so development can occur right up to the wilderness boundary.
- Preventing any regulation of military overflights above Wilderness.

The wilderness provisions of PAW are NOT found in the Senate version of the NDAA, and Senate Republicans appear opposed to allowing these non-germane wilderness provisions to be attached to the NDAA. A House-Senate conference committee will need to iron out differences between the two versions. Stay tuned! 🌿