

Cube Cove and what it means to be "Wilderness"

How do you restore a 23,000-acre landscape scarred by massive clearcuts and 200 miles of logging roads? In many cases, the answer would be to roll in with bulldozers and other machines, rip out culverts and bridges, and re-contour abandoned roads. But what if those lands are part of the million-acre Kootznoowoo Wilderness, where the letter and spirit of the law call for a different approach than earth-moving machinery and massive human intervention?

That's the challenge presented by the "Cube Cove" lands recently purchased by the federal government on Admiralty Island in southeast Alaska.

Background

Kootznoowoo is a world-class Wilderness, even by Alaska standards. It's part of the largest intact temperate rainforest on the planet, with its coastal forests of towering Sitka spruce and western hemlock. The island as a whole has both hundreds of miles of shoreline and mountains that reach over 3,000 feet. It's home to all kinds of wildlife but is particularly noted for having one of densest populations of nesting bald eagles and brown bears in the world.

The conservation history of Cube Cove dates back at least a half-century. Under the 1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, Congress "settled" the land claims of indigenous peoples in Alaska with a cash payment, and by creating a dozen regional native corporations and dozens of local village corporations which were allowed to select 45.5 million acres of land from the public domain to be used to benefit the indigenous residents.

In the 1970s, the native Shee Atiká Corporation from Sitka selected three consecutive valleys of old-growth forest bordering Cube Cove on Admiralty

Island. Because of controversy surrounding this selection, including opposition from the local native village in Angoon, Congress codified the Cube Cove selection as part of the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA). Shee Atiká's land selection totaled about 22,890 acres of the over one-million-acre island. ANILCA designated nearly the entire rest of Admiralty Island and its smaller surrounding islands—over 970,000 acres—as Wilderness. In 1990, Congress re-named the Wilderness as Kootznoowoo, meaning "Fortress of the Bears."



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President's Message



If you go to the Wilderness Watch website, you will find issues of the *Watcher* that date back to 2004. Each issue describes some of the work being done at that time to protect the National Wilderness Preservation System. Our site also has an overarching and historical look at the Wilderness Act and what it means. Our goal at Wilderness Watch is to make sure that this visionary law is upheld and our nation's wildest lands remain protected. Since WW's founding in 1989, our work has been supported in a myriad of ways, including when folks reach out to us, either after visiting a Wilderness and witnessing problems on the ground, or to let us know about a project or proposal that impacts Wilderness.

Recently a former board member contacted us with information about a proposed action on a National Forest they are very familiar with. It turns out that their information will be helpful with efforts to correct other forest plans that do not adhere to the Wilderness Act nor to its intent. But you don't have to be a current or former board member to bring your observations to us. Across the country, our readers, supporters, and members are out in Wilderness—they are hiking and camping—and can be the eyes on what is happening.

The Wilderness Act eloquently defines Wilderness as "...untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain...an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which...generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable." I believe that when you see something detrimental to the protection of Wilderness, you will know it, whether the threat is significant on its own, or part of a larger and more complicated whole.

For more on the law and what it means, you can find the text of the Wilderness Act on our website along with guidelines and policies for adhering to the law and the vision of the Act's writers. There are descriptions of actions and processes that are illegal or lead to diminished protections.

In addition to alerting WW to issues on the ground, we as individuals have other ways to help protect Wilderness, including many ways to enhance and expand our voices, our message. Whether you spend your time visiting areas in our National Wilderness Preservation System or focusing on our elected officials and representatives and following bills like the proposal to retire unused grazing permits, you can share your concerns, your knowledge, and your experiences with those that might not know of the issue. Many things can make such a difference in the quality of our environment and the quality of our lives: letters-to-the-editor; articles or stories in neighborhood newsletters or other publications; participation in public policy decisions; painting, photography or other art; natural resource or environmental clubs and organizations; and, always, a passion for Wilderness. Share your copy of the *Watcher*, or your story of the last Wilderness trip you took, or your appreciation in just knowing that there are places in this vast, wonderful country that are still there for solitude, for connection to the natural world, for wildlife that need wild places, and for refuge from the human-dominated landscapes we inhabit every day. 🌿

—Louise Lasley



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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Over the next couple decades, Shee Atiká clearcut much of its three drainages and built 200 miles of roads. Logging ended around 2003.

With the timber gone and the corporation running out of money, Shee Atiká sold its Cube Cove lands to the U.S. Forest Service. The purchase was completed in 2020, returning the Cube Cove lands to the Tongass National Forest.

Since logging ceased, the lush and vigorous Admiralty Island lands have begun to heal. The roads are now generally impassible—eroded by gullies and choked off by alder trees. Second-growth forests of western hemlock, Sitka spruce, and western redcedar are gaining a foothold. Bears have returned, deer are abundant, cutthroat trout still thrive in the lakes, and salmon swim in the streams.

But all is not entirely well—road cuts still bleed sediment into streams, culverts pose risks of blow-outs that would send debris into the creeks, and bridge timbers with toxic creosote could collapse into streams. The ecological values of this former industrial logging site will be compromised for a long time.

The Current Situation

Now, the Forest Service is proposing a massive restoration project involving heavy equipment, explosives, chainsaws, helicopters, and other motor vehicles. The initial proposal includes opening up miles of logging roads and building a bridge to bring in heavy machinery for removing culverts, recontouring some roads, removing bridges, and more. It also includes cutting and removing trees on more than 1,200 acres along streams and lakes, and placing woody debris in streams where it might benefit fish. This sweeping and intensive restoration would reshape the landscape on a scale unprecedented in any area already designated as Wilderness.

Absent from the Forest Service's initial proposal is any adequate recognition of the profound implications of such a heavy-handed approach in Wilderness, and what such a cavalier disregard for the designation means for the rest of the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). Beyond Cube Cove, the desire of many managers to intervene in Wilderness is increasingly prevalent. While restoration of Cube Cove lands may appear a worthy cause in a scarred landscape, the real question—given the area's *Wilderness* status—is this: should nature now shape the outcome at Cube Cove, or should humans attempt to dictate it?

What Happens Next?

Since the Cube Cove lands apparently became Wilderness upon acquisition, the question arises as to what kind of restoration is appropriate. At its core, the Wilderness Act calls for restraint, a hands-off approach that lets nature determine the evolutionary path for Wilderness lands. It's a forward-looking law defining these areas' future administration, with the essential mandate that the lands will be *untrammelled* (i.e., *uncontrolled*) by humans. While no one should ignore or downplay the damage heaped upon Cube

Cove by Shee Atiká's logging and roading, ecosystems have been shaped by far more cataclysmic disruptions for millennia, and given a chance, the land will heal. Further, that process of recovery would achieve two other benefits from Wilderness, the scientific and educational opportunities from

watching and learning. Humans are an impatient lot; Wilderness calls on us to take a more humble, restrained approach.

The short answer to the question of what kind of restoration is appropriate is to let nature continue the process of healing the lands. That doesn't necessarily mean doing nothing. If creosote timbers from the bridges or other toxins need to be removed, they should be. Some roads may need to be blocked to prevent vehicle trespass, and some culverts might have to be removed to avoid major blowouts. Where feasible, all work should be done with hand tools and labor, without motorized use. As for landscape-scale restoration, that should be left to nature.

Final Thoughts

In the process of acquiring Cube Cove, little thought was apparently given to the challenge of administering this abused landscape as Wilderness. It would have been helpful had Congress designated the Cube Cove lands as *potential wilderness*, a designation used many times where nonconforming activities are ongoing, with the lands automatically becoming Wilderness once the nonconforming activity ceased. Perhaps it's not too late to ask Congress to take such an approach.

But getting Congress to act is never easy, so the decision on how to proceed lies with the Forest Service. Will it respect and adhere to the requirements and ideals of the Wilderness Act, or will Wilderness give way to the typical desires to manage, setting a horrible precedent in the process?

Whatever is decided, Wilderness Watch will do all we can to make sure the Wilderness Act and the NWPS aren't further casualties of the damage inflicted at Cube Cove. 🌿

Wilderness calls on us
to take a more humble,
restrained approach.

On the Watch

Boundary Waters-area mining moratorium

Wilderness Watch is supporting a 20-year mineral withdrawal on 225,378 acres of federal land on the Superior National Forest, in the watershed of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW). The 1.1 million-acre BWCAW in northeastern Minnesota is the most visited Wilderness in the entire National Wilderness Preservation System.

Early this year, thanks to support from Wilderness Watch members and others, the Forest Service put a temporary pause on destructive mining activity in the area and re-initiated a study of how copper-nickel sulfide-ore mining could harm this region of streams and lakes. The agency concluded its study in June and, based on the findings, then proposed a 20-year moratorium on mining of federal public lands and minerals in the BWCAW watershed.

Copper-nickel sulfide-ore mining is some of the most toxic mining on the planet. The mineral withdrawal would prevent disastrous impacts to this iconic Wilderness, its wild character, its irreplaceable fish and wildlife habitat, and the pristine water quality that all help make this such a special place. The Forest Service should finalize this mineral withdrawal and protect this spectacular Wilderness. 🌿



equipment to service the stations, for good reason—to preserve the qualities that set Wilderness apart from everywhere else. The FS has unfortunately abdicated its responsibility to preserve the wild character of the Glacier Peak Wilderness by simply dismissing the project's impacts to Wilderness.

We offered several alternatives in our Objection that the FS failed to adopt. We urged the agency to determine whether monitoring stations near or just outside the Wilderness could provide useful monitoring data, and we suggested that temporary facilities could be packed in, and that newer technologies—like satellites or LIDAR—could do the same monitoring without violating the Wilderness. 🌿

Double the harm to Sids Mountain

Wilderness Watch is opposing a project to build a barrier, using motorized equipment, within the Sids Mountain Wilderness in Utah. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) has failed, for 20 years, to prevent ATVs from illegally entering the Wilderness from an ATV trail in Cane Wash, south of the wilderness boundary. BLM is now proposing to construct a line of side-by-side boulders “neatly and strategically placed” inside the Wilderness, with a cable running through.

BLM would degrade the Wilderness with this barrier and the use of motorized

Alternatives not considered for Glacier Peak

In June, despite an Objection filed by Wilderness Watch, the Forest Service (FS) approved four new seismic monitoring stations in the Glacier Peak Wilderness in Washington, along with upgrades to an existing station, and up to 20 helicopter trips to install the monitors (plus future helicopter trips to replace batteries). Similar to other proposals for structures in Wilderness, the FS failed to justify how these stations are necessary to protect the Wilderness and did not analyze alternatives that would preserve the wild character of the area rather than degrade it.

The Wilderness Act prohibits the installation of permanent structures—such as monitoring stations—in Wilderness, as well as the landing of helicopters or use of other motorized

equipment, while essentially allowing illegal motorized use to continue—since the barrier is within the Wilderness, it won't prevent ATV access in the part of the Wilderness in front of the barrier. BLM's proposal also fails in that it does not intend to indicate the wilderness boundary, which will lead people to assume the boundary is at the barrier, rather than before it.

Trying to solve illegal motorized use by using heavy motorized equipment and constructing a large barrier is the wrong approach in Wilderness. We suggested that BLM needs to consider alternatives that would end ATV trespass and protect the Wilderness from further degradation. This includes closing off all ATV use in Cane Wash and perhaps all of the side routes that get down there from the east and west. BLM could also enforce the law by ticketing ATV trespass in the Sids Mountain Wilderness. 🌿

On the Watch

Absaroka-Beartooth poisoning challenged

Wilderness Watch and its allies have together filed a formal Objection against the Buffalo Creek Yellowstone Cutthroat Trout Conservation Project, a Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks proposal to poison 45.5 miles of Buffalo Creek, plus 11 lakes in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness in Montana—part of the famed Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. The Forest Service’s draft decision notice approved the project despite a 2021 federal court order requiring the agency to postpone a nearly identical project in the Scapegoat Wilderness also in Montana.

The state’s goal is to kill the rainbow trout it has been stocking since the 1930s and replace them with Yellowstone cutthroat trout, though neither species existed here historically. The plan involves massive amounts of helicopter and motorized equipment use—for up to a decade—in addition to spreading hundreds of gallons of the poison rotenone, which kills all gill-breathing organisms.

The Forest Service will authorize 99 helicopter landings in the Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness to deliver supplies and to aerial spray rotenone in meadow areas, plus the use of motorboats and gas-powered generators, and various installations. Even more troubling is the state’s plan to again fill these naturally fishless lakes and streams with fish, despite the impacts fish stocking has on the area’s native amphibians and other aquatic biota by introducing these non-native predators.

While we support efforts to conserve Yellowstone cutthroat trout, those efforts need to focus on the trout’s native waters. Destroying native species and damaging naturally fishless ecosystems isn’t the answer for protecting native trout. Moreover, intensive intervention and manipulation projects like this are fundamentally at odds with the FS’s mandate to preserve wilderness character, and they raise concerning questions over the long-term viability of Wilderness. The appropriate wilderness response to previously-introduced fish in these waters is to let nature take its course as the Wilderness Act prescribes, but if fish are to be removed, it must be done

without motors and poisons. Under no conditions should other fish be stocked in this historically fishless area. 🐾

Mine remains a threat to Okefenokee

In June, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers restored necessary federal oversight to the proposed Twin Pines Minerals mine in southern Georgia, only to reverse this good decision in August after Twin Pines sued. With federal oversight shelved, the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge and Wilderness are at risk again. The short-lived June decision would have restored wetlands protections by revoking a Trump-era determination that the Clean Water Act did not apply to Twin Pines’ mining activity. Now the mine won’t face extensive environmental analysis, and only the state of Georgia will decide whether to allow Twin Pines’ massive heavy minerals sand mine at the doorstep of the Okefenokee.

The Okefenokee is one of the largest Wildernesses in the East, covering 353,981 of the Refuge’s 440,000 acres. Recognized worldwide as a Wetland of International Importance and a Dark Sky Park, Okefenokee’s wilderness values—such as solitude, silence, and remoteness—could be lost if the mine is built.

Twin Pines Minerals wants to mine 12,000 acres of Trail Ridge, a prehistoric sand dune that helped create and now forms the eastern border of the refuge and Wilderness. Hydrologic and water quality changes could damage the Okefenokee—one of the world’s largest intact blackwater swamp ecosystems—and the St. Marys and Suwannee Rivers which flow from Okefenokee’s placid waters. The mine would destroy over 370 acres of wetlands, pump over a million gallons of fresh groundwater every day, discharge pollutants into the air and waste into the St. Marys River basin, and disturb the refuge with noise and light pollution.

Thank you to our members and supporters who have sent nearly 50,000 comments opposing the Twin Pines Minerals mine. We’ll keep you posted. 🐾



Wilderness in the Courts

E-bikes in National Parks

In 2019, we joined Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility in a lawsuit against the National Park Service. The Park Service had issued a rushed policy directive (and later a final rule) with no public comment, generally requiring all park units to permit e-bikes anywhere that bikes may be allowed. This would have forced managers at different national parks to allow the expansion of a growing type of motorized travel with no regard for the distinction between where it is likely appropriate (think, say, paved roads and trails in historic sites) and where it may have detrimental environmental effects in sensitive or wild areas. We argued that the rule was ill-conceived in violation of procedural laws and that the Park Service should have conducted more environmental analysis.

This May, a federal judge in Washington D.C. sided with us and the other plaintiffs on the environmental review issue. The judge said that the Park Service had failed to consider the foreseeable environmental impacts of its broad new rule and ordered the agency to go back and carry out a more robust analysis. However, a later iteration of the Park Service's decision remains in place in the meantime. While we await the more thorough environmental analysis, the rule continues to generally permit e-bike use where other bikes are allowed, but it does contain provisions giving individual park superintendents discretion to analyze or modify e-bike access as they find necessary. The Park Service recently took initial steps to appeal the decision, and we are exploring options for keeping motorized bikes off of non-motorized trails while the court process continues. 🌿

We want to hear about your experience in Wilderness

By Brett Haverstick

I recently received a very pleasant phone call from one of our members. She is a monthly donor to Wilderness Watch, and she called to say hello and to see how things are going. We talked about the hot weather, summer vacation plans, and, of course, the importance of Wilderness. After saying goodbye, I was reminded how refreshing it is to talk with someone instead of sending or receiving an email or text.



I find this to be true with our relationship to Wilderness. Many of us are so consumed by hectic schedules and “advanced technology” that we forget to relax, unplug, and spend time in wild country. But when we do spend a day or a week or longer in Wilderness, we come away feeling refreshed, inspired, and optimistic. Our connection with each other and Wilderness is so vital to our mental and physical well-being.

If you've spent any time in Wilderness this summer, or at any point this year, please consider submitting to us a written summary of your trip. Our Wilderness Experienced blog offers our members and supporters the opportunity to share their stories and musings from our nation's Wildernesses. To learn more on our website, visit bit.ly/3vG3GwA.

As you've read in this newsletter, Wilderness is currently threatened in all parts of the country, and we continue to rely on you to make sure there is a loud and collective voice to defend it. Thank you very much

for your great response to our summer fundraising letter. Your generosity and activism continue to enable us to meet these challenges.

As our new donor match is still ongoing, please consider sharing this newsletter with a friend, family member, or neighbor. If you're interested in receiving extra copies, please contact me in the office—remember, a phone call is sometimes better! 🌿

Wilderness in Congress

New Mexico Grazing Permit Retirement Bill Moves in Senate

On July 21, the New Mexico grazing permit retirement bill (S. 2980) was marked up by the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee during a massive bill markup session. The bill, authored by Sen. Martin Heinrich (D-NM), failed to move to the Senate floor on a 10-10 party-line vote, but all is not lost.

S. 2980, called the Wildlife-Livestock Conflict Resolution Act, would authorize the federal government to accept the donation of, and subsequently retire, any valid existing grazing leases or permits on federal public land in New Mexico. This would include grazing permits in units of the National Wilderness Preservation System, and it could be a big plus to improving the wilderness character of grazed lands in Wildernesses in New Mexico.



S. 2980 is similar to the Voluntary Grazing Permit Retirement Act (VGPR), HR 6935, that has been introduced in the House, though the VGPR would apply to grazing permit retirement nationwide and not just in New Mexico.

Conservationists hope that passage of S. 2980 might help pave the way for a nationwide grazing permit retirement bill like the VGPR.

Under Senate rules, bills that end up with a tie vote in committee may still be brought to the Senate floor by the committee chair and with the consent of the Senate Majority Leader. Energy and Natural Resources

Committee Chair Joe Manchin (D-WV) voted for S. 2980 in committee and can still bring this bill forward to the full Senate. It may well be included in the expected public lands omnibus bill near the end of the session. 🌿

Welcome new Wilderness Watch staff member, Andrew!



Andrew Hursh has joined Wilderness Watch as a staff attorney to help coordinate our litigation strategy, legal representation, and cooperation with other attorneys for partner organizations and co-plaintiffs. Andrew has an academic and professional background in natural resource science and policy, global climate change modeling and carbon cycle research, in addition to law. He has a varied history working in and around western federal lands, including trail and restoration work, Wilderness character monitoring, guiding backcountry and river trips, and working with multi-interest groups. Andrew spent a law school summer in 2019 interning at Wilderness Watch and is thrilled to return full time. Andrew enjoys hiking, backpacking, paddling, biking, canyoneering—all modes of outdoor exploration—and is always considering the next international travel or backcountry destination to pursue. He's also an avid musician. A Wilderness buff from the beginning, Andrew is excited to defend wild places where law and ecology and humility toward nature intersect. Welcome, Andrew! 🌿



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Keeping Wilderness Wild

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Inaugural Healthy Public Lands Conference



WW staff members George Nickas and Dana Johnson and Board member Gary Macfarlane speaking at the Healthy Public Lands Conference.

Photo: Adam Bronstein

In June, Wilderness Watch led a panel discussion at the inaugural Healthy Public Lands Conference in Salt Lake City, UT about the harm cattle and sheep grazing inflicts on Wilderness. Livestock grazing is currently authorized in 330 Wildernesses, on approximately 13 million of the 53 million acres of Wilderness in the lower 48. The three-day conference focused on the strong need to reform livestock grazing on public lands in the American West, and it included a field trip to a nearby grazing allotment administered by the Bureau of Land Management.

Learn more about the Healthy Public Lands Project at www.healthypubliclands.org.

Learn more about our efforts to reform grazing in Wilderness by visiting our website: bit.ly/3zMVr2W 🐾