

Planting Sequoias in Wilderness, Because "We Broke It"

by René Voss

The southern Sierra Nevada Mountains are home to one of earth's most iconic tree species—the giant sequoia (*sequoiadendron giganteum*). Not only are sequoias the largest trees on earth by weight and volume, they can also live for up to 3,000 years. Sequoias are revered for their beauty and resilience, and seedlings have been planted around the world. But the only place they grow wild is a narrow 60-mile band of mixed conifer forest on the western slopes of the Sierras. Sequoias tend to grow in groves, and varying accounts suggest that there are currently between 65 and 81 sequoia groves, with most sequoia groves found in the Giant Sequoia National Monument and Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks, also known as SEKI.

With a few exceptions, most of SEKI's sequoia groves are located in designated Wilderness. Congress designated most of SEKI's Wilderness in 1984, but after many decades of pressure from environmental groups, in 2009 Congress added much of the area south of Mineral King as the John

Krebs Wilderness. This newer Wilderness is a part of an ancient landscape, which includes several remote sequoia groves, including the little-known and mostly inaccessible Board Camp Grove.



A giant sequoia after a recent fire in Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

Photo by René Voss.

In the drought-parched summer of 2020, the Board Camp Grove, and a dozen others, burned in the 2020 Castle Fire, killing many of the giants. The Park Service calls this fire "unnatural" and plans to intervene in the natural recovery by planting thousands of sequoia seedlings, rationalizing the action as fixing a system we broke due to human-caused climate change.

But sequoias are born with fire. In fact, sequoia cones need a hot fire to roast them open. Each tree can drop tens of thousands of seeds to the ground to restart a new generation of sequoias. In the following season the bare mineral soil below these burned sequoias is often covered with so many seedlings—sometimes vast carpets of thousands—that it is difficult not to step on them. Several years after a fire, the understory in these burned groves is often waist-high in dense thickets of sequoias.

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Executive Director's Message



Walter Hickel, former governor of Alaska and Secretary of Interior under Nixon, once famously exclaimed, "You can't let nature run wild!" Crazy as it sounds, Hickel's assertion seems to have become the motto for the federal agencies charged with administering our nation's Wilderness system.

Whether it's directives from the Forest Service to douse every naturally-ignited fire, BLM's attempts to reverse the advance of juniper forests, or the innumerable efforts to "control" predators that prey on preferred "game" species, nature running wild is something managers just can't abide.

As René Voss describes in the cover story, the latest example of Hickel's maxim being put in action is the National Park Service attempting to determine where giant sequoia trees will or won't grow in Wilderness in Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. Fires, drought, and insects, all exacerbated by climate disruption, are accelerating the pace of change in our nation's forests and in some instances, like the giant sequoias, making it likely some species won't be able to survive in all the places they currently live. Rather than trusting nature—and its eons of evolutionary practice—to work it out, managers are hell bent on planting a new stand of sequoias in a place nature has deemed may be better suited to something else.

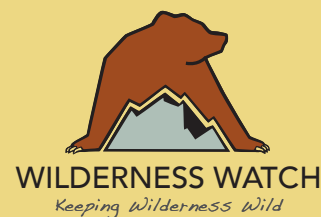
Perhaps someday the agencies charged with Wilderness protection will understand what Howard Zahniser, the Wilderness Act's chief architect, meant when he wrote they should be "guardians, not gardeners." The fate of Wilderness depends on it. 🌿

—George Nickas

Thank You for Your Great Work!

Wilderness Watch had two board members term-limit at our Fall 2021 board meeting—Marty Almquist and Franz Camenzind. **Marty**, a retired Forest Service wilderness ranger, joined our board in 2014 and served two terms. Before joining the board, Marty was a long-time Wilderness Watch member who counted our former Senior Advisor and dear friend, the late Stewart "Brandy" Brandborg, as a close friend and mentor. Marty also worked with Bill Worf, one of WW's founders, on Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness issues in the

1990s. During her board tenure, Marty held both secretary and vice president positions. **Franz**, a retired wildlife biologist turned filmmaker and environmental activist, also joined our board in 2014 and served two terms. Franz is a long-time member introduced to WW by his colleague, Louise Lasley, who is our current president. During his board tenure, Franz held the position of vice president and contributed numerous articles to our blog and newsletter. Thank you, Marty and Franz, for your years of service to the organization and Wilderness! 🌿



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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Sequoia Seedlings (continued from page 1)

The Fremont Creek Grove in the Giant Sequoia National Monument also burned in the 2020 Castle Fire and lost thousands of giants, but is replacing those losses with literally millions of baby seedlings. Most will not survive, but the most vigorous ones will thrive and grow into giants.

Not so in the Board Camp Grove, according to the Park Service. While the grove saw some regeneration in lower elevation areas, the upper drier reaches burned at high severity and appear to have few seedlings. So, as early as this fall, the Park Service plans to fly in 12,000 seedlings with helicopters to supply ground crews for planting on these steep upper slopes. This may be repeated for two more years—for a total of up to 36,000 holes dug and planted in fragile post-fire soils—until the Park Service is happy with the results of its efforts to manipulate the forest. Without intervention the forest will recover on its own but it may never look the way it did before the fire.

There is little dispute that climate change is having an effect on the forests of the Sierras. A drought from 2012-2014 caused a massive die-off of over 120 million trees in the southern Sierras alone, many of which now stand as grey sentinels throughout the surviving forest. The pines, firs, and cedars bore the brunt of the losses, while nearly all of the large giant sequoias weathered the drought, showing off their amazing resilience. And while the forest is resilient and has likely seen similar droughts over the millennia, humans have not witnessed such an event since European settlers arrived in California.

To compound the drought, the 2020 Castle Fire and subsequent fires in the summer of 2021 burned most of the sequoia groves in the Monument and half of those in SEKI. After such fires, the temptation to do something to “help” nature recover is a powerful one. Many people, including federal agency personnel, assume that forests that burn in a wildfire have been destroyed and will remain a moonscape unless humans intervene. As Dana Johnson wrote in a recent issue, “this is a familiar story. Humans are exceedingly bad at exercising restraint and simply not doing things.” See *Wilderness Watcher*, Spring 2021 (“Wilderness and the Value of Doing Nothing”).

Long-time sequoia activist Carla Cloer, who leads the Sierra Club’s Sequoia Task Force, put it well in her public comments about the planting proposal:

If a precedent is set that an agency can enter official Wilderness to try to stop or ‘repair’ changes due to climate change, then these areas are no longer Wildernesses where natural processes—even those whose results do not please us—can proceed.

“The lands and natural processes of designated Wildernesses have the highest and most powerful protection that exists in any country on earth.

The Park [Service] says it has a ‘need’ to ‘repair’ this grove from the effects of global climate change. This is not the same as a ‘need’ to repair after the collapse of a dam or after a plane crash. Global climate change is global, not local. Every inch of Earth is and will be affected by climate change. Ecosystems will adapt, change or be replaced.

There are about 803 Wilderness Areas encompassing over 111,368,221 acres of wildlands, and ALL of them are and will be affected by climate changes. Some will be flooded, others will burn or suffer drought, but all will be affected.

Complex ecosystems including giant sequoia groves have always changed in response to changing conditions. There is fossil evidence of sequoia growing in Idaho and later near Reno NV; there is one hypothesis that the

current separate groves were once a continuous belt along the Sierra and later became separated into smaller isolates because of changes in climate. This change could not have been ‘repaired.’

If a precedent is set that an agency can enter official Wilderness to try to stop or ‘repair’ changes due to climate change, then these areas are no longer Wildernesses where natural processes – even those whose results do not please us – can proceed. The only possible way to mitigate or slow these changes is to attack the causes of climate change.”

Carrying out a large-scale landscape manipulation project in a pristine isolated sequoia grove inside a National Park Wilderness under the guise of repairing damage from climate change sets a terrible precedent. The Wilderness Act demands restraint, and Wilderness Watch and our partners are demanding that the Park Service choose an untrammeled approach to the Wilderness’ recovery. 🌿

René Voss is a natural resources attorney from northern California who works on protecting the forests of the southern Sierra Nevada Mountains. He is on the Wilderness Watch board of directors and serves as its treasurer.

On the Watch

A reprieve for Gates of the Arctic

In March, the Biden administration suspended a Trump-era right-of-way decision for the 211-mile Ambler Road, which would cross a vast wild area in the southern Brooks Range in Alaska. This destructive and unnecessary industrial road would facilitate huge mining operations for the benefit of a private Canadian company at the expense of Wilderness and wildlife. The Biden administration will conduct a new environmental review to replace the Trump administration's insufficient and faulty review.

The road would cross Gates of the Arctic National Preserve and the Kobuk Wild and Scenic River, which make up part of the largest remaining roadless area in the country. The route would cross nearly 3,000 streams, 11 major rivers, 1,700 acres of wetlands, and major caribou migration routes. Gates of the Arctic is one of our wildest parks—with no roads, trails, or established campsites. Grizzly bears, wolves, Dall sheep, moose, wolverines, and three caribou herds make their home here.

Wildernesses in Alaska, even those as large as Gates of the Arctic, derive much of their extraordinary values from the expanse of wildlands surrounding them, which are critical to maintaining the integrity of these last great wild places. The road would undoubtedly lead to more use and motorized intrusions into the Wilderness, and noise, dust, and headlights would degrade the area's wild character. Though proposed to be closed to the public, if it were opened, the negative impacts would be compounded. Suspending the right-of-way decision is a good start, but the administration needs to cancel the permit altogether. 🐾

Capturing bighorns with helicopters

Wilderness Watch is opposing an Idaho Fish and Game (IDFG) plan to use helicopters to pursue, capture, and collar up to 20 bighorn sheep in the Gospel Hump and Frank Church–River of No Return Wil-

dernesses in Idaho. IDFG would use net guns to capture the sheep from the air, and put radio collars on after landing the helicopters. The stated purpose is to enable IDFG to test bighorn sheep now and in the future for *Mycoplasma ovipneumoniae* (MOVI) bacteria.

The use of helicopters to pursue, capture, and place telemetry tracking collars on wild animals deep within Wilderness—to transmit their every movement to a computer

manned by a “game” agency that places high value on control and manipulation—is fundamentally antithetical to everything Wilderness is about.

The FS needs to reject this motorized intrusion and intentional trampling of Wilderness. IDFG can conduct its monitoring outside of Wilderness. 🐾



Good news for the Hoover Wilderness

In April, the Forest Service (FS) issued a decision to keep part of the Hoover Wilderness in California closed to cattle grazing, in part due to pressure from Wilderness Watch and our members and supporters. The area in the “Bridgeport Southwest Rangeland Project” had been closed to livestock grazing for more than a decade, after domestic sheep were removed to protect state and federally endangered Sierra bighorn sheep. In 2018, the FS proposed re-opening part of the Hoover Wilderness to cattle grazing.

Bordering Yosemite National Park along the Pacific Crest and falling away to the Great Basin to the east, the Hoover Wilderness is a spectacular piece of the Sierra Nevada range in California, and one of our first officially-designated Wilderness areas.

Re-opening this area to cows would have created substantial impacts to the Wilderness, its watersheds, sage-grouse, and other native wildlife. A big thank you to everyone who sent a public comment urging the FS to drop this grazing proposal, and to FS district ranger David Risley for saying no to cattle in this part of the Hoover Wilderness. 🐾

On the Watch

Air Force targets Wilderness in AZ and NM

The U.S. Air Force (USAF) is proposing a massive increase in low-level jet training flights above thousands of acres in 28 Wildernesses. Wilderness Watch is urging the USAF to keep low-level jet noise, sonic booms, and supersonic flights out of the Gila and Blue Range Wildernesses in New Mexico, and the Superstition, Salt River Canyon, White Canyon, Needles Eye, Aravaipa Canyon, Galiuro, Santa Teresa, Fishhooks, Bear Wallow, Escudilla, Mount Baldy, Chiracahua, Arrastra Mountains, Tres Alamos, Rawhide Mountains, Harcuvar Mountains, Swansea, East Cactus Plain, Harquahala Mountains, Aubrey Peak, Upper Burro Creek, Hummingbird Springs, Organ Pipe Cactus, Coyote Mountains, Baboquivari Peak, and Pajarita Wildernesses in Arizona. The USAF proposal also threatens the Blue Range Primitive Area and many Wilderness Study Areas.

The Air Force wants to make changes to 10 Military Operation Areas (MOAs), including lower altitude training (as low as 100 feet above the ground in one case), supersonic training at lower altitudes in more MOAs, using aluminum-coated silica chaff bundles and aluminum- and Teflon-coated flares closer to the ground, and expanding the Tombstone MOA. Such activity would shatter the area's natural sounds, ruin the wilderness experience for visitors, and stress native wildlife.

We shouldn't sacrifice Wilderness areas when there are better places for this military training. We urged the Air Force to use more appropriate non-Wilderness areas. 🐾

Do better for Wilderness in Olympic

Wilderness Watch is urging the National Park Service to adopt a wilderness-compatible alternative for addressing the boardwalk on the Cape Alava and Sand Point trails in Olympic National Park in Washington. Ninety-five percent of the Park is designated Wilderness, including this northwestern corner on the Pacific Coast. The trails start from the Lake Ozette trailhead,

which is Olympic National Park's busiest trailhead for overnight wilderness use. About 70 percent of the 13,533 feet of boardwalk is damaged.

The NPS is looking at three preliminary alternatives to address the condition of the boardwalks, two of which include massive amounts of helicopter use. One alternative in-

cludes 178 to 250 round-trip helicopter trips over five years, and the other alternative, which involves replacing some of the boardwalk with turnpike (ground-level wood boxes filled with gravel and soil), includes 690 to 835 round-trip helicopter trips. A third no action alternative continues the Park's current management where small sections of boardwalk are replaced by carrying in materials when possible.

The NPS must do better for Wilderness in Olympic. This extensive boardwalk is inappropriate in Wilderness. Before replacing it, the NPS should determine if the trail is necessary, and consider rerouting it to a different location. The NPS could close the trail and divert people to points south of the area. The agency could also reduce the number of visitors to the area, or it could remove the boardwalk and let people have a wilderness experience where visitors accept conditions as they are. If the NPS decides to rebuild the boardwalk, it needs to do so without motorized equipment. Volunteers could assist by hauling in boardwalk pieces. 🐾



Wilderness in the Courts

Ninth Circuit deals blow to Izembek, AK

In a devastating legal opinion this past March, the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals upended decades of successful efforts, including three prior court opinions, protecting the Izembek Wilderness from road construction. The Department of Interior had previously determined “construction of a road would lead to significant degradation of irreplaceable ecological resources that would not be offset by the protection of other lands to be received under an exchange [of lands]” and there were “reasonable and viable transportation alternatives.”

A District Court upheld Interior’s findings. But Secretaries Zinke and Bernhardt—both representing the Trump administration—disregarded those findings and executed two closed-door land exchange agreements to facilitate road construction. We challenged both agreements, and two District Courts found in our favor, holding Interior could not discount its prior findings. Trump’s Interior appealed, and disappointingly, the Biden administration continued the appeal. In a shocking 2-1 decision, the Ninth Circuit reversed the District Court decisions, holding Interior had discretion to disregard its prior findings and, specifically, to give socioeconomic development priority over conservation. The sharply divided panel also held Interior—an agency beholden to the varying political winds of changing administrations—could effectively gut Congressional National Wildlife Refuge and Wilderness protections by swapping protected lands for unprotected lands.

The effects of this opinion extend far beyond the Izembek Wilderness, and we are aggressively pursuing all options to reverse the opinion and stop the road. Thanks to Trustees for Alaska for representing us and to all of you who have sent thousands of comments in support of protecting Izembek and its wildlife. 🐾

Good news for brown bears in the Kenai Refuge, Alaska

On April 18, the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a prohibition on hunting brown bears over bait in the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) and Wilderness in Alaska, and also limited some hunting and trapping in the Refuge’s Skilak Wildlife Recreation Area. The Kenai NWR includes approximately 2 million acres of important wildlife habitat and more than 1.3 million acres of Wilderness. In its important ruling, the court rejected the



State of Alaska’s efforts to reduce predator populations, and affirmed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s (FWS) authority to manage wildlife in National Wildlife Refuges so as to protect the natural diversity of wildlife.

In 2016, the FWS finalized regulations for the Kenai NWR, which codified long-standing management decisions, collectively known as the Kenai Rule, that helped protect brown bears and other wildlife. The State of Alaska, Safari Club International (SCI), and Alaska Professional Hunters Association (APHA) challenged the Kenai Rule, and Wilderness Watch and our allies intervened in the lawsuit to defend the Kenai Rule. In November 2020, a U.S. District Court upheld the Kenai Rule, and the State, SCI, and APHA unsuccessfully appealed to the Ninth Circuit. The recent Ninth Circuit decision keeps the Kenai Rule in place.

Thanks to Trustees for Alaska for representing us and to all of you who have sent thousands of comments in support of protecting the Kenai and its wildlife. 🐾

Wilderness in Congress

Voluntary Grazing Permit Retirement Act reintroduced

The Voluntary Grazing Permit Retirement Act (VGPR), H.R. 6935, was reintroduced in March by Reps. Adam Smith (D-WA) and Jared Huffman (D-CA). The bill holds out the hope that grazing permits in designated Wilderness (as well as other conservation units) can be permanently retired and wilderness conditions restored.

Previously, Congress authorized voluntary grazing permit retirement in specific areas throughout the western states, including Death Valley National Park, Arches National Park, and in designated Wilderness in the Owyhee Canyonlands and Boulder-White Clouds in Idaho. Grazing permit retirement can be a great tool to eliminate this incompatible use in Wilderness that inflicts harm across millions of acres of Wilderness in the West.

The VGPR would direct the federal agencies to accept, on a first-come, first-served basis, any grazing permit or lease related to federal land in the 16 western states that is voluntarily waived by a grazing permittee or lessee with the intention of permanently ending livestock grazing on that grazing allotment, and also require the agencies to immediately terminate any grazing permit or lease so waived. In earlier cases, some grazing permittees retired their permits when they received compensation from a third party, such as a conservation organization.

Rep. Smith continues as the lead author of the VGPR, and is joined this year by Rep. Huffman, a senior member of the House Natural Resources Committee. Wilderness Watch continues to support the VGPR in Congress. 🌿

Welcome to the Board

Mark Pearson is a long-time advocate for Colorado's wilderness, wildlife, and public lands. Mark currently serves as the Executive Director of the San Juan Citizens Alliance in Durango, a position he has filled for 15 years. He has been engaged with public lands and wilderness advocacy in western Colorado for almost 40 years, in both staff and volunteer positions. Mark previously worked with the Wilderness Land Trust purchasing inholdings within designated and proposed Wilderness for conveyance into public ownership. Mark holds a M.S. from Colorado State University in Natural Resource Management and a B.S. in Engineering Physics from the University of Colorado. He has authored several guidebooks to existing and proposed Wilderness areas in Colorado. Welcome, Mark! 🌿

Tracy Davids is the Southeast Program Coordinator for Defenders of Wildlife and former Executive Director of Wild South and Southern Appalachian Biodiversity Project. She has been an ardent advocate for public lands, wildlife, and reducing her ecological footprint since 1998. Tracy's current work focuses on connecting people with the wild and engaging Southeastern communities in wildlife/habitat protection efforts. Her experience also includes non-profit consulting/coaching/training, the practice of civil law, and volunteer board service for organizations, including Fund for Wild Nature, Dogwood Alliance, Cherokee Forest Voices, National Forest Protection Alliance, and Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition. When not advocating for wild places, she's spending time in them. Welcome, Tracy! 🌿





WILDERNESS WATCH

Keeping Wilderness Wild

Wilderness Watch

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The Robert J. Weggel Opportunity Fund of Wilderness Watch

Some of you may be familiar with one of our long-time members, Bob Weggel, who has generously matched first-time donors in the past. He's an avid backpacker with a strong commitment to conservation. Bob was also listed in the 1980s edition of *The Guinness Book of World Records* for co-designing a magnet that generated the most intense continuous magnetic field in the world. You could say, he has some pull!

In 2021, we worked with Bob to establish the Robert J. Weggel Opportunity Fund.

The purpose of the fund is to support select projects that are of high importance, and that work to protect Wilderness,

as well as enhance the effectiveness of Wilderness Watch's mission. Bob made an initial contribution to the fund, and intends to make further contributions until the fund grows to \$500,000. We are incredibly grateful for Bob's dedication to strengthening protections for Wilderness, and his steadfast support of Wilderness Watch.



Bob atop Mt. Sneffels