

The next 60 years: Elevating earth's community of life

By Dana Johnson

This fall, Wilderness Watch and other wilderness advocates gathered at the feet of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, in the trees and away from computer screens, to reflect on the 60th anniversary of the Wilderness Act and talk about where we might go in the years ahead. The conservation movement has excelled at Power Point presentations and Zoom meetings and cranking out 50-page legal briefs, but we've become really lousy at gathering around the campfire to tell stories, share food, and build our strength from the ground up. The campout was a welcome opportunity to reconnect.

I was asked to speak about the next 60 years of wilderness protection, which is no simple forecast. It's hard to envision the next 60 years. Many of us feel that uncertainty in our bones. But it seems that if the future will be aided by anything, it will be storytelling and community—remembering what it is to be a human animal who exists as part of a broader community of life and finding ways to tell that story from the gut. We need the lawsuits and agency comments and the technocratic data and lingo—we have to play that game to hold the line—but we can't get so wrapped up in those boxes that we forget how to tell the right stories.

We are a world in crisis—in ecological crisis, in climate crisis, in a crisis of community and belonging. If there were ever a time for a radical retelling of how we exist on this planet, it is urgently now. Yet, the loudest voices in this discussion, including many non-profit conservation groups, are becoming increasingly corporate in their operations and thinking, and they end up pushing the

same more-of-everything agenda that we see everywhere else. Restraint—the thing that creates space for other species to exist—is not at the forefront of the conversation.



Desert bighorn lambs by James Marvin Phelps

In explaining the need for Wilderness, Howard Zahniser said, "This need is for areas of the earth within which we stand without our mechanisms that make us immediate masters over our environment—areas of wild nature in which we

sense ourselves to be, which in fact I believe we are, dependent members of an interdependent community of living creatures that together derive their existence from the sun."

The Wilderness Act, more than anything, codifies restraint and recognizes a natural right for "earth and its community of life [to be] untrammelled by man." The drafters of the Act were careful in their word choice here.

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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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Message from the board

By Mike Browning



The 60th anniversary of the signing of the Wilderness Act is a good time to reflect on what comes next. In 1964, the Wilderness Act was passed by the House of Representatives on a near unanimous vote of 373 to 1. It passed the Senate by a vote of 73 to 12. Does anyone believe it could garner such overwhelming congressional support today?

The 1964 Wilderness Act is undergoing challenges like never before. Fewer and fewer new Wilderness areas are being added to the National Wilderness Preservation System, although nearly 500 Wilderness Study Areas meet all or most of the required wilderness characteristics. The Wilderness areas that are being added are often subject to “special provisions” that diminish the protections of the Wilderness Act by allowing otherwise prohibited activities. And the boundaries of new Wilderness areas are often gerrymandered to allow mechanical and motorized uses to continue in the heart of what should remain intact wilderness ecosystems.

In addition, special user groups continue to try to chip away at the protections afforded to existing Wilderness areas, whether it be rock climbers wanting to drill permanent bolts into pristine rock faces or mountain bikers wanting to open up Wilderness areas to biking. Everyone seems to want to be able to enjoy their favorite sport in the few wildlands we have left.

Under the guise of “administration” or simple convenience, federal agencies also propose to undertake and allow actions in Wilderness areas that are prohibited under the Wilderness Act, including using chainsaws to clear downfall or helicopters to bring in equipment.

Climate change and wildfires are also changing wilderness ecosystems. The federal agencies in charge often want to suppress lightning-caused fires or manipulate Wilderness to try to “preserve” historic flora and fauna—rather than let Nature respond and take care of itself.

And then there's the fact that there are simply more of us. When the Wilderness Act was passed in 1964 the population of the United States was 179 million. Now it's over 341 million—almost double. More humans mean more people who want to recreate in Wilderness. The mechanized and motorized recreation industries eye Wilderness areas as additional opportunities to expand their sales. And most politicians' love of economic growth leads them to support such degradation of Wilderness. After all, grizzly bears and wolves don't vote or make contributions to political campaigns.

Even long-time conservation groups with “wilderness” in their names, or that were historic promoters of Wilderness, are not immune to these pressures and no longer fight as hard for the intrinsic value of Wilderness, favoring recreation over the “wild” in Wilderness.

That is where Wilderness Watch comes in. We are the only national organization whose sole mission is the preservation of Wilderness. We have no other agenda. We truly believe that, as Henry David Thoreau said, “in wildness is the preservation of the world.”

So, thanks for supporting Wilderness Watch—whether you help Wilderness Watch through your generous donations, respond to our action alerts, let your congressional representatives and the federal agencies know of your concerns, help to elect pro-wilderness politicians, or volunteer for local wilderness groups. It takes constant vigilance to defend Wilderness, and will take more in the next few years. Thanks for helping Wilderness Watch do that. 🐾

Mike Browning serves on the board of directors for Wilderness Watch and the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, which works to protect four Wilderness areas in Colorado. He is passionate about the intrinsic values of Wilderness.

The next 60 years (continued from page 1)

People often mistake “untrammelled” for “untrampled” or “pristine and untouched,” but that isn’t what this word means. A trammel is a restraint or a shackle, something intentionally used to restrict freedom and to control. To be untrammelled is to be free and unbound, to have autonomy and self-will.

There are no places on this planet that are untouched by humans and uninfluenced by human activity, but that is different than direct, intentional control and domination. The Wilderness Act defines Wilderness “in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape.”

The word “untrammelled” is, fundamentally, a check on domination. Rather than the “desired condition” bias so prevalent on other public lands, the Wilderness Act protects natural processes—the intelligence of nature. And it prohibits the industrial tools that have allowed us to decimate unprotected landscapes so quickly—roads, aircraft, motorized and mechanized equipment, structures, installations, and commercial enterprise are all prohibited.

But the Wilderness Act protects less than three percent of land in the Lower 48, and it’s no big surprise that those three percent are some of the most secure spaces left for wildlife trying to persist in the middle of overwhelming human activity. Add to the mix booming outdoor recreation and our desire to chase what is left of the wild, and these pockets of protected space really start feeling the squeeze.

I was sitting in on a Forest Service discussion about stunning recreation overuse in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness. In one ranger district, the Forest Service counted over 100,000 visitors entering just a few trailheads in a one-year period. The Forest Service used helicopters to fly out 8,000 pounds of human waste in 2022 and buried nearly 1,100 piles of exposed human excrement and toilet paper—a 790 percent increase from 10 years prior.

In that discussion, there were various “stakeholders” talking in circles about “user group” interests and “visitor use metrics” and doing more studies when someone from the Tulalip Tribes spoke up and said bluntly, “The animals have nowhere left to go. Where do you want them to go?” Nobody answered that question, but that’s exactly the question we need. Until we address the access needs of other species—across their native territories, which includes rural and populated areas, and into new spaces they may need for adapting to a rapidly changing climate—we should be extremely concerned about further imperiling their delicate space in Wilderness.

We need to unapologetically extend the umbrella of equity to the rest of the natural world—to the pika drying wild-

flowers for winter, the grizzly foraging cutworm moths on a scree slope, the bighorn mother giving birth in the spring, and the honeybee gathering pollen. Their interests matter, and they have a lot to teach us about what it is to be a human animal beholden to the influences and limits of the world that sustains us.

And as we carry wilderness protection into the future, we should be forging better relationships with other communities telling similar stories. The climate movement has a

lot of energy, and at least a portion of that movement isn’t afraid of telling the right stories. We should be building relationships with Indigenous communities who carry deep historical knowledge and thousands of years of connection to place.

Speaking on the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, Jamie Pinkham, a Nez Perce tribal member, said, “For the last 50 years the Wilderness

Act has been a platform for us to protect natural laws and nature’s freedom.” And, “our task going forward is to harmonize our constitutions with nature’s instinctive constitutions that are timeless and intelligent with long established roles, processes, and commitments essential for their survival.” Jamie noted that nature’s “constitutions depend on the freedom to remain wild.”

This goal—safeguarding the freedom to remain wild, protecting these timeless natural rights—is the ultimate goal of wilderness protection.

The Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes took the wilderness model and made it better. Using the 1964 Wilderness Act as a template, they designated their Mission Mountains Tribal Wilderness. The Tribe outright prohibits commercial outfitting and guiding in the Wilderness and codifies respect for grizzly bears, closing a 10,000-acre area to human use between July 15 and October 1 when grizzly bears are gathering to feed on insects.

Instead of wheeling and dealing compromises to the recreation industry or acting like the livestock industry gets a pass to decimate landscapes forever and always, we should take a note from the Salish Kootenai and treat the 1964 Wilderness Act as a floor rather than a ceiling. I very much appreciate the hurdles such things face in Congress, but I also know that if we never demand it, it will never happen. And if we start telling the right stories, more people will understand why we are demanding it.

Our current undeniable reality is that human activity—with our buildings, highways, fast-moving cars, 4-wheelers,

The Wilderness Act protects natural processes—the intelligence of nature.

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Welcome Nicole, Dan, and Mason!

Wilderness Watch recently welcomed three new staff members:



Nicole Cannavaro joined Wilderness Watch this past July as our administrative assistant. Nicole handles the office logistics for Wilderness Watch's day-to-day organizational needs. She comes from a strong background in animal rescue and rehabilitation, and previously worked as an aircraft technician for several years before transitioning to the conservation field. Nicole spent her formative years hiking around the Bob Marshall and Scapegoat Wildernesses in Montana. When she isn't elbows deep in paperwork, she can be found roaming around the wilderness with her family, tinkering on something in her garage, or feeding her insatiable curiosity with a good book.



Daniel Brister joined Wilderness Watch this past September as our staff attorney. He holds a M.S. in Environmental Studies and a J.D. with certificates in Natural Resources & Environmental Law and American Indian Law from the University of Montana. He has worked in private legal practice and spent two decades as an activist with Buffalo Field Campaign, protecting wild bison and their habitat in the Yellowstone Ecosystem. Dan enjoys live music, being outdoors, and spending time with his daughter, sometimes all at once. He lives in Montana near the Mission Mountains.



Mason Parker joined Wilderness Watch this past October as our wilderness defense director, focusing on management issues that impact the National Wilderness Preservation System. He previously served as coordinator for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Western Regional Panel on Aquatic Nuisance Species, and led the implementation of Missoula's Zero by Fifty plan as Home ReSource's Zero Waste Systems manager. He received his M.S. in Environmental Studies from the University of Montana, where he was an editor for *Camas* magazine and an ecology research assistant. Mason recently caught the packrafting bug and looks forward to exploring Wilderness by float and by foot. 🐉

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e-bikes, aircraft and drones and satellites, 5G networks, mono-cropping, pesticides and herbicides, urban sprawl, logged out landscapes, and an increasing appetite for adventure sports and outdoor recreation—is overwhelming. Some species persist amid all of this, but many don't, and we've squeezed plants and animals who don't into increasingly fragmented pockets of land away from this inundation. In this context, it should not be a radical position to hold the line for them and to demand a lot more. And we should do this while simultaneously reassessing—*seriously reassessing*—how we exist on this planet and what our obligations are to those living alongside us.

We owe the rest of the natural world restraint and deference. We owe it a voice. We owe it space. We certainly owe it three percent. Rather than squeezing out that last percent, killing it with the same stories of entitlement and business as usual, our goal for the next 60 years is to unapologetically defend these endangered landscapes and pull them closer, to start seeing and protecting more of the wild in our own backyards and in ourselves. 🐉

Dana Johnson is Wilderness Watch's policy director.

Thank you, Drew and Jon!

This past summer, Wilderness Watch mentored two law students from the University of Denver. Interns Drew Carlson and Jon Thompson researched case law and legislative history surrounding the Wilderness Act's public purposes and special provisions to help produce arguments that limit the scope of wilderness degrading activities and that maintain the Act's fundamental purpose of wilderness preservation. They also researched the implications of the Supreme Court overturning the Chevron Doctrine and the potential positive impacts this may have in preventing runaway agency discretion in Wilderness cases. Thank you, Drew and Jon!



Drew grew up in Colorado near an abundance of wild spaces. He studied Environmental Sciences at the University of Colorado Boulder with focuses in Ecology and Policy, and worked as an environmental scientist prior to returning to school to study law. Drew writes, "Wilderness areas provide a wonderful window into the intricacies of our world's biological

systems and cycles, which I have a vested interest in doing my part to protect. Transitioning into my legal career, I've had the pleasure of interning with Wilderness Watch where I discovered the scope and breadth of the issues surrounding wilderness law and policy. My time with Wilderness Watch was wonderful. Working alongside this group of fierce advocates was inspiring and provided guidance for the kind of attorney and environmental steward I hope to be."



After a five-year stint in the Marine Corps, Jon took his GI Bill all the way to Paris. His time there was incredible, but the lack of wild spaces there (and in Europe) reinforced his appreciation for America's most unique and valuable asset—Wilderness. Jon writes, "Even up in the Alps, a railway and tourist chalet are truly never out of sight, and while one can drop their pack whenever they

please, something certainly good for the lumbar, it's less-so for the soul. A well-guarded wilderness is an assignment and reflection of our values, and if it happened under the Matterhorn, it could certainly happen here, too. And that's why interning for Wilderness Watch has been both uplifting and a privilege—they're a passionate and dedicated cast of characters who help remind us of what it's all about and why stewardship and vigilance is a lifetime commitment." 🌿

Support Wilderness and wildlife during the holidays and in the new year! By Brett Haverstick



It's always hard to believe when the calendar flips to December, but here we are. As we reflect back on 2024 and 60 years of the Wilderness Act, we're so grateful to you for everything you did this year for Wilderness and its wildlife!

Your steadfast support allowed us to grow our staff and confront the ever-present threats to our irreplaceable Wilderness System. We've stepped up our work in Washington, D.C., we continue to tackle harmful agency proposals, and we're not afraid to march into the courtroom when we need to. It's what we do. And, with your help, we're making a difference for the wild.

Please make a generous end-of-year donation to help us embrace the opportunities and meet what are sure to be increasing challenges in the year ahead. Membership is \$30, while a monthly \$5 donation doubles your impact! If you're donating via a donor-advised fund or a qualified charitable distribution, please make sure that your financial manager includes your full name with the check. You can also donate stock or other securities to Wilderness Watch.

Thank you for making Wilderness and wildlife a priority during the holidays and in the new year! 🌿

DONATE:



On the watch

No land exchanges on Cumberland Island

Wilderness Watch is opposing four land exchanges the National Park Service (NPS) proposes for Cumberland Island in southern Georgia. The proposal lacks a lot of necessary information, but would benefit private interests and undermine Congress' intent when establishing the Cumberland Island National Seashore and Wilderness—to allow the island to rewild over time.

Cumberland Island is the largest undeveloped barrier island on the Eastern Seaboard. It's an international biosphere reserve and one of the gems of the National Park system, with its live oak maritime forests, saltwater marshes, and spectacular white sand beach where loggerhead sea turtles make their homes.

Once the private enclave of wealthy families, the federal government acquired most of the island's private land in the 1960s to save it from the real estate development that had beset many other barrier islands. Then Congress established the Cumberland Island National Seashore in 1972. Many previous land owners—as part of the deal when selling their land—retained the right to occupy the land for a specified period of time. Some of these “retained rights” have already expired and all eventually will.

In 1982, Congress designated much of the island's northern two-thirds as the Cumberland Island Wilderness, or as potential Wilderness in areas with retained rights. Already quite a treasure, Cumberland Island was on the path to wild restoration and becoming one of the premier Wildernesses in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Unfortunately, some retained rights owners or their heirs have worked to undo the deals made decades ago by trying to regain complete private ownership of lands that are currently part of the national seashore and potential Wilderness. They've recently been working behind the scenes with the NPS to that end, and this proposal is the result of those backroom deals.

Though the details provided are vague, it appears some of the lands the NPS is proposing to “acquire” are lands the federal government already bought from the families

trying to regain title to them. It's a good deal for the private interests, but terrible for the public, and will undermine six decades of rewilding Cumberland Island.

The NPS has the authority to acquire remaining private lands on the island, and it should use that authority rather than trading away public lands. Exchange proposal #4 on the island's north end poses the greatest threat to existing or potential Wilderness and must not be pursued under any condition.

We're urging the NPS to suspend any further efforts on these exchanges until more information is made available to the public and to provide another public comment period upon the release of this information. 🍷

Reclaim the wild Mount Timpanogos Wilderness

The U.S. Forest Service (FS) erroneously claims its Emerald Lake Shelter Reconstruction Project would improve the wilderness character of the Mount Timpanogos Wilderness in Utah, when in reality, it would seriously degrade this rugged, high elevation Wilderness.



Mount Timpanogos Wilderness, Utah by Brian Smith

The proposal includes helicopters, cement mixers, and other motorized equipment to reconstruct a sheet metal Quonset hut damaged by snow during 2021/2022.

Prior to the area's 1984 wilderness designation, the hut supported an annual public hike—until the event's excessive impacts caused the Forest Service to end it around 1970. Being only five miles from the trailhead, the hut is neither necessary to administer the Wilderness nor for safety.

The agency's own wilderness policy recognizes that a structure is not needed for visitor use, stating that visitors must be prepared on their own to face “inherent risks of adverse weather conditions, isolation, physical hazards, and lack of rapid communications, and that search and rescue may not be as rapid as expected in an urban setting.”

The natural deterioration of structures is evidence of untrammelled and timeless natural processes reclaiming Wilderness from temporary human occupation. Wilderness Watch is urging the FS to adopt an alternative that either lets these processes unfold or that uses wilderness-compatible means to remove its remnants. 🍷

On the watch

Fighter jet flights threaten 30 Wildernesses

Wilderness Watch is pushing back against a U.S. Air Force (USAF) proposal for a massive increase in low-level jet training flights in more than 1.2 million acres of Wilderness in Arizona and New Mexico. The activity detailed in the USAF's Draft Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) entitled *Regional Special Use Airspace Optimization to Support Air Force Missions in Arizona*—including low-altitude jets, sonic booms, and supersonic flights—would shatter the area's natural sounds, ruin the wilderness experience for visitors, and stress native wildlife.

The 30 Wildernesses at risk include the Gila and Blue Range in NM, and in AZ, the Superstition, Salt River Canyon, White Canyon, Needles Eye, Aravipa 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, Cabeza Prieta, Coyote Mountains, Big Horn Mountains, Baboquivari Peak, and Pajarita. The Blue Range Primitive Area and many Wilderness Study Areas are also threatened.

The Air Force wants to lower the training altitudes of existing Military Operation Areas (MOAs) to 500 feet above the ground in some areas, and in one area, just 100 feet above the ground; authorize supersonic training at lower altitudes in more MOAs; lower the minimum release altitude for aluminum and Teflon flares (which have ignited fires after being mistakenly released at low altitudes and hitting the ground); and authorize the use of chaff bundles containing up to 5 million aluminum-coated silica fibers, which settle to the ground.

Research documents the serious health effects of aircraft noise (including low-level supersonic jet flights) on humans and wildlife, such as auditory damage and startling response. Extreme sound disturbances can cause wildlife to abandon habitat and decrease their ability to feed, mate, nest, and raise their young. For people who seek quiet and solitude in Wilderness, military training exercises are always at odds with experiencing such values of Wilderness and should be prohibited.



Superstition Wilderness, Arizona by Deborah Lee Soltesz

We shouldn't sacrifice Wilderness when there are better places for military training. The USAF must adopt the No Action alternative or delete the proposed military airspace overlap above all Wildernesses in AZ and NM. 🌿

Support federal buy-out of state school trust lands in the Boundary Waters

Wilderness Watch is supporting a good agreement between the U.S. Forest Service (FS) and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) for a federal purchase of about 80,000 acres of state-owned school trust lands and 3,200 acres of county tax-forfeited land inside the 1.1-million-acre Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) in Minnesota. These school trust lands do not have wilderness protections and could be developed.

The issue goes back to Minnesota statehood in 1858, when the federal government granted the state two sections of land in every township to support education. Elsewhere in Minnesota, school trust lands were often sold with the proceeds deposited in the state's Permanent School Fund. In other places, revenues

from mineral exploration, mining permits, and timber sales on school trust lands also went into this fund.

But because of wilderness designation, school trust lands in the BWCAW have not generated income, and Minnesota's fiduciary responsibility to the fund has not been met.

In 2012, a land exchange was proposed—for Superior National Forest lands outside of the BWCAW for some school trust lands inside the BWCAW. But this proved to be time-consuming and would have been prohibitively costly, and the DNR has now formally withdrawn its request for an exchange.

The DNR and FS are now proposing a federal purchase of these lands using funding from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund. A federal purchase would increase the efficiency of administering and protecting the BWCAW, prevent future state or county governments from developing these lands, and provide far more money to the Permanent School Fund than a land exchange would. 🌿



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Wilderness in Congress: Poison pills

Republicans will take control of the White House, the Senate, and the House in January. Wilderness issues do not often directly influence Americans' votes, so impacts to Wilderness are byproducts of who we elect. These impacts, to the administrative and legislative branches, will unfold more clearly after this newsletter goes to press.

On January 3, 2025, the 118th session of Congress ends, and bills that have failed to become law must be re-introduced in the 119th Congress. Between now and January, spending bills are likely the only ones to move forward, and this will depend on whether the Republicans decide this strategy can serve their broader agenda. The fad for spending bills is to add unrelated amendments (riders), counting on lawmakers to vote for poison bills that might otherwise die over failing to fund the government.

A couple potential riders threaten Wilderness. The Senate Committee on Armed Services recommended a defense spending bill (S. 4638) with a rider forcing the Bureau of Land Management to reverse its decision and approve

construction of the Ambler Mining Road in Alaska. The Ambler Road would span 211 miles and run adjacent to the Gates of the Arctic Wilderness, allowing motorized

use to degrade some of America's wildest public lands. Another proposed rider not yet adopted is the EXPLORE Act, which has already passed the House and would amend the Wilderness Act to allow recreational climbers to install permanent fixed climbing anchors in Wilderness.

Over the last few decades, the Wilderness System and the Wilderness Act have been attacked regardless of which party controls the federal government. The EXPLORE Act is bipartisan. A committee

from a Democrat-controlled Senate recommended the bill with the Ambler Road rider. But, bills that will likely die in this Congress—such as a bill that would allow copper-nickel sulfide mining in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness watershed—very much threaten to make it further in the next Congress. While we can acknowledge that defending Wilderness and the Wilderness Act will be a steeper fight in the next few years, we will meet this challenge head on, and hope you do, too. Wilderness needs all of us. 🌿



Gates of the Arctic Wilderness by Zak Richter/NPS