First time I read about the Wilderness Act—or the Wilderness Bill at that time—was in The New York Times of May 15, 1956. In the column headed “Conservation,” John B. Oakes reported that Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota was sponsoring legislation to establish a national wilderness preservation system. “The idea is certainly worth exploring,” Oakes wrote, “if what is left of our country in a natural state is worth saving, as many of us believe it is.”

Oakes outlined the problem as follows:

This isn’t just a question of city folks seeking outdoor recreation, or enjoying spectacular scenery, or breathing unpoisoned air. It goes much deeper; it springs from the inextricable relationship of man with nature, a relationship that even the most insensitive and complex civilization can never dissipate. Man needs nature; he may within limits control it, but to destroy it is to begin the destruction of man himself. We cannot live on a sterile planet, nor would we want to.

John Oakes stirred my conscience, and my curiosity, to learn more. I determined in due course that he was voicing a viewpoint deeply rooted in American culture and history, manifest in earlier days through the works of James Fenimore Cooper, William Cullen Bryant, John J. Audubon, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and John Muir. Muir felt uplifted and exalted in the wild sanctuary: Wilderness to him was an expression of God on earth—the mountains, God’s temples; the forests, sacred groves. In our own era, the celebrated photographer Ansel Adams expressed the idea: “Here are worlds of experience beyond the world of aggressive man, beyond history, beyond science. The moods and qualities of nature and the relations of great art are difficult to define; we can grasp them only in the depths of our perceptive spirit.”

I found such lofty expressions from political leaders too—leaders of both major political parties. One hundred years ago Charles Evans Hughes, Republican governor of New York and later chief justice of the Supreme Court, declared at the dedication of Palisades Interstate Park:

Of what avail would be the benefits of gainful occupation, what would be the promise of prosperous communities, with wealth of products and freedom of exchange, were it not for opportunities to cultivate the love of the beautiful? The preservation of the scenery of the Hudson is the highest duty with respect to this river imposed upon those who are the trustees of its manifest benefits.

In Maine, Governor Percival Baxter, the son of a wealthy family, found in Mount Katahdin the gift he wished to give with his own money to the people of his state. By stipulating that the area “forever shall be held in its natural wild state,” Governor Baxter passed on his understanding of the need for wild places in modern civilization. “The works of men are short-lived,” he declared on November 30, 1941. “Monuments decay, buildings crumble and wealth vanishes, but Katahdin in its massive grandeur will forever remain the mountain of the people of Maine. Throughout the ages it will stand as an inspiration to the men and women of this State.”

Attainments in preservation, as in any manifestation of ethics and idealism, do not come easily. In the case of the Wilderness Act, fruition came after eight years of discussion and debate by the Senate and House of Representatives, and after 18 separate hearings conducted by congressional committees around the country. I believe it would never have happened without the unflinching commitment of a
very broad coalition that rallied people—all kinds of people—around the wilderness cause.

Now I believe the time is at hand to review the scope and strengths of that coalition, and to renew it to meet new challenges. On one hand, Americans can be proud of the 106 million acres (42.9 million ha) safeguarded by the Wilderness Act. It defines wilderness in law and public policy and how it should be cared for and used. It does even more, encouraging us to conserve the feeling and skills of self-reliance. That we have set aside these special places is known throughout the world; wilderness preservation treats ecology as the economics of nature, in a manner directly related to the economics of humankind. Keeping biotic diversity alive, for example, is the surest means of keeping humanity alive. But conservation transcends economics—it illuminates the human condition by refusing to put a price tag on the priceless.

Reconstituting the Coalition

On the other hand, I see the wilderness concept diluted in proposal after proposal before Congress, and in management plan after management plan prepared by our resource agencies. I feel deep concern about the effects of overuse, misuse, and commercialization; about allowing motorized equipment inside wilderness, and about the willingness to accept something-less-than-wilderness in the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). When you read legislation providing for “conservation, recreation, and development” in the same package, you can bet your bottom dollar that wilderness protection will come last and least.

I don’t mean to target any group or individuals for blame, for we are all part of the problem. More important, we can all contribute to the solution. Reconstituting the coalition—of citizen conservationists, scientists, elected public officials, public servants in the resource agencies, writers, artists, and the media – will make it happen. We all love our country. Although we don’t say it enough, that is what brings us together.

I think of the campaigners for the Wilderness Act as true patriots. Howard Zahniser, the principal author and advocate of the Wilderness Act of 1964, was studious, articulate, and compassionate. “We are not fighting progress,” Zahniser said. “We are making it. We are not dealing with a vanishing wilderness. We are working for a wilderness forever.” In 1956 Representative John P. Saylor of Pennsylvania introduced the Wilderness Bill in the House of Representatives. I knew Saylor as a friend and hero. In many ways he was a conservative Republican. Nevertheless, for eight years he led the bill’s uphill legislative battle and never gave up. In 1961, when the going was tough, Saylor declared: “I cannot believe the American people have become so crass, so dollar-minded, so exploitation-conscious that they must develop every last little bit of wilderness that still exists.”

I remember Senator Frank Church of Idaho as one of the courageous conservationists in Congress, and recall in particular the battle over reclassification of the old Idaho Primitive Area as the River of No Return Wilderness.

When Senator Church conducted hearings in different sections of Idaho, people who had never spoken publicly before stood up and responded to him, opening their hearts in praise of an area larger and wilder than Yellowstone. The designation of this great area as the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness certainly is a deserved recognition of Senator Church’s service to his own state and the nation.

I have known and worked with able scientists, such as John and Frank Craighead, the experts on the grizzly bear, and with committed wilderness advocates in the federal agencies. To my mind, Bill Worf ranks with Arthur Carhart, Robert Marshall, and Aldo Leopold, Forest Service professionals...
We should not allow the mismanagement of our public lands, whether classified as wilderness or not.

who led the way in wilderness awareness and management. Worf came to Washington, D.C., soon after the act was passed, to write implementing regulations for the agency. He is a public servant who never quit, establishing and leading the wonderfully constructive organization Wilderness Watch after he retired.

I’ve known others like him elsewhere in the Forest Service and in the other agencies as well. I think also of the late Paul Fritz. He was a feisty, stocky New Yorker, who came west to study landscape architecture at Utah State University, worked for a time for the Forest Service, then transferred to the National Park Service. In 1966 he was placed in charge of Craters of the Moon National Monument, a striking Idaho landscape of lava fields studded with cinder cones. Disregarding bureaucratic admonitions in his own agency, he gained support from local communities and environmental groups for the Craters of the Moon wilderness, established in 1970 as the first national park unit added to the NWPS.

But my favorite heroes have been my own breed, writers who were activists, such as Sigurd Olson, Richard Neuberger, Wallace Stegner, and Paul Brooks, and journalists, notably John Oakes, a champion of wilderness, civil rights, and all good causes, who rose to be editorial page editor of The New York Times.

The best defense clearly is an aware, alert, and involved public. It makes things happen. It has worked in times past. It starts at the grass roots with individual citizens who care about the beauty of the earth. I will illustrate by citing a case history of defeat turned into victory. In 1966 the National Park Service chose the Great Smoky Mountains of North Carolina in Tennessee as the site of its first proposed wilderness designation under the Wilderness Act of 1964. Unfortunately, the plan was terrible, designed to destroy rather than defend wilderness. But it seemed like a done deal, with all the political power behind it.

Harvey Broome, of Knoxville, Tennessee, however, felt otherwise. He was my friend and mentor. He earned a law degree at Harvard and had a successful law practice, but he was committed to the work of the Wilderness Society, of which he was one of the founders and subsequently president. So he accepted a job as clerk to a judge with the understanding that he would be allowed time off when needs of the Wilderness Society required it. With his right-hand man, Ernie Dickerman, Harvey led in mobilizing defense of the Great Smoky Mountains. Newspapers from The New York Times to the Portland Oregonian responded with powerful editorials; thousands of citizens wrote letters demanding better stewardship from the National Park Service. It took six years, but ultimately the agency withdrew its horrendous antiwilderness plan.

Wilderness Legacy

Looking back, I remember environmental leaders of 40 or 50 years ago as missionaries. Those people gave us broad shoulders to stand on. They want us to work together through tough and trying times, to sound the alarm and to alert the public, from the grass roots to Washington, in defense of wild places.

That is why I feel we should not allow the mismanagement of our public lands, whether classified as wilderness or not. I believe strongly in the principle of public land ownership and in the professional agencies that administer them. I feel alarm at moves to disassemble and privatize national parks, national forests, national wildlife refuges, and areas administered by the Bureau of Land Management. I hope we will not allow it, for public lands are the last open spaces, last wildernesses, last wildlife havens.

I feel the same about charging fees for recreation on public lands. It’s a terrible idea. National parks in the United States are being reduced from sanctuaries to popcorn playgrounds, managed as theme parks in the Disney mode rather than by park professionals in the public interest.

The role of government in recreation—of government at all levels—should be to support conservation, physical fitness, and healthful outdoor leisure away from a mechanized supercivilized world. A wholesome natural environment provides the foundation for a wholesome human environment. We can’t have one without the other. The preservation of nature is a use in its own right—a “wise use.” Gifford Pinchot, the 20th-century conservation pioneer, said it this way:

The planned and orderly development and conservation of our natural resources is the first
When you read legislation providing for "conservation, recreation and development" in the same package, you can bet your bottom dollar that wilderness protection will come last and least.

I thought at the time his words were a challenge meant for me. But no, they are a legacy meant for us all. **IJW**

**MICHAEL FROME,** author, educator, and activist, has written 18 books, including Greenspeak, Green Ink, and Battle for the Wilderness. Former U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin said of him: "No writer in America has more persistently argued for the need of a national ethic of environmental stewardship." He lives in Port Washington, Wisconsin.

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