Why All This Fuss About Wilderness?

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NOT MANY YEARS AGO, nearly anyone you might have asked would have told you that preserving our wilderness areas is a kind of rear guard action against the inevitable, that the areas themselves are mostly the concern of the few hardy outdoorsmen who enjoy their hiking, climbing, camping, hunting and fishing in primitive country.

Now, suddenly, public interest in wilderness preservation is up everywhere. Congressmen received more mail on the Wilderness Bill last year than on any other conservation issue. The House Interior Committee, in a list of interested correspondents, named 18 persons against the bill, while the list of those in favor filled 13 pages.

For the second time in two years, the Senate has passed a measure to establish a national policy to preserve wilderness. The same interest has produced articles, editorials, and comment in magazines, newspapers, and broadcast media across the country in increasing amounts.

The Reverend Duncan Howlett, pastor of one of the large metropolitan churches in Washington, D.C., made the Wilderness Bill the subject of his sermon one Sunday last March. He said, "With the Wilderness Bill, we enter the realm of values where commercial interests are irrelevant, provided they can be satisfied elsewhere — as they can be in our rich and fruitful country."

He closed with a prayer: "God of time and eternity, as we strive on toward a better day, grant us to cherish this living emerald, the broad green earth, our home. Amen."

What does it all mean?

Part of the answer — a most important part — is that Americans, being Americans, have a deep regard for the wilderness. They look on it as a part of their inheritance; the scene of the exploits and sacrifices of their forebears; and of their own excursions. We are an outdoor people, and the wilderness is the ultimate in the outdoors. It is wrong to assume that its preservation is the concern of only a few' specially-interested persons. It is the concern of every American.

Furthermore, more and more Americans are becoming aware of their share in this great national resource, and they are urging the Congress to protect it in their behalf. They are aroused at the idea that a few persons who represent vested interests might prevent the Congress from getting the chance to act.

That's just what happened last year. Opponents of the Wilderness Act passed by the Senate used various parliamentary devices to keep the bill from coming up in the House of Representatives. The bill was not acted on by the House, and the thousands who had worked for it were shocked and indignant at its obstruction.

Those two factors are the basis for all the fuss. You — like every other American — own a share in this great, irreplaceable, living resource — the wilderness. And somebody is trying to get it away from you.

Why do we need wilderness areas?

First, because of the regard, and need, of our people for the wilderness. Only there can we find wildlife in its truly natural habitat. Only there is the tranquil majesty of our own continent still preserved. A sense of that living presence, with access to its

wonders, offers a richer, fuller, more healthful life to anyone who wants it. But as open spaces all around us are being taken up for one kind or another of human occupancy, we are beginning to sense how fragile and how easily destroyed our true wilderness is. Since, by 1970, shopping centers are expected to occupy space in this country equal to the combined areas of Maryland and Delaware, opposition to a proposal to set aside only two percent of the country is hard to understand. It is bound to stir interest.

Just what is wilderness? What areas are involved? How can we preserve them? What will it cost? What can we do next? There are a lot more questions; answering one brings up another.

A look in the dictionary shows the origin of the word, wilderness, and its primary definition: Wild-deer-ness; an area in a wild-deer condition. The regard for wildlife is at the very core of the meaning of wilderness.

In its present meaning, the definition includes an absence of human influences for change. Paradoxically, wilderness is a human concept, but its essence is the absence of everything human except man himself — as visitor. True wilderness, of course, can mean many things to many people. But when we talk of wilderness as in the Wilderness Bill, we use the Senate's definition:

> "in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape ... an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man; where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

In describing the areas with which it is concerned, the act goes on to describe wilderness as: "undeveloped federal land without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions." The Act also describes some of these conditions. An area of wilderness, it says:

- Generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's works substantially unnoticeable.
- Has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a rugged, primitive, and unconfined type of recreation.
- Is of sufficient size to make practicable its preservation and use in unimpaired condition.
- May also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value J

There are three kinds of wilderness areas in our publicly owned federal lands. They are in wildlife refuges and ranges, in our National Park system, and in certain specially-classified portions of our national forests (about eight percent). Within these classifications, the wilderness areas are also serving their purposes as refuge, park, or forest land,

as well as protected watersheds and potential scientific research areas. This is a most fortunate part of our present opportunity. The Wilderness Act recognizes this, and states that the Act will not interfere with these other purposes except that the current administering agencies will lx* charged with continuing to maintain their wilderness character.

There are more than 24 million acres of wilderness in two dozen wildlife refuges and ranges. Nearly 19 million of those acres are in Alaska; others include great, wild Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia; the National Bison Range in Montana; the Red Rock Lakes Migratory Refuge in Montana with its trumpeter swans; and the Aransas Refuge in Texas where the whooping cranes winter. On those lands, the primary concern is that of preserving the habitat of the wildlife. This wilderness is protected for the wild creatures, not for recreation that might interfere with them.

In the National Park system, we have four dozen units with about 20 million acres of wilderness in the back country. Not all can be preserved as wilderness — some must be taken up by roads and facilities for millions of visitors. Large areas are thus occupied at this time; more will be needed in the future. But the great stretches of this superb wilderness can well be left in this "reservoir of wilderness."

Our national forests also include a great expanse of wilderness. More than 14 million acres are so classified, and though variously labeled "wilderness," "wild," "primitive," or "canoe," all are wilderness, and are a most important part of our national wilderness preservation system. That preservation is one of the multiple uses that our national forests can serve. Even within areas of wilderness, there are multiple uses to be served.

The total wilderness in the park, refuge, and forest classifications is indeed extensive and magnificent, but still less than two percent — one-fiftieth — of our nation's total area. Not all of it can be preserved forever as wilderness, but our grandchildren will thank us for every acre we can save.

What price preservation? In dollars, the cost is negligible. More than money, the job will take clear and firm purpose, for it will not cost any more to preserve the refuge and range lands and National Park and national forest wilderness areas than it will to handle them in some other way.

We have the areas of wilderness now. We know that we must preserve them, and we know how — and how simply — it can be done. We need not lie fighting a "delaying action," for the opportunity before us makes possible a program that can endure. It is not a rear guard action, but in reality is a pioneer effort in land management that can keep the living wilderness forever a part of America.

The legislation needed to establish the necessary policy and program is already pending. It has been urged by the President and passed by the Senate, and is now facing the House of Representatives. Our wilderness preservation program is in the hands of our Congressmen. What it needs now is the support of the people, whose combined voices can shout down any special interest group, no matter how effective the lobbyists may be. Perhaps that is the big reason behind the new interest in wilderness. This is decision time.

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