

Ted Kaczynski's Correspondence with the Wilderness Society

February 26, 1969 & July 21, 1969

“It seems to me that, as matters now stand, the work of the Wilderness Society is bound to fail in the long run.” So began a letter from Theodore Kaczynski to the Wilderness Society dated February 1969. At the time, Kaczynski was a young mathematics professor at the University of California at Berkeley, unknown to the nation he would later terrorize. Only in retrospect does Kaczynski’s letter offer clues to his later career as one of the nation’s best-known domestic terrorists. In fact, many of the questions he posed about wilderness in 1969 resonated with debates that rattled the wilderness movement in the same years that the environmental movement emerged as a popular force in American culture and politics. While the Wilderness Society focused on the immediacy of the Wilderness Act, the ten-year reviews, and the enlargement of the wilderness system, Kaczynski cast his imagination into the future. He warned the Wilderness Society, “I see no reason to suppose that there will be any change in the present trends toward rapidly increasing over-population and over-industrialization, and a technology that grows with uncontrolled and indeed cancerous rapidity.”¹

Foremost among the questions Kaczynski asked, and one that had already begun to divide the wilderness advocacy community, was a concern about the place of recreation in the wilderness system. Wilderness may have been meant for solitude and primitive recreation, but by the late 1960s, a rapidly growing number of backpackers crowded into the nation’s wild places. Kaczynski observed, “either the wilderness areas will become so overcrowded that they lose their value, or else public admittance to the areas will have to be severely restricted.” Kaczynski also questioned how the popularity of wilderness might threaten its very character. More visitors would require agencies to spend more time managing the wilderness areas. “These conditions,” Kaczynski warned, “will make necessary more and more scientific control and manipulation of wilderness areas.” Ultimately, “the areas will not really be wild at all, because every aspect of them will be under the control of man.” Finally, Kaczynski fore-shadowed his own retreat to Montana two years later. He described the tamed, recreational wilderness areas of the future as “artificially maintained museumpieces with ‘do not touch’ signs all over them.” Then, he wrote with emphasis, “Real wilderness living will be impossible.”²

It took the Wilderness Society five months to reply to Kaczynski’s letter. When Virginia Carney, the Wilderness Society’s administrator, did respond, she failed to address the questions Kaczynski posed about the uses and management of wilderness. Instead, she focused on his fear of a future technical-industrial society and she explained that those concerns went beyond the Wilderness Society’s agenda. She praised his thoughtful letter and then explained that the Wilderness Society could only “fulfill

¹ Theodore J. Kaczynski, “Letter to the Wilderness Society,” February 26, 1969, TWSR,⁽¹⁾ box 7:107, folder “States/California: Correspondence.”

² Ibid.

⁽¹⁾ TSWR = Wilderness Society Records, CONS¹³⁰, Conservation Collection, Denver Public Library, Colorado.

our primary purpose: the preservation of wilderness.”³ Yet, neither the Wilderness Society nor Theodore Kaczynski would escape the questions he posed. Behind the tensions over recreation, ecology, and wilderness that Kaczynski highlighted were larger questions about the place of wilderness in a world beset by environmental crisis. In the years before and after Earth Day, some wilderness activists saw the intrinsic value of wilderness as the most important argument for protecting wilderness, and they began to press this argument within the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society. How the mainstream wilderness movement navigated these tensions and consolidated its moderate approach to wilderness was crucial to the wilderness movement’s political successes and its limitations since the 1970s.

Kaczynski himself veered away from public wilderness debate. In 1971, he resettled in a rustic cabin in rural Montana and set out to resolve his concerns about modern society in his own violent way. In the 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s, a string of bombs, one placed onboard a domestic airliner and others mailed to scientists, business executives, and other agents of what Kaczynski called the “industrial-technological system” captured national attention. Three people died, twenty-two were injured, and in time he became known as the “Unabomber.” After the publication of his manifesto, “Industrial Society and Its Future,” in June 1995, Kaczynski was apprehended and sentenced to four life terms in federal prison.⁴

³ Virginia C. Carney, “Letter to Kaczynski,” July 21, 1969, *ibid*.

⁴ David Johnston, “Judge Sentences Confessed Bomber to Four Life Terms,” *New York Times*, May 5, 1998.

The Ted K Archive

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The Promise of Wilderness by James Morton Turner & William Cronon (University
of Washington Press).

www.uwapress.uw.edu/book/9780295993300/the-promise-of-wilderness

Only these letter extracts are currently public. The full letters can be found at the
Denver Public Library in Colorado, under their Wilderness Society Records,
CONS¹³⁰, Conservation Collection.

www.thetedkarchive.com