

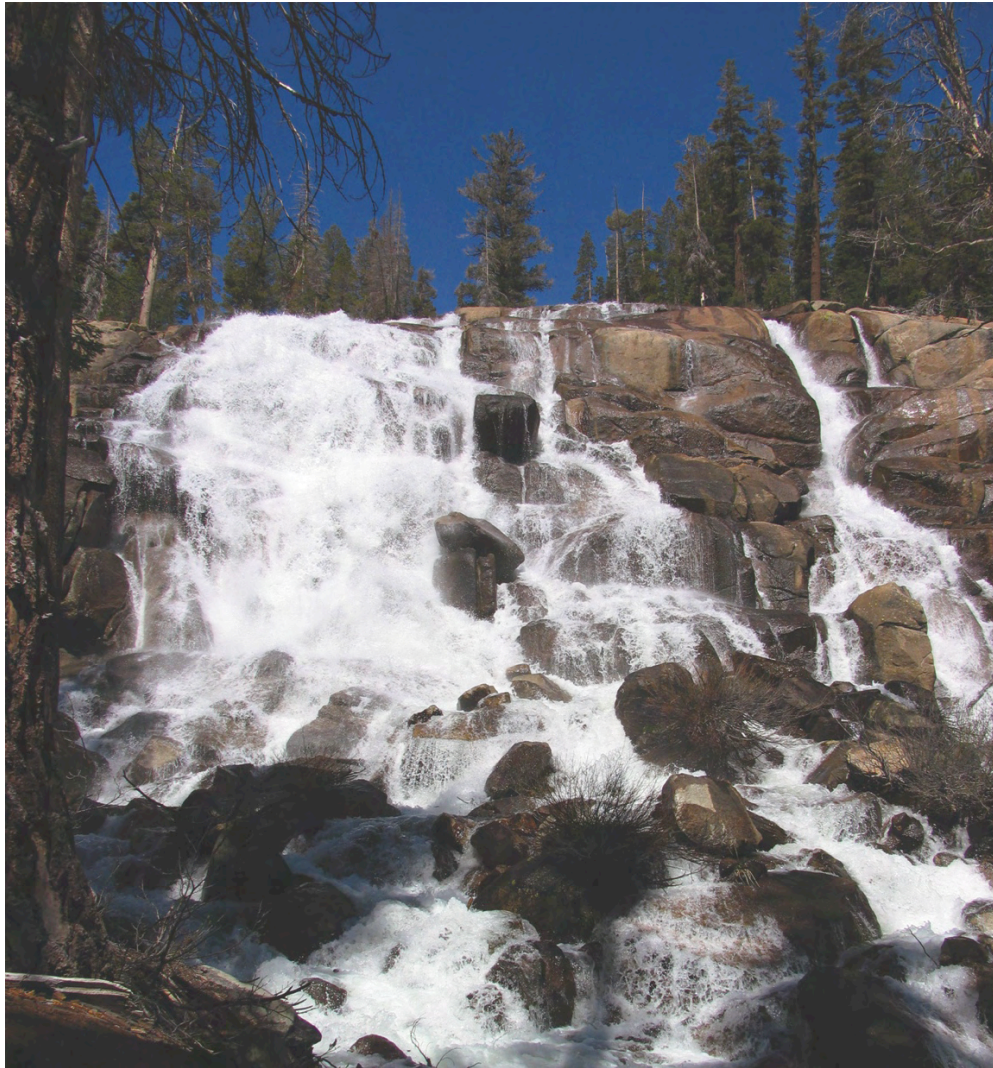


The Wilderness Act of 1964 marks a seminal shift in the history of American attitudes toward nature. It created the national wilderness preservation system, which has grown to more than 110 million acres in 700 congressionally designated wilderness areas. More than 40 million of those acres are in the national parks, including this beach in Cumberland Island National Seashore (Georgia).



You can experience national park wilderness areas at the edge of a metropolis (Fire Island National Seashore, near New York City) and at the edge of the continent (Wrangell–St. Elias National Park and Preserve, Alaska).





The language of the Wilderness Act says: “In contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, [wilderness] is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” Minaret Falls in Devils Postpile National Monument (California), part of the Ansel Adams Wilderness Area.





Even supporters of the Wilderness Act, however, worry that the dichotomy between humans and nature suggested by this language may be overstated. Thinking about wilderness as “unpeopled” overlooks the indigenous populations who called these lands home, in effect erasing Native Americans from environmental history. The Wilderness Act, they say, sidesteps a more complicated and nuanced environmental and cultural narrative. Compton Falls, Upper Buffalo Wilderness, Buffalo National River (Arkansas).





Even the remote archipelago of Isle Royale National Park (Michigan), which is almost entirely designated wilderness, has a long and complex cultural history, as does the desert wilderness area in Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument (Arizona).





In recent years, a massive energy boom in western North Dakota has impacted Theodore Roosevelt National Park and its designated wilderness area.





Like all wilderness areas, the designated wilderness portion of Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve (Alaska) has no roads, though for the first time one is being proposed to run through the park near the wilderness area.



Still, wilderness in national parks offer unparalleled opportunities to experience nature relatively free from the influences of people. Some say that an important value of wilderness is simply knowing that it exists, whether we ever visit it or not. Stephen Mather Wilderness in North Cascades National Park (Washington).