

Securing an Enduring Wilderness in the National Park System: The Role of the National Wilderness Steering Committee

The National Park Service (NPS) can take great pride in the fact that it is responsible for the stewardship of more designated wilderness than any other federal land management agency. Since the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964, 46 separate units have been established in national park areas. These 44 million acres of designated wilderness comprise nearly 53% of the total NPS-managed acreage. Most of the legislation establishing NPS wilderness was passed during the 1970s and 1980s. The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act in 1980 set aside an astounding 33 million acres in eight large park units. In addition, past presidents have recommended an additional 19 wilderness areas to Congress for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System, and the NPS has formally proposed wilderness for another 20 parks. By NPS policy no actions that would diminish the wilderness suitability of these proposed or recommended areas will be taken until after the president and Congress have made their decisions on wilderness designation.

Although the modern era of wilderness stewardship began with the legislative establishment of designated NPS wilderness following the passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act, the administrative commitment to wilderness as a supplemental responsibility for managers lagged, and the agency was frequently criticized for its shortcomings. Similar criticism continued well into the 1990s (Sellars 2000). In response, the National Park Service convened several national task forces beginning in the mid-1980s in an attempt to identify its major wilderness stewardship issues and to recommend solutions.

Central to implementing most of



the recommended solutions for the issues identified by these task forces is the challenge of providing leadership for wilderness stewardship across the



National Park System. It is a challenge because National Park Service wilderness is fundamentally different, especially when compared with wilderness managed by agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management (BLM).

In other agencies, wilderness is the outcome of an allocation decision among largely consumptive uses, whereas wilderness in the National Park System is more about an allocation among largely non-consumptive uses. Moreover, where there is wilderness in a national park, most of the park becomes designated wilderness, which is not correspondingly true of wilderness in a national forest or BLM district. The result of this is that most national park staff members are involved in some manner in wilderness stewardship, in contrast to the other agencies where more limited and specialized staff are involved. And

although it is possible in the other agencies to do programmatic budgeting for wilderness management, it is more realistic for the National Park Service to budget its resources by park rather than by program.

All of these factors point toward the likelihood and need for different approaches to providing leadership for wilderness stewardship in these agencies. Centralized program management and budgeting fit wilderness stewardship in the Forest Service and BLM, but are not functional in the National Park Service, where a different approach has evolved.

After the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964, the National Park Service response was to establish a centralized program within the Planning Office to conduct the mandated 10-year study of national parks for the purpose of making recommendations on their suitability for designation as wilder-

ness. The National Park Service had largely completed this planning effort by 1978, when recommended wilderness in over thirty parks was designated, and on-ground assessments and studies were complete in more than 40 other parks where wilderness proposals and recommendations were developed.

As this wilderness study program wound down, many of its staff and resources were channeled into the special studies in Alaska that helped to influence wilderness decisions that were made in the Alaska National Interests Land Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980. But there is no evidence that the agency had yet begun to think systematically about wilderness management in the national parks.

And wilderness studies did not entirely disappear even after ANILCA because many pieces of park legislation in the 1980s created new parks with "wilderness study" provisions. Furthermore, some members of Congress supported wilderness studies because they viewed wilderness as the best means of ensuring that national parks in their states or districts would be kept in their current natural state without further development (e.g., Cumberland Island National Seashore, Guadalupe Mountains National Park, Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, etc.)

But wilderness studies do not address the problems associated with managing wilderness, and this was becoming apparent within and without the agency. In 1986, the NPS director developed a 12-Point Plan for the National Park Service that, among

other things, called in general terms for several activities relating to management of legislated wilderness areas. The action plan for implementing the 12-Point Plan called specifically for ensuring that designated, potential, and proposed wilderness areas in the National Park System were managed according to the principles of the Wilderness Act and, for Alaska, of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. It also called for specific steps to improve coordination and consistency in management of all wilderness areas; to monitor human use, air quality, and noise trends in wilderness areas; to develop an initiative on interpretation and public information regarding wilderness areas; and to develop a systematic resource management strategy for such areas.

To implement these action steps, the National Park Service convened a task force of wilderness specialists from eight regions, key headquarters staff, representatives from the other wilderness management agencies, and wilderness constituent groups. In the process of developing recommendations, the task force systematically reviewed management policies, major wilderness management issues, and the intent of the Wilderness Act as applied to the overall National Park Service mission. The task force developed six major recommendations together with implementation steps to be completed over five years. These were related to (1) designation of national and regional wilderness coordinators; (2) management techniques appropriate for wilderness; (3) wilderness uses and capacity determination; (4) education and training of wilder-

ness management personnel; (5) educating the public; and (6) interagency coordination and consistency. The primary recommendation for addressing wilderness management leadership in the agency was the establishment of wilderness coordinator positions at headquarters and the regional offices.

Despite this impressive program management plan and agency efforts to implement it, including the naming of regional wilderness coordinators, agency efforts faltered after several years and had largely dissipated by 1989. This happened essentially because critical measures were never institutionalized and staff and funding commitments were inadequate for significant progress to be made in implementing the action plan.

This lack of progress led to the formation of a second task force in late 1993 charged with revisiting wilderness management issues across the National Park System. The recommendations of this task force dealt with wilderness leadership, conveying the wilderness message, developing partnerships, investing in NPS employees, improving wilderness planning, improving resource management and understanding, and addressing the backlog in the wilderness review process. Major leadership recommendations focused mainly on the establishment of interdisciplinary wilderness steering committees at the national and regional levels, establishment of an interagency wilderness policy council, maintenance of a strong wilderness coordinator in headquarters, and participation in the interagency Arthur Carhart National

Wilderness Training Center and the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute.

As a result, the NPS established a National Wilderness Steering Committee (NWSC) in 1996, comprising four superintendents together with representatives from Alaska, natural resources, cultural resources, maintenance, interpretation/education, and rangers (Figure 1). In addition, NPS established a collateral-duty wilderness coordinator position and funded an NPS position at the Carhart Training Center. Since that time, the NWSC has evolved into an increasingly effective organizational entity for improving wilderness stewardship in the National Park System. Task Force recommendations continue to be used by the NWSC in development of their on-going work plans. The effectiveness of the NWSC is evidenced by some of the major actions it has taken:

- Development of Director's Order 41: Wilderness Preservation and Management
- Development of Reference Manual 41: Wilderness Preservation and Management
- Participation in the Carhart Training Center, including inauguration of on-site wilderness training in parks
- Establishment of the Director's Order 41 Survey Database
- Inauguration of an annual NPS wilderness report
- Development of a wilderness education plan for the National Park System
- Completion of a wilderness planning handbook
- Development of a wilderness resource book for NPS interpreters
- Development of internet and intranet NPS wilderness websites
- Inauguration of a White Paper Series on wilderness management issues for inclusion in Reference Manual 41



Figure 1. National Wilderness Steering Committee members and park staff discuss proposal for ecological restoration in wilderness to protect cultural resources at Bandelier National Monument. *Photo by Jim Walters, National Park Service.*

- Making the new wilderness management text available on-line
- Development of servicewide performance goals

The reorganization of the NPS that began in 2001 has also led to other opportunities to improve the agency's wilderness stewardship. The program now has a full-time wilderness program manager who reports directly to the new associate director for visitor and resource protection, Karen Taylor-Goodrich. Under the reorganization, this associate director now shares program leadership responsibilities with the associate directors for natural resources, science, and stewardship (Mike Soukup) and park plan-

ning, facilities, and lands (Sue Masica) for issues related to wilderness science and planning. And in a promising development, the NWSC now has committee liaisons from natural resources and science, park planning and special studies, cultural resources, and the associate regional directors for operations. Further improvements in relationships with training and interpretation programs are being explored. The evolution of the NWSC as an effective force for improving wilderness stewardship in the National Park System has been aided by the commitment of such able leaders as Maureen Finnerty, Dick Ring, Karen Wade, Doug Morris, Ernie

Quintana, and Don Neubacher.

The associate directors for visitor and resource protection and for natural resources, science, and stewardship also sit as the National Park Service representatives on the Interagency Wilderness Policy Council that was recently established to address the full suite of interagency wilderness issues.

The highest priorities for the NWSC will continue to be in ensuring that wilderness stewardship training is available to Park Service managers and staff, to make wilderness stewardship information available to park staffs, to aid in the development of educational materials for park visitors, and to be responsive to field staff on wilderness

stewardship issues. The new White Paper Series may be an excellent way to address critical stewardship issues, and a number of them are now in the process of being developed. And finally, at the request of Director Fran Mainella, the NWSC is developing a wilderness action plan to strategically guide the agency's course over the next five years.

The National Wilderness Steering Committee welcomes comments on its effort to become an increasingly effective advisory body focused upon achieving consistency in NPS wilderness management objectives, techniques, and practices on both an agency and interagency basis.

Reference

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Wes Henry, National Park Service, 1201 Eye Street NW (10th Floor, Room 40), Washington, D.C. 20005; wes_henry@nps.gov

Steve Ulvi, Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve and Yukon-Charley Rivers National Preserve, 201 First Avenue, Fairbanks, Alaska 99701; steve_ulvi@nps.gov

