

# MISSION STATEMENTS

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## Celebrating Wilderness in 2004

*Roderick Frazier Nash*

WILDERNESS PRESERVATION IS AN AMERICAN INVENTION—a unique contribution of our nation to world civilization. As we approach the 40th anniversary of the Wilderness Act (September 3, 1964), Americans should renew their pride in and commitment to the National Wilderness Preservation System. It is one of the best ideas our country ever had.

One place to start the celebration is with the recognition that wilderness is the basic component of American culture. From its raw materials we built a civilization. With the idea of wilderness we sought to give that civilization identity and meaning. Our early environmental history is inextricably tied to wild country. Hate it or love it, if you want to understand American history there is no escaping the need to come to terms with our wilderness past. From this perspective, designated wilderness areas are historical documents; destroying them is comparable to tearing pages from our books and laws. We cannot teach our children what is special about our history on freeways or in shopping malls. As a professional historian I deeply believe that the present owes the future a chance to know its wilderness past. Protecting the remnants of wild country left today is an action that defines our nation. Take away wilderness and you diminish the opportunity to be American.

Of course our nation changed its initial wilderness environment. Early on we eliminated a lot of wild places along with the wild people who were there before us. But in this process of pioneering we also changed ourselves. In time Americans began to understand that the conquest of

the wilderness could go too far for our own good. Now, many think, it is time to conquer a civilization notorious for its excesses. Unrestrained growth can be ironic; bigger is not better if the support systems are compromised. Wilderness is an anchor to windward in the seas of increasingly frightening environmental change.

The intellectual revolution that changed our attitude toward wilderness from a liability to an asset is one of the most profound in environmental history. In the beginning of the American experience wilderness was “howling”: feared and hated by European colonists who longed to bring order and security to uncontrolled nature. Their religious heritage taught them that god cursed wild places; the civilizing process was a blessing. Only gradually and incompletely did these old conquer-and-dominate biases give way first to wilderness appreciation and then to preservation.

Romanticism, with its delight in awesome scenery and noble savages, underlay changing attitudes. So did the concept that wilderness was the source of a unique American art, character, and culture. The Adirondacks and the Grand Canyon were the American equivalent of the Acropolis and Buckingham Palace. By the 1850s

Henry David Thoreau could celebrate the physical and intellectual vigor of the wild as a necessary counterpoint to an effete and stale civilization. He called for people and landscapes that were “half cultivated.” He realized that saving some wilderness from development would help keep the New World new.

Granted, few paused to read Thoreau’s essays at the height of westward expansion, but a half-century brought significant physical and intellectual changes in the United States. Discontent with urban environments, and the perception that the frontier was vanishing, brought new popularity to wilderness. National parks (notably Yellowstone, the world’s first in 1872, and Yosemite, 1890) began a policy of protecting unmodified public land for its scientific, scenic, and recreational values. John Muir organized the Sierra Club in 1892 to defend the parks and rallied the nation around the idea that wilderness was a valuable component of a diverse and strong civilization. In the early 20th century, Theodore Roosevelt’s conservation movement included concern for protection of big wild country in which pioneer skills, such as hunting and camping, had meaning. By the 1920s the United States Forest Service was giving administrative recognition to large roadless areas of the national forests. Simultaneously, the growing science of ecology called attention to the importance to wildernesses as reservoirs of basic biological and physical processes. Understandably, Aldo Leopold, a forest ecologist, led the way in calling for wilderness preservation and defining an ethical, not merely an economic, relationship to land.

What was new about the Wilderness Act of 1964 was the way it gave specific, systematic, and secure protection to wilderness qualities and the wilderness experience. The law spoke about the importance

of securing “an enduring resource of wilderness” for the American people. The language itself was revolutionary. Traditionally, Americans reserved the term “resource” or “natural resource” for hard-core economic stuff like lumber, oil, soil, minerals, and hydropower. In describing wilderness as a “resource,” Howard Zahniser, who wrote most of the act, and Congress enlarged the definition of that term to include space, beauty, solitude, silence, and biodiversity. They created a framework for understanding wilderness protection as just a legitimate use of the public lands as the extractive industries. As a professor I sometimes used a literary metaphor to explain the evolution of American wilderness policy. Think about individual national parks and forests as books. In time they were “shelved” in libraries such as the National Park System and the National Wilderness Preservation System. Rangers, who might be thought of as “librarians,” provided protective and custodial services. By the 21st century the task of collecting and cataloguing was largely over. Most of the wilderness we will ever have is identified and at least nominally protected. The challenge now, to continue the metaphor, is to improve our ability to read the books we have reserved. We need to become more environmentally literate. This task calls for a new generation of educators and interpreters who will help people realize the full value of the preserved wilderness resource. Scientists are important, but so are poets, theologians, historians, and philosophers. With their help we may realize the highest potential of our preserved wilderness: using it for instruction and inspiration in how to live responsibly and sustainably on this planet. In 1964 the American public understood the Wilderness Act to be anthropocentric. Wilderness was protected as a scenic outdoor playground. Recreation

and the economic gains that came from tourism justified the policy of preservation, and they served the cause well. But, as the Endangered Species Act of 1972 suggested, there were higher horizons for wilderness valuation. New philosophies called *environmental ethics* or *ecocentrism* gained credibility. If, as the ecologists claimed, nature was a community to which people belonged, didn't we have a responsibility to recognize the intrinsic value of its other non-human members and of natural processes? Wasn't it plausible to assume that nature had rights humans ought to respect? Wilderness figured importantly in this new ecocentric philosophy because it was uncontrolled environment. We didn't make it; we don't own it; and our use of it is not in the old utilitarian style. Indeed designated wilderness could be understood as not for people at all. As the act states, humans are "visitors" who do not remain. Wilderness, then, was someone else's home. It was an environment in which to learn that we are members and not masters of the community of life. An environmental ethic, rules establishing fair play in nature, is the logical next step. Why not do for other species what we have tried to do for oppressed minorities within our species?

Restraint is at the core of the new valuation of wilderness as a moral resource. When we protect wilderness we deliberate-

ly withhold our power to change the landscape. We put limits on the civilizing process. Because we have not conquered and do not dominate wild nature, we demonstrate understanding of the basic ethical concept of sharing and fair play. In this case it's the rest of life on the planet that's involved! Thoreau realized that "wilderness is a civilization other than our own." Respecting it by restraining our impact is the key to effective global environmentalism. The kind of ecocentrism wilderness teaches is not *against* humans at all; it transcends them and recognizes that their best interest is ultimately that of the larger whole.

The Wilderness System, then, is still a place to recreate; but it is also evidence of our capacity for badly needed self-restraint in our relationship to nature. Wildernesses are places to learn gratitude, humility, and dependency; to put our species' needs and wants into balance with those of the rest of the natural world. Even if we never visit them, wilderness areas have value as a symbol of unselfishness. Wilderness preservation is a gesture of planetary modesty by the most dangerous animal on Earth! On its 40th anniversary, let's celebrate the Wilderness Act as the dawn of a kinder, gentler, and more sustainable relationship with our planet. Can anything really be more important?

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