

**The Bush Administration Stifles New National Park
Wilderness Designations
September 8, 2003**

High-ranking National Park Service (NPS) officials have received the “word” that wilderness is a non-starter with the Bush Interior Department. This not too subtle “no new wilderness” message is freezing the wilderness review process within the NPS in its tracks. Four examples of the Bush Administration wilderness moratorium follow:

Big Cypress National Preserve, Florida

Big Cypress National Preserve was authorized in 1974 and expanded in 1988. Approximately 90 percent of the lands in the 700,000 acre park are federally owned, while much of the subsurface oil and gas rights remain in nonfederal ownership. In the 1974 enabling act for the preserve, Congress directed NPS to study Big Cypress for wilderness suitability.

The NPS study, dated August 1979, concluded that there were no wilderness suitable acres in Big Cypress, primarily due to the nonfederal oil and gas rights under the preserve and the abundance of off-road-vehicle trails. But the NPS also committed to restudy the preserve for wilderness suitability within five years, i.e. in 1984. The NPS never conducted the restudy.

In 1988 Congress added 147,000 acres to Big Cypress and required a wilderness study of the added lands be submitted to Congress in five years, i.e. in 1993. The NPS began the assessment of the 1988 Addition lands in May 2001. When the NPS regional office and the NPS Washington Office concluded in May 2002 that the assessment was more detailed than necessary, they rejected it.

It is important to note that the wilderness assessment was not rejected for being inadequate but for being too detailed. In order to cure this seemingly pretextual objection, officials at Big Cypress slimmed down the assessment and resubmitted it in June 2002. The assessment found over 350,000 acres of the preserve to be suitable for wilderness. Although the assessment now met the format and standards demanded in May 2002, the NPS officials in Atlanta showed their hands in July 2002 by informing the officials at Big Cypress to remove all references to wilderness suitable lands from the draft general plan for Big Cypress.

In its letter of May 22, 2003 to PEER, the NPS in Washington, D.C. insisted that the Big Cypress wilderness assessment was rejected in May 2002 because the assessment was too detailed. The NPS in Washington refuses to acknowledge that a revised assessment, satisfying format objections, was resubmitted. The NPS HQ declares of the wilderness assessment for Big Cypress “status unknown.”

In fact, the assessment was rejected in July 2002 even after it met format standards. NPS is now proceeding to develop a general management plan for the Big Cypress Addition

without any discussion of its wilderness suitable lands or any study, including the study mandated by Congress back in 1993.

Channel Islands National Park, California

Channel Islands was proclaimed a national monument in 1938 and became a 125,000 acre national park in 1980, consisting of five islands off the California coast. The law that established the park required that the Secretary of the Interior study Channel Islands for wilderness suitability and report his/her findings to Congress by October 1, 1983. The NPS never conducted the study and never developed a proposal or recommendation. However, on April 24, 2002, the NPS sent a wilderness suitability assessment memo to the Director. That assessment found over 68,000 acres of the park to be suitable as wilderness. Sixteen months later, NPS Director Mainella has failed to act on the assessment and the matter remains pending in her office.

Guadalupe Mountains National Park, Texas

On April 1, 2003, NPS Director Fran Mainella approved a wilderness suitability assessment for more than 38,000 acres of land both in the additions and original boundaries of Guadalupe Mountains. Five months later, the Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish, Wildlife and Parks^{3/4}Craig Manson, a Bush political appointee^{3/4}has yet to approve the publication of that assessment in the Federal Register, effectively strangling the process.

Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, Michigan

Congress created the Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in 1966. The park contains 36,000 acres of federal land. Congress established the park two years after the passage of the Wilderness Act and thus technically was not subject to the requirement that the Secretary study its roadless areas to make a recommendation to Congress. However, the congressional report accompanying the enabling act proposed that the Beaver Basin area of the new lakeshore be managed as a roadless area.

On April 26, 2002, capping a process that began in 2000, local NPS officials sent to the Director an assessment for Pictured Rocks. The assessment found that 18,400 acres of Pictured Rocks were suitable as wilderness. The assessment left out a key roadless tract known as the Grand Sable Dunes, in violation of NPS Management Policies. Now, 15 months later, the NPS is proposing that only 11,700 acres be considered for possible wilderness, an area equaling only 15 percent of the park

Note on Apostle Island National Seashore, Wisconsin

The Administration has allowed the NPS to proceed with a wilderness study, now out for public comment. The Administration had little choice. Senator Feingold (D-WI) mandated funds for the study in 2001. However, NPS has produced a preferred alternative that fails to protect the wild character of three of the remote and roadless