

National Parks: Unfinished Wilderness Agenda

In 1964 the Wilderness Act enacted a national mandate to identify and preserve American wilderness in perpetuity. Framers of the Act saw it as the ultimate safeguard for shrinking wild lands against development and commercial exploitation.

The Act also designated more than 9 million acres as the first segment of the National Wilderness Preservation System. These first 9 million acres were a down payment on a much larger commitment. In order to make good on that commitment, the Act required the Secretary of Interior to review every roadless area of 5,000 contiguous acres or more throughout the national park system and report to the President as to the suitability of each area for preservation as wilderness. In turn, the President is to advise Congress of these recommendations.

The National Park Service (NPS), with its unambiguous preservation mission, was deeply affected by this wilderness imperative. Since 1964 Congress has designated more than 44 million acres of wilderness within 46 national parks, monuments, and other areas in 20 states from New York to Alaska. Nearly half of the 105 million acres in the entire Wilderness Preservation System. While much progress has been made, much has been left undone.

But in recent years, the wilderness imperative has become inoperative in NPS. The process of securing statutory protection for an enduring resource of wilderness within units of the parks has stopped dead in its tracks:

- Congress has yet to act upon 18 presidential recommendations totaling more than five million acres. Among those out in the cold are such popular parks as Yellowstone, Glacier, Grand Teton, Rocky Mountain and Big Bend.
- NPS has prepared wilderness studies and recommendations for more than 2.3 million acres of wilderness in eight other parks that have never been submitted to either the Secretary, the President or transmitted to Congress. The eight parks include Bighorn Canyon, Grand Canyon (with more than 1.1 million acres), Lake Mead and Voyageurs.
- The Alaska National Interest Lands Act of 1980 required that the Secretary transmit recommendations to Congress on wilderness for the areas of the national park system not designated wilderness by ANILCA. NPS and the Department have yet to do so. This lapse affects 13 parks and potentially 19 million acres of wilderness.

In addition, NPS has failed to conduct required wilderness studies for 14 parks, including Acadia, Big South Fork, Cape Hatteras, Channel Islands, and Redwood. Studies are underway in only two parks, Apostle Islands and Pictured Rocks, but it remains to be seen whether the resulting wilderness recommendations will also be stillborn.

All told, stalled wilderness recommendations would increase park wilderness land by more than half, putting at least an additional 26 million acres under wilderness protection.

At present NPS has only one full-time employee devoted to managing the national

wilderness program. This is the least of any Federal agency, even though NPS administers more wilderness acres than any other agency. Under President Nixon, NPS had an entire office devoted to wilderness.

President George W. Bush has his own park funding plan to address park maintenance backlog, paving parking lots and expanding visitor facilities. Though the Bush plan commits little new money, it contains nothing for wilderness. Until that oversight is remedied, the promise of the Wilderness Act remains unfulfilled.