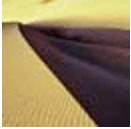


## **40th Anniversary of Wilderness Protection Act**

### **Our great American wilderness needs better protection**

Roderick Nash

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Wilderness is the most fundamental fact of the American environment. From its raw materials we built a civilization. With the idea of wilderness, we gave that endeavor meaning and value. Americans were special because of our contact with wild places.

Designated wilderness areas are historical documents; destroying them is comparable to tearing pages from our books and laws.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 with freeways or shopping malls. As a professional historian, I believe that the present owes the future a chance to know its wilderness past. Protecting the remnants of the American wilderness is an action that defines our nation -- that is one of the reasons lawmakers passed the Wilderness Protection Act 40 years ago. Take away wilderness and you diminish the opportunity to be American.

Californians have the good fortune to live in a state with impressive wilderness monuments and preserves. From the desolate yet beautiful California deserts (including Death Valley and Joshua Tree National Parks and the Mojave National Preserve), to the splendor of the Yosemite Wilderness and Ansel Adams Wilderness in the Sierra Nevada, to the spectacular Ventana Wilderness along the Big Sur Coast, some of the Golden State's most pristine areas have been granted protection in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Moreover, we are neighbors with states that hold natural marvels only a day's drive away. The Grand Canyon region of northern Arizona, for example, is the largest, wildest part of the lower 48 states, as the Colorado River winds through the continent's most breathtaking gorge. Rivers, some think, are the blood of the earth. They carry continents to the sea. On the old Colorado River, you could see the process in moving silt. Glen Canyon Dam has changed much of that, for the clear, cold, greatly diminished flows no longer saw through the ancient rock. But the Grand Canyon is still one of world's greatest wildernesses and deserves a wilderness management policy that matches the magnificence of the place.

You get a sense of the scale of the place driving from the visitor's center on the South Rim to its counterpart on the North Rim. Go either via Marble Canyon or Hoover Dam: the country in between is extraordinarily isolated. Much of it is unexplored. Sit on your boat anywhere along the 279 miles of the Grand Canyon and look in any direction. People have not stood on most of the land you can see. Outstanding opportunities for long-term solitude exist up most of the side canyons. And veteran canyon guides know: It's not the rapids, it's the wildness. From another perspective, in the 225 river miles from Lee's Ferry to Diamond Creek, there are no roads -- not even "off roads." You don't see vehicles of any kind. Think about it -- there is no comparable place in the planet's temperate latitudes.

Thanks to the California Desert Protection Act, sponsored by Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., and enacted 10 years ago, we did right by creating 7.7 million acres of parkland and preserve, about 3.5 million of which is designated wilderness.

But the political process has not measured up to the responsibility of protecting the Grand Canyon, even now as the park goes through another round of management planning for the river. Glen Canyon Dam, completed in 1963, cut the heart out of the downstream ecosystem. Natural processes no longer shape the river corridor. Although roadless and without trace of civilization, Grand Canyon is not legally designated wilderness. Cars are absent, but motorboats still transit the nation's premier national park backcountry. They should be replaced by oar and paddle-powered craft. And, in the interest of protecting the canyon's unparalleled wilderness experience, the number of people permitted to float the river should be significantly reduced. Both the commercial and self-guided boating communities must answer this problem. Where is the moral vision to recognize that the Grand Canyon would have transcendent value to our civilization even if no one floated down the river?

Restraint is at the core of the new valuation of wilderness as a moral resource. When we protect wilderness, we deliberately withhold our power to alter the environment. We put limits on the civilizing process. We respect the rights of the rest of nature. As we mark the 40th anniversary of the Wilderness Act today, Americans should renew their pride in and commitment to our national parks and the National Wilderness Preservation System. They are two of the best ideas this nation ever had. Fully protected as they should be, the Grand Canyon and the California desert wilderness can be places to learn gratitude, humility and dependency, and to build a gentler and more sustainable relationship with our planet. Can anything really be more important?

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## Wilderness Facts

### Under the 1964 Wilderness Act:

-- There are now 106 million acres protected as wilderness. Alaska accounts for more than half of them, 58 million acres, which is 16 percent of the state. California has 14 million acres, or 14 percent of the state. Other states with more than 4 million acres of wilderness are Arizona, Washington and Idaho.

-- President Bush so far has signed four wilderness bills by Congress adding 529,604 acres, nearly all in Nevada. The most acreage was added by President Carter, who signed 14 wilderness bills covering a total of 66.3 million acres, mostly in Alaska. Ronald Reagan signed 43 bills adding 10.6 million acres. Bill Clinton signed 13 bills adding 9.5 million acres. George H. W. Bush signed 10 bills adding 4 million acres.

-- California has the most wilderness areas, 130, followed by Arizona, 90; Alaska, 48; Nevada, 42; Colorado, 41; Oregon, 40; and Washington, 30.

Sources: The Interior Department; The Wilderness Society; Wilderness.net

Roderick Nash, professor emeritus of history and environmental studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara, is author of "Wilderness and the American Mind" (Yale Univeristy Press, 2001; fourth edition). He has also been a Grand Canyon boatman since the 1960s. To learn more about how the National Park Service is managing the Colorado River and to comment on its draft alternatives for public comment, visit [www.nps.gov/grca/crmp/documents/press/26aug04.htm](http://www.nps.gov/grca/crmp/documents/press/26aug04.htm). The Arizona Wilderness Coalition has developed a resolution that will protect the wilderness qualities of the Colorado River and preserve visitor numbers by lengthening the river running season earlier in the spring and later into the autumn. Visit [www.azwild.org](http://www.azwild.org) for more information about the resolution.

<http://sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2004/09/03/EDG7O8ICBQ1.DTL>

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