

"WILDERNESS IN THE EAST? YOU BETCHA!"

Remarks of Ed Zahniser

Celebrating the 100th Anniversary of Howard Zahniser's Birth

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Friends of Allegheny Wilderness

Let me try to encapsulate our national wilderness preservation story and then say a few words about wilderness in the eastern United States, which is in fact where wilderness preservation began. There have been three broad federal public lands preservation efforts in our nation's history. Three broad attempts by the American people, working through their representatives in Congress, to see *preserved* some of our legacy of federal public lands. Lands "to which," as cultural geographer Bret Wallach writes, "Progress would otherwise show no mercy."

First we Americans tried to preserve forests but they were soon opened to logging, mining, and grazing. Congress authorized a national Forest Reserve status in the 1870s. Forest Reserves were effectively forest preserves because they were closed to logging, mining, and grazing. However, in 1905 they were re-designated as national forests open to logging, grazing, and mining.

So, second, we Americans tried to preserve parks, and national parks were created by Congress from 1872, becoming an organized national park system by 1916. However, as wildlands the national parks were soon compromised by automobile tourism development that threatened wild park backcountry.

Now, the third effort to see *preserved* some of our legacy of federal public lands, has been the Wilderness preservation movement that spawned the 1964 law "to establish a National Wilderness Preservation System for the permanent good of the whole people," as the Wilderness Act is fully titled. The 1964 Wilderness Act provides a statutory *preservation* overlay to certain lands of some national forests, parks, and wildlife refuges and Bureau of Land Management lands. Wilderness areas that Congress designates are closed to logging, to most mining, and to most mechanized vehicle and equipment use (with significant legislated exceptions in Alaska).

Wilderness preservation began in the East, in the Adirondack and Catskill mountains of New York State beginning in the 1870s. The 1894 insertion of the "forever wild" clause into the state Constitution meant that New York State's publicly owned wild forest lands were protected by law *forever*. Today 17 New York State-designated wilderness areas total some 1.1 million protected acres.

It is critically important to keep in mind that when we talk about federally designated

wilderness, we are talking ONLY about lands that belong to ALL American citizens, that are owned in common by ALL American citizens. All federally designated wilderness involves only federal public lands. It is not owned by the states, counties, nor only by the residents or business interests of states in which these federal public lands lie. Federally designated wilderness lands are publicly owned in common by ALL Americans.

What are now eastern national forests were once largely *The Lands Nobody Wanted*, as a book about them is titled. Many were farmed-out, eroding, cut-over, and/or burned over. Progress had showed them no mercy. Now, fewer than 100 years later, these eastern national forests are public lands *everybody* wants for the many values they offer, including their wildness.

The purpose of wilderness preservation is to let some portion of the land be self-willed. To let some land evolve by natural processes so that not all land becomes a projection of human desire. Wilderness designation recognizes, for example, that we humans should not dictate, for *all* forest lands, what tree species should dominate or what animal populations should be maximized for human purposes. Wilderness respects what we do *not* know about the land organism.

Wilderness, as ecologist Aldo Leopold wrote, is "an antidote to the biotic arrogance" of humans. Preserving wilderness shows restraint and humility. Preserving wilderness makes some room for permanence as well as for change. Preserving wilderness treats some remnant of the land as community not as commodity.

What are the benefits of wilderness? The US Forest Service conducts intensive sociological surveys about wilderness benefits. Their sample size and statistical reliability dwarf those of the Gallup and other mere polls of public opinion. Ranking them in order of their importance, Americans see the benefits of wilderness as:

1. Protecting water quality
2. Protecting air quality
3. Protecting wildlife habitat
4. Legacy value (knowing that future generations will have wilderness areas)
5. Protecting rare and endangered species
6. Protecting unique wild plants and animals
7. Providing scenic beauty
8. Existence value (knowing that wilderness areas exist)
9. Providing recreation opportunities
10. Option value (knowing that in the future I will have the option to visit a wilderness area)
11. Preserving natural areas for scientific study, and
12. Providing spiritual inspiration

An often-heard argument against wilderness is that it locks up the land and is therefore elitist. How can that be? Those first eight benefits of wilderness don't even involve setting foot in wilderness. Benefit nine is recreation. Benefit 11 scientific study. Just

two of the 12 benefits accrue from people being *inside* a wilderness area.

Naturalist John Hay calls wilderness "the Earth's immortal genius." Gary Snyder calls wilderness the planetary intelligence. Wilderness embodies what the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called "our inescapable network of mutuality." Human ecologist Paul Shepard says wilderness is where our genome lives. We were shaped by Ice Age hunter-gatherer culture. We still need to experience wildness, Shepard asserted, to be fully human.

"The material world is closed to those who think of it only as a commodity market," Jeanette Winterson writes. Why would I *choose* "to live in exile from my evolutionary environment?" she asks, from "the land, the seasons, other creatures, and certain rituals..." Preserving wilderness asserts that it is the birthright of every child across the womb of time to be able to witness "the world as it was."

Is There Wilderness in the East? You Betcha!

Is there wilderness in the East? Yes, indeed. The Appalachian Trail traverses 21 federally designated wilderness areas, so, yes, there is wilderness in the East. Three wild areas in the East were so-designated by the U.S. Forest Service long before Congress passed the Wilderness Act in 1964. These three areas and the Boundary Waters Canoe Area national forest lands became federally designated wilderness immediately upon the Act's signing by the President in 1964. As Doug Scott writes: ". . . the Forest Service's 1963 press release announcing their administrative designation of the Shining Rock Wild Area in North Carolina pointed out that to achieve a desirable ridgetop boundary configuration, a *current* clearcut logging area within the new wild area would be closed and the roads obliterated."

Yes, Virginia (and North Carolina and Pennsylvania), there is most definitely wilderness in the East.

That was and is as it should be, because the full title of the 1964 law is "An Act to establish a National Wilderness Preservation System for the permanent good of the whole people." It is not the Western Wilderness Act or the Upper Midwest Wilderness Act. It is the the charter for a *National* Wilderness Preservation System. The Act was meant from the get-go to be national. In final Senate hearings on the wilderness bill, a Senate opponent of the bill tried to get the words *National* and *System* removed from the bill's formal title, but my father testified earnestly to the importance of the words to the intent of the Act. And the words *National* and *System* stayed in the Act's title.

My father chose the word *untrammelled* in the Act's ideal definition of wilderness exactly in anticipation of future efforts to deny wilderness designation because a proposed landscape may not be pristine or, to use the old word, *virgin*. The word was so important to his concept of the Wilderness Act that my father stuck by it despite intense criticism from several close cooperators on the legislation.

That word *untrammelled* is frequently misquoted—even in academic writing—as *untrampled*. But that is hardly what it means. *Untrammelled* means "unfettered" or "unconfined." It describes, perhaps most fundamentally, something upon which we humans have not projected our desires. William Blake, the 17th-century English poet and engraver, used the word in its meaning as a snare or a fish-net to illustrate how overweening rationalism binds the human spirit. This is from Blake's "Book of Urizen."

If you look at a map of the western United States, for example, you see all those straight lines marking state boundaries. Those straight lines ignoring all natural features are the projection of Thomas Jefferson's Enlightenment desire that nature be totally rational. Told that a ground sloth had existed in North America and gone extinct, Thomas Jefferson refused to believe it. Nature is too rational, he said, to develop something just to let it go extinct. The Wilderness Act intends that there be preserved some remnant of the great legacy of federal public lands that is untrammelled, unfettered, self-willed, and not subjected to the projection of our desire.

When Congress began to implement the Wilderness Act, it understood this thrust of the Act. It designated as wilderness areas that were once logged and roaded in national parks and national wildlife refuges. This policy was crystal clear because the Act mandated reviews of Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains national parks and the Seney and Moosehorn national wildlife refuges. Portions of all four areas were formerly greatly impacted by human actions in historic time. In the early 1970s the U.S. Forest Service put forth a purity doctrine that asserted that no land in the East could qualify for designation as wilderness. The Forest Service tried to reject the Wilderness Act's overlay of preservation by re-defining wilderness out of existence.

But Congress rebuked the Agency's leaders in public hearings leading to the passage of the Eastern Wilderness Areas Act in 1975. That Act and its legislative history emphatically assert that, yes, eastern national forest lands can and do qualify for designation as wilderness. Congress had the same message for the Forest Service in many other laws adding eastern, Midwestern, and southern areas to the *national* wilderness system.

Unfortunately, the Milwaukee regional office of the Forest Service, which oversees management of the Allegheny National Forest, has resurrected that old purity doctrine that Congress laid to rest 30 years ago. The regional office has sought to frustrate the sole authority of the Congress to determine what lands shall be designated as wilderness. They have resurrected the purity doctrine in the guise of a solitude buffering requirement for wilderness.

Their method is to assert that any area to be recommended as wilderness in a forest plan must be large enough so that a visitor's experience of solitude is buffered from influences outside the wilderness area. Now, if you recall that Forest Service survey on wilderness benefits, the first eight of the 12 benefits of wilderness surveyed do not require that a person even be *in* wilderness to reap the benefits. So what's there to buffer?

The upshot is that your Congressionally acceptable opportunity to enjoy all 12 benefits of wilderness are held hostage to a bogus buffering requirement concocted for *just one aspect* of one benefit *ranked ninth* in importance in the definitive Forest Service polling of the American people.

As a citizen you should not let this happen. This ruling—that has no basis in law and is made by regional administrators you do not elect—this administrative ruling frustrates the sole legal authority of your elected representatives in the U.S. Congress. This clearly frustrates the intent of the statutory overlay of preservation that Howard Zahniser and Pennsylvania Congressman John P. Saylor (among so many, many others) labored eight years to see realized in the 1964 Wilderness Act.

As I said earlier, the Appalachian Trail traverses 21 federally designated wilderness areas. In my home state of West Virginia we have wonderful wilderness areas like Dolly Sods, the Laurel Forks, and the Cranberry on the Monongahela National Forest—and we are working toward seeing 15 more areas designated as wilderness.

Why would individual Pennsylvanians not want a better representation of Allegheny National Forest lands preserved as wilderness? You are its owners-in-common with all American citizens. Remember those 12 benefits cited above: Protecting water and air quality, wildlife habitat, and rare, endangered, and unique plants and animals; the legacy value of knowing that future generations will have wilderness areas; providing scenic beauty; the existence value of simply knowing that wilderness areas exist; providing recreation opportunities; the option value of knowing that in the future you will have the option to visit a wilderness area; preserving natural areas for scientific study; and providing spiritual inspiration.

If you want to send a 100th birthday card to Howard Zahniser, you can address it to your public officials. Let them know you want more wilderness preserved on the Allegheny National Forest. By doing so you will gift yourself and all the forest's other 298,169,241 owners-in-common, you will gift yourself and the womb of time, in perpetuity, with the wealth of benefits of a wilderness forever future. You will bequeath to the future a wild remnant of the eternity of the past.

One of my great mentors in wilderness work was the late Mardy Murie, who died in October 2003 at age 101. With her husband Olaus, Mardy had an enormous impact on my life. Memorializing Mardy's conservation vision, Verlyn Klinkenborg wrote in the New York Times that "Over the centuries, the ink has gone to the discoverers, the men who found or claimed or opened new territories. But we've gotten to a place in history where the preservers are the ones who deserve the ink."

With the Friends of Allegheny Wilderness proposals—to preserve a more reasonable percentage of the Allegheny National Forest as wilderness—you can step up and be one of the preservers who will one day "deserve the ink." Kirk Johnson will gladly sign you up. Melyssa Watson will sign you up. Fran Hunt will sign you up. Now is your chance, tonight, right here.

If you have ever felt the urge to connect to eternity, working for these wilderness proposals is your chance to connect. Because by working for a wilderness-forever future (as my father once wrote) we "project into the eternity of the future some of that precious, unspoiled ecological inheritance that has come to us out of the eternity of the past."

You can become, just as Mardy Murie became, the link between those two eternities—"for the permanent good of the whole people." Go forth. Do good. Tell the stories. Be one of the preservers. Deserve the ink. And do not miss this most rare of wild chances—"for the common good of the whole people"—to touch eternity with both hands in the here and now.