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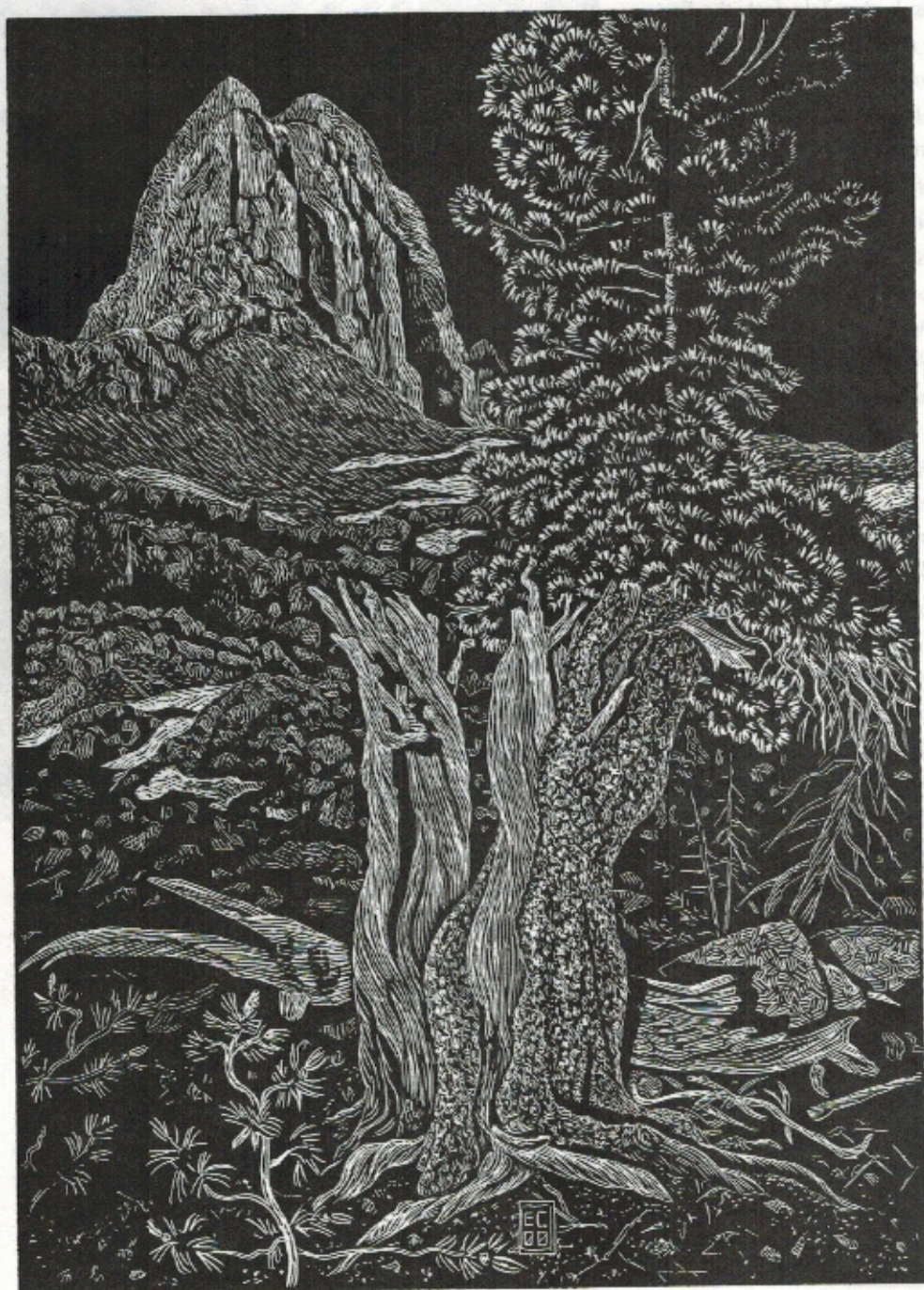
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# Wilderness KEEP IT WILD!

by George Nickas  
and Gary Macfarlane





**L**ong before the 1964 Wilderness Act became law, wilderness and the allied value of *wildness* were under threat from modern society. This threat has not diminished in the intervening years. A growing number of "wise use" advocates, wilderness revisionists, environmental philosophers, federal land administrators, and some conservationists and researchers are challenging the concept of self-willed land. Even those who profess support for wilderness suggest that the act itself is flawed, that it has set up conflicting goals between preserving an *untrammelled* or *wild* wilderness versus managing to achieve *natural* or *pristine conditions* (Cole 1996), and that managers must choose one or the other (Cole 2000). Others suggest that the goal for wilderness is both naturalness and wildness, but that managers will often have to compromise the latter to achieve the former. This perceived conflict is what drives most calls for management-induced restoration today.

A different view suggests that there is no such conflict. The Wilderness Act does not mandate a "pristine" condition; rather, there is a mandate to allow natural processes to operate freely (Worff 1997). Fire behavior, for example, might be different had fire suppression never been practiced in a particular wilderness or in the surrounding terrain, but by designating an area as wilderness we have decided that from that point forward natural processes will determine the conditions within that area. We recognize that some unexpected changes may occur. But wilderness must be allowed to play the cards it's dealt (Nickas 1999).

We believe the suggested dichotomy between protecting an *untrammelled* wilderness and preserving its *natural conditions* is a straw-man, used by some to diminish the extraordinary ideal expressed by the Wilderness Act. The result will be a gaping loophole, called restoration, through which managers will inflict their will on lands deemed by the American people through the Wilderness Act to be self-willed lands. Some of those engaged

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in this high-stakes game do it with the best of intentions; yet many use these ideas as *carte blanche* authority to finally bring the remaining wilderness *under management*. Indeed, most ecological manipulation and restoration efforts in wilderness areas are little more than attempts to produce resources, create conditions desired by humans, make-work projects, or all of the above, and have nothing to do with protecting wild Nature.

Evidence is everywhere. Typical of restoration efforts are two examples from the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness in central Idaho, the largest wilderness area in the national forest system. While managers continue to suppress the vast majority of lightning-ignited fires, they've embarked on plans for tens of thousands of acres of manager-ignited fire projects of dubious purpose. The first of these, the Elkhorn-Jersey Project, was initially proposed to increase winter range for elk. When that justification was challenged, the rationale shifted toward protecting the adjacent Cove-Mallard timber sales. When that rationale fell flat, the project became ecological restoration to prevent catastrophic and unnatural damage from natural fires. A Freedom of Information Act inquiry from Friends of the Clearwater and Wilderness Watch to the Forest Service requesting all post-fire data and assessments for the past several decades failed to turn up a stitch of evidence that a single acre has ever suffered such a catastrophic fate in the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. Despite all of this, the project went forward unchanged.

In that same wilderness area, the Forest Service has launched a major herbicide spraying effort to "control" non-native plants (while the agency simultaneously allows stocking of wilderness lakes with non-native fish), predominantly spotted knapweed and rush skeletonweed. Much of the habitat where the target species are found is dominated by a non-target alien, cheatgrass (*Bromus tectorum*). Cheat is an invader that replaces native grasses through competition and by altering natural fire regimes. Rather than face the difficult question of whether the "natural" ecosystem can be restored in light of the preponderance of cheatgrass, the Forest Service has instead declared herbicidal war on two non-native species, while declaring cheat a "naturalized" species no longer in need of control. Removing a few thousand acres of knapweed and rush skeletonweed will do little to restore more than 300,000 acres now invaded by cheat. The result will be neither *natural* nor *wild*, but rather a managed landscape that expresses the personal biases of present-day managers.

This is to say nothing of the wholesale damage done throughout the federal wilderness system by managers engaged in predator control, fish stocking, fire suppression,



non-native wildlife introduction, and wild "game" population manipulation. Every one of these intentional, wilderness-harming practices continues to be widely used today, often (if not in every instance) in the very wilderness areas where managers argue other manipulative actions are necessary to restore "natural conditions."

In light of the evidence, we don't believe that the vast majority of restoration and manipulation is about wilderness at all. Instead, these actions are more of the same old management paradigm, selectively practiced to produce certain conditions and resources that are desired by individual managers.

### A LEGAL CONTEXT

The fundamental charge of wilderness stewards is to preserve wilderness character, which is defined in the Wilderness Act as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man...retaining its primeval character and influence...managed so as to preserve its natural conditions." Michael McCloskey (1999) puts these descriptive phrases in context:

*The section referring to "natural conditions" follows the key initial point about it being untrammelled....Any meaning given to the phrase "natural conditions" should be consistent with the key idea of not "trammeling" these areas. This interpretation is favored because this language comes first and, in accordance with rules of statutory construction, it avoids any unnecessary implication of conflict between provisions....Thus, the community of life in wilderness should not be subdued, or put under the domination of man.*

McCloskey is right. The act can and should be read such that the goal of an untrammelled wilderness managed to preserve its natural conditions is not self-conflicting. It requires recognizing that "natural conditions" refers to a set of interacting influences or processes rather than any particular point-in-time condition. Wilderness character is about fire, wind, rain, avalanche, blizzard, shadow, sunlight, heat, cold, predator, prey, hurricane, and flood. It's not about the number of ponderosa pine per acre, elk per square mile, acres of old growth, or acres burned per year.

Moreover, trying to interpret the meaning of "natural condition" as a stand-alone phrase raises all sorts of dilemmas. Since humans are natural, wouldn't anything we create be a *natural condition*? By proclaiming a conflict between natural and wild, any management action can be justified on this basis.

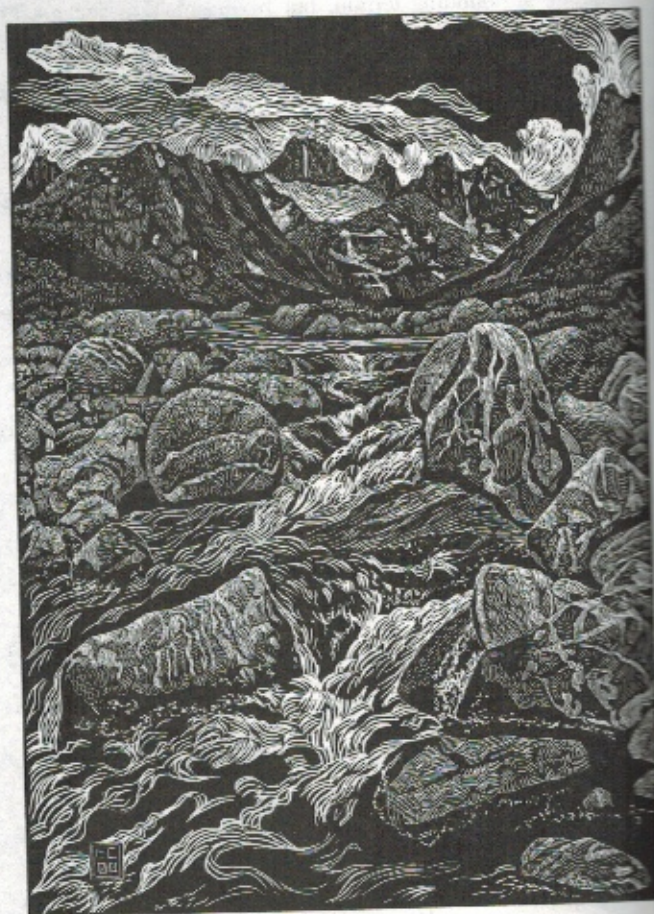
Admittedly, any reliance on the ideal of untrammelled or

self-willed land has to be qualified. In part, this is because virtually no wilderness is immune to outside, human-caused influences. Even the largest wildernesses can't escape the consequences of disrupted wildlife migration routes, acid rain, human-caused global climate change, or exotic species migration. There is little that wilderness stewards can do about these disturbances except to allow wilderness to respond in its own way. Trusting Nature might make us uneasy at times, but it has a track record unmatched by humans.

### A REAL RESTORATION AGENDA

Given this charge to keep wilderness wild, are there times when the mandate for an untrammelled wilderness can legitimately be compromised? Leaving aside relatively uncontroversial actions such as restoring a damaged campsite or stream crossing, we believe there are times, albeit very limited, when restoration or manipulation is both appropriate and consistent with the limits imposed by the Wilderness Act.

Recovering a threatened or endangered species is one of these. It can be argued that tension exists between the Wilderness Act's hands-off approach and the interventionist



Titcomb Basin, Bridger Wilderness, Wyoming by Evan Cantor



bent of the Endangered Species Act (ESA). That may be true. In those cases where managers may have to choose between conflicting statutes, the balance of harms, if not the explicit requirements of the ESA, seems to favor recovering the species.

In some cases, even though it may not be right, it is legal to manipulate wilderness. Fire suppression and perhaps even management-ignited fire are two examples. Though we believe both should be used sparingly, if at all, the Wilderness Act does provide managers with discretion "in the control of fire, insects and diseases" (Section 4(d)(1)). Where manager-ignited fire is used, the goal must be to create conditions that will allow a natural fire regime to operate in the future.

The converse is also true: There are instances where it may seem advisable, but legally questionable, to allow direct, intentional manipulation. Trying to eradicate established populations of non-native species—such as brook or rainbow trout in most western waters, chukars in the Southwest, mountain goats in Utah, or weeds almost everywhere—is a situation that comes to mind. While we aren't judging whether such actions should be taken, we believe these issues should be openly debated and discussed in advance.

It seems to us, however, that before humans undertake efforts to further work our will—in the name of restoration—on wilderness, we should first stop doing harm. No more fish stocking or introducing other non-indigenous wildlife, no more artificial watering sources to favor "game," no more packing in hay and other weeds, and no more suppressing most wildfires.

Second, conservationists, researchers, and managers must acknowledge that the *management* paradigm that is so ingrained in our public land management institutions has no place in wilderness. The current path of active restoration is linear and ultimately leads to the elimination of wilderness itself.

Third, we should build a new wildlife management paradigm "where the forces of natural selection and survival rather than human actions determine which and what numbers of wildlife species will exist" (USDA Forest Service 1990). Nothing would do more to restore wilderness (untrammelled and natural) than to end the current fish and game production mentality that dominates wildlife management.

Fourth, manage lands adjacent to wilderness to complement wilderness protection. Restore natural migration corridors for wildlife. Bring adjacent lands into wilderness fire management plans so that the legal line boundary is permeable to fires that start within and outside wilderness areas. Focus weed removal on adjacent lands, trailheads, etc., and restrict or eliminate those activities that promote weeds on adjacent lands.

Fifth, before launching down the path of restoration, the wilderness community needs to openly discuss and try to agree on a set of principles that will govern if, when, and where active restoration is appropriate. For example, is a one-time intervention, such as removing fish from a naturally fishless lake, appropriate and distinguishable from manipulation that requires ongoing treatments, such as maintaining a fire-dependent ecosystem with regularly scheduled manager-ignited blazes? We may conclude that there are reasons to engage in overt trammeling of wilderness. If so, then we should ask Congress to codify those carefully considered exceptions. This will avoid the quagmire of having hundreds of individual managers making their own judgements about how much manipulation is okay within each wilderness area. As Reed Noss has warned, "our desire to manage everything is exceedingly arrogant given our ignorance of how nature works. In many cases, what needs to be managed is not nature, but rather our own consumptive, manipulative, and destructive behavior" (Noss 1991).

Finally, let's move cautiously. *Wild, untrammelled* wilderness is what attracts millions of Americans to the wilderness cause. The desire to have places where humans aren't in control is what keeps the wilderness dream alive and insures its survival both in our minds and on the land. We would do well to remember the words of Howard Zahniser, the Wilderness Act's author: "We must remember always that the essential quality of the wilderness is wildness" (Zahniser 1992). ☐

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