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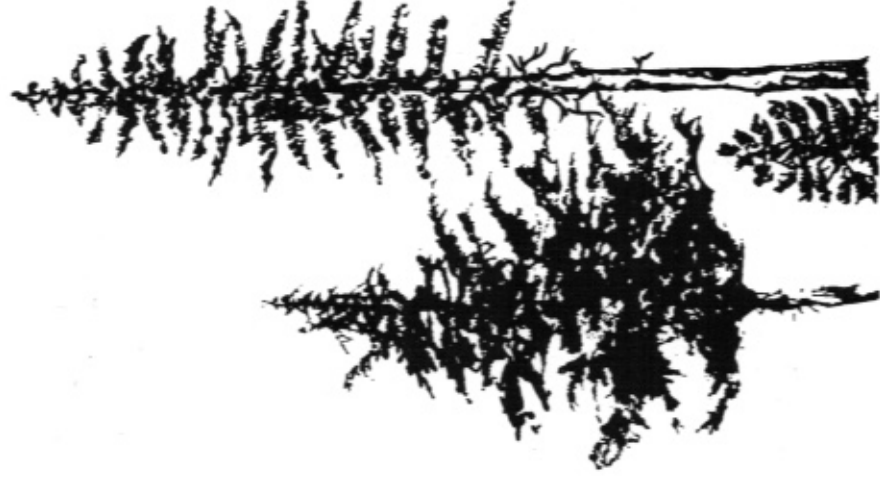
The Politics of Wilderness Preservation

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PASSAGE OF THE WILDERNESS ACT, 1955-1964

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It may seem presumptuous for men and women, who live only 40, 50, 60, 70, or 80 years, to dare to undertake a program for perpetuity, but that surely is our challenge.

—Howard Zahniser in testimony before the House Interior Committee, April 28, 1964, six days before his death

PREFACE TO A WILDERNESS BILL

In 1954, James P. Gilligan received his doctorate from the University of Michigan School of Natural Resources. His dissertation was entitled *The Development of Policy and Administration of Forest Service Primitive and Wilderness Areas in the Western United States*. It was at that time the only book-length, scholarly study of wilderness that could be described as politically oriented. Dr. Gilligan's dissertation was particularly significant because he made a number of his conclusions public in a speech delivered on October 26, 1954 to the Society of American Foresters meeting in Milwaukee, Wisconsin.¹ Gilligan observed that wilderness in America was doomed to extinction under the prevailing conditions and that prevailing conditions could not be altered unless preservation interests formed a united front in support of some positive program of wilderness preservation.

Gilligan's address is important for its physical appraisal of the state of wilderness preservation, for its analysis of preservation politics, and for its effect on the preservation movement. As an assessment of the state of wilderness preservation in the early 1950s the conclusions of the speech are unassailable, for the dissertation upon which they are based is the most comprehensive study of the problem undertaken prior to the 1960s.²

The Gilligan address painted a bleak picture of the prospects for wilderness preservation, given existing law and administrative practice.

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Even though the consideration of minority wishes has long been an admirable trait of our governing groups [he reported], it is obvious in land use decisions that there is a steady trend favoring mass use over high quality benefits to fewer individuals. This fact, when combined with the irresistible emphasis on dollar rather than social values of our free enterprise economy, points out the tremendous barrier that wilderness preservation confronts.³

Gilligan's conclusion that present law and practice cannot preserve wilderness was based on a catalog of exceptions to wilderness management hidden behind large total acreage figures for officially recognized wilderness areas.

Those interested in national forest wilderness preservation are easily lulled into complacency by the soothing and oft-quoted figures of 13 million acres of land reserved in 77 wilderness, wild, and primitive areas throughout the West.⁴

Gilligan examined only a portion of these areas, yet he reported that they contained 200 miles of public roads, 145,000 acres of private holdings, 400 to 500 mining claims of unknown acreage, sixty mines, twenty-four air strips, pasturage for 140,000 sheep and 25,000 cattle, and nearly ninety dams. He also found wilderness areas diminished by boundary modifications that had shifted land suitable to economic development out of the system.

These deletions have largely been offset by the addition of high, rocky zones to each area where there is little possibility of development demands or timber harvest. [This policy] places a peculiar emphasis on maintaining a large national acreage figure for the wilderness system, while at the same time gradually removing areas needed in multiple-use management.⁵

Gilligan found the lack of dedication to wilderness in the Forest Service compounded by the fact that the Forest Service is far from completely sovereign in its own domain. The service is helpless to protect wilderness from exploitation under the Mining Act of 1872 and is not empowered to prevent dam building by the Interior Department.

In the national parks and monuments, the situation was only marginally better. National parks and monuments contained more wilderness than did national forests, and they were, for the most part, protected by law against lumber, water, or mineral development. Still, according to Gilligan, the National Park Service "is subject to the unrelenting pressures of mass use, and retreats gradually behind the cold logic that more areas must be developed to care properly for the public to which the land belongs."⁶

Gilligan's speech was not limited to castigating those who administer the public lands. He reserved equal criticism for wilderness proponents.

Philosophic incantations about wilderness values and the repetitious theme of saving wilderness everywhere are too abstract for the average administrator faced with unshakable realism. Wilderness supporters have been chiefly defense minded, rushing to prevent developments that may have been carefully drawn and justified. The majority of areas now called wilderness exist because recreational or industrial developments have not, as yet, been economically feasible.

If there were well defined purposes and plans for a national wilderness system which could generate common support, the wilderness movement might well be irrepressible. As it is, the disagreement among wilderness proponents is a highly important deterrent to wilderness preservation in this country.⁷

Gilligan concluded with a quiet plea for a united effort to preserve areas of wilderness.

Those who understand the problems of wilderness preservation on Federal lands are convinced that Congressional action is necessary to retain wilderness areas for future generations. It is improbable, however, that Congressional action or tighter administration to retain important wilderness regions can be effected with only the support of uncertain and divided wilderness proponents.⁸

This speech did not go unnoticed among proponents of wilderness preservation. The spring/summer 1955 issue of *The Living Wilderness*, the official organ of the Wilderness Society, reprinted it in full and devoted its editorial space to a reply saying, in part,

His criticisms should inspire us who uphold wilderness preservation to think out our plans and purposes more clearly and to seek more earnestly the certainty and unity among wilderness proponents which he sees as a requisite for the congressional action that is "necessary to retain wilderness areas for future generations."⁹

In a sense, then, the Gilligan speech was a warning to wilderness supporters that disunity and "philosophic incantations" could spell the end for wilderness even if the proponent groups maintained their ideological purity. It was a call for a positive program, and the Wilderness Society responded.

On May 24, 1955, Howard Zahniser, the society's executive secretary, addressed the National Citizen's Planning Conference on Parks and Open Spaces for the American People. His address, entitled "The Need for Wilderness Areas," outlined the kind of program that Gilligan had asserted was necessary. Zahniser proposed a "national wilderness preservation system" which would be composed of areas already under federal ownership. These areas would continue to be administered by the same agencies that already had jurisdiction over them. No new land administration agency would be required. Rather, administrative procedures would be modified

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so as to protect for all time the wilderness character of these areas. While the system Zahniser envisioned might be augmented by executive order, only an act of Congress could delete areas. The program, simply put, was to set aside those areas that had so far survived the onslaught of civilization as a kind of perpetual living museum, for the enjoyment of all the nation's people.¹⁰

The Zahniser speech did not merely express the society's position on preservation, but also proffered a specific program that was moderate in tone and perhaps capable of passage. It seemed to anticipate several major objections. It established no new federal administrative agency, scotching objections based on federal bureaucratic proliferation. It involved lands already in federal ownership, thus precluding the necessity of federal appropriations.

The speech attracted immediate legislative attention. On June 1, 1955, less than a week after its delivery, Senator Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota inserted the full text of "The Need for Wilderness Areas" in *The Congressional Record*. As Zahniser later explained, Senator Humphrey's interest led to the drafting of a wilderness bill under the auspices of the Citizens Committee on Natural Resources and the Council of Conservationists with the cooperation of the Wilderness Society, the Sierra Club, the National Wildlife Federation, Trustees for Conservation, National Parks Association, Wildlife Management Institute, and others.¹¹

On February 29, 1956, Senator Humphrey publicly stated his intention to submit wilderness legislation along the lines of the Zahniser proposal as soon as possible. He had been encouraged to sponsor the legislation by William Magie of the Friends of the Wilderness, a Humphrey constituent. According to Magie, Humphrey never forgave him for the pressures he had to withstand as chief sponsor of the measure.¹² Many residents of northern Minnesota feared that the wilderness bill would damage the tourist trade generated by the Boundary Waters Canoe Area.

COMPREHENSIVE WILDERNESS LEGISLATION IS INTRODUCED IN CONGRESS

On June 7, 1956, Senator Humphrey introduced the nation's first wilderness bill, designated S. 4013. Senators Richard Neuberger and Wayne Morse of Oregon, Margaret Chase Smith of Maine, Herbert Lehman of New York, James Duff of Pennsylvania, Paul Douglas of Illinois, Thomas Kuchel of California, Karl Mundt of South Dakota, and William Laird of West Virginia joined in sponsorship of the bill.

S. 4013 was but the first of four Humphrey wilderness bills. The Wilderness Society, the National Parks Association, the Izaak Walton

June, it surprised most observers by reporting out an amended version of H.R. 9070—the Saylor bill. The subcommittee amendment allowed mining activity for twenty-five years after the act's passage.

Two other amendments were made by the full committee. By a vote of 14 to 11 it deleted the San Geronio Wild Area from the bill and ordered the secretary of agriculture to classify approximately 3,500 acres for a ski development.¹⁵⁷ This overruled the decisions against such development dating from 1947.

The second amendment cast serious doubt on the sincerity of those opponents who had couched their opposition in the necessity for congressional control over the public lands. The Saylor bill as amended by the committee would allow the executive branch to declassify areas now classified primitive, subject, in cases where a large acreage was involved, to a congressional veto within sixty days.¹⁵⁸ The committee thus proved to be willing to give the executive branch more power over deletions than S. 4 had given over additions.

PASSAGE OF THE 1964 WILDERNESS ACT

The work of the full committee was substantially undone on the House floor. A Saylor proposal to restore the San Geronio Wild Area to the wilderness system was passed 73 to 39.¹⁵⁹ A second Saylor amendment, to eliminate the authority granted the executive branch to declassify administratively portions of the primitive areas not suitable for preservation as wilderness, was adopted by a vote of 67 to 38.¹⁶⁰

Thus amended, the wilderness bill, for years an exceedingly controversial measure, was adopted by a 374 to 1 roll call vote.¹⁶¹ Following its adoption, it was renamed S. 4 and returned to the Senate. The report of the ten conferees¹⁶² largely followed the House version of the bill. In the only significant change, the conferees set forward the date on which wilderness would be closed to appropriation under the mining laws, from 1990 to 1984.¹⁶³ The Conference Report was agreed to by both Senate and House on August 20, 1964, and signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson on September 3, 1964.¹⁶⁴

SUMMARY

After several years of effort in Congress, the preservation community had succeeded in passing comprehensive wilderness legislation. Gilligan's call for well-defined plans and an end to philosophic incantations had been answered. The preservation lobby had marshaled the strength manifested in the battle to save Dinosaur and focused it to produce the Wilderness Act of 1964.