

THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY

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Policy Brief Series

Wilderness Act

The Wilderness Act of 1964 established the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) to designate and preserve pristine undeveloped lands. President Johnson and Congress recognized the importance of preserving wild lands, including wildlife habitat, for future generations of Americans.¹

Methods

The Wilderness Act defines wilderness as, “an area of undeveloped federal land retaining its primeval character and influence...and which generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable.” Wilderness land does not have to be virgin land, however the land should be returned to a pristine or wild condition before being designated. Only existing federal lands can be chosen for wilderness designation.

Congress has the exclusive power to designate wilderness and to change the boundaries or un-designate a wilderness area.² Citizens can develop their own wilderness proposals and submit them directly to a member of Congress.

Wilderness areas are managed by four federal agencies: the U.S. Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Park Service. When an area is designated as wilderness it usually continues to be managed by the same agency; for example a national forest that is designated wilderness continues to be managed by the U.S. Forest Service.

Results

NWPS designated 54 Wilderness Areas encompassing 9.1 million acres across 13 states at its inception in 1964. The system has grown to include over 750 areas covering over 109 million acres in 44 states and Puerto Rico.³

Discussion

Wilderness areas provide a range of benefits from clean water and air, to critical habitat for species and recreational opportunities including hiking and primitive camping. Wilderness restricts development of the land, including logging, drilling, and building roads, and most motorized vehicles are prohibited. The Wilderness Act allows for fire, insects, and diseases to be managed in wilderness areas.

Implications for Wildlife Professionals

Wilderness is the highest protection that can be given to wild lands by the federal government. The management of wilderness areas by federal agencies provides pristine environments for wildlife and those who study them. The Wilderness Act ensures habitats will remain intact and unfragmented, helping wildlife professionals sustain healthy wildlife populations.

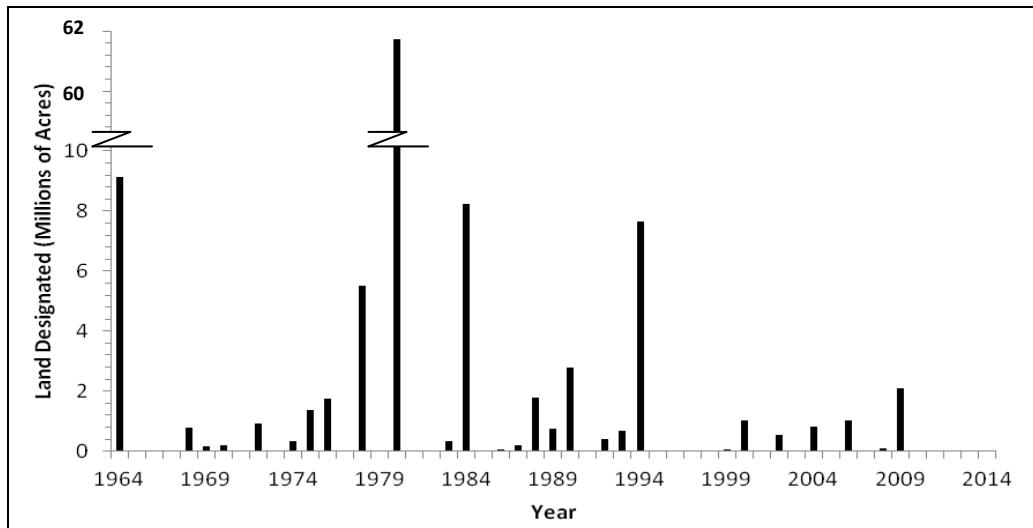


Figure 1. Number of wilderness acres designated by Congress each year (Adapted from [Wilderness.net](#)).

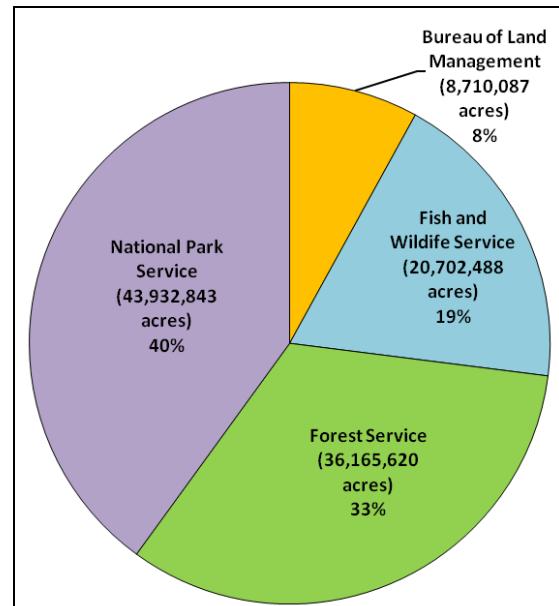


Figure 2. Each agencies share of the over 109 million acres of national wilderness areas (Adapted from [Wilderness.net](#)).

Wilderness Act: Features



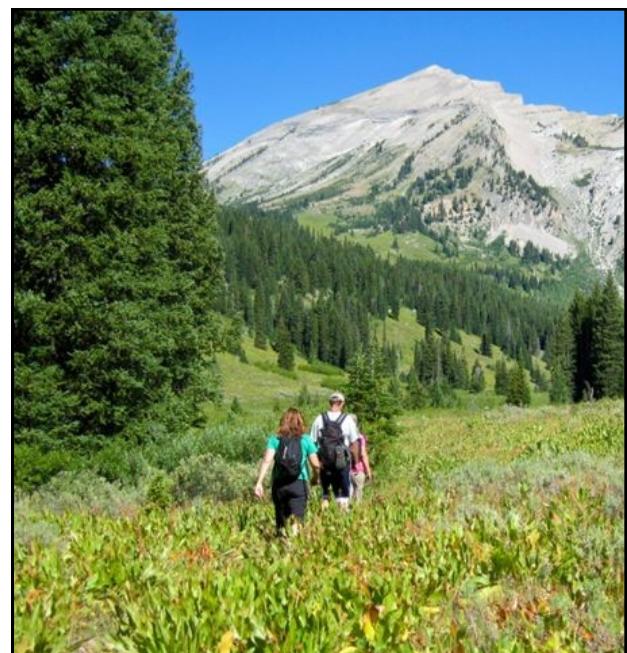
The Scapegoat Wilderness area is part of the Helena National Forest
(Credit: USFS).

Scapegoat Wilderness⁴

The Wilderness Act is unique because Congress is given the authority to designate specific parcels of land rather than federal agencies. This enables citizens to recommend federal lands to their Congressmen for wilderness designation. The Scapegoat Wilderness, designated in 1972, was the first citizen-initiated wilderness area in the U.S. The Scapegoat Wilderness area is comprised of over 239,000 acres in Montana managed by the U.S. Forest Service. Wildlife in the area includes wolverines, elk, mountain sheep, and grizzly bears.

Teton Wilderness⁵

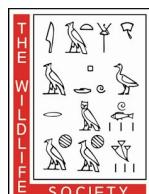
A wilderness designation is the highest protection that can be given to federal land and the areas often provide critical habitat for wildlife. The Teton Wilderness in Wyoming provides critical habitat for wolves, bison, coyotes, and other wildlife. The Teton Wilderness is Wyoming's second largest wilderness area, behind the Washakie Wilderness. The U.S. Forest Service manages all 585,238 acres of the Teton Wilderness.



The Teton Wilderness area is located in the Bridger-Teton National Forest (Credit: USDA).

Sources

- 1 The Wilderness Society. 2004. The Wilderness Act Handbook.
- 2 BLM. 2012. Wilderness FAQs. <http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/prog/blm_special_areas/NLCS/wilderness2/Wilderness_FAQ.html> Accessed 3 Sept 2014.
- 3 Wilderness.net. 2015. Fast Facts, The Beginnings of the National Wilderness Preservation System. <<http://www.wilderness.net/NWPS/fastfacts>> Accessed 29 Apr 2016.
- 4 Wilderness.net. 2014. Scapegoat Wilderness. <<http://www.wilderness.net/NWPS/wildView?WID=538>> Accessed 3 Sept 2014.
- 5 USFS. 2014. Bridget-Teton National Forest Wilderness. <<http://www.fs.usda.gov/detail/btnf/recreation/?cid=stelprdb5343268>> Accessed 3 Sept 2014.



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