

## THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY PLAN

# Protecting National Forests

Wilderness, by definition, has few advocates. Civilization is where you find advocates. For the life of the planet thus far, wilderness has existed largely because no one wanted to use it for anything. Tracts of wilderness existed not so much because they were protected as because they were ignored.

Those days are over. If tracts of wilderness are to survive, they must be protected. Who needs 'em? the urban 10-toed sloth inquires.

Civilization does.

Which brings us to a case at hand. The U.S. Forest Service, a part of the federal Department of Agriculture, has recently completed a series of manage-

ment plans for the national forests, including the Nantahala and Pisgah forests in North Carolina. Those plans give short shrift to wilderness.

Call it an institutional mindset. In the Department of Agriculture, forests tend to be seen as farms, trees as produce. Timber management is the game. You play it by building roads into remote places and then selling timber rights. Some of the rules of this game need changing — to protect wilderness, of course, but to stop wasting resources, too. Federal timber management is currently a lumber industry subsidy program, selling timber on federal land at below cost. The proposed management plans would double the program.

The Wilderness Society has a better plan, featuring 10 recommendations. At the top of the list is adoption of a policy that would emphasize forest benefits not available on private lands. Biological diversity, scenic beauty, wildlife habitat, recreation opportunities and a more intangible but no less valuable benefit: a tie both to the past and to nature that people too often ignore or misunderstand — these are some of the things unique to national forests. Timber is a plentiful resource.

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Other recommendations deal with the specific implementation of that policy. A phase out of below-cost timber sales and an end to further construction of permanent roads are two that make compelling common sense. Two others that ought to be adopted quickly are the establishing of a forest rehabilitation program to include permanent road closure in some areas and

a reform of timber management to stress longer timber rotations, uneven-aged tree management and a ban on logging in unsuitable terrain, like steep and erodible slopes.

A report, *Mountain Treasures at Risk*, has been put out by the Wilderness

Society providing details and statistics about the current and projected condition of Southern Appalachian national forests. It is reading to make you scared, sad and angry all at once.

The management plans for the Southern Appalachian forests are now on the desk of the Forest Service chief. The Wilderness Society has asked him to send the plans back to the drawing board for revision. The society makes a case for revision that is unassailable, unless perhaps you make a living logging on federal lands.

Politics is a science of advocacy, however, and the black bear lobby has trouble competing for attention with the lumber and paper industries. If the Forest Service chief feels pressure, it's not from the black bear side.

Part of the problem is that one side is talking hard-case economics and livelihood while the other talks about beauty, biological diversity and concepts that appear to lack immediacy, urgency or solidity. Environmentalists are seen as dreamers; industries make jobs, development, progress.

That is the short view. If a longer view isn't adopted and adopted soon, the long view will become bleak indeed.

