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# The Power of Wilderness

The one-sentence preamble to Public Law 88-577 of the United States of America has the ring of grandiose federalism to it—like so many noble pronouncements from Washington that promise much and often deliver less. This legislation, signed into law 25 years ago by Lyndon B. Johnson, bears the preface: "An act to establish a national wilderness system for the permanent good of the whole people . . ."

For the permanent good of the whole people . . . indeed. A grand concept. But, in point of fact, the national wilderness system has fully lived up to that promise. America's wilderness stretches today not just from sea to shining sea, but from the Florida Keys to Alaska's Gates of the Arctic and the most remote dot of the Aleutian Islands; from volcanoes in Hawaii and Pine Creek in San Diego County to the Moosehorn in upper Maine.

Four hundred seventy-four units totaling 91 million acres of federally owned land—held for the permanent good of the whole people—are incorporated in the National Wilderness Preservation System, including 57 million acres in Alaska. The act Johnson signed into law a quarter-century ago incorporated 9 million acres of wild lands that previously had been set aside by administrative action. Getting to that point was not easy. The concept of wilderness was not as popular and acceptable to broad segments of the public as it is today.

Still, the job is not finished. Some states, including Montana and Nevada, even now lack major wilderness legislation incorporating recommended national park and forest regions. Large eastern states with substantial stretches of wild lands have virtually no federal wilderness. Nor does Texas.

The nation must move into protection of ecosystems that go beyond the arbitrary boundaries of parks to guard their natural wonders against the encroachment of development. And Congress soon must deal with proposals to create wilderness within the 250-million-acre estate of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, including the Cali-

fornia desert and the sprawling plains regions of Montana, Wyoming and other western states.

Wilderness designation for such areas is on the agenda of the Wilderness Society, which launches the celebration of the act's 25th anniversary this week. The new wilderness debates may be just as lively as some of the past battles. Sharp attention has been focused by the Exxon Valdez accident on conservationists' demands that portions of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska be maintained as wilderness rather than drilled for oil. Timber, mining and other interests will battle efforts to create wilderness on potentially exploitable Bureau of Land Management regions.

But the tide of public opinion has turned against opponents of wilderness, who still attempt to portray creation of wilderness as the "locking up" of critical resource areas for the selfish enjoyment of a minority of backpackers. Most wilderness has negligible economic value. By definition, these roadless tracts tend to be in high mountain country, swamps or other regions where it is uneconomic to extract resources even when they are there. The bottom line here is not oil or logs, but wonder and human renewal.

Wilderness is important far beyond its recreation value and the considerable industry that has evolved from it. As Wilderness Society President George T. Frampton notes, wilderness is important for biological diversity, protection of watersheds and for its contribution to the maintenance of a livable planet.

Such arguments are not needed to justify the establishment of wilderness, however. There should be wilderness just because there should be wilderness. Americans need places where they can wander off at their own pace to experience the grandeur and sublimity of nature that is unaffected by man. They can look in the waters of a mountain lake and see themselves in new ways. They can witness the world anew through the prism of a waterfall. Their thoughts can soar with the eagles. Indeed, the American wilderness system truly serves the permanent good of the whole people.

