



## Wilderness Act

The Wilderness Act of 1964 established the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS) to designate and preserve pristine undeveloped lands. In passing the Act, Congress sought to “secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.”<sup>1</sup>

### 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, but 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.<sup>1</sup> Citizens, however, 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 (USFS), 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 Wilderness area designated on a national forest would be managed by USFS.

### Results

The Wilderness system has grown from 9.1 million acres across 54 Wilderness areas in 13 states in 1964 to now more than 109 million acres across more than 750 Wilderness areas in 44 states and Puerto Rico.<sup>2</sup>

### Discussion

Wilderness areas provide a range of benefits from clean water and air; to critical habitat for threatened and endangered species; to recreational opportunities like hiking and primitive camping. The Wilderness Act restricts development of the land, including logging, drilling, and road construction, with most motorized vehicle use also prohibited. The Wilderness Act does, however, allow for the management of fire, insects, and diseases in Wilderness areas.

### Implications for Wildlife Professionals

Wilderness is the highest level of protection that can be given to wild lands by the United States 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, thereby helping wildlife professionals sustain healthy wildlife populations.

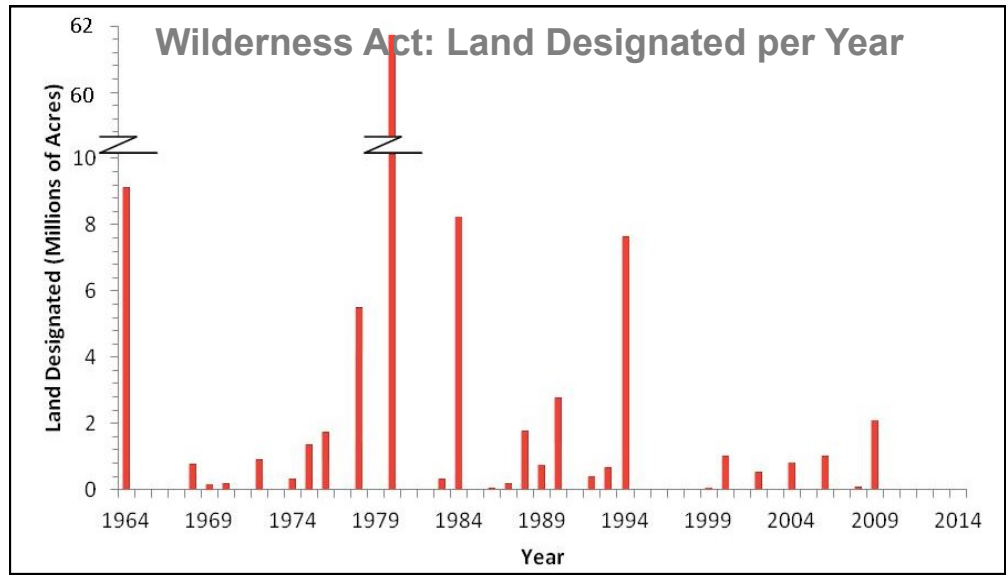


Figure 1. Number of wilderness acres designated by Congress each year (Adapted from Wilderness.net)

### Wilderness Acres Managed by Agency

Based on data from Dec. 2016

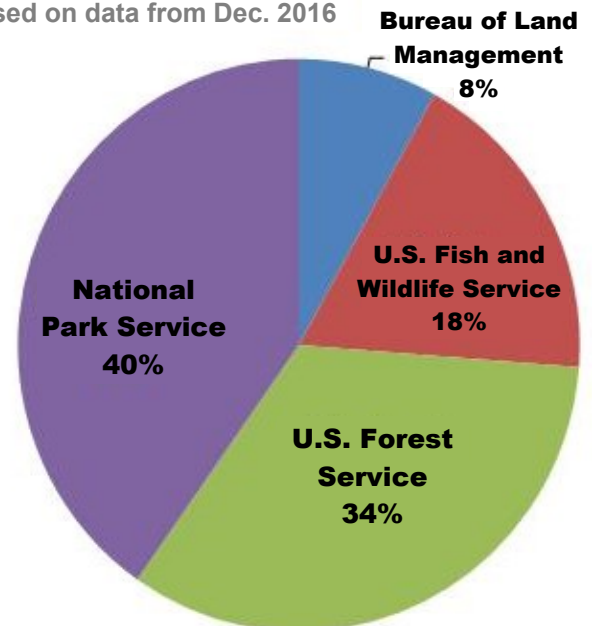


Figure 2. Each agency’s share of the 109.5 million acres of national wilderness areas (Adapted from Wilderness.net)

## Wilderness Act: Features



### Scapegoat Wilderness<sup>3</sup>

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

Scapegoat Wilderness area in Helena National Forest (Credit: USFS)

### Gila Wilderness Area<sup>2,4</sup>

Gila Wilderness became the first area recognized as “wilderness” in 1924, when USFS preserved the land through an administrative process following insistence by Aldo Leopold. It later became the first congressionally designated wilderness area in 1964 following passage of the Wilderness Act. Gila is New Mexico’s largest Wilderness area, totaling 559,040 acres. Still managed by USFS, the area is a popular destination for hikers and backpackers as it is one of the 26 Wilderness areas located along the Continental Divide Trail. The area is composed of high mesas, deep canyons, mountains, and rivers, as well as swaths of ponderosa pines (*Pinus ponderosa*).

Gila Wilderness area in Gila National Forest (Credit: USFS)



### Alaska Wilderness Areas<sup>2,5</sup>

The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) of 1980 contributed to the largest addition of wilderness areas to NWPS in a single year—designating over 27 million acres as Wilderness in Alaska. The state of Alaska now contains 48 Wilderness areas totaling over 56 million acres. Wrangell-Saint Elias Wilderness, located in Alaska, is the largest wilderness area in NWPS with over 9 million acres. The area also contains the second highest peak in the United States, Mount Saint Elias. Alaska is home to 15 of the top 20 largest Wilderness areas in the United States.

Mount Saint-Elias in Wrangell-Saint Elias Wilderness area (Credit: NOAA)



1. The Wilderness Society. 2004. The Wilderness Act Handbook.
2. Wilderness.net. 2016. Fast Facts, The Beginnings of the National Wilderness Preservation System. <<http://www.wilderness.net/NWPS/fastfacts>> Accessed 9 Jun 2017.
3. Wilderness.net. 2014. Scapegoat Wilderness. <<http://www.wilderness.net/NWPS/wildView?WID=538>> Accessed 3 Sept 2014.
4. Wilderness.net. 2016. Gila Wilderness. <<http://www.wilderness.net/NWPS/wildView?WID=205&tab=General>> Accessed 9 Jun 2017.
5. Wilderness.net. 2016. Wrangell-Saint Elias Wilderness. <<http://www.wilderness.net/NWPS/wildView?wname=Wrangell-Saint%20Elias>> Accessed 9 Jun 2017.

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