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Forest law intent is frustrated by ruling

Wilderness areas to require solitude buffer



BY ED ZAHNISER

Throughout this nation's history, Americans have persistently sought to preserve our globally admired legacy of federal public domain lands, which

are owned in common by all 298 million Americans.

There have been three broad efforts to see remnants of this legacy preserved.

First was the late-19th-century forest reserves movement. Forest reserves were effectively closed to logging, mining and grazing. But in 1905 they were redesignated as national forests open to these uses.

Second was the national parks movement, but national parks soon accommodated automobile tourism and development threatening wild park backcountry.

The third effort, the wilderness preservation movement, spawned the 1964 law to establish a National Wilderness Preservation System for the permanent good of the whole people, as the 1964 Wilderness Act is fully titled. The act provides a statutory preservation overlay to certain lands of some national forest, parks, wildlife refuges and Bureau of Land Management property.

Wilderness areas can be designated only by Congress and are closed to logging, most mining and to most mechanized vehicle and equipment use (with legislated exceptions in Alaska).

Today's great eastern national forests were once largely lands nobody wanted. Many were farmed out, eroding, cut or burned over when Congress authorized buying them as federal public lands for national forests. Some 100 years later, eastern national forests are public lands everybody wants for their many values, including wildness.

The purpose of wilderness preservation is to let some portion of the land be self-willed — to let it evolve by natural process so that not all land becomes a projection of human desire. Wilderness designation recognizes that humans should not dictate, for all lands, what tree species should dominate or what

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ED ZAHNISER is a writer and poet in West Virginia. This is an excerpt of remarks he made recently in Warren marking the 100th anniversary of the birth of his father, Howard Zahniser, the primary author of the 1964 Wilderness Act.

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animals should be maximized for human purposes.

Wilderness designation also respects what we do not know about the land organism. John Hay has called wilderness "the Earth's immortal genius."

Gary Snyder likens it to the planetary intelligence.

Bill McKibben writes that "wilderness and Gandhian nonviolence were the two most potentially revolutionary ideas of the 20th century, precisely because they were the two most humble: they imagine a whole different possibility for people."

Wilderness has many benefits, which are the subject of sociological surveys by the U.S. Forest Service. The service's sample size and statistical reliability dwarf those of Gallup and other public opinion polls. Ranking them in order of their importance, Americans see the benefits of wilderness as:

- 1. Protecting water quality.
- 2. Protecting air quality.
- 3. Protecting wildlife habitat.
- 4. Legacy value (knowing that future generations will have wilderness areas).
- 5. Protecting rare and endangered species.
- 6. Protecting unique wild plants and animals.
- 7. Providing scenic beauty.
- 8. Existence value (knowing that wilderness areas exist).
- 9. Providing recreation opportunities.
- 10. Option value (knowing that in the future I will have the option to visit a wilderness area).
- 11. Preserving natural areas for scientific study.

The Forestry Service's Milwaukee regional office, which oversees management of the Allegheny National Forest in Pennsylvania, has cooked up a solitude buffering requirement: any area, to be recommended as wilderness in a forest management plan must be so big that a visitor's experience of solitude is buffered from influences outside the wilderness.

■ 12. Providing spiritual inspiration.

A persistent argument against wilderness preservation is that it locks up the land and is elitist. But how can that be? Those first eight benefits don't even involve setting foot in wilderness. Benefit nine is recreation, and No. 11 is scientific study. Just two of 12 benefits accrue from being inside a wilderness area.

In the early 1970s, the forest service asserted a purity doctrine, saying that no national forests in the East could qualify for wilderness designation.

That would have rejected the Wilderness Act's overlay of preservation on any eastern national forests. But Congress rebuked the agency in hearings on the 1975 Eastern Wilderness Areas Act, whose legislative history counters that eastern national forest lands qualify for wilderness designation.

Congress had the same message in many other laws adding eastern,

midwestern and southern areas to the National Wilderness System.

Unfortunately, the service's Milwaukee regional office, which oversees management of the Allegheny National Forest in Pennsylvania, has cooked up another purity doctrine. The Milwaukee office doctrine is disguised as a solitude buffering requirement: any area, to be recommended as wilderness in a forest management plan must be so big that a visitor's experience of solitude is buffered from influences outside the wilderness.

But recall the Forest Service's survey on wilderness benefits: the first eight of the 12 don't require that one even be in wilderness to reap its benefits.

So what's there to buffer?

The upshot is that your congressionally acceptable opportunity to enjoy all 12 benefits of wilderness are held hostage to an arbitrary administrative buffering requirement concocted for just one aspect of one benefit ranked ninth in importance by Americans.

We should not let this happen. The ruling has no basis in law and is made by regional administrators who are not elected. This clearly frustrates the intent of the statutory overlay of preservation that Pennsylvania Congressman John P. Saylor and so many others labored eight years to see realized in the 1964 Wilderness Act.

The Friends of Allegheny Wilderness — www.pawild.org — believe that a more reasonable percentage of Allegheny National Forest lands should be preserved as wilderness. Support of their proposals will contribute to "the permanent good of the whole people."