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The 1964 Wilderness Act, from “wilderness idea” to governmental oversight and protection of wilderness

Nathalie Massip

Introduction

- ¹ In 1960, David Pesonen, a research assistant at the Wildlands Research Center at the University of California, was asked to write a report assessing “the Place of Wilderness in National Outdoor Recreation” (Pesonen 1). Faced with a daunting task, which he considered as “loaded against wilderness preservation,” Pesonen reached out to western historian and writer Wallace Stegner, asking him to write about “the Wilderness Idea, abstracted from wilderness use” (1). Pesonen explained he was turning to Stegner as “the only person [he knew] of who [was] qualified to articulate” this “idea” of wilderness (2). What Pesonen wanted was for Stegner to “consider the place of wilderness in the national consciousness, culture, psyche, whatever it is that constitutes a feeling about wilderness, of which science and recreation are only a part” (1). Pesonen fleshed out his request with very clear and straightforward instructions, for instance asking Stegner to show that wilderness did not belong to an elite, but was to be enjoyed by all. Stegner’s reply—“the labor of an afternoon” (Stegner 1980), as its author would describe it twenty years later—took the form of a letter.
- ² It is no accident that Stegner’s conception of the wilderness idea “as something that has helped form our character and that has certainly shaped our history as a people” (Stegner 1997, 146) is highly reminiscent of historian Frederick Jackson Turner’s assertion that “[t]he existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward explain American development” (Turner 1996, 1). Even though they were writing more than sixty years apart, both

Turner and Stegner stood at a turning point in the history of the nation. While the very first lines of Turner’s essay famously refer to “the closing of a great historic movement,” Stegner’s text is peppered with references to potential loss, if no action were taken to preserve wilderness:

as the wilderness areas are progressively exploited or “improved,” as the jeeps and bulldozers of uranium prospectors scar up the deserts and the roads are cut into the alpine timberlands, and as the remnants of the unspoiled and natural world are progressively eroded, every such loss is a little death in me. In us. (Stegner 1997, 150)

- 3 Stegner’s letter is a plea to preserve the wilderness that remains, with no equivocation as to the urgency—and drama—of the situation. Four years after this letter was published, Congress would vote a law protecting wilderness throughout the United States.
- 4 The purpose of this article is to trace the evolution of the debate over wilderness protection from the “idea” of wilderness to a national policy of preservation signed into law by President Johnson in 1964. Thanks to this act, the United States became the first nation to define and protect wilderness areas through law on a national scale. I contend that in spite of the fact that it granted Congress power to designate wilderness areas through the National Wilderness Preservation System, the Wilderness Act carried more symbolism than political clout when it was passed in 1964. Only with hindsight is it possible to realize its political significance, as the act opened the way for a series of laws that considerably expanded the role of the federal government in terms of environmental protection.
- 5 As the exchange between Pesonen and Stegner suggests, wilderness was a concept, an “idea” before becoming the object of a congressional act. While this concept and the various analyses it fostered are well documented, the immediate context that prompted Congress to legislate over wilderness protection needs to be assessed. Then the legislative process itself will be presented, along with the strategies its main advocates resorted to in order to ensure passage of the act. This will allow an evaluation of one of the consequences of the act, which is the enlargement of federal responsibilities in terms of environmental oversight and wilderness protection and, ultimately, increased federal presence in the American West.

The need for wilderness protection

- 6 The concept of wilderness has an old and complex history. The 19th-century origins of wilderness protection, as well as the conservation efforts of the Progressive Era, which paved the way for the Wilderness Act in involving the federal government in resource management and preservation¹, are well known and well documented (Nash; Frome; Oelschlaeger). The debate over wilderness protection itself was shaped by two key periods: the interwar years and the aftermath of World War II. A fairly traditional depiction of the interwar years’ discussions portrays the wilderness idea at the intersection of three trends: the use—if not abuse—of resources, utilitarian conservation, and aesthetic preservation (Nash). However, as historian Paul Sutter has recently argued, “the nascent forces of industrial tourism” and their devastating effects on wilderness areas have to be reckoned with. If national parks were “the best idea [Americans] ever had” (Stegner 1998, 135)², they also contributed to the development of

mass tourism, whose impact was detrimental to the very nature that they were supposed to showcase and protect:

Interwar wilderness activists formulated the wilderness idea largely to oppose modern *recreational* trends, not to offer recreational preservation as an alternative to resource development on the public lands. The modern wilderness idea was less a higher form of the national park ideal than it was a response to the compromises and tensions that were making park preservation politically attractive at the dawn of the automobile age. (Sutter 168-9; italics in the text)

- 7 As Sutter maintains, the growing affordability of cars made national parks and nature in general easily accessible to a larger number of Americans, who embraced “recreational nature” (Sutter 170). The disappearance of the frontier in the 1890s had left room for the development of nature tourism, and the “See America First” campaign of the 1910s and 1920s called on Americans’ patriotism to explore their country (Schaffer). Therefore, the democratization of tourism, the affordability of cars, and the improvement of road systems, among other elements, help explain why park visitation skyrocketed, from close to 315,000 visitors in 1915 to 1 million visitors five years later, on to 15 million by 1939 (“Visitation numbers”).³
- 8 And indeed, the trend accelerated in the years following World War II, with the 50 million visitor landmark being reached in 1956. Not only did national parks and forests become extremely popular, but what some have called “windshield wilderness”—admiring wilderness from the comfort of one’s vehicle—made wilderness easily accessible to all (Louter). The kind of wilderness here encountered is broadly defined “as a place where nature was in its purest form and where the contrast with urban, suburban, and rural landscapes was starkly clear” (Harvey 2007, 187). It became so accessible, in fact, that the postwar “recreational explosion” (Harvey 2007, 193), facilitated by the 1956 Federal Highway Act, led to excesses and abuses, often in the form of off-road/all-terrain vehicles or motorboats, among other examples.
- 9 Meanwhile, the economic expansion of the country in the aftermath of the war, illustrated by the housing and baby booms, and the growth in manufacturing, was accompanied by increased mining, oil drilling, and timber harvesting, as well as attempts—if not pressures—to exploit resources in wild areas (Harvey 2007, 193-4). Among other examples, timber companies tried to shrink Olympic National Park, in Washington, in order to develop logging (Frome 127-30), while several dam projects were devised, that would have flooded parts of national parks, such as Glacier National Park, in Montana, or the Grand Canyon in Arizona (Harvey 2001, 276-302).
- 10 One such controversial project was the sparkle that ignited the fight to legislatively protect wilderness. In the early 1950s, the Bureau of Reclamation called for the construction of a dam in Echo Park, located within Dinosaur National Monument, in Utah. As the project gained support from Eisenhower’s and Truman’s Secretaries of the Interior as well as from the neighboring states, organizations such as the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society joined forces and launched a campaign advertising the wilderness beauties and values of little-known Echo Park. Roderick Nash describes the fight as one opposing Western and Eastern interests: on the one hand, “Congressmen, governors, civic clubs, chambers of commerce, utility companies, water-users associations, the Bureau of Reclamation, and a tribe of Navajo Indians” and, on the other hand, “Eastern Congressmen, many educational institutions, conservation and nature organizations, and a mounting tide of public opinion expressed in letters, telegrams, and editorials” (Nash 216). The torrent of concerns and protests that the

project triggered led to passage, in 1956, of the Colorado River Storage Project Act, which authorized the erection of several dams, yet prohibited the construction of dams or reservoirs within national parks and monuments. Not only did Echo Park become a symbol of the United States’ endangered wilderness, but the campaign to preserve the site and the victory over the dam project attested to the increasingly central role, efficiency, and power of the postwar wilderness movement (Harvey 2007, 194-6).

- 11 The Echo Park victory emboldened wilderness activists, giving “preservationists the momentum necessary to launch a campaign for a national policy of wilderness preservation” (Nash 200). Most importantly, the various battles they were fighting persuaded these activists that wild areas had to be granted permanent protection, which implied an act of Congress.

Legislating wilderness protection

- 12 A bill meant to create a national wilderness system was first introduced in Congress in 1956, the year of the Echo Park victory. From then on, the process proved long and complicated, “one of the herculean efforts of the conservation movement in the twentieth century” (Harvey 2005, 186). According to historian Roderick Nash, “Congress lavished more time and effort on the wilderness bill than on any other measure in American conservation history” (Nash 222).⁴ It took 8 and ½ years, eighteen public hearings in the nation’s capital and in western cities, as well as “the groundswell of public support” for the legislation to be finally enacted (Frome 139-40). Throughout the long and arduous process, its main artisan, Wilderness Society director Howard Zahniser, spared no effort to ensure passage of the bill.⁵ At one point, Zahniser’s activism even became a source of concern to Wilderness Society council members, who feared the society might lose its tax-exempt status should the IRS look into Zahniser’s legislative activities and decide that they constituted “substantive” lobbying (Harvey 2005, 193).
- 13 From the start, opposition from ranching, mining, and timber interests was particularly fierce. Fearing a decrease in their commodity production and, hence, financial loss, these industries presented a united front, putting forward the economic but, also, strategic worth of lands, timber and minerals at a time when the nation was engaged in the Cold War. A potential decrease in revenues was also the major concern of western states, which depended on subsidies paid for by the Forest Service in compensation for lands exempted from local and state taxation, due to their management by the federal government. In fact, the National Forest Service itself, along with federal agencies managing wilderness areas—the very areas that would be overseen by the National Wilderness Preservation System should the bill become an act—stoutly opposed the bill. National Park Service officials, in particular, felt that the new system would threaten the mission of the Park Service and would ultimately diminish its prerogatives. Director of the NPS Conrad Wirth considered that “[w]hat we have now can hardly be improved upon” (quoted in Harvey 2005, 189). Indian lands constituted a potential issue, as did the authority of tribal councils whenever Indian lands would fall under the National Wilderness Preservation System, while the fact that the bill “prohibited the construction of roads into the wilderness areas” was also cause for concern (“History of Dispute on National Wilderness System”, 1061).

- 14 Further complicating the debate, the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission, a fifteen-person bipartisan commission, was created by an act of Congress in 1958 in order to assess the nation’s recreational needs and resources. The goal of the ORRRC was threefold:
- to determine outdoor recreation wants and needs expected in the years 1976 and 2000; to determine the recreation resources expected to be available to meet those demands; and to determine the policies and programs that would meet the present and future outdoor recreation needs. (Siehl 2)
- 15 While interest groups were adamant the legislation should not pass until the ORRRC had published its report—seemingly trying to buy time or, even, hoping the report would conclude wilderness protection was not necessary—Zahniser and conservation activists used Americans’ increasing love of outdoor recreation to further the cause of wilderness protection.
- 16 Zahniser’s efforts in securing, first, the introduction of the bill and, then, its passage, should not be underestimated. Zahniser had long been involved in wilderness protection but, realizing that “[t] he Wilderness Society was constantly playing defense” (Harvey 2014, 88), he started to push for a more assertive agenda in order to establish a national wilderness system right after World War II. In 1949, he took advantage of the Sierra Club’s first biennial wilderness conference to lead a discussion on the topic, entitled “Keeping the Wilderness Wild.” Working with the Wilderness Society, along with the Sierra Club, Zahniser knew that he was in for a long fight, and that legislation would take years, if not decades.⁶
- 17 Howard Zahniser was more than a fixture of the conservation movement. Even though he was neither a congressman nor a politician, he was familiar with the murky waters of government, “having been a writer and editor for the Fish and Wildlife Service and in the Department of Agriculture” (Frome 139). His connections among politicians enabled him to prompt an all-encompassing assessment of the American wilderness, in terms of values as well as support by various organizations and state and federal agencies, by the Library of Congress’s Legislative Reference Service (see Keyser⁷). Not only was he undaunted by the task, but he was also very well aware of two things that were crucial in achieving his goal. First, a pragmatic approach was required, due to the fierce opposition the idea of a national wilderness system generated. Second, only bipartisanship would ensure the success of a bill.
- 18 Zahniser had already laid out what can be considered as a pragmatic approach in 1951. On the occasion of the second Sierra Club’s biennial wilderness conference, he delivered an address in which he endeavored to assuage the fears of those who felt that wilderness preservation would be detrimental to the nation’s economic and industrial growth. Echoing the main premise of Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 frontier thesis—that the American character and democracy were born out of the experience of the frontier—Zahniser claimed that
- Out of the wilderness [...] has come the substance of our culture, and with a living wilderness [...] we shall have also a vibrant culture, an enduring civilization of healthful citizens who renew themselves when they are in contact with the earth. (Zahniser 2014, 97)
- 19 Having stated this point—a traditional idea in the preservation debate—Zahniser then presented a more unusual argument. The speech owes its title, “How Much Wilderness Can We Afford to Lose?” to the following passage:

This is not a disparagement of our civilization—no disparagement at all—but rather an admiration of it to the point of perpetuating it. We like the beef from the cattle grazed on the public domain. We relish the vegetables from the lands irrigated by virtue of the Bureau of Reclamation—our Bureau of Reclamation, too, we should recall now and then. We carry in our packs aluminum manufactured with the help of hydroelectric power from great reservoirs. We motor happily on paved highways to the approaches of our wilderness. We journey in streamliner trains and in transcontinental airplanes to conferences on wilderness preservation. We know the exultation of the music and the spoken words (some of them anyhow) marvelously brought to us by radio. We nourish and refresh our minds from books manufactured out of the pulp of our forests. We enjoy the convenience and comfort of our way of living—urban, village, and rural. And we want this civilization to endure and to be enjoyed on and on by healthful happy citizens. (Zahniser 2014, 97-98)

- 20 Without the slightest trace of sarcasm, Zahniser concluded this passage with the following exclamation: “It is this civilization, this culture, this way of living that will be sacrificed if our wilderness is lost. What sacrifice!” (Zahniser 2014, 98) Even though these words were uttered in 1951, Zahniser stayed true to this pragmatic approach throughout the long and strenuous legislative process leading up to passage of the wilderness act. Along with Zahniser, supporters of the bill were highly aware of the necessity to conciliate both economic uses and protection. Therefore, they favored debates and compromises, including with extractive industries, in order to ensure broad political support in Congress.⁸ The final version of the bill attests to these compromises. For instance, the act did not impact the grazing of livestock where it already existed; it also allowed mineral extraction to continue unchanged for twenty more years. Promoters of preservation also undertook to accommodate recreationists, allowing the use of aircrafts and motorboats where it already existed prior to the act (Public Law 88-577). As for public lands, wilderness advocates emphasized the “reasonableness” of the system, as “the maximum possible acreage to be included in the Wilderness System can be stated at approximately 2½ percent of our national total” (Nadel 45; 46).
- 21 Along with pragmatism, Zahniser and proponents of the law strove to reach bipartisan support. Their purpose was not only to ensure uncontested success for the bill but, also, to prove that wilderness protection was a truly national ideal. To do so, they depicted it as key to the common good and the national interest. Supporters of the law were not limited to the traditional conservation groups, but consisted in a wide-ranging coalition of organizations, which included the AFL-CIO and the General Federation of Women’s Clubs (Turner 2012, 18). In spite of the various reports that were released in the years prior to the final vote on the bill⁹, and as historian James Morton Turner contends, “[t]he campaign was not won with careful research briefs on the state of the nation’s natural resources or the scientific benefits of protecting the public lands” (Turner 2009, 126). The campaign was successful because it “appealed to national values—patriotism, spirituality, outdoor recreation, and a respect for nature—and the responsibility of the people and the government to protect them” (Turner 2009, 126). And, indeed, the purpose of the act is “to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness” and to establish a system “for the permanent good of the whole people” (Public Law 88-577).
- 22 Zahniser’s efforts paid off when ten Senators (from both parties and from all over the country) agreed to co-sponsor the bill.¹⁰ The legislation was first introduced by

Democrat Hubert Humphrey (MN) and Republican John Saylor (PA). The results of the final vote reflected this large bipartisan support: the Senate voted 73-12 in April 1963¹¹, while only one Representative voted against the bill in July 1964 (“History of Dispute on National Wilderness System” 1063). As James Morton Turner asserts, such bipartisanship is remarkable in light of the polarization of American environmental politics in the 1980s and 1990s (Turner 2009, 126). President Johnson signed the Wilderness bill into law on September 3, 1964, making the United States the first nation to define and protect wilderness areas through law.

- 23 The fact that the bill ended up passing both chambers with such large majorities is evidence that the issue it tackled—wilderness—was more ideological than political at the time. I would further argue that the Wilderness Act was less a political tool when it was created than it became afterwards. This is not to say that the act was not political; as the eight-year legislative fight attests, it was political in the sense that it opposed various interests. Among other examples, the version of the bill that the House finally passed in July 1964 was different from the Senate’s due to a provision allowing mineral exploration in wilderness areas, that was added as one western Representative’s “price for the compromise, a final thrust of old power against the spirit of the new law” (Frome 140).¹² Yet, the main reason behind the act—as should be clear by the fact that its drafter and most ardent supporter was neither a Congressman nor a politician—was genuine concern for the present and future state of wilderness, and the wish to see it preserved by federal law, through a system that would encompass the whole United States territory, and “in perpetuity” (Zahniser 162). However, the political significance of the Wilderness Act rests in the fact that the law greatly expanded federal responsibilities in matters of environmental oversight and protection, ultimately reinforcing the federal presence in the American West.

The federal government and environmental oversight

- 24 The Wilderness Act gave Congress power to designate wilderness areas through the National Wilderness Preservation System. The latter was:
- to be composed of federally owned areas designated by Congress as ‘wilderness areas’, and these shall be administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, and so as to provide for the protection of these areas, the preservation of their wilderness character, and for the gathering and dissemination of information regarding their use and enjoyment as wilderness; and no Federal lands shall be designated as ‘wilderness areas’ except as provided for in this Act or by a subsequent Act. (Public Law 88-577)
- 25 Upon signature of the act, 9.1 million acres of national forest, national park, and wildlife refuge land became protected from roads, motorized vehicles, as well as various equipment, such as chain saws.
- 26 The act also required the Forest Service (part of the Department of Agriculture) to review its primitive areas and the Fish and Wildlife Service (part of the Department of the Interior) to do the same with its roadless areas within the next ten years (Public Law 88-577). Both services would then produce a report and send a list of recommendations to the president regarding the areas that should be added to this “embryonic” national system (Zaslowsky and Watkins 212). The president would then

submit his own recommendations to Congress, which would have the final say (Public Law 88-577).

- 27 In 1964, the Wilderness Society’s magazine, *Living Wilderness*, published a map of the “areas to be considered for or included in the National Wilderness Preservation System as provided in the Wilderness Act [...]”

[Illustration n° 1]

“The Wilderness Act’s... National Wilderness Preservation System: Areas to be Considered for or included in the National Wilderness System as Provided in the Wilderness Act, S.4, and in the Saylor-Quie-Cohelin Wilderness Bills.”

The Living Wilderness (Spring-Summer 1964). Wilderness Society Papers, Denver Public Library, CONS130.

- 28 This map of the newly established system distinguished between the first federally designated wilderness areas—represented by stars on the map—and the potential wilderness areas—i.e., the other icons: trees representing national forests; shields standing for national parks; and geese denoting wildlife refuges. What is striking upon reading of this map is the abundance of “potential” wilderness areas, compared to the ones designated by the act in 1964, the original 9.1 million acres. These numerous icons are a reminder that the original National Wilderness Preservation System that was created by the 1964 Wilderness Act was just a first step, meant to grow in the following years, as suggested by the ten-year reviews imposed by the act, and decades.
- 29 The National Wilderness Preservation System was met with a lot of resistance on the part of the agencies that were supposed to survey the land and make recommendations. The Forest Service, in particular, was not ready to collaborate and comply with these new instructions. While it did “[prepare] regulations for the protection and management of areas already classified as wilderness under the provisions of the act,” the Forest Service did not make a single recommendation between 1964 and 1973 (Zaslowsky and Watkins 212). According to *These American Lands*, a publication sponsored by the Wilderness Society, “[a]ll proposals made during

this period came from the swelling ranks of professional conservationists and interested citizens” (Zaslowsky and Watkins 212-3).

- 30 One example illustrates the reluctance, if not resistance, of the Forest Service regarding the new regulations. In 1968, the Gore Range Primitive Area in the White River National Forest in Colorado was the site of a dispute between wilderness supporters, who wanted a larger area of the forest to be considered as “primitive” and, thus, included in the National Wilderness Preservation System, and the Forest Service, which aimed to exploit the timber of the area. When the US District Court for the District of Colorado finally settled the case, in 1969, it ruled against the Forest Service. In this landmark decision, the court considered that the action of the Service “thwart [ed] the purpose and spirit of the [Wilderness] Act” in preventing “a Presidential and Congressional decision” (309 F. Supp. 593).
- 31 The National Park Service was as disinclined to accept the new rules as the Forest Service. In 1965, when part of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park was considered for wilderness classification, national park officials unveiled plans for a new highway meant to facilitate more traffic to the park and develop tourism. The matter was settled after a five-year fight, when neither side won: the trajectory of the highway was pushed back to the outskirts of the park, but the area did not make it to the wilderness system (Zaslowsky and Watkins 214-5).
- 32 On top of this resistance, if not hostility, the Wilderness Act also had to put up with attacks from the Reagan administration, and more specifically from its Secretary of the Interior, James Watt. The latter, who did not hide his “bias for private enterprise” (Watt quoted in Turner 2012, 233), was eager to take advantage of the fact that the act allowed mineral exploration in wilderness areas until 1983. Not only did he authorize—and push for—seismic exploration in wilderness areas in order to exploit oil and gas resources, but he also conceived a plan meant to chip away at the wilderness system (Zaslowsky and Watkins 217). Watt liked to boast about his anti-environmentalist stance,¹³ explaining that “‘conservative’ and ‘conservationist’ [came] from the same root” and that, as a result,
a real conservative is your best conservationist, because he believes in people and he manages the land for the present population, but also for future generations. [...] We are the conservationists, we conservatives. The liberal has prostituted the word in an effort to achieve his political objectives. (“Exclusive Interview” 10)
- 33 Controversy characterized Watt’s two-year tenure as Secretary of the Interior,¹⁴ and the environmental movement’s “Dump Watt” petition, which was sent to Congress in October 1981—a mere nine months after Watt took office—collected more than a million signatures (Roby). Nevertheless, despite Watt’s attempts to roll back environmental regulations during his tenure, 8.6 million new acres of wilderness were designated in 1984, just a few months after the controversial Secretary’s resignation, an addition that represented “the largest amount of acreage allotted to the National Wilderness Preservation System” since 1980 (Zaslowsky and Watkins 218).¹⁵
- 34 And indeed, despite the resistance and attacks, the National Wilderness Preservation System did grow, reaching the 90-million-acre landmark by 1989. By 2014, the system was made up of 110 million acres of wilderness, twelve times what it was upon its creation in 1964, and more than twice what proponents of the system had argued it would ever include. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, the *National Geographic* published a map documenting “America’s Wilderness Areas”:

<http://www.jamiehawkcartography.com/wilderness/> The legend reads as follows: dark green patches represent wilderness areas; orange squares stand for proposed wilderness awaiting Congressional approval; light green areas symbolize land managed by the National Park Service, the US Forest Service, the US Fish and Wildlife Service, or the Bureau of Land Management; grey pieces indicate urban areas.

- 35 Even more striking than on the 1964 map is the location of the existing and potential wilderness areas, i.e. the icons on the 1964 map, and the green spots and orange squares on the 2014 one: the large majority of these areas are situated in the Western part of the United States, including Alaska. According to the *National Geographic* caption accompanying the map, “states east of the Mississippi River only contain 3% of the nation’s 110 million acres” (“Map of America’s Wilderness Areas”). In other words, this map suggests that the 1964 Wilderness Act did not just enlarge federal responsibilities in terms of wilderness preservation; it also considerably reinforced the federal presence in the American West.¹⁶
- 36 The act itself increased federal responsibilities in matters of environmental oversight: it created a national system that could be expanded at Congress’s will, and tasked federal agencies with reviewing and suggesting wilderness areas. In other words, it granted the federal government the power to protect wilderness as it saw fit. Yet as such, the act was but the first step in this expansion of governmental responsibilities: several acts were passed, in its wake, which confirmed and strengthened the powers of the federal government in terms of environmental oversight. Such was the case of the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act, the 1970 Clean Air Act, the 1972 Clean Water Act, the 1973 Endangered Species Act, among others. As the environmental movement gained traction in the late 1960s and early 1970s, while, at the same time, new laws and court decisions gave the movement even more momentum, the concept of the “environment” did become political, with Democrats becoming its champions, while Republicans denounced the expansion of federal powers and promoted wise use.
- 37 The enlargement of federal responsibilities culminated in 1976, when Congress passed the Federal Land Policy and Management Act, which not only put an end to homesteading in the contiguous United States, but also tasked the Bureau of Land Management with reviewing its lands for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System (Public Law 94-579). More than 200 wilderness areas were subsequently added to the system, amounting to more than 9 million acres for the BLM only (“Summary Report Fact Sheet”). Not only that, but, while the public domain—which had long been a contentious issue in the relationships between the federal government and western states—had been strategically left out of the Wilderness Act, in order not to trigger more opposition from westerners, the 1976 Federal Land Policy and Management Act stated that, from then on, the public domain would be managed by the BLM. This addition represented no less than 174 million acres (Turner 2012, 116-7). As a result, by 1979 the Bureau of Land Management ended up controlling and managing huge portions of lands in western states—from 52% in Oregon to 63% in Utah, and up to 86% in Nevada (*Public Land Statistics* 9).
- 38 The fact that, in fifty years, the National Wilderness Preservation System reached more than twice the size its proponents said it would ever reach is evidence that the spectacular expansion of the scope of the system was unexpected. It is hard to tell whether wilderness advocates genuinely believed its compass would remain modest, or whether this was no more than a strategy meant to allay sceptics and challengers’ fears

in order to win the fight. In any case, it is now obvious that one of the opponents’ main requirements regarding the bill backfired and led to the expansion of the system. Indeed, the bill’s adversaries were convinced that if the right to designate wilderness areas were granted to Congress only, then the system would not grow much—due to the overwhelming presence of rural westerners’ representatives in the congressional committees (Turner 2012, 33)—and, hopefully, at the same slow pace as the wilderness bill itself had become a law. This reasoning turned out to be wrong. Not only did the system grow dramatically in the decades following its creation but, also, according to the Wilderness Society, Congress has often designated more areas for wilderness than recommended by the federal agencies (“What is wilderness?”). In other words, the “modest ambitions” (Turner 2009, 130) of the newly-created National Wilderness Preservation System could foretell neither its spectacular expansion over the following decades, nor the reinforcement of the federal presence in the American West.

- 39 It would be an understatement to say that the expansion of federal prerogatives that the act initiated has not always been well perceived. Despite the large bipartisanship the Wilderness Act finally gathered, after years of haggling between wilderness advocates and western interests, its implementation, along with the various laws that came after it, has triggered a lot of resentment and opposition. Because their livelihoods depended on mining, ranching, and agriculture, the so-called “Sagebrush Rebels” of the late 1970s, for instance, were very forceful in their denunciation of federal overreach (Boly). Even though the rebellion was tamed as a result of James Watt’s tenure as Secretary of the Interior, it was revived in the late 1980s under the name “wise use movement.” The latest episode in this “War for the West” took place in early 2016, when an armed militia—the “People for Constitutional Freedom”—occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon, demanding that the federal government relinquish control of “the people’s land and resources” (Bundy Ranch).

Conclusion

- 40 Despite the long legislative fight that led to the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964, the issue the act tackled—wilderness and its protection—was more ideological than political, at the time. Its champions’ pragmatism and tireless efforts to find compromises with their opponents (ranching, mining, and timber interests, for instance), in order to reach large bipartisanship, attest to this idea. Similarly, the modest scope of the National Wilderness Preservation System at the time it was created, and its remarkable expansion in the following decades, signal that its political clout could not be fully comprehended in 1964. Finally, the philosophical, spiritual, even religious arguments of its proponents prove their genuine and deeply-ingrained love of wilderness more than their political shrewdness. Wallace Stegner’s 1960 “Wilderness Letter”, for instance, concludes on the idea that wilderness “can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope” (Stegner 1997, 153). Another telling example is the definition of the key concept of the legislation. Despite the various revisions the text went through over the years, Howard Zahniser’s definition of “wilderness” survived the editing process:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.
(Public Law 88-577)

- 41 The phrasing of this sentence contrasts with the style traditionally used in the drafting of official, legal documents. It is remarkable that, in spite of “pressures from many directions to change the evocative language,” Zahniser did not waver (Wilkinson 12).
- 42 Perhaps this phrasing, along with advocates’ more philosophical arguments, did contribute to the bipartisanship garnered by the act. In any case, the near-consensus over an environmental issue would be over by the late 1970s. As James Morton Turner explains, environmental politics would grow more and more polarized in the final decades of the 20th century; partisanship was at an all-time high at the turn of the century, with 86% of Democrats voting in favor of the environmental reform agenda in 2004, against 10% of Republicans (Turner 2009, 147). The end of bipartisanship coincided with the Sagebrush Rebellion and its endorsement by Ronald Reagan during his campaign and early stages of his administration. Fueled by a conservative agenda, Republicans pressed the case for wise use and private property rights, and echoed rural westerners’ denunciation of federal overreach, while Democrats took on the role of champions of environmental protection and regulation.
- 43 Yet, as the federal presence remains highly unpopular in the American West, as exemplified by the Malheur Refuge occupation, environmental protection seems to have been less of a divisive political issue lately. On February 12, 2019, the Senate “overwhelmingly passed a sweeping public lands bill that protects millions of acres of land and reauthorizes a major conservation program” (Rott). With 92 Senators voting in favor of the bill, “S. 47 (Natural Resources Management Act)”¹⁷ comes as a double surprise: not only does conservation appear as a unifier again, after decades of polarization, but, also, such large bipartisanship jars with the current political climate (“Roll Call Vote 116th Congress - 1st Session”). The trend is brand new, and only time will tell if wilderness still has the same power to unite as it did in the 1960s. Perhaps it is a belated confirmation of Zahniser’s dream that “[w]hen the wilderness law is enacted it will be the whole nation who will be for it” (Zahniser quoted in Turner 2012, 300).

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NOTES

1. A significant episode was the 1908-1913 controversy over the building of a dam in the Hetch Hetchy Valley, which opposed preservationists and conservationists and raised public awareness about the necessity to preserve nature and natural resources (Nash 161-181; Frome 142-144).
2. Stegner thus justified his enthusiasm for American national parks: “Absolutely American, absolutely democratic, they reflect us at our best rather than our worst” (Stegner 1998, 135).
3. The acceleration of the trend in the 1930s is also the result of New Deal programs, such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Public Works Administration (PWA), whose building of roads and campgrounds considerably helped develop recreational tourism (Sutter 173).
4. For a summary of the legislative process and year-by-year details of legislative action, see “History of Dispute on National Wilderness System”, 1061-1063.
5. The fight certainly took its toll on Zahniser, who died of heart failure in May 1964, four months before President Johnson signed the act.

6. This focus on Howard Zahniser as the main artisan of the Wilderness Act is not meant to imply that he was its only champion. Many had actively advocated for legislation before he did. For instance, Bob Marshall and Aldo Leopold obviously paved the way for his own activism. Others worked alongside him as tirelessly as he did, such as Olaus Murie. Yet, Zahniser drafted, defended, and pugnaciously shepherded the bill through Congress.
7. On the occasion of this assessment, Zahniser spelled out the Wilderness Society’s stance (see “A Statement on Wilderness Preservation: In Reply to a Questionnaire”).
8. James Morton Turner makes an interesting comparison between the wilderness movement and other movements of the same period, such as the antiwar and black power movements. Contrary to the latter, the wilderness movement did not resort to a strategy of “extralegal protest activities.” Instead, “wilderness advocates remained committed to advancing reform by working through the political system” (Turner 2009, 128).
9. These included the reports from the Library of Congress and from the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission previously mentioned. The latter, entitled “Outdoor Recreation for America”, was submitted to President Kennedy in January 1962.
10. Hubert Humphrey (Minnesota), Wayne Morse and Richard Neuberger (Oregon), Herbert Lehman (New York), Paul Douglas (Illinois), and William Laird (West Virginia) were the Democratic sponsors of the bill, while Thomas Kuchel (California), Margaret Chase Smith (Maine), Karl Mundt (South Dakota), and James Duff (Pennsylvania) were its Republican sponsors (Harvey 2005, 279).
11. 7 Democrats and 8 Republicans did not take part in the vote.
12. The Representative referred to here was Wayne Aspinall, a Democrat from Colorado who was chairman of the House Interior and Insular Affairs Committee during the legislative fight over the wilderness bill. Aspinall strongly supported western economic interests and is considered by some as the wilderness movement’s “sharpest opponent” (Turner 2012, 33).
13. In 1977, Watt had taken the lead of the Mountain States Legal Fund, created as “the litigation arm of the anti-environmental wise-use movement” (Barnhill 508).
14. Watt triggered yet another, final, uproar when, addressing the United States Chamber of Commerce in September 1983, he described one of his commissions in the following terms: “I have a black, I have a woman, two Jews and a cripple” (Weisman A1).
15. 1980 constitutes a landmark in terms of wilderness designation, due to President Carter’s signature of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, which added more than 56 million acres to the National Wilderness Preservation System (Turner 2007, 244).
16. Out of the 95 wilderness areas created by the 1964 Wilderness Act, only 4 were located East of the 100th meridian. While conservationists actively advocated for more areas in the East, their appeals were met with the fiercest opposition from the Forest Service. Because the Wilderness Act states that wilderness areas “generally [appear] to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable” (Public Law 88-577), the Forest Service adopted a “purist” approach in order “to oppose application of the wilderness designation to areas where any man-made intrusions exist” (Foote 255). Because most eastern forests had once been altered by man, they could not qualify as wilderness areas, according to the “purity” argument of the Forest Service. To solve the conundrum, an “Eastern” Wilderness Act was passed in 1974 (Public Law 93-622).
17. This Act is the largest public lands package since the 2009 Omnibus Public Land Management Act, which protected more than 2 million acres of wilderness.

ABSTRACTS

This paper aims to trace the evolution of the debate over wilderness protection, from the “idea” of wilderness to a national policy of preservation signed into law by President Johnson in 1964. Central to this evolution was Wilderness Society’s activist Howard Zahniser, who started campaigning actively for a wilderness preservation law in the late 1940s. Relying on a pragmatic approach, Zahniser and advocates of wilderness protection favored debates and compromises, including with natural resource industries, in an effort to conciliate both economic uses and protection. The wide bipartisan support that this endeavor resulted in is remarkable in light of the polarization of American environmental politics from the late 1970s on. Most significantly, the Wilderness Act enlarged federal responsibilities in terms of wilderness preservation, especially as it gave Congress power to designate wilderness areas through the National Wilderness Preservation System, therefore reinforcing the federal presence in the American West.

Cet article a pour objectif d’étudier l’évolution du débat sur la protection de la wilderness, ou nature sauvage, du « concept » de wilderness à une politique nationale de préservation promulguée par le président Johnson en 1964. Représentant la Wilderness Society, Howard Zahniser milita activement en faveur d’une loi de protection de la wilderness dès la fin des années 1940. Son combat en fait une figure centrale de la présente étude. Attachés à une approche pragmatique, Zahniser et les défenseurs de la protection de la wilderness ont favorisé les débats et les compromis, y compris avec les industries d’exploitation des ressources naturelles, dans l’espoir de réconcilier exploitation des ressources et protection. Cette stratégie a donné lieu à un soutien bipartite de très grande ampleur, qui est particulièrement remarquable eu égard au clivage que l’on peut observer en matière de politique environnementale à partir de la fin des années 1970 aux États-Unis. Qui plus est, la loi de 1964 a considérablement élargi les prérogatives du gouvernement fédéral en matière de préservation de la nature sauvage : non seulement le Congrès s’est vu attribuer le pouvoir de désigner et délimiter des zones de wilderness par le biais du National Wilderness Preservation System, mais, en outre, la présence fédérale s’est vue renforcée dans l’Ouest américain.

INDEX

Keywords: wilderness, Wilderness Act, bipartisanship, federal government, American West

Mots-clés: nature sauvage, Wilderness Act, coalition bipartite, gouvernement fédéral, Ouest américain

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