

Julie May

## **The Creation of the National Wilderness Preservation System, 1964**

Although wildlife conservation and environmental issues have sprung up throughout the course of American history, beginning with the creation of the nation's first national park, Yellowstone, in 1872, (Wyoming) one of the most monumental achievements for all environmentalists came on Sept. 3, 1964, when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Wilderness Act into law and created the National Wilderness Preservation System to protect over nine million acres of national forests and wilderness areas for future generations (Wilderness Act).

Under the Wilderness Act, "wilderness" is defined 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," and further characterized by, "an area of undeveloped federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions" (Wilderness Act).

Before this act, there were no conditions saying that an area of land was fully protected by federal law and there was a widespread fear among the National Park Service and other systems of wilderness management that, even though administrative orders had protected the land through several presidential administrations, the land would begin to disappear. They began appealing to legislators to create an Act of Congress protecting these lands from disappearing due to human demands (Allin), but it was several years before they saw any real progress.

While the first attempts to define a stable system of parks and national forests dates back to the establishment of Yellowstone, Congress did not actually create a true wilderness system until the late 1950s and it took eight years to get through legislation (Allin). Several national forests and parks had been set up before the mid fifties, but there was little standing between them and the desire of people to turn them into tourist attractions or to attempt to buy off and cultivate the land. There were also growing public concerns involving pollution in the United States.

Howard Zahnisser wrote the first draft of the Wilderness Act in 1956 (Wilderness.net). It went through several rewrites, two votes in the Senate, and finally made it through the House of Representatives in 1964 (Wilderness.net).

The first 9.1 million acres of wilderness was set aside by the Act, but it failed to increase the actual amount of acreage that had been considered wilderness prior to the Act (Campaign for America's Wilderness, Allin). Today though, National Parks and Wilderness areas cover a total of 105.8 million acres

(Campaign for America's Wilderness). The Act did change the way areas were designated as "wilderness." Formerly, the Department of Agriculture was the administrative head when it came to these areas. After the Act, it became the duty of Congress to appoint and create an actual wilderness area (Allin).

Awareness about the nation's wilderness has continued to grow since the National Wilderness Preservation System was created in 1964, but the dream of maintaining areas that still appear untouched by man is still embattled by the economic desires of a growing nation. Maintaining and preserving the natural heritage of North America for future generations will continue to be a tough sell for a nation hungry for natural resources.

## Works Cited

- Allin, Craig W.. "Understanding the Wilderness Act of 1964". Wilderness Wars. 2002. Chapter 4. Web. October 21, 2008.  
<<http://cornellcollege.edu/politics/courses/allin/355/allin-wilderness%20act.pdf>>
- Campaign for America's Wilderness. "The National Wilderness Preservation System". 16 October 2007. Web. October 21, 2008.  
<[http://www.leaveitwild.org/resources/wilderness\\_101\\_national\\_wilderness\\_preservation\\_system](http://www.leaveitwild.org/resources/wilderness_101_national_wilderness_preservation_system)>
- Wilderness Act of 1964. Pub. L. 88-577 (16 U.S. C. 1131-1136), 88<sup>th</sup> Congress, Second Session, Sept. 3, 1964. Web. 21 October 2008.  
<[http://www.wilderness.net/nwps/documents/publiclaws/PDF/16\\_USC\\_1131-1136.pdf](http://www.wilderness.net/nwps/documents/publiclaws/PDF/16_USC_1131-1136.pdf)>
- Wilderness.net. "Wilderness and Protected Areas Timeline." Web. October 21, 2008. <http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm>.
- Wildlifeconservation.gov. "Previous White House Conferences on Conservation. Conservation Timeline". Web. October 24, 2008.  
<<http://wildlifeconservation.gov/documents/HistoricalTimeline.pdf>>
- Wyoming. Dept. of Tourism and Travel, [The Majestic Yellowstone National Park](#). Web. 21 October 2008  
<[http://www.wyomingtourism.org/cms/d/yellowstone\\_national\\_park.php](http://www.wyomingtourism.org/cms/d/yellowstone_national_park.php)>