

NATURAL RESOURCES

Our American Wilderness

The continental United States was a vast wilderness until a relatively few years ago. Today we are faced with the problem of preserving our remaining wilderness areas.

See Front Cover

By BENITA TALL

► THE UNITED STATES of America includes a total of some 2,250,000,000 acres. Two hundred years ago most of this land was wilderness, with seemingly boundless stands of pines, hemlocks, oaks, and with waterways and land equally untouched by man.

Today this wilderness has shrunk to approximately 58,000,000 acres or about two and two-tenths percent of the total land area. The nation's remaining wilderness would fit an area the size of Michigan.

This wilderness is in peril; it may shrink still further. Roads, lumber, dams, reservoirs, and the demands for energy and power resources such as oil and minerals, even recreation when it involves changing the wilderness, are all very effective shrinking agents. They are also important to our economy and the business of living in the Twentieth Century.

In a very real sense, however, the American wilderness is important. For the immigrant who arrived yesterday and for the fourth generation "American" it is a symbol for the nation. The wilderness represents a pioneer heritage in which the individual, not machines and things, is valued.

The photograph on the cover of this week's SCIENCE NEWS LETTER shows just one of the nation's wilderness areas. If some action is not taken soon, we may lose the opportunity of coming in close contact with these areas such as the one near Crater Lake that lies in the crater of an ancient volcano in Crater Lake National Park, Oregon.

Protecting Our Heritage

"Our pioneer heritage" is a fine phrase. Yet how does it lend support to the claims of wilderness against those of board feet of lumber and miles of road?

The proposed National Wilderness Preservation Act (S. 1176), and companion bills in the House, are designed to do just this: for the first time, if the legislation is passed, there will be a Congressional law with the purpose of deliberately designating wilderness areas and protecting and preserving them.

The wilderness act is in many ways simply another step in a long history of practices designed for conservation and wildlife preservation. Since Thoreau extolled the virtues of the wilderness, there has been a long procession of Americans whose goal has been the preservation of some remnants of the American scene as

it was when man first set foot on this continent.

Through their efforts, and the procession has included Presidents as well as poets, we have our national parks, forests and national wildlife refuges and ranges. These public lands were set aside, as in the typical case of the National Park System, to "provide for the enjoyment" of the land "in such manner and by such means as to leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations." Anyone is free to wander through the national parks. The National Forests are administered to yield the "most productive use for the permanent good of the whole people." Many of the parks, forests and refuges serve more than one purpose. For example, the public can hunt and fish in some forests or farm refuge lands.

The governmental agencies which administer these lands provide roads and shelter for visitors, food for wildlife and, in the case of national forests, they help to maintain a continuous supply of our forest resources.

The National Park Service even pays \$600,000 a year to pick up park guests' litter. Private and commercial interests are concerned with some of this public land; about 20,000 ranchers pay to graze on national forest ranges.

The national parks, forests and refuges are controlled, protected and supervised lands. More than 200,000,000 acres are represented by these three services.

Within these 200,000,000-plus acres lie most of our 58,000,000 acres of wilderness. In contrast to the parks and forests, the wilderness is land-let-alone. The novelty of the wilderness act is that it would establish a system for the preservation of land untouched by any kind of civilized hand, no matter how well-intentioned. It gives us a national policy and insures adequate legal protection against commercial pressures.

Under present conditions each administrative head of the three services, parks, forests, and fish and wildlife, determines the disposal of land within his jurisdiction. At a time when pressures for control and use of natural resources is growing, a clear-cut distinction between land resources and wilderness is necessary.

Legal Status for Wilderness

What the wilderness bill does is give wilderness status by legally excluding roads and other improvements. Accessibility and recreation in the sense of providing ski tows and swimming pools, perfectly all right in their place, are not considered as part of a

wilderness. Watershed protection and other scientific, as well as recreational benefits, are uses that can be harmonized with keeping land in its primitive state.

No change in administration of our public lands is involved in the proposed bill. Neither is it concerned with dictating the use made of national parks, forests and refuges. Nor does it establish any kind of special privilege legislation. Anyone would be free to enjoy the wilderness, to visit and to hunt where hunting has been permitted.

No reforms as such are proposed except for the provision that Presidential authorization for mining in our national forests would be required. Prospecting and mining activities, a threat to wilderness, would thus be possible, if they serve the interests of the nation.

A wilderness preservation council would also be established under the act. The council, consisting of administrative representatives and interested citizens with the Secretary of the Smithsonian serving as its secretary, would function mainly as an information body. It provides a clearing house, meeting ground and information center for those with common wilderness interests in land administration. While the council would make an annual "state of the wilderness" report to the Congress, it would also fulfill the necessary public function of calling attention to our wilderness and its preservation.

Hearings have already been held on the proposed act so that interested persons could present their views. Representatives of Government agencies, lumber and mining organizations, and conservationists have discussed the merits of the legislation. Wherever possible, changes have been made to clarify issues and answer objections without nullifying the goal of wilderness preservation. Further action is now up to the Congress.

Land for Everyone

Every 12 seconds our population increases by one person. Each year there are increasing demands placed on our natural resources. More persons seek recreation; greater demands are necessitated on water and minerals. The National Wilderness Preservation Act is considered by conservationists as a necessary piece of basic national legislation, a logical successor to earlier acts protecting what belongs to the people, not to any private, commercial or exploitative group.

Rep. John P. Saylor (R. Pa.), one of the bill's sponsors, said:

"In the face of our increasing populations and the growing mechanization of so much of our activity, our only democratic hope for success in preserving our wilderness resources is in our policy of deliberately setting aside such areas for preservation and then maintaining the integrity of our designation."

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