

Wilderness Facts - LTE *White Mountain Independent* (September 28, 1978)

In view of the great amount of misinformation and emotional statements flying around, it might be useful to set down a few facts about Wilderness.

First, just what is Wilderness? It is not just any piece of remote relatively wild countryside as any of our mountain lands might seem to visitors from the city, but is legally defined by the Wilderness Act of 1964 as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor. . .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. . .with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable. . . .”

The purpose of the Law, according to its opening words, is “to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness” by assuring “that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition.”

The current Roadless Area Review and Evaluation (RARE II) is an attempt of the Forest Service, with public help, to inventory all remaining roadless areas on the National Forests and to classify them according to their suitability as Wilderness. They are considered suitable if they provide “outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation,” are of at least 5000 acres size, or “contain ecological, geological or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.”

It is irrelevant to the issue of Wilderness whether we prefer to see a hippy, a cow or a cowboy under a shady tree in the forest. It is also irrelevant whether we prefer to see grass and healthy forage or the bare rock left in many of our areas by extreme overgrazing. Wilderness designation has nothing to do with any of that. The relevant questions have to do with the effect of motorized population growth on the last roadless areas in the country: how important is it to us to protect them from our own pollution and disruption as we turn our towns into cities and our roads into highways? How much land, on a national basis, do we want to for Wilderness designation, but even if they pass onto our descendants in a natural condition? How many places do we need for future generations and ourselves to get away from it all, from each other, from the noise and crowd and hectic vibrations of the internal combustion engine?

In Arizona, less than two percent of the land is being considered by the RARE II process. Few of these will be finally chosen but even if all were chosen the effect on resource production would be negligible. Wilderness is not in conflict with the concept of multiple-use, but a necessary part of it, a resource that makes possible the continuance of all the others.