

Opinion: Wilderness Act faces midlife crisis

By Christopher Solomon, New York Times

You won't hear it on your summer hike above the bird song and the soft applause of aspen leaves, but there's a heresy echoing through America's woods and wild places. It's a debate about how we should think about, and treat, our wilderness in the 21st century, one with real implications for the nearly 110 million acres of wild lands that we've set aside across the United States.

Fifty years ago this September, Congress passed the Wilderness Act, which created a national system of wilderness areas. Wilderness has been called the "hard green line" for the act's uncompromising language: Man will leave these places alone. As the law's drafter and spiritual father, Howard Zahniser, put it, "we should be guardians, not gardeners."



Views from Ralston Peak in Desolation Wilderness.
Photo/LTN file

At 50, however, the Wilderness Act faces a midlife crisis.

We now know that, thanks to climate change, we've left no place unmolested and inadvertently put our fingerprints on even the most unpeopled corners of the planet. This reality

has pushed respected scientists to advocate what many wilderness partisans past and present would consider blasphemy: We need to rethink the Wilderness Act. We need to toss out the “hands-off” philosophy that has guided our stewardship for 50 years. We must replace it with a more nuanced, flexible approach – including a willingness to put our hands on America’s wildest places more, not less, if we’re going to help them to adapt and thrive in the diminished future we’ve thrust upon them.

A great example is Joshua Tree National Park in Southern California, most of which lies within the 595,000-acre Joshua Tree Wilderness. Up to 90 percent of the park’s namesake trees could disappear by century’s end, according to models that factor in expected warming. Should we let that happen as nature’s atonement for our mistake? Or should park managers instead intervene in some way – relocating trees to higher elevations to promote their survival, for instance, or finding or creating a hybrid species that can withstand the hotter temperatures and combating exotic grasses that increase the threat of fires?

Such questions didn’t exist in 1964 when President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Wilderness Act. Then, the nemesis of wilderness was America’s unchecked appetite – for land, roads, mines, timber – that gnawed away even at the boundaries of government-sanctioned “primitive areas.” Wilderness advocates craved permanence, in the form of legislation that took decision making away from capricious bureaucrats and political appointees.

Read the whole story