

Remarks by Sierra Club President David Scott on October 17, 2014, at the National Wilderness Conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Celebrating the 50th Anniversary of the Wilderness Act

When you tell people you're from in Columbus, Ohio, different things come to mind. Long-suffering college football fans. A November media invasion every four years in a perennial swing state. One word that doesn't come to mind is "wilderness." And I'd be the first to admit that growing up in the East creates a different perspective. A few years back, I took part in a week-long Sierra Club backpacking trip at Lake Superior's Isle Royale National Park, a 43-mile-long island that is almost entirely protected as wilderness, except for the eastern tip. On the fifth or sixth day, I stopped part of the group in mid-hike and took out my camera. Our hike leader, a Himalaya expeditions veteran, came back to see what I'd stopped for. A moose? One of the wolves that Isle Royale is best known for? When she saw the snowshoe hare I'd paused to take a few pictures of, I heard her mutter dismissively, "We don't stop for bunnies." Gently admonished, I kept my eyes trained for wolves or moose.

Ohio jokes aside, no wilderness lover should dismiss the states east of the Mississippi. I say that in part because the Eastern half of the country has larger and more and spectacular wilderness areas than some might imagine. Isle Royale itself is a backpacker's paradise, and I could cite many others, including Minnesota's Boundary Waters, North Carolina's Nantahala Wilderness, Florida's imperiled but unique Everglades, or other areas that deserve more protection than they have, such as Maine's North Woods. The eastern US also matters because so many important public lands champions have hailed from east of the Mississippi, including former congressmen John Seiberling and Ralph Regula of my own home state.

But what I want to talk about today is the Wilderness Act, about where we've been, and about crucial new directions we need to go.

To appreciate the significance of the Wilderness Act, one has to think back to 1964 and understand what the laws were at that time and how federal public

lands were being managed.

In the early 1960s, not only was there no Wilderness Act, there was no Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, no Endangered Species Act, no National Environmental Policy Act, no Clean Air Act, and no Clean Water Act. There were no requirements for public notice or public hearings and no environmental law firms bringing citizen suits to protect the environment. We had in many respects a continuation of the Wild West buffalo hunter mentality -- exploitation of what were still perceived as limitless resources, and the taming of all things wild in the name of progress and profit.

In 1964, the post-World War II housing boom was still going strong. With no regard for sustainability, our national forests were being clear-cut for lumber. Timber companies got huge taxpayer subsidies for logging projects, subsidies so large that many timber sales actually cost the taxpayers money. Large portions of our public lands were literally in disposal status, managed primarily to promote such uses as mining and livestock grazing with no regard to environmental impacts.

Not even the national parks were safe. In the early 1960s, plans were being drawn up to usher in a flurry of major development in the parks, and to encourage more tourism by building more roads, more hotels, and other commercial attractions. Throughout the arid West, the parks were also under assault by water developers and the Bureau of Reclamation. The Sierra Club, which had cut its teeth fighting the damming of Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite, had engaged in national campaigns to block dams in Dinosaur National Monument and the Grand Canyon.

Onto that scene came a group of visionaries, citizens who were intent on changing the status quo and establishing a system of permanently protected wild areas on our public lands -- areas where there would be no logging, no mining, no roads, no airports, no dams, no stores, no private homes, and no hotels. These lands were to be kept "untrammelled" and administered in order to maintain "outstanding opportunities for solitude" where "man would be a visitor who did not remain." In a nation with a tradition of Manifest Destiny, with a history of subjugating the natural landscape and its original inhabitant and converting much of a continent to private ownership and use, this proposal must have struck many as radical.

Of course, the wilderness visionaries' idea actually wasn't radical at all – or even that novel. In the early 1800s, Henry David Thoreau and his colleagues were repeating the mantra “in wildness is the preservation of the world.” In 1864, the world's first wilderness park was established when President Lincoln granted to the state of California the Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias as a reservation to be “held inalienable for all time.”

In 1872, that grant was followed by the establishment of Yellowstone National Park, thus launching what has been called “America's best idea” – the national park system. And in 1885, the New York State Legislature established the Adirondack Preserve as an area that “shall be forever kept as wild forest lands.”

Building on those efforts, in 1892 John Muir and a band of prominent men and women in the Bay Area founded the Sierra Club. 2014 marks the 122nd year that the Sierra Club has been working to protect our wilderness heritage. That work started with struggles to protect such iconic California landscapes as Yosemite and what are now Kings Canyon and Sequoia National Parks, but it quickly spread into a worldwide wilderness movement.

John Muir would write in his unpublished journals, “In God's wildness lies the hope of the world – the great fresh unblighted, unredeemed wilderness.” And throughout the 20th century, those inspired by Thoreau and Muir carried on the battle to protect wild places from destruction. In every decade new national parks, wildlife refuges and other preserves were established.

And in spite of its utilitarian views regarding resource exploitation the Forest Service took a few modest steps of its own, such as administratively setting aside the first official wilderness area --the Gila Wilderness -- in New Mexico in 1924. The man who prodded the agency to take this step was a young forest ranger named Aldo Leopold, who wrote that “wilderness is premised on the assumption that the rocks and rills and templed hills of this America are something more than economic material...[that] wilderness is the very stuff America is made of.” That 1924 Forest Service action was followed by other administrative wilderness designations in the national forests, but none enjoyed permanent protection. It would be 40 long years after that first official federal wilderness that federal lands would receive the statutory permanent full protection of law under the

Wilderness Act.

The case for wilderness was most eloquently put forward by Wallace Stegner, a creative writing professor, award-winning novelist, and former member of the Sierra Club's board of directors. In 1960, Stegner wrote what has been since called "The Wilderness Letter". I will share just a few passages from this gifted advocate and writer, but I encourage you to seek out the entire text this anniversary year as a source of inspiration.

The following is from Stegner's letter:

"What I want to speak for is not so much the wilderness uses (such as recreation), valuable as those are, but the wilderness idea, which is a resource in itself. Being an intangible and spiritual resource, it will seem mystical to the practical-minded --but then anything that cannot be moved by a bulldozer is likely to seem mystical to them. I want to speak for the wilderness idea as something that has helped form our character and that has certainly shaped our history as a people. It has no more to do with recreation than churches have to do with recreation, or than the strenuousness and optimism and expansiveness of what the historians call the "American Dream" have to do with recreation...

"Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed; if we permit the last virgin forests to be turned into comic books and plastic cigarette cases; if we drive the few remaining members of the wild species into zoos or to extinction; if we pollute the last clear air and dirty the last clean streams and push our paved roads through the last of the silence, so that never again will Americans be free in their own country from the noise, the exhausts, the stinks of human and automotive waste. And so that never again can we have the chance to see ourselves single, separate, vertical and individual in the world, part of the environment of trees and rocks and soil, brother to the other animals, part of the natural world and competent to belong in it...

"One means of sanity is to retain a hold on the natural world, to remain, insofar as we can, good animals. Americans still have that chance, more than many peoples; for while we were demonstrating ourselves the most

efficient and ruthless environment-busters in history, and slashing and burning and cutting our way through a wilderness continent, the wilderness was working on us. It remains in us as surely as Indian names remain on the land. If the abstract dream of human liberty and human dignity became, in America, something more than an abstract dream, mark it down at least partially to the fact that we were in subdued ways subdued by what we conquered...

“We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope.”

Today, the idea of protecting wilderness by law may seem like a no-brainer, but the Wilderness Act was no easy sell to a Congress beholden to miners, grazers and loggers. It took nearly 17 years of blood, sweat and tears to ultimately see the Wilderness Act signed into law. The campaign was spearheaded by The Wilderness Society Executive Secretary Howard Zahniser and Sierra Club Executive Director David Brower. Their idea was ultimately embraced by President Kennedy and his Interior Secretary, Stewart Udall, and the Wilderness Act was finally signed into law by President Johnson in 1964.

But passage of the Wilderness Act did not instantly protect all the threatened and deserving candidate wilderness areas. Those original wilderness areas established when the act was passed were mostly high mountain areas in the western national forests -- areas with few known conflicts with logging and mining. Moreover, the price of passing the law included a provision to allow miners and energy developers to continue to stake mineral claims and lease energy resources in wilderness areas for an additional 19 years, up until 1983, just in case the Congress might have locked up any valuable mineral resources by accident.

The original wilderness areas established in 1964 covered 9.1 million acres of western high peaks. Today, the National Wilderness Preservation System protects a total area larger than the state of California, with over 110 million acres in 757 wilderness areas stretching from the Brooks Range in northern Alaska to islands off of Cape Cod, from the deserts of the Southwest and the volcanoes of Hawaii to the cloud forests of Puerto Rico.

Even my home state of Ohio has a wilderness area, Lake Erie's 81-acre West Sister Island, designated as a national wildlife refuge in 1937 by President Franklin D Roosevelt in order to protect the Great Lakes' largest nesting colony of wading birds. In an especially ironic example of the concept of multiple use, the island was used for artillery practice by the Army during World War II, but it remains an important wildlife refuge, and the island was recognized in 2000 as part of a globally [important bird area](#), Lake Erie's Pelee Archipelago.

What is remarkable, and well worth our celebrating this year, is that not only West Sister Island, but every one of these 757 wilderness areas was championed by citizen activists who loved their particular prized piece of the earth, and were determined that it would not be exploited and destroyed for private profit. These passionate citizens and wilderness champions waged campaigns that sometimes took decades of hard work, heartache, and personal expense to win. Their selflessness and sacrifice have given us all an enduring wilderness legacy for present and future generations. Most of their names will never be known to us – many of them are here in this room --- but thanks to the permanent protection guaranteed under the Wilderness Act, the gift they gave us will last an eternity.

But what does the next 50 years hold for the wilderness system, and how permanent is that protection we fought so hard to win?

I want to turn to some of the challenges for all of us wilderness advocates, challenges for the country and for the wilderness system itself. How we rise to these challenges will determine not only the fate of our wilderness, but literally the fate of humankind as well.

Climate Disruption and Wilderness

The promise in The Wilderness Act was that once we established a wilderness area, it would be protected intact for present and future generations in its present condition, and that the wildlife and native plants dependent on that wilderness would have a safe haven.

Tragically, human-caused climate change is eroding that promise. As global warming intensifies, seas rise and become more acidic, snowpack disappears,

temperatures soar, the wildfire season lengthens and severe storms increase. These unnatural climatic changes are not only threatening urban areas and farmlands, but also putting the very foundation of our wilderness system at risk.

Scientists project that Joshua Tree National Park Wilderness may no longer be able to grow Joshua trees. We could lose up to 90 percent of our native amphibians and native trout and salmon. Alpine ecosystems in the Sierra Nevada are projected to lose 90 percent of their snowpack, and tree line is projected to move upward, reducing the habitat for alpine species such as pikas and alpine chipmunks. By the middle of this century, there may be no glaciers left in Glacier National Park.

Early wilderness advocate Robert Marshall wrote in 1937: "Wilderness is melting away like some last snow bank on some south facing mountainside during a hot afternoon in June..." Marshall was referring to the loss of wilderness due to logging, mining, and roadbuilding, but his observation proved to be prophetic, as we now have wilderness literally "melting away" due to global warming impacts on our wildlands. In fact, no wilderness area is safe from climate change, and some of the most threatened are the most remote, such as in the arctic.

In order to address this, the first line of defense must be to reverse the alarming rise in greenhouse gas emissions and to bring atmospheric concentrations back to a safer level. No amount of irrigation of plants and translocation of species will head off the projected mass extinction that is likely to occur if we allow global emissions to continue to climb as they have been. Even with greenhouse gas concentrations of 400 parts per million, we are already witnessing climate-change-induced extinctions, and if we don't act soon, we will bring on a mass extinction similar to the time when dinosaurs and their ecosystems were wiped off the face of the earth.

A world with a 2 degree Celsius increase will experience significant loss of species and wilderness values, but much can still be saved. If the world is forced to cope with a 4 degree Celsius increase, no amount of management and stewardship will head off disaster. It will be climate chaos and catastrophe. Adaptation efforts will be overtaken by mass extinction. The World Bank tried to model a 4 degree Celsius increase and realized that they had no idea what would happen, bluntly warning that there's "no certainty that adaptation to a 4 degree Celsius world is

possible."

This is one major reason why an organization like the Sierra Club, which has spent over 100 years defending wilderness, is now so dedicated to addressing climate disruption. We have not forgotten our roots or abandoned the wilderness cause – instead we realize that the most important thing we can do to defend wilderness, nature, and humanity is to address climate change.

That said, there are still very important land use policy decisions that can protect wilderness and wildlife from climate change if we can manage to hold warming to 2 degrees Celsius or less. Establishing big, connected climate refugia with wilderness as the core is one of the best adaptation strategies. We need large, landscape-level protection plans that spread across public and private lands. As the planet warms, species need to shift to more hospitable habitats, which often means migrating up in elevation or toward the poles to find acceptable climatic conditions. If there is a protected corridor to make that migration possible, the species can survive. If a species is isolated in a small island of wilderness with no chance to migrate, it will most likely perish.

We also need to reduce non-climate stressors, which means stepping up our efforts to restore damaged lands and curtail pollution, water diversions, logging, mining, energy development, invasive species and harmful impacts of off-road vehicles.

A now famous Grinnell resurvey of Yosemite, conducted by the University of California, offers grounds for hope. When researchers went back 100 years later looking to see where various park mammals were living after a century of climate change, they found that the animals' ranges had changed dramatically, but because there were connected pathways to allow migration, none of the species were lost. For example, researchers found that the pinyon mouse -- formerly a resident of pinyon-juniper-sagebrush in east slope foothills at 8,000 feet -- had moved up to subalpine whitebark pine forests at 10,200 feet, but it still was thriving. But what will another 2 degrees of warming bring – what happens when there is no more room to move up the mountain? Connectivity is essential, but it can only get you so far. If we don't cap and reduce carbon emissions it will be game over for all too many wilderness-dependent species.

We will still have a wilderness system, but we may find that pikas, wolverines, salmon, and millions of other species were not able to survive in a climate-changed world. And that those species that enriched our lives perished on our watch because of our failure to act.

We must re-envision the wilderness system for present and future dangers posed by climate disruption. Just as surely, we must re-envision wilderness protection in a way that acknowledges egregious wrongs from the past, wrongs that remain to this day. Indigenous peoples populated North America's wilderness for thousands of years before they were systematically removed, infected, overrun and killed. We have a moral obligation to them and their progeny, and we must fulfill it.

Only after the continent's wild places were cleared of the original inhabitants did conservationists come onto the scene and wax poetic about wilderness areas as pristine lands where "man is but a visitor and does not remain." In some cases, lands that were reserved for tribes were later taken away and made into parks or national forests, and conservationists were sometimes accomplices to those takings. For too much of our history, the white environmental movement has failed to acknowledge its complicity in the displacement of indigenous people, and in the disregard of their rights regarding wild areas and public lands.

The brutal history of genocide and displacement in no way diminishes the need to protect wilderness, but we have an obligation to try to right wrongs where we can. Here are a few examples of how the Sierra Club believes we must respect and partner with indigenous people regarding wilderness protection.

- Where treaties and legislation reserve special rights to native people, we need to help find ways to honor those rights while also continuing to protect the wilderness. For example, natives in Alaska are guaranteed subsistence hunting and fishing rights and access in all parks and wilderness areas.
- Where indigenous people have traditionally used lands and waters for religious and spiritual activities, we need to protect those sites and accommodate those traditional uses – even in parks and wilderness areas.
- As we export the concept of parks and wilderness areas to countries where indigenous people still inhabit wild areas, we need to promote a concept of

wilderness and parks that accommodate and benefit indigenous people, instead of seeking to displace them.

- Park interpretation efforts should accurately convey the history and present status of native people and the land, even when that history reflects badly on the way our government and society acted toward the native people. Indigenous people should be sought out to provide their own interpretation of their culture and their relationship with the parks and wilderness areas. Because of their special and unique relationship to the land, who better than indigenous people to show us how best to protect nature?
- Where tribes are interested in co-management of parks and wilderness areas where they have historic and religious ties, these options should be pursued.
- When planning and carrying out our land and water protection campaigns, we must reach out to indigenous people, listen to their concerns and perspectives, and build a trusting partnership with them whenever possible.

In addition, we must also recognize and act on our obligation to make the experience of nature and wild places more broadly available to all.

Statutory federal wilderness is usually large, wild, remote, and hard to get to, located in places “where the sights and sounds of civilization are substantially unnoticeable, with outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive unconfined recreation.”

Protecting big, remote wilderness areas and keeping them wild and remote still remains an important goal that I hope we will always pursue – and pursue with zeal. But in addition to protecting the wild backcountry,” we need to balance that by also protecting the “front country”, or what we call “nearby nature.”

To share America’s wild heritage with all, we need wild places where a family can access the area by public transit and have a picnic or take an hour-long stroll, instead of only providing areas that are accessible by private car, hundreds of miles away, in places where a multiday backpacking trip is the primary or only way to experience the area. Nearby nature wild areas might have more amenities such as toilets, trash and recycling barrels, picnic tables, accommodations for the

disabled, multilingual interpretive signs, or guides and programs to better accommodate day users and help protect the resource from overuse.

The San Francisco Bay Area's Golden Gate National Recreation Area, which the Sierra Club and past club president Dr. Edgar Wayburn fought so hard to protect, serves a model for a nearby nature national park. Dr. Wayburn received a Presidential Medal of Freedom recognizing his role in protecting Alaska wilderness.

Just last week, President Obama's recent designation of the San Gabriel Mountains National Monument marked an important step in making large-scale natural areas accessible to diverse communities of citizens – protected nature and recreation in the where they live.

The Sierra Club strongly supports the establishment of a 350,000 acre national monument to protect the Lake Berryessa-Snow Mountain wild land complex. The Berryessa-Snow Mountain region of northern California is one of the most biologically diverse regions of the state, but also one of the least known.

Wilderness and national parks have been criticized as a set of protected areas that are visited primarily by affluent white people. While parks and wilderness areas are open to all, it is true that remote wilderness areas today are predominantly used by white recreationists.

But love of nature is shared by people of all cultures and all income levels. Polls have shown that Latinos, for example, are very supportive of nature protection and action to prevent climate change. All too often, there are barriers to urban low income and people of color experiencing nature and wilderness. The Sierra Club and all wilderness advocates need to join with our natural allies to remove these barriers and form a powerful partnership to protect wilderness and wild places for everyone. This will not only provide a healthy and renewing nature experience for all, but also help broaden the social movement of those demanding more protection for wild places and the environment in general.

The Sierra Club is doing this in a number of ways:

- We have an Inner City Outings Program – at no cost to participants -- to introduce low income inner city kids to the wonders of nature. This volunteer-led program operates in over 50 locations and takes over 13,000 kids out on hikes, overnights, and river trips every year.
- Sierra Club Chapters offer over 12,000 free local outings that are open to all as a way to make nature more accessible. Each year, over 200,000 participants enjoy these local outings. We also run over 250 multi-day volunteer led national outings for a modest charge that serve over 3,000 participants annually.
- The Sierra Club also runs a Military Families and Veterans Initiative in the Outdoors Program, a program that helps over 1,500 veterans and their families experience nature each year, and helps heal the mental and physical wounds of war and military service.
- The Club's Our Wild America campaign deploys Spanish-speaking organizers and leaders in urban areas with large Latino populations, and promotes wildland protection and wildland experiences from Los Angeles to Puerto Rico.

Finally, we have an obligation to rededicate ourselves to the noble cause of the visionaries who fought and protected so much.

The battle to protect wilderness is far from over. Over the years, we have helped secure protection for over 250 million acres of parks, wilderness areas, wild and scenic rivers, national monuments and other preserves, but much more needs to be done. This generation and the next generation need to rededicate themselves to the wilderness cause and protect the next 100 million acres before it is lost forever to development.

The 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act is a time to celebrate, but is also a time to rededicate ourselves to the cause. As climate change, fossil fuel extraction, logging, mining, off-road vehicle abuse and population growth put increasing pressure on our remaining unprotected wild spaces, we need a renewed and expanded movement to carry on the fight.

This campaign is already underway. In addition to the nearby nature examples I cited, we should protect such large landscapes such as the Greater Canyonlands

and the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge coastal plain, as well as places of national significance close to urban areas.

As Sierra Club founder John Muir told us, “The battle we have fought, and are still fighting ...is a part of the eternal conflict between right and wrong, and we cannot expect to see the end of it. ... So we must count on watching and striving ...and we should always be glad to find anything so surely good and noble to strive for.”

In this golden anniversary year of the Wilderness Act, my hope is that we all leave this celebration not only proud of what has been accomplished, but rejuvenated and rededicated to meet the enormous challenges of the future. I hope we leave this celebration prepared to not only protect more wild places on a map – important as that is -- but to also counter the enormous challenge of climate disruption, to make our environmental movement and our society more broad, more just and more inclusive, and to leave for future generations the beautiful, wild and livable planet that is their birthright.

Thank you.