

OPINIONS: NATIONAL WILDERNESS ACT

Happy 50th Birthday, National Wilderness Act

BY JOSH WEBER

The autumn of 2014 marks the celebration of 50 years of the Wilderness Act. This successful landmark decision has kept in perpetuity 110 million acres of pristine, intact wilderness across the United States, where, as stated in the legislation, “the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man...” and where “undeveloped Federal land retains its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvement or human habitation.”

The Applegate watershed has been blessed with our own unique wilderness area, the 20,796-acre Red Buttes Wilderness, and many other surrounding unprotected roadless areas.

These primitive lands have the potential to provide for whatever the individual who braves the wild may seek—they inspire the artist and form the temples for quenching spiritual thirst. They provide recreation and physical outlet for hikers, equestrians, and mountain climbers. In my opinion, wilderness provides an ethical base for humans to emulate if we slow ourselves to notice the pace of nature, where all creatures live in harmonious balance as part of a greater whole.

There was a remarkable transition in America, over a couple hundred years, from a burgeoning colony viewing wilderness as a dark and sinister land of serpents needing to be tamed, to an era, in the first decades of the 20th century, when wilderness was seen as a place of renewal and inspiration that urgently needed protection. The outspoken views of heroic historical leaders helped form the path to the preservation of these lands.

John Muir (1838-1914) is our nation’s foremost mountain man; he brought the issue of preservation to the forefront of the minds of his fellow countrymen following rapid expansion after the Civil War. He was a co-founder of the Sierra Club, one of the most influential environmental groups lobbying on behalf of wilderness. His legacy carries on through his numerous books, often-replicated quotes, and the spectacular 215-mile trail that bears his

name through the Sierra Nevada range.

Aldo Leopold (1887-1948) is the forefather of the wildlife conservation movement and an early spokesman of wilderness preservation shortly after the US Forest Service’s founding. He introduced a new concept, his “land ethic,” which “enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land...and affirms their right to continued existence and, at least in spots, their continued existence in a natural state.” Throughout his life, he ceaselessly wrote and spoke on this philosophy and many others as laid out in his landmark book, *A Sand County Almanac*.

Bob Marshall (1901-1939) was a passionate, engaged conservationist, a voracious explorer of high country, and a driving force behind the vision that resulted in the Wilderness Act. He wrote a policy-changing book on the need for reform of national forest management and penned hundreds of papers promoting wilderness, civil rights, and education. His efforts towards preservation resulted, posthumously, in the 1964 act’s formation, which included 1,009,356 acres of northern Montana wilderness, named after this legendary character.

The creation of the law in Congress took nine years, 65 rewrites, and 18 public hearings, but its journey began long before that and continues today. With passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964, Americans chartered a course to preserve some of our country’s last remaining wild places. Fifty years later, the legacy carries on. In our beautiful Oregon alone, there are 47 wilderness areas to visit. Local organizations contribute time and labor to keep trails accessible, while ceaselessly advocating on behalf of wild lands.

To get involved, contact any of these groups: Williams Community Forest Project (www.williamscommunityforestproject.org), the Applegate Trails Association (www.applegatetrails.org), or the Siskiyou Mountain Club (www.siskiyoumountainclub.org).

Josh Weber•greenpathlandscape@gmail.com

Celebrating 50 years of wilderness

BY LUKE RUEDIGER

September 3, 2014, marks the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act. Lyndon B. Johnson signed this landmark conservation bill into law in 1964, creating the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS). Initially the NWPS set aside 9.1 million acres of wilderness; however, with the support of the American public, Congress has added over 100 million acres over the past 50 years.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 states, “In order to assure 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, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness. For this purpose there is hereby established a National Wilderness Preservation System to be composed of federally owned areas designated by Congress as ‘wilderness areas,’ and these shall be administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use as wilderness, and so as to provide for the protection of these areas, the preservation of their wilderness character, and for the gathering and dissemination of information regarding their use and enjoyment as wilderness.”

Howard Zahniser, former executive director of the Wilderness Society, drafted the bill in 1956 with the intention of protecting the nation’s last remaining wildlands. Sadly, Zahniser died just months before it was signed into law. Although he never got to see his amazing and lasting legacy, the American people will benefit for generations to come.

The NWPS today includes more than 750 wilderness areas, 109,511,966 acres of protected wilderness, and a wilderness area in all but six US states. Wilderness areas represent the nation’s highest form of land protection, allowing for natural processes

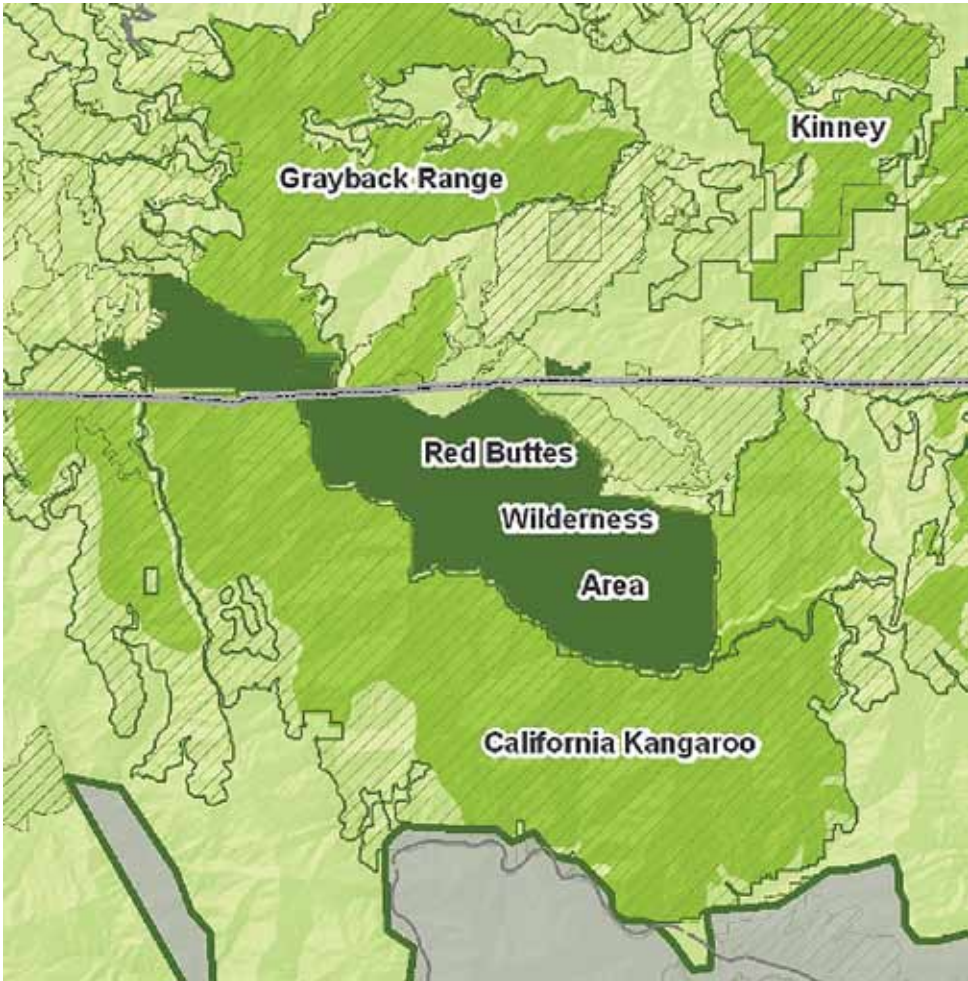
to occur while prohibiting mechanization and other damaging human activities.

Our own Red Buttes Wilderness, located at the headwaters of the Applegate River, was designated wilderness in 1984. Unfortunately, because of politics and pressure from extractive industries at the time, much of the roadless, wild terrain surrounding the Red Buttes was left out of the officially designated wilderness. The Red Buttes Wilderness is on the small side, encompassing only 20,234 acres. Extending from the forested flank of the Middle Fork of the Applegate River and south to the Siskiyou Crest, the wilderness encompasses the Butte Fork drainage, the headwaters of Carberry Creek’s Steve Fork, and the dark forests of the Right Hand Fork of Sucker Creek. Richly endowed with ancient and diverse forests, the region is defined by the rugged summits of the Siskiyou Crest, including the area’s spectacular namesake, Red Butte.

Large sections of adjacent wilderness were excluded from the Red Buttes in 1984, including miles of ridgeline and large areas of ancient, uncut forest. At the time of wilderness designation, the entire Grayback Range—containing vast tracts of productive forest—was left unprotected and was later impacted by US Forest Service timber sales such as China Left and Sugarloaf. This area, known as the Oregon portion of the Kangaroo Roadless Area, or the Grayback Range, exists today as a 31,778-acre island of forest, meadow, high peak, and wild mountain stream. Also left unprotected were large portions—some 60,000 acres—of the Kangaroo Roadless Area in California, dropping to the banks of the Klamath River.

In this era of seven billion people and climate change, it is more imperative than ever to protect native ecosystems. In celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, it is time to push for new additions to the Red Buttes Wilderness and further protect the roadless wildlands of the Applegate River watershed.

Luke Ruediger
siskiyoucrest@gmail.com



Map, left, shows the Red Buttes Wilderness Area in dark green. The medium green areas are “inventoried roadless areas,” and the light green designates US Forest Service land. **Photo above** is Echo Lake. Located at the top of the Horse Camp trail, the lake was left out of the Red Buttes Wilderness and remains unprotected. Photo and map provided by Luke Ruediger.