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Their View: Organs don't fit original concept of Wilderness

By Richard C. Johnson

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I am a strong believer in the concept of pure wilderness! The present trend to make more unreasonable additions to the Wilderness system concerns me. Congress seems to have gone along with this trend. As supervisor of the Gila National Forest, I was involved in the administration of wilderness prior to the Wilderness Act of 1964, and then after the act was signed into law. I am also concerned about most of the changes made to the Wilderness Act.

One of Aldo Leopold's favorite hunting areas was the Middle Fork of the Gila. He normally entered it from the north, over the ridge running west from Black Mountain. From this vantage point, the circular Gila River watersheds make the area look like a tremendous bowl. All forms of transportation, except foot or horseback, terminated at some point outside the bowl. I can imagine Leopold thinking how wonderful it would be if the area from the Black Range on the east, to the Mogollons on the west, to Tadpole Ridge and the Pinos Altos Range on the south would stay just like our forefathers found it! Sometime later Leopold wrote, or helped write, the Forest Service Regulation establishing Wilderness Areas. The Gila was made the first Wilderness Area in the United States and the world, in 1924.

Sometime in the late 1920's, the New Mexico Game Department got permission for a road from Beaverhead to the Mimbres. It separated the Black Range from the Gila. Another regulation was written establishing Primitive Areas to cover areas of less acreage than required for Wilderness. The area east

of the road became the Black Range Primitive Area. Several other areas around the Gila were changed, for various reasons, and were classified as Gila Primitive Areas.

Sen. Clinton P. Anderson conducted a number of hearings during the 1962 and 1963 period on the proposed Wilderness Act. At one of these hearings a question was asked about how many areas or acres "they" wanted. The reply was essentially, "only the areas presently classified as Wilderness or Primitive, and maybe a few more areas found suitable for such classification." That response satisfied the attendees opposed to the act. That assurance, together with a compromise to permit livestock grazing, allowed the passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964.

When the act was passed, the areas previously classified as Wilderness automatically became Wilderness under the law. Areas classified as Primitive were required to be studied within 10 years to determine if they met Wilderness qualifications set by law. We did the Gila Primitive Areas first and the Black Range second.

When the North Star Mesa road was built, the boundary between the two areas was described as one-half mile each side of the road. This boundary was difficult to determine from the winding road. I recommended new boundaries following ridges along the road, which could be described in the legislative act and recognized on the ground. A ridge top boundary provided a feeling of going "into another era" as you crossed it. Hearings were held by 1970, and all of my additions and the old half mile boundaries were approved. I also proposed the Aldo Leopold name for the Black Range, and it was accepted.

I have learned of the many amendments to and weakening of the Wilderness Act since. I wish

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somebody would take a closer look at them and restore the primitive purity concept back into law. The promises made to the Americans who supported wilderness on the word of the U.S. government have been broken.

Over the years I have acquired a fondness for the Organs as a backdrop for Las Cruces. I agree they should be fully protected as such, but I don't agree as a designated Wilderness! There is no place on the rugged mountain range that you can get out of sight of a growing city on the west or the activities and facilities of the missile and flight complex on the east. The requirement of solitude that is essential to Wilderness no longer exists in the Organs.

I am not familiar with the other points in the current Wilderness proposal, but from what I have read, I question if any of them meet the purity standards of the act. The areas proposed along the border of Mexico would deny the Border Patrol vehicle access. This would curtail their efforts of stopping illegal aliens from entering the United States.

The last time I was in the Gila Wilderness was in 1989. When supervisor, I could spend a week or 10 days there and rarely see another person. In 1989, our small group was rarely out of sight of pack strings or individuals. There was no longer the solitude Leopold considered an essential element of wilderness.

I firmly believe that selfish individuals and organizations have generally convinced an uninformed public that Wilderness designation is a "panacea for all ills!" It is not such a panacea! I know this, having provided administrative leadership to the Gila and Aldo Leopold Wilderness Areas. It appears to me that these organizations are making a fairly successful land grab to eliminate all uses,

except maybe recreation, from the public lands in this country. What a travesty this would be!

My generation successfully achieved the privilege of setting aside most of existing true wilderness places. These places established for future generations a gap between our country as it once existed, and present day more industrialized civilization. Unfortunately, the gap has been narrowed, and the amendments to the Wilderness Act have weakened the bridge which the act provided between the two segments. At my age, 94, I probably won't see the gap closed completely and the collapse of the bridge. I sincerely hope it never happens.

If it becomes necessary to protect lands in a new age, a proper designation should be made, but not at the expense of the existing Wilderness Areas!

Richard C. Johnson is a former forest supervisor on the Gila National Forest and now lives in Las Cruces.

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