What – Exactly – is Wilderness?

by Glenda Price

Wilderness. The word rolls beautifully off the tongue and into tired ears. It speaks to modern humans' longing to escape the cacophony of their daily lives and to find refuge in "nature."

They are certain their angst will be totally alleviated by a visit to the "wilderness" -- a utopia where humanity does not disrupt Mother Nature's harmony and spiritual renewal is assured.

So what – exactly – is Wilderness? According to the Wilderness Act of 1964, wilderness is recognized as "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

The act further says the wilderness area will have no permanent improvements or human habitation and it will be protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions affected primarily by the forces of nature with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable; has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; has at least 5,000 acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic or historical value.[1]

Nine million acres were included in the National Wilderness Preservation System when the Wilderness Act was adopted. Each year, Congress is asked to designate more land, and now more than 106 million acres are officially designated as wilderness.[2]

The push for more and more wilderness is driven by environmental extremists who believe "untouched wilderness" is in some way superior to the works of man. More than that, in its extreme form it assumes man to be an excrescence on the face of the earth.[3]

Even before passage of the Wilderness Act, federal land management policy was to extinguish wildfires as soon as they began (or as soon as possible) and to prohibit selective timbering. The result after at least 75 years: Forests have become unnaturally dense and choked with undergrowth and fallen trees. Now, because of all that stored fuel, when forests do catch on fire they often turn into unstoppable infernos that wipe out entire forest stands.[4]

Dr. John Fowler, a highly respected scientist and professor at New Mexico State University, explains "nature's management" of wilderness. There are several seral stages of "natural" wilderness progression. After a devastating fire which destroys every living thing in the area, it's a black nothingness for a long while because even the soil is sterilized by the intense heat.

The first plants to grow back are weeds and other annuals. Oak brush and other low-growing perennials grow next. Aspens are the first trees to gain a foothold, followed by spruce and fir. Finally, other perennials grow along with insects, etc., to produce a mosaic of life. At that stage grasses, forbs and other plant life that nourishes wildlife flourish. Later, as the forest reaches what is called its climax, the canopy closes, sunshine cannot reach the floor and the wildlife retreats to the perimeter. At that point a fire will be devastating, and the resource will be back at its black, dead beginning once again. This natural process can take up to 400 years.

"I'd rather not wait," Fowler says, and adds, "If we don't manage the living resource, Mother Nature will manage it for us. It's then called a catastrophic event."[5]

Dr. Fowler is coordinator of the Range Improvement Task Force, housed at New Mexico State University, which is a group of scientists with impeccable credentials who conduct peer-reviewed scientific studies.

In June of 2000, Fowler presented the results of a scientific study of grazing trends in New Mexico's Gila National Forest .

The Gila National Forest was set aside in 1924 at the urging of Aldo Leopold. In 1964, 558,014 acres of its 3.3 million acre total became the Gila Wilderness.

The Range Improvement Task Force studied grazing trends in the Gila from 1906 through 1998. The study concluded that precipitation and cattle prices seemed to have no relationship to the drastic lowering of livestock stocking rates (86.7 percent) so other factors had to be considered. The only viable answer was that U.S. Forest Service policy was the single greatest factor in the decrease of livestock numbers in the wilderness areas, even though the Wilderness Act states that grazing would continue in the same manner and degree as it did prior to wilderness designation.

His team has just completed a study in New Mexico's Lincoln Forest. Since the 1970s (and particularly after passage of the Endangered Species Act of 1973) multiple use management, especially in the timber sector, has been compromised by an environmental lawsuit on behalf of the Mexican Spotted Owl.

The study found excessive accumulation of biomass that "will enhance the likelihood of catastrophic wildfires. In the worst case scenario, wildfires potentially could destroy forest habitat beyond reasonable recovery."[6]

Dr. Fowler says, "If we are concerned about our resources into perpetuity, what have we learned from 43 years of rest? We have learned that most of the benefits of rest are achieved very quickly. After year five, we start losing those benefits. The middle of the plant finally rots away if it is not grazed. We have many exclosures that prove this. Light to moderate grazing fosters more species richness and diversity."

He also points out that hoofed animals provide soil disturbance so it will hold rainwater, and excrement benefits the soil. "The mosaic includes both flora and fauna -- more microorganisms and small birds. The organic matter on the soil surface allows water to infiltrate and recharge."

He adds, "We need a mosaic of life. We have to use common sense and have a sustainable balance, not a total preservation and lock up. Management includes people. We are an essential component of the landscape, and we're failing to do our job."[7]

University of Nevada and University of Idaho researchers recently released "Livestock Grazing Guidelines for Controlling Noxious Weeds in the Western United States." This research and education information presents, in detail, which animals at what time of the year can be most helpful in eliminating noxious and invasive weeds.[8]

The use of animals (rather than chemical or mechanical means) would be quite sensible in the struggle to rehabilitate our wilderness areas that continue to burn because of non-management or mismanagement.

The Range Improvement Task Force, with cooperators, is currently in the process of demonstrating it is quite possible to have a net increase in perennial herbaceous vegetation cover, stabilize soils, increase species richness and diversity of flora and fauna on and around

oil and gas disturbance areas in an aesthetically pleasing manner. They call it BLEND – Biological Landscape Enhancement in Natural Resource Development.[9]

As we've learned from our study of the seral stages of ecological systems, nature is not static. Change is always underway. A noted anthropologist says, "The period hundreds of millions of years ago called the permo-Triassic Boundary saw a 96 percent extinction of all life forms. This kind of thing we now know happened again and again in the long history of earth; and is a part of the heritage of life. Perhaps God has never read the Environmental Protection Act."[10]

About 29 percent of the United States' land mass is government-owned, mostly in the West but in other states as well. Here is a partial list: Nevada-82 percent, Alaska-68 percent, Utah-64 percent, Idaho-63 percent, California-61 percent, New Mexico-47 percent, Arizona-57 percent. Oregon-60 percent, Texas-4 percent.

Anyone can propose additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System, and each year many proposals are presented to Congress.

Remember Karl Marx's observation: "…the theory of the Communists may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property."[11]

Wilderness designation abolishes private property.

ENDNOTES

[1] Public Law 88-577, 88th Congress, S. 4, September 3, 1964

[2]Henry Lamb, Environmental Conservation Organization, Hollow Rock, Tennessee, Sustainable Development: Transforming America, December 1, 2005

[3]Arthur E. Hippler, Anthropologist, Institute of Social and Economic Research, University of Alaska, July-August 1980 "Resource Review," a newsletter published by the Resource Development Council for Alaska, Inc.

[4]Alison Berry, Research Fellow, Property and Environment Research Center, Bozeman, Montana

[5]John M. Fowler, Ph.D., Range Improvement Task Force Coordinator, Cooperative Extension Service, College of Agriculture and Home Economics, MSC 3169, New Mexico State University, 2000

[6] Ric Frost, Garrett Hyatt, and John Fowler with support from the Joe Skeen Institute of Rangeland Restoration, Montane Meadow and Open Area Encroachment in the Lincoln Forest, Sacramento Grazing Allotment. p.27, 2007

[7] John M. Fowler, Ph.D., interview 2007.

[8] Ibid. Hippler

[9] Biological Landscape Enhancement in Natural Resource Development, Range Improvement Task Force members: Nick Ashcroft, Dr. Terrell "Red" Baker, Dr. Alexander "Sam" Fernald, Dr. Jon Boren, Dr. Andres Cibils, Dr. Dawn Vanleeuwen, Dr. John Fowler. Cooperators: BLM (Farmington), Duke Energy, Sterling Construction, NMSLO, Joe Skeen Institute for Rangeland Restoration (JSIRR), Analyzing the Cumulative Impacts of Federal Land Policy and Management, Linebery Foundation. 2007

[10] Jason C. Davison, Forage and Alternative Crops Specialist, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension
Ed Smith, Natural Resource Specialist, University of Nevada Cooperative Extension
Linda M. Wilson, Invasive Plant Ecologist, Plant, Soil and Entomological Sciences, University of Idaho
Livestock Grazing Guidelines for Controlling Noxious Weeds in the Western United Stated EB 06-05

[11] Karl Marx, The Communist Manifesto 1848.