

# The Philadelphia Inquirer

Monday, September 6, 2004

## Preserving Wilderness

# A wondrous act of man

*Macadam is good, and airplanes are good, and jangling telephones are good, and apartment house dwelling is good — but they are not good enough. They have to be complemented with roadless areas, with places that are far removed from our cities ...*

— U.S. Rep. John Saylor  
(R., Pa.), 1963

**P**erhaps no country has struggled more with wilderness than the United States.

Early settlers fought relentlessly to tame it. Industry determined to dam, drill, log and mine it.

America's wild lands inspired novels and ballads, paintings and photographs.

But as more acres were plowed under and paved over, wise legislators and conservationists foresaw that America's struggle would someday move from seeking to master the wilderness to trying to preserve it.

In the 1950s, an adept Pennsylvanian, Howard Zahniser, hatched a uniquely American idea: What if the United States set aside certain remote lands forever? Different from monuments or national parks, these would be places where man himself would be merely a visitor and not remain. There'd be no roads, no power lines, no sign of habitation. Just wilderness.

Another Pennsylvanian, Rep. John P. Saylor, a conservative Republican, quickly got on board. Then a liberal Democrat from Minnesota, Hubert H.



RANDY MACK BISHOP

### Forty years ago, Congress passed the Wilderness Act. As custodians, we must ensure the preservation of the wilds.

Humphrey. Eight years of debate later, Congress passed the Wilderness Act, preserving 9 million acres in perpetuity.

President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Wilderness Act into law 40 years ago this month. On Sept. 3, 1964, he said: "If future generations are to remember us with gratitude rather than contempt, we must leave them with more than the miracles of technology. We must leave them a glimpse of the world as it was in the beginning, not just after we got through with it."

Most Americans still cling to that value. They know that saving wilderness isn't just about hiking, fishing or

bird-watching. It's also about protection of watersheds, promotion of clean air, and preservation of wildlife habitat, often for rare and endangered species. It's about honoring the cultural and historical memory of early explorers, trappers and pioneers who braved these harsh lands.

The federal Wilderness Act, copied by state and foreign governments, is one of America's environmental success stories.

Every Congress since 1964 has used the Wilderness Act, setting aside a total of 106 million acres so far. Proposals for more than 2.5 million acres are pending this Congress.

Credit goes to both

political parties. The most land was preserved under President Jimmy Carter — 66 million acres, most of it in Alaska. The most laws were passed under President Ronald Reagan — 43, designating 10.6 million acres in 31 states. President Bush signed 526,000 acres into wilderness during the last Congress.

Beyond preserving land, the Wilderness Act furthered participatory democracy. It was one of the first laws to require a federal agency to disclose its planning process and allow the public to attend hearings. Now taken for granted, that kind of public input was rare in the 1960s.

When the Great Swamp Wilderness Area was proposed in North Jersey in 1968, an unprecedented 1,000 people turned out to be heard. Wilderness activism formed a grass-root and legislative base that would lobby for the landmark clean air, water and anti-toxic waste legislation in the 1970s.

Today, wilderness designations often face challenges from off-road recreation interests, as well as industries. Their thinking focuses too much on selfish, short-term gains.

The great naturalist John Muir wrote that trees could survive drought, disease, avalanches, and "a thousand straining, leveling tempests and floods" — but not fools. Only Uncle Sam can save nature from them.

Forty years ago, one generation created a valuable tool to safeguard America's natural wonders for future generations. Today's leaders should use it well.