

Wilderness in the National Parks— *Now More Than Ever*

BY JAY WATSON

Abstract: Kim Crumbo's article describes the wait for departmental or congressional action on wilderness recommendations at Grand Canyon National Park. But the Grand Canyon is not the only place where we are waiting for Godot. Agency wilderness recommendations affecting more than 13 million acres in 40 national parks, monuments, and recreation areas in the lower 48 states have either never been forwarded to the president or acted upon by Congress. Only 4.7 million of 16 million acres found suitable for wilderness in Alaska were recommended for designation.

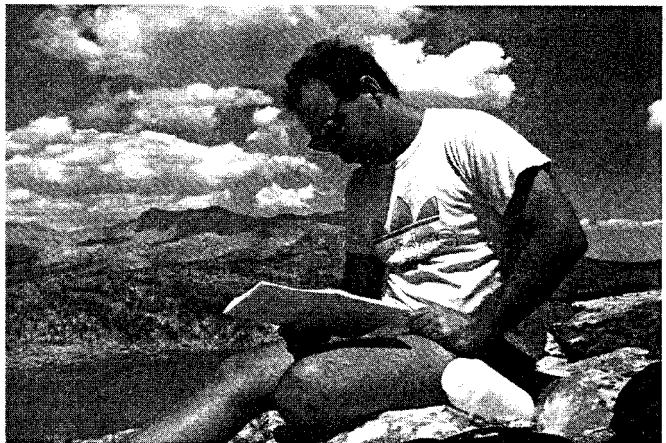
WHILE THE WILDERNESS ACT OF 1961 AROSE largely out of a concern over disappearing roadless areas on the national forests, it also applied to roadless lands within the U.S. Department of Interior National Park Service (NPS) system. Section 3c of the Wilderness Act (P.L. 88-577), provided for wilderness reviews of national park lands following a course similar to that set forth for the national forests. Over a 10-year period, the secretary of the interior was directed to review roadless areas of 5,000 or more contiguous acres, or smaller roadless islands of the then-existing national parks and monuments and report to the president on the suitability of those areas for preservation as wilderness. The department completed those reviews within the 10-year period. The president was then to forward recommendations for wilderness to the House of Representatives and U.S. Senate.

Today, 43 million acres in 44 units of the NPS system are included in the National Wilderness Preservation System—more than one-half of all park lands nationwide. In other words, the NPS is responsible for the management of more wilderness than any other agency. In California, wilderness accounts for 76% of all federal park lands in the state.

At the same time, wilderness in the national park service has been misunderstood. In the agency's own words, "wilderness has suffered from a crisis of identity." Yet, despite this misunderstanding and identity crisis, it is undeniable that wilderness designations in parks have limited development in many parks, and has had a beneficial impact on the long-term stewardship of those parks. There is additional protection realized through wilderness designations in national parks beyond that found in the NPS Organic Act of 1916.

Waiting for **Godot** at 40 National **Park** Units

Much more has yet to be accomplished. While Kim Crumbo continues his wait for Godot at Grand Canyon National Park, we are also waiting at 39 other park units. Agency wilderness recommendations affecting more than 13 million acres in 40 national parks, monuments, and recreation



Article author Jay Watson. (Photo by Kathleen Watson.)

areas in the lower 48 states have either never been forwarded to the president or, in other instances, acted upon by Congress. These units include areas such as Canyonlands, Grand Teton, Great Smoky Mountains, Yellowstone, and Zion National Park, as well as Glen Canyon National Recreation Area.

Even more is at stake in Alaska. Section 13 17 of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 (ANILCA) mandated wilderness study for 19 million acres in national parks in Alaska that were not designated as wilderness when ANILCA was enacted into law in 1980. ANILCA directed that these studies be completed by 1985 and that the president was to forward wilderness proposals to Congress by 1987. The NPS completed the studies on time, finding that 16 million acres in 13 park units were suitable for wilderness. But today, nine years past ANILCA's deadline, the secretary of the interior has yet to forward recommendations to the president for subsequent transmittal to Congress. The delay stems in large part from policies of the Reagan presidential administration. In 1985, the assistant secretary of the Interior for Fish, Wildlife, and Parks ordered the park service to limit its wilderness recommendations for Alaskan parks. As a result, of the 16 million acres already found suitable for wilderness designation, only 4.7 million acres were subsequently recommended.

Parks Need Wilderness to Protect Against Development

In an increasingly commercialized world, designating wilderness within units of the NPS system is more important than ever. External and internal development threats, interest in making national parks "centers of commercial enterprise," and the political climate in Congress with respect to U.S. parks will steadily apply pressure on the NPS and individual park superintendents to develop lands within national parks.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 provides a firm line of defense against development of park lands. Designated wilderness within the NPS system is to be managed at the highest level of protection when these lands are managed under the protective mandates of both the 1964 Wilderness Act and the 1916 Organic Act. It is important to note that while the Organic Act of 1916 gives the NPS the discretion to balance between development and preservation, the Wilderness Act of

1964 strictly limits agency discretion. Some of the more important restrictions include the following:

- No permanent or temporary roads can be built.
- Commercial enterprises are disallowed.
- *With certain specific exceptions, no buildings or structures can be built.
- Aircraft and motorized equipment are prohibited, except for minimal administrative or emergency purposes.

In addition to land and resource protection, there is a second, equally important value of wilderness within the NPS-public education. If wilderness is to survive, efforts to promote public understanding and appreciation for the role of wilderness in the natural world must reach a much broader spectrum of U.S. citizens. Our nation's parks offer terrific opportunities for visitor outreach and education about wilderness. In some places, the park service has embraced this opportunity. For example, the agency has created and staffed a wilderness education center

in Yosemite Valley, at Yosemite National Park, where 90% of the park is designated wilderness.

A Long Wait for **Godot**

Wilderness has indeed been a long-time coming at many units of the NPS system. Where they are lacking, wilderness designations in national parks would strengthen long-term land protection and stewardship. The ultimate question is one of timing. Certainly, the 104th Congress is no fertile ground for designating additional wilderness. But it too will pass, and the day may soon come when it is time to bestow our nation's highest level of protection to deserving areas of wilderness in our national parks. **IJW**

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'You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle. and that is because the power of the world always works in circles, and everything tries to be round The sky is round and I have heard that the Earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours Even the seasons form a great circlin their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves.'

--Black Elk (1863-1950), Oglala Sioux Holy Man