

WILDERNESS STATE OF MIND MUST BE SHARED TO BE UNDERSTOOD

Cody Moran

I remember my first time leaving Wrangell, Alaska, and stepping onto a jet boat. I had been living in Alaska for a few months and was blown away by the natural beauty of my daily backdrop. I was at the beginning of a fellowship with the Society for Wilderness Stewardship (SWS), tasked with writing wilderness baseline analyses for four wilderness areas in the Tongass National Forest. At the time, this work—monitoring positive and negative changes occurring in a wilderness area—was new to me. We measure things like the acreage of invasive plants or the miles of designated trails to collect baseline data to assess trends in the Wilderness over time.

A month into living in Alaska, I had not been to any of these areas, but a short boat ride would change that. The mouth of the Stikine River is just outside Wrangell, but you must first dodge the ever-changing minefield of

mudflats, fallen logs, and seals to reach the wilderness. This area is designated the Stikine-LeConte Wilderness, showcasing features such as one of the fastest free-flowing navigable rivers in North America and a truly

At the heart of Gunnison Gorge National Conservation Area in Colorado is the Gunnison Gorge Wilderness Area. BOB WICK, BLM



breathtaking namesake glacier, the LeConte Glacier. The Stikine-LeConte Wilderness, with its unique landscapes and natural features, was my first introduction to the wild areas I would be monitoring in Alaska.

Leaving the dock that day was the moment I began to realize the importance of wild and rugged intact ecosystems and why it is important for others to recognize that, too. A similar realization led to the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964, giving life to the National Wilderness Preservation System. Congress was responding to the concern that lands that are—to paraphrase the Wilderness Act—natural, untrammled, and offer opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation were disappearing.

Although the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) did not manage wilderness areas until after the passage of the Federal Land Management and Policy Act in 1976, these highly protected lands have become a pillar of BLM's National Conservation Lands. Learning about the system and its growth expanded my perspective as I moved from focusing on a few Alaskan wilderness areas to considering wilderness data across BLM's 263 areas nationwide. BLM boasts a wide array of ecosystems, including a large swath of deserts, river-carved canyons, remote rocky coastlines, and dramatic mountain peaks,

each spectacular. Yet, still, these often-remote areas face the challenge of earning society's full appreciation.

Over the past two years, SWS staff have gathered updated data for over 40 areas and are collecting more data regularly. From visitor use in the Gunnison Gorge in Colorado, or the desert tortoise habitat of the Kingston Range in California, the National Conservation Lands program is ready to protect and conserve the BLM's most intact ecosystems. Congress has added twice as much wilderness acreage to BLM than to the other three land management agencies (US Forest Service, National Park Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service) combined, largely by virtue of the vast lands BLM manages and its extensive system of wilderness study areas. With that, BLM should be able to generate twice as much appreciation from the public for these special places.

Wilderness may be a designation, but it is more than that. It is a feeling. A feeling that can be realized if you visit some of the more than 10 million acres of wilderness managed by the BLM as part of the National Conservation Lands system. I hope I can inspire citizens to—if not explore these areas—at least appreciate them as a reminder of the beauty and grandeur of America's wild places.

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