

An introduction to wilderness



1. What is wilderness?

As defined by Congress in the Wilderness Act of 1964, a wilderness is an area of federal land (*not* including Indian reservations or military installations) 5,000 acres or larger in size (or smaller under some circumstances) and “retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions....” It is further defined as an area which “generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable.”

Therefore, the provisions of the Wilderness Act do not apply to private lands of any kind, or to federal lands that have been substantially disturbed or developed. Most often, wilderness areas are established on lands overseen by four federal agencies: U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Park Service.

2. How is a wilderness area established?

Congress must pass a law designating an area as wilderness. Federal agencies can recommend to Congress that an area be designated as wilderness, but Congress must vote on the recommendation to actually protect the land. Wilderness proposals are often brought to Congress' attention not by federal agencies, but by conservation groups or dedicated individual activists.

3. What is allowed in wilderness?

- Hiking
- Hunting
- Horseback riding
- Native American gathering and other cultural activities
- Skiing
- Snowshoeing
- Rock climbing
- Camping
- Fishing
- Wheelchair use
- Commercial outfitter and guide services.
- Mining on existing mining claims
- Commercial livestock grazing in portions of wilderness areas that were being grazed at the time that they were designated as wilderness.
- Fire suppression, including the use of aircraft, bulldozers, and other heavy equipment if necessary to protect life and/or property.
- The use of fire as a management tool, such as controlled burns.
- Search and rescue efforts, including the use of motorized vehicles if necessary.
- Law enforcement, including the use of motorized vehicles if necessary.
- Access to private property across federal land, even if this requires motorized vehicles.

4. What is not allowed in wilderness?

Wilderness is the most protective type of land designation available under American law. For example, the following activities are prohibited. Please note that most of these activities are not occurring in the areas that are proposed for wilderness protection. If they were, the land might not qualify for wilderness designation in the first place. The hope is that by making them wilderness areas, these activities will never occur there:

- Logging
- Road construction
- Off-road vehicle use, or the use of other motorized vehicles.
- The filing of new mining claims.

- Grazing in areas that were not being grazed at the time they became wilderness
- Mountain bikes
- Oil drilling
- Powerline development

5. What impact does wilderness have on private landowners?

The Wilderness Act only applies to federal land. Private land can only be added to a wilderness if the federal government purchases it from a willing seller. Access to private land across federal land is guaranteed under federal law whether the federal land is a wilderness area or even a national park. Furthermore, there are no restrictions on the use or enjoyment of private lands situated near or surrounded by a federal wilderness.

6. Why designate an area wilderness?

The primary motive for designating an area wilderness is to prevent the federal government from ever deciding to log, mine, build roads, or otherwise develop an exceptionally wild stretch of federal land. Wilderness designation is a guarantee under federal law that the land will remain just as it is today. There are other areas of federal land open to development, while wild places are few and far between.

7. What are the benefits of wilderness?

- Visitors today, and our children tomorrow, will have places to see vestiges of wild California and get away from the hustle and bustle of daily life.
- Old-growth forests, healthy streams, and other rare features will be protected in perpetuity from development.
- Scenic vistas
- Clean water
- Outstanding plant and wildlife habitat.
- Hunting and fishing with less competition from people who stick to the roads.
- Peace and quiet