Pleistocene wildlife header graphic by Sergio de la Rosa Martinez

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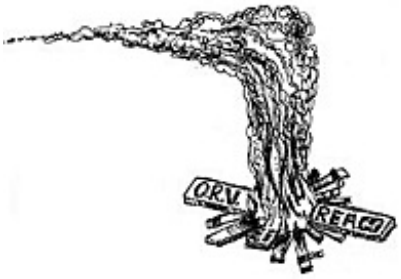
Around the Campfire
with Uncle Dave Foreman



How RARE the Wilderness?

The last time we gathered around this ol' campfire, I told the tale of how the United States Forest Service fought against changing its ways after the Wilderness Act became law in 1964. They kept on the road on which they had been since the end of the Big War in 1945. That road they hoped would lead to a National Forest system fully under the hand (and will) of Lord Man (an engineer) with all the messy, decadent, and "overmature" forests cleared off to grow thrifty plantations of improved trees while affording watershed protection, wildlife (big game) habitat, forage for livestock, and a spread of outdoor play for Americans of whatever taste. My old friend Paul Hirt, now a history professor at Arizona State, calls this engineering gall and hopefulness the "Conspiracy of Optimism."[1]

What the Conspiracy of Optimism meant for new Wilderness Areas and for overall protection of wilderness on the National Forests was that the Forest Service would fight every which way it could to hem in the acreage set aside as Wilderness, most of all if there was any sawtimber on the land. They would also make the ghost of Harry Houdini envious of how the agency could worm its way out of any fetters put on it by Congress.

RARE

So. As you heard around our last campfire, the Forest Service's professional pride took three heavy blows between 1965 and 1971: 1) a federal judge forbidding the FS from logging or road-building in roadless areas next to Primitive Areas; 2) conserva-tionists going over the Forest Service's head to Congress and asking for new Wilderness Areas that had not been Primitive Areas; and 3) Congress making bigger Wilderness Areas than the Forest Service had wanted.[2] Forest Service Chief Edward P. Cliff gruffly whined, "Every time we made a move into a roadless area we ran into opposition which generally materialized in the form of a lawsuit or a wilderness proposal by a congressman."[3] The Forest Service took these setbacks as the biggest and most frightening threats since its beginning in 1905. These blows were mighty ax swings at the hallowed timber and road-building program and at the Forest Service's wish to stamp its managerial will over the whole National Forest System.[4] That wish of taming unruly, wasteful wilderness in the National Forests with professional management had been a holy goal for the Forest Service from its birth. Some gung-ho foresters acted as though Gifford Pinchot had come down from a mountain with such inscribed on a stone tablet.

Nonetheless, in 1971, the Forest Service said that it would inventory all roadless areas on the National Forests and evaluate their suitability for Wilderness designation. That was the official line, anyway. But I believe the truth was that the Roadless Area Review and Evaluation (RARE) was a carefully drawn-up stealthy strike by the USFS brass to undercut the calls—from citizens and members of Congress alike—for new Wilderness Areas, foremost those with trees. The inventory was quick, fickle, uneven, sloppy, and underhanded; the evaluation was set up to recommend the fewest areas and the smallest acreage. The goal was to stop dead in their tracks "wildcat" Wilderness Area proposals from tying up the Forest Service's logging program and managerial freedom to bring wildlands to heel.

A smoking chainsaw to back up my belief is that the Forest Service had been slyly laying the groundwork for such a review as early as May 1969: "New Study Areas. By June 30, *-1972,-* Regional Foresters will identify and submit a brief report on unclassified areas which seem to warrant further and more intensive study."[5]

Corry MacDonald and Jim Stewart of the New Mexico Wilderness Study Committee doing field study in Sandia Mountains © Dave Foreman

On August 11, 1971, Chief Cliff told National Forest leaders "to inventory all roadless areas and to make recommendations by June 30, 1972 on areas that should later be studied intensively for possible wilderness designation." However, the Sierra Club warned, "Few conservationists even learned of the expanded scope of studies until mid-November 1971."[6] The way this stealth inventory came out—after eighteen months undercover—hampered conservationists doing their own field studies. Jerry Mallett of The Wilderness Society wrote that "there is not time for [conservationists] to do groundwork of their own, and make good informed comments on the areas involved. They have only a matter of weeks in the dead of winter to study over a hundred areas in Colorado alone."[7] Mind you, forty years ago most of the National Forest roadless areas were yet unknown to conservationists. Moreover, most of them were in the high country. How do you check on boundaries and "signs of man" when the landscape is under feet of snow? In New Mexico, I roped in over thirty University of New Mexico students to run whirlwind field studies of roadless areas in the name of the UNM Wilderness Committee, while scientists at Sandia and Los Alamos labs, gathered as the New Mexico Wilderness Study Committee, did likewise.

The Forest Service studies were tilted against Wilderness. In the Southwest Region (New Mexico and Arizona), roadless areas had to be "truly unroaded." The Regional Forester wrote to his Forest Supervisors, "Exclude all areas where parallel wheel tracks or rut roads remain plainly visible the season following their occurrence."[8] In other words, if an elk hunter drove into a wet meadow right before snowfall, and his tracks could be seen in spring after the

melt, a whole roadless area would be kicked from the inventory. Or, if a daredevil jeeper drove through a rough, back-of-beyond canyon and some of his tracks were left above the snowmelt flood line, the canyon was no longer a roadless area. (Under a sounder yardstick, the Forest Service inventoried *three times* the roadless acreage in New Mexico and Arizona in 1977-79, thanks to Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Rupert Cutler and Forest Service staff such as George Davis.)

The Evaluation came after the Inventory. Each roadless area was weighed on a handful of scales; though some were dropped for sundry reasons during the evaluation

(marked with *).

Quality Index
Size
Opportunity Cost
Public views
Regional Foresters' picks
More Wilderness near cities*
Ecological Diversity*

What is now 50,000 acre Chama River Canyon Wilderness Area and National Wild River was not inventoried as a roadless area by the Forest Service in RARE © Dave Foreman

RARE was for the National Forests in the West, by the way. National Grasslands were not included and only two roadless areas were found in the East (and one in Puerto Rico). The Forest Service's love for alpine peaks and lakes and horse-based recreation came through in the Quality Index used to numerically rate roadless areas on three factors: Scenic, Isolation, and Variety.

Scenic quality

Isolation and likely dispersion of visitors within an area to minimize contacts

Variety of wilderness experiences and activities available in the area

These three ratings made up the Wilderness Quality of a roadless area.[9] Note that they were all about recreation. Worksheets listed sundry characteristics with a range of quality for each. A number was awarded for the "quality" of an area for each characteristic. Totals were then added up for each rating category. The total points for Scenic were multiplied by 4, while those for Isolation and Variety by 3. Possible scores for the Quality Index ranged between 0 and 200 for each roadless area. Some typical criteria were: An area with "numerous lakes" got a 6, while an area with "no lakes and few streams" was hit with a 1. An area with lots of campsites got a 4, while an area with few campsites: 1. "Numerous access points and trails" rated a 3, while only a few trails were slapped with zero.[10]

Areas were also given points for size. However, the Forest Service stacked the deck against timbered areas by chopping up such big roadless areas into a few smaller inventory units—and then giving each unit lower marks for its smaller size! To wit, the Nezperce NF in Idaho cleaved the 300,000-acre Gospel Hump roadless area into nine roadless areas and rated each on its own, now smaller acreage.[11]

Another telling yardstick for picking new Wilderness Study Areas was the "opportunity cost"—"the estimated dollar loss if the area was designated as Wilderness." If, say, the local forest supervisor made a high guess that a roadless area could crank out two million dollars of timber yearly, then the opportunity cost would be two million dollars. But the Forest Service guesstimated only a high *gross* opportunity cost, not a *net,* which would have been "the values of the timber minus road construction and maintenance, construction and maintenance of developed campgrounds, fire protection, reforestation, etc."[12] Also not reckoned in any way was how much an area might be worth in dollars if designated as

Wilderness—recreation, wildlife, watershed, and so on. But added to the negative side of the ledger were costs if an area was made Wilderness: price of buying inholdings, costs of doing Wilderness studies, and so on. Talk about juggling the books! But this was the cockeyed, shady way the Forest Service had been working since World War Two.

Field Work by New Mexico Wilderness Study Committee in Santa Fe National Forest © Dave Foreman

The short time to organize, notwithstanding, wilderfolk showed up in droves at public hearings, although most were held in small towns in the Western sticks, not in cities. We also flooded the Forest Service with letters. The Forest Service acknowledged in their RARE Final Environmental Impact Statement that most public input was for more Wilderness Areas. Up to that time, RARE was the largest public involvement process ever undertaken by the federal government.

More than a year after the close for comments, in October 1973, the Forest Service made known its "New Wilderness Study Areas" (NWSAs), which would be managed and studied just as if they were Primitive Areas. Picked as NWSAs were 274 areas with 12.3 million acres out of 1,449 roadless areas making up 55.9 million acres. Even the 12.3 million-acre NWSA figure was fudged. Forty-six of the areas making up 4.4 million acres were already under study for Wilderness recommendation by the Forest Service because they were next to Primitive Areas or "had already been officially committed to study by prior Forest Service decisions or Congressional action."[13] So in truth only 238 areas with 7.9 million acres in all were picked for new study. The areas dubbed as NWSAs were mostly "rocks and ice." Lots of alpine lakes and peaks above timberline. Darn little wildwood. The Forest Service claimed they had bent over backwards to make wilderfolk happy. Well, they hadn't. We were steamed.

We came back with the Eastern Wilderness Areas Act and the Endangered American Wilderness Act, both of which helped lead to a second RARE in 1977-79. Yet, forty years later, new generations of wilderfolk fight to protect as Wilderness the same roadless areas my generation of wilderfolk cut our teeth on.

Adapted from my forthcoming Conservation vs. Conservation.

--Dave Foreman, sneezing amongst dusty old documents in my garage and dreaming of field work...

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[1] Paul W. Hirt, *A Conspiracy Of Optimism: Management of the National Forests since World War Two* (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, 1994). Hirt's "Introduction" to his book is the best short overview of the National Forest problem I've read. It has been of great help to me.
[2] http://rewilding.org/rewildit/images/56-Chopping-Down-the-Wilderness-Act.pdf
[3] Dennis M. Roth, *The Wilderness Movement and the National Forests: 1964-1980* (FS 391, USDA Forest Service, Washington, 1984), 36.
[4] Most of the Forest Service brass were road engineers or foresters.
[5] Forest Service Manual. Amendment No. 35. May 1969. (Odd punctuation in original.)
[6] Sierra Club Bulletin, March 1972.

[7] Jerry Mallett, The Wilderness Society, undated alert.
[8] Roadless Inventory procedure, Southwestern Region, Forest Service, 1971.
[9] *Roadless and Undeveloped Areas* (Final Environmental Impact Statement), (USDA Forest Service, Washington, DC, October 1973), 26.
[10] Scenic Quality Rating Criteria worksheets, U.S. Forest Service. We will reproduce the full worksheets for *Conservation vs. Conservation.*
[11] Roth, *The Wilderness Movement and the National Forests: 1964-1980,* 51-52.
[12] Dick Gale, Untitled memo on how to respond to USFS EIS on Roadless Area Inventory, in author's files. Other conservationists also wrote thorough critiques of RARE. In my files, I have an anonymous memo "Analysis of Selection Methodology Used for Roadless Areas Inventory," "A Short Review of RARE," by Colorado State University forestry student Henry Carey, and an analysis from Colorado wilderness outfitter Bill Mounsey. That unpaid grassroots folks wrote these reviews of RARE on their own tells us much about how things have shifted in the conservation network.
[13] CI Report No. 11, "New Wilderness Study Areas," Forest Service USDA, October 1973.

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