



Wilderness Policy

Background:

The Wilderness Act of 1964 established the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS), to "*secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.*" The NWPS currently consists of 703 congressionally designated wilderness areas, covering more than 107.4 million acres, managed by the USDA Forest Service and the USDI National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Fish & Wildlife Service.

Our nation's wilderness areas possess and protect exceptional ecological, geological, scientific, educational, scenic, aesthetic, historical, cultural and recreational values. The Act describes wilderness as having "outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation." Hence, wilderness offers hikers unsurpassed opportunities to experience nature, observe flora, fauna, and natural processes, enjoy quiet, natural sounds, and find inspiration in ways large and small. Qualities such as pure water, clean air, diverse wildlife, scenic landscapes, primitive conditions, and the ability to enjoy unconfined, self-reliant recreation are highly valued elements of the hiking experience in wilderness.

Policy:

Maintaining the integrity of wilderness environments and natural processes is essential for ecological health, to ensure high-quality recreation opportunities, and to preserve aesthetic and historic values. American Hiking supports recreational visitation in wilderness and provision of a wilderness-appropriate infrastructure including formal trails that allows the safe use of wilderness while minimizing associated impacts. Recreational use of wilderness allows visitors to experience wilderness and its benefits, which instills conservation and stewardship values and increases public support for wilderness protection.

American Hiking supports the Wilderness Act's intent, purpose, and general wilderness management principles that include:

- Allowing natural processes to operate freely within wilderness.
- Providing for human use while preserving the wilderness character.
- Preserve outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive, and unconfined recreation experience in each wilderness.
- Avoiding and minimizing the adverse impacts of human use through education or minimum regulation.
- Favoring wilderness-dependent activities when managing wilderness use.
- Accomplishing necessary wilderness management work with the "minimum tool."

American Hiking supports the prohibitions on motorized equipment and mechanical transport in wilderness in accordance with The Wilderness Act.

Recreational Uses:

- Recreational visitors to wilderness should learn and apply the most appropriate *Leave No Trace* practices and adhere to applicable regulations. Visitors should be aware that some areas are so fragile that uses may be restricted or prohibited to protect natural or cultural resources.
- American Hiking opposes the use of mountain bikes in areas designated or under consideration as wilderness.
- Management of recreational livestock use may require restrictions to a subset of trails and campsites. Grazing of non-recreational livestock should be managed to protect wilderness resources and phased out where possible.
- Commercial outfitters, guides and their clients must, at a minimum, adhere to regulations applicable to other wilderness visitors and should teach and employ *Leave No Trace* practices. When land managers need to restrict use, the allocation between outfitted and non-outfitted users should be equitable.
- Recreationists should expect wilderness visitation to entail risk and challenge and accept responsibility for their own health and safety.

Wilderness Management:

American Hiking supports the professional management of wilderness, including:

- The establishment of specific management objectives, developed in concert with the public, in a management plan for each wilderness. Plans should be prepared and updated in accordance with agency guidance.
- Plans should include frameworks that incorporate indicators and standards of quality to guide decision-making pertaining to recreational uses and the protection of natural resources and visitor experiences.
- Congress and managing agencies should provide funding and staffing necessary for the professional management of wilderness, including adequate monitoring programs to evaluate resource and social conditions.
- Zoning is appropriate within wilderness when needed to adjust management objectives and actions to different types and amounts of recreational uses.
- Management should use the minimum tool principle, including provision of training in the use of traditional skills and hand tools.

Trails, Bridges, Structures, and Signs:

Formal trails are necessary and appropriate in wilderness to provide safe visitor access and to protect natural resources from excessive impacts associated with informal (visitor-created) trail networks. Formal trails, in contrast to informal trails, are generally well-designed and maintained to safely sustain visitation with limited impact. However, while wilderness trail construction and maintenance standards should ensure resource protection, they should be lower than those applied in non-wilderness settings. For example, wilderness trails may be more challenging to hike, with rocky or uneven treads and fewer signs and blazing to guide visitors.

Cross country travel and dispersed hiking are appropriate in less visited areas of wilderness. However, wilderness designation should not preclude the development of new formal trails. For example, new trails could be constructed to replace informal trails with unacceptable impact, to access a popular feature of interest, to connect existing trails, or to enable construction of a new long-distance trail.

Formal campsites and camping-related structures, such as shelters, rustic hitching rails or corrals, trail-related structures such as wooden bridges or stone steps, and other primitive structures may be appropriate if vetted and found to be necessary through a minimum-tool decision process that considers resource protection and visitor access and safety. Facilities and structures should use primitive and rustic designs and materials that are in keeping with the character of wilderness settings.

Wilderness visitors should expect to be self-reliant in their knowledge and application of map-reading and orienteering skills. The blazing and signage of formal trails should be rustic and unobtrusive and the minimum necessary to ensure safe visitor access and adequate natural and cultural resource protection.

National Wilderness Preservation System Expansion:

Because wilderness often offers the highest and best form of protection for the hiking experience, American Hiking supports ongoing assessments of lands for future designation as wilderness. Assessments should include evaluations of whether wilderness designation might strengthen or hinder the management of existing trail systems. Care should be exercised to ensure that new designations include appropriate consideration of hiking trail development and maintenance.

As the national voice for hikers, American Hiking Society may assist on behalf of hikers or intervene to ensure that hikers' needs and concerns are represented in wilderness debates, campaigns and other related efforts. American Hiking may also speak on behalf of hikers at large, particularly where the hiking constituency is not organized.

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