



**APPROVED**  
**4-13-13**

## **Wilderness Policy**

### **Overview**

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 757 congressionally designated wilderness areas, covering more than 109.5 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.

### **Position**

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
- Prohibitions on motorized equipment and mechanical transport in wilderness in accordance with the current Wilderness Act, recognizing that extenuating circumstances (e.g. severe storms, fire, disease) may require mechanized equipment in Wilderness Areas to effectively address significant resource management concerns.
- The professional management of wilderness.

### **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. 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.

*Development of New Trails:* 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.

*Campsites and Related Structures:* 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 System Expansion & Funding:***

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 well as support for long-term management of ecological systems. As more Wilderness Areas are developed, it is imperative that funding is available to support management. Supporting such funding should be a priority over advocating for additional designated Wilderness Areas.

*Adopted by the American Hiking Society Board of Directors: XXXXXXXXXXXX (last time it was approved was 2008)*