

Wilderness: THE HIGHEST PROTECTION

“A Wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” – 1964 Wilderness Act

The 1964 Wilderness Act enabled Congress to designate “Wilderness” areas in National Forests, National Parks, and other federal lands to be kept permanently undeveloped. Wilderness areas are protected from timber-cutting, roads, dams, and, since 1984, from new mining claims and mineral leasing. In short, Wilderness designation allows the forest to follow its own natural processes. Other protected portions of public lands – such as “backcountry recreation” areas – restrict logging and roadbuilding on a limited basis, **but only designated Wilderness protects the forest forever.**

As more areas of our landscape – both private and public – are logged, converted to pine plantations, and paved by urban development, protected space for wildlife habitat, clean water, and recreation become more and more important. Designating Wilderness assures that our increasing population and its expanding settlement will not occupy and modify all areas within the United States.



STATE – NATIONAL FOREST	NATIONAL FOREST ACRES	WILDERNESS ACRES	% OF FOREST PROTECTED AS WILDERNESS
Alabama – Talladega and Bankhead	412,228	45,850	11%
Georgia - Chattahoochee	752,192	117,378	16%
North Carolina – Nantahala Pisgah	1,033,999		
South Carolina - Sumter	84,615	7,402	9%
Tennessee - Cherokee	639,907	66,667	10%
Virginia – Jefferson & GW	723,683	57,760	8%

Wilderness Frequently Asked Questions

What can I do in wilderness areas? Hunt, fish, hike, camp, canoe, kayak, swim, picnic, backpack, bird watch, take wildflower walks, ride horses, cross-country ski, snowshoe, go spelunking or rock-climbing, conduct ecological research, lead educational trips, photograph, enjoy the solitude.

Are roads permitted in wilderness areas? Generally, no. No permanent roads are allowed. However, the law makes a few limited exceptions for temporary roads if absolutely necessary to administer the wilderness area, including protecting public health and safety. Also, access is allowed to private property surrounded by wilderness.

Are all motors banned from wilderness areas? In order to preserve the wild, natural character of the nation's wilderness areas, the Wilderness Act prohibits the general use of motorized equipment and transportation. But the Act clearly allows for their use by the U.S. Forest Service (and other managing agencies) for search and rescue operations, firefighting to protect adjacent private land, insect and disease control, and other circumstances where they are the minimum tools necessary for the proper administration of the area.

How are trails maintained in wilderness areas? In general, only the minimum tools necessary for maintenance are used, normally hand tools. However, power tools can be authorized in emergencies brought on by ice storms, extensive blow-downs, or other events.

Can fires be fought in wilderness areas? The Wilderness Act specifically states in Section 4(d)(1) that certain measures may be taken to control fire in wilderness areas. These include the use of mechanized equipment, the building of fire roads, fire towers, firebreaks, or pre suppression facilities and other techniques for fire control. In short, anything necessary for public health or safety (for example, protecting adjacent private lands and buildings) is clearly permissible. U.S. Forest Service policy provides for suppression of wild fires in wilderness areas.

Doesn't wilderness conflict with other uses of the National Forest? No. In fact, not only is wilderness identified as one of the "multiple-uses" for National Forests under the law, it is one of the best tools to achieve many of the other designated uses, including recreation, water and soil conservation, and wildlife habitat.

Does wilderness hurt the timber industry and other parts of the economy? Wilderness preservation is a negligible factor in the availability and production of timber. Further, timber in designated and potential wilderness areas is generally less accessible and less cost-effective to harvest than on other government and private forestlands. In fact, wilderness can help communities diversify their economy by attracting new businesses, residents and visitors. It also protects scenic backdrops that help improve individual property values, and protects the headwaters of the drinking water supply for many communities.

Source - The Southern Environmental Law Center

