

Ah, Wilderness! Save It.

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By Gaylord Nelson

WASHINGTON — Today, and 200 years from now, when Americans want to know what the land looked like when their forebears arrived, they need not resort to pictures in a history book. They can go see the real thing, in no small part because of the passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964.

But as we celebrate this 20th anniversary, we must face the fact that much more remains to be done. The acreage preserved so far has been modest. Less than 2 percent of the land in the lower 48 states has been designated wilderness, and with each passing day there is a little bit less wilderness left to protect.

Congress can help by acting promptly on legislation that would protect land in a dozen states. Most prominent is a California bill designating such sites as the Tuolumne River and the Ansel Adams Wilderness in the Sierra Nevada. This measure, passed in August by the Senate, now awaits House approval, as does legislation for Florida, Utah and Arkansas. Not as far along are bills for Pennsylvania, Colorado, Texas, Virginia and other states. The proposed bills for Wyoming, Montana and Idaho, however, are inadequate because they do not include acreage that clearly deserves protection.

Opponents of wilderness bills, which represent long study and considerable compromise, continue to traffic in myths. They warn that we are "locking up" land needed by oil,

timber and mining companies. But surely a country as large and as rich as ours can afford to keep more than just two acres out of every 200 in their original condition. Nor are we talking about land rich in mineral resources. Independent geological surveys indicate that only about 1.2 percent of the nation's undiscovered, recoverable oil is in existing wilderness areas.

In contrast, the recreational value of these areas is tremendous. The Wilderness Act, originally introduced by Hubert H. Humphery, wanted land set aside for "the use and enjoyment of the American people," and Americans are responding. During the past decade, recreational-visitor days have increased 42 percent, to more than 11 million a year. Wilderness areas are hardly the exclusive playgrounds of the elite as some opponents would have us believe.

Even those who never set foot in a wilderness area can expect to "use and enjoy" this land. Almost half of our modern pharmaceuticals are derived from natural substances. The rosy periwinkle, for example, is the key ingredient in drugs used to treat leukemia and Hodgkin's disease. And because we have yet to tap the potential of nearly 99 percent of the plants that do exist, we should treasure the research opportunities offered by these natural laboratories called wilderness.

Wilderness does many other things for us. The high quality of New York's water, for example, is a direct result of the foresight of those who years ago protected watersheds in the Adirondacks and Catskills. Wilderness limits erosion and the siltation of streams and rivers. It also provides vital habitat for wildlife valued by hunter and bird-watcher alike.

Few of us will leave as bountiful a legacy as that of the great environmentalists — men like Frederick Law Olmsted, John Muir and Howard Zahniser, a director of the Wilderness Society whose lobbying efforts did so much to move Congress. But all of us should try. While there is still a little time left, shouldn't we save here and there a few undisturbed remnants of nature's work? Is not a million years or 10,000 of evolving landscape and fragile beauty worthy of our most attentive stewardship? The ultimate test of man's conscience may be his willingness to sacrifice something today for future generations whose words of thanks will not be heard. □

Gaylord Nelson, former Democratic senator from Wisconsin, has been chairman of the Wilderness Society since 1981.