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***Birthdays of a revolution
Wilderness Act represented break with the past***

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It is not often that poetry emerges from the U.S. Congress, a legislative sausage factory where lucid, elegant prose is more likely to die than to be born. For the most part, the printed matter churned out by the nation's lawmakers and staff is a hash of legalese and linguistic misdirection intended to mask its purpose: delivering money and favors from the federal establishment to an increasingly large and clamorous crowd of claimants.

There are rare exceptions. Perhaps the most striking example of legislative eloquence in the past century turns 40 years old on Friday. It is a law unlike any other in American history, expressing an idea that represented a profound break with centuries of human philosophy and behavior.

Here are the defining words of the Wilderness Act, written largely by Wilderness Society Executive Director Howard Zahniser, approved by votes of 374-1 in the House and 73-12 in the Senate, and signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson on Sept. 3, 1964:

"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. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions"

Of all those words, it is the poetic first sentence that resonates most deeply and still seems startling today. *That passage uses decidedly atypical legislative language to codify an equally revolutionary idea: that the world erected by human beings cannot alone sustain its builders, that the salvation of civilization lies in preservation of its opposite.*

Henry David Thoreau had made pretty much the same point more than a century earlier with his famous assertion, "In wildness lies the preservation of the world," which he repeated in lectures before his death and in an essay published posthumously in 1862. But even though the conservation movement in the United States began gaining traction in Thoreau's time, the 1872 establishment of Yellowstone National Park launching a process of protection that continues today, the national park system has always been at heart a utilitarian conceit.

From the start, the parks have preserved areas of profound natural beauty from wholesale exploitation, but specifically to maintain them "for the enjoyment" of human beings. Economic exploitation has always been countenanced, hotels and other tourist services being incorporated into the system from the very beginning, but in a controlled fashion.

Not until 1964 did the federal government formally embrace the idea that wild places should be preserved for their own sake, not simply because they offered a chance for visitors to enjoy their wonders and for local entrepreneurs to profit from tourists. Wilderness has temporary utility -- paddling, hiking, horseback riding, fishing and other nonmechanized uses are permitted -- but it is primarily a spiritual utility rather than a consumptive one.

This is not a universally embraced ideal. Many Americans *still regard the natural world with what is essentially a 3-year-old's philosophy: "What's in it for me?"* And if they are not among those who routinely visit wilderness areas, or who merely derive emotional sustenance from the knowledge that such places still exist, they neither understand nor support efforts to make sure the last remaining scraps of wild America remain that way.

Still, the campaign to enlarge the nation's stock of federally designated wilderness -- now totaling 4.7 percent of the nation's land mass, or 66.3 million acres -- continues in incremental fashion. At least 16 bills to establish or expand wilderness areas are pending before Congress, including several pertaining to California: Sen. Barbara Boxer's California Wild Heritage Act (S1555), which would designate 2.5 million acres of wilderness and 400 miles of wild and scenic rivers, and several other bills that together mirror Boxer's bill but each target geographically specific regions: HR1501, S738, HR3325 and HR3327. Most have bipartisan support, as well as endorsement by local communities, and deserve passage.

Revolution is a process, not a discrete event. As long as there are those who would happily drill, cut, plow or bulldoze the last unspoiled acre if there's a buck to be made from it, the battle launched 40 years ago will -- must -- continue.

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