

Celebrating Wilderness

by Ron Hamlin

The Appalachian Trail in Georgia is 78.6 miles long, stretching from Springer Mountain to the North Carolina state line at Bly Gap. Over half the miles, 40.4 to be precise, are in federally designated wilderness areas. The year 2024 marked the 60th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, a giant step in preserving the wild areas that remained in this country, but it mainly protected areas west of the Mississippi River. It would take a second effort ten years later to bring the idea of wilderness preservation to much of the eastern United States.

It seems a bit of a myth that this continent was a wilderness when the first explorers and colonists from Europe arrived. For Native Americans, this continent was never a “wilderness.” Indigenous communities thrived here long before our European ancestors began to explore and populate this continent. European traders had been engaged with Native Americans for decades before attempts to permanently settle this continent began. They traded for seafood, furs, timber, and other goods that were becoming rare in Europe by the late 16th century.

When colonists began to arrive, they had little understanding of the Native Americans’ unbounded way of living. Native society was quite different from that of the Europeans. They had no permanent villages. They moved with the seasons and, over the years, between areas they had cleared for subsistence farming and hunting or fishing grounds. Native Americans only produced what they needed to survive, whereas the colonists needed boundaries, built permanent villages, and produced enough for themselves and more to sell or trade.

Native Americans changed the environment in which they lived in significant ways prior to the arrival of Europeans. Their impacts included using fire to clear and maintain their planting fields, which they changed every several years as soil nutrients diminished. As the quality or quantity of the product of their fields diminished, they moved on and created new ones, so human impact on the North American continent had been taking place for centuries before European colonists began arriving.

Colonists brought with them a Judeo-Christian understanding of humanity’s relationship to the earth and the products it provides. Their beliefs led them to think that the Native American male, in particular, was lazy, as they left many of the farming and household chores to the women while they went out on the hunt or to fish, which colonists thought of as less rigorous. Colonists also brought diseases that were unknown on this continent and for which the indigenous people had no defense. The population of Native American villages was reduced in many cases by 90% or more as a result. Consequently, colonists and early Americans were able to take advantage, at least in part, of the reduction in the native population to develop their villages and eventually spread across the continent, believing that the original people here were not using the land to the highest economic value possible.

The notion of wilderness preservation, as we think of it, has its roots in the Transcendentalist era of the nineteenth century. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and others less well-known wrote about the disappearance of our natural resources, the evils of capitalism, and the westward movement that was beginning to take root at that time. The transcendentalists also lamented the movement away from an agrarian economy toward industrialization. Artists of the Hudson River Art Movement, led by Thomas Cole and practiced by many other artists of the time, translated into paintings that which was important to the Transcendentalists – the preservation of the landscape that had been so transformed by the early European settlers and their descendants. Both the

Transcendentalist and Hudson River School movements were the first expression of a truly American philosophy and artistic style, expressing a nostalgia for the wilderness they felt was being lost.

John Muir, throughout the second half of the 19th century, advanced the idea of preservation, acting to protect the California tall trees and, most famously, working to preserve the granite valleys in the Yosemite region. The first areas set aside by Congress and signed into law by Abraham Lincoln were Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of sequoia trees, based in large part on Muir's advocacy. However, preservation was only partly successful because the areas were left to state management, which enforced fewer restrictions on commercial use. It wasn't until the 1890s that Yosemite returned to federal management as a national park. But another episode 20 years later left Muir devastated: the encroachment into the national park at Hetch-Hetchy Valley turning it into a reservoir that would serve the growing city of San Francisco.

The first act aimed solely at the preservation of wilderness in the U.S. was made by Arthur Carhart, a recreational planner with the U.S. Forest Service. In 1919, at the age of 27, Carhart was assigned to survey an area around a remote forest lake in Colorado for recreational development. On his return, he sent a note to his supervisor, Aldo Leopold, stating that the "...time will come when these scenic spots, where nature has been allowed to remain unmarred, will be some of the most highly prized scenic features of the country." His recommendation was successful, and the area around the lake remained undeveloped. In 1975, Trapper Lake, the lake surveyed by Carhart in 1919, received permanent protection as it was included in the Flat Tops Wilderness Area. Today, the Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center is in Missoula, Montana, where federal land managers receive training about wilderness values and preservation.

A few years later, Aldo Leopold was working in the Gila National Forest in New Mexico. He had been influenced by his former employee, Carhart, and was also concerned about the proliferation of automobiles, the associated road building that was taking place as a result, and the impact they were having in every corner of our nation. What remained of our undeveloped areas was being made more and more accessible by the advent of the automobile era. He wrote, "Of what avail are forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map?"

Leopold coined the term "wilderness preservation" and promoted the idea through his writings. He began the movement that led toward the preservation of undeveloped areas as wilderness that were rapidly disappearing by the 1920's. By his efforts, the Gila Wilderness Area was set aside by the U.S. Forest Service in 1924, creating the first federally preserved area recognizing the importance of preserving wild areas, protecting them from harvesting and development, and allowing them to be set aside for primitive recreation. But the designation was not permanent, as the decision was made locally by the forest supervisor. Policies could change depending on the notions of any succeeding superintendent. Near the Carhart Center in Missoula, the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute is a multi-agency facility providing valuable information and research on wilderness areas.

Benton MacKaye, the forester who first proposed an "Appalachian Trail" in 1921, played a critical role in the preservation of wilderness as we think of it, as well. After the stock market crash of 1929 and the financial depression that followed through the 1930s, President Herbert Hoover was looking for the means to respond to the crisis. His administration had access to money set aside for drought relief in Virginia. Recognizing the growing popularity of auto touring and in concert with the development of the new national park in the Shenandoah Mountains, his administration used those funds to begin construction of the nation's first ridge-top roadway – the Skyline Drive. While this

was a successful, though limited, way to get people back to work, the roadway was built mainly over the Appalachian Trail that had been created through the Shenandoah Mountains by the volunteers of the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (PATC) after it was organized in 1927. MacKaye thought this was greatly disturbed by this development along the trail he conceived.

Myron Avery, who was one of the founding members of the PATC and its first president, came to dominate the construction of the Appalachian Trail in 1931 and for many years beyond. Avery was a lawyer working for the U.S. government in Washington. He saw a benefit to the construction of the new road. It would provide access for his volunteers to what had been one of the most inaccessible parts of Virginia. It was an inconvenience that the trail would need to be relocated, but now his members would have easier access. He also realized it would improve access for hikers to the trail. In the end, much of the replacement trail in Shenandoah would be built by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) during the Roosevelt administration.

From what had originally been a somewhat socialist-leaning idea, as described in his 1921 article, MacKaye's ideas about the trail had evolved toward providing a wilderness experience for hikers on the eastern seaboard. He frequently wrote to and argued with Avery about the placement of the Appalachian Trail, particularly about the advent of the new roadway project along the Shenandoah ridgeline. Influential members of the PATC and within the A.T. movement took sides in the argument – some with Avery, others with MacKaye. MacKaye argued for abandoning the Trail through the Shenandoah area while Avery thought that a disconnected Trail was nonsense.

The discussion came to a head at the 1935 Appalachian Trail Conference. The PATC hosted it that year at the Skyland Resort in what is now Shenandoah National Park. With the topic of the Skyline Drive and its relationship with the trail on the agenda, Avery made sure that his side was well represented. MacKaye was unable to attend, but conference members who agreed with him were at the meeting. Avery won the vote of those in attendance. After this, MacKaye and several others who had been influential in the Trail movement severed their relationships with the Appalachian Trail. At the time, MacKaye was employed by the Tennessee Valley Authority in Tennessee.

In 1934, a year before the issue of the Skyline Drive came to a head, MacKaye attended a meeting of the American Forestry Association in Knoxville, near where he lived. He had been influenced in his thoughts on wilderness by a fellow forester, Robert Marshall. During the conference, on a field trip to a CCC camp, MacKaye, Marshall, Harvey Broome of the Smoky Mountains Hiking Club, and another forester, Bernard Frank and his wife, discussed the idea of creating an organization dedicated to the preservation of wilderness. A year later, Marshall, MacKaye, Broome, and Frank, joined by Aldo Leopold, Robert Sterling Yard of the National Park Association, Harold Anderson of the PATC, and Ernest Oberholtzer - who advocated for the preservation of the Boundary Waters of northern Minnesota - agreed to create a new organization dedicated to wilderness preservation. The Wilderness Society was founded. It was incorporated two years later in 1937 and spearheaded the movement that would eventually lead to the passage of the Wilderness Act.

In the mid-1940's, while serving as president of the Wilderness Society, MacKaye hired a writer and publicist named Howard Zahniser for the organization. Zahniser did not have much of a previous history with outdoor activities, but he was soon set to the task of writing proposals for the preservation of wilderness.

Olaus Murie replaced MacKaye as president in the 1950's, as the effort to create a federal law that preserved wilderness was heating up. He and his wife, Mardy, had a ranch in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, adjacent to the Grand Tetons National Park, that became the focal point as the effort

gained momentum. Howard Zahniser made frequent trips between Jackson Hole and Washington, D.C., as he wrote and rewrote proposals for a new law. He worked tirelessly, working the halls of Congress to build a coalition of lawmakers who would carry the proposal forward. He attended 18 congressional hearings on the topic.

Finally, on September 3, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Wilderness Act designating 54 areas managed by the U.S. Forest Service as federally protected wilderness. The Act uses unusually eloquent language to define its intent, but by the stroke of his pen, 9.1 million acres became protected. Of those, only three areas were located east of the Mississippi River: the Great Gulf in New Hampshire, and Linville Gorge and Shining Rock in North Carolina.

Neither Howard Zahniser nor Olaus Murie lived to see the bill's passage, but their hard work survives and has continued to grow. It is a bit ironic that by the efforts of MacKaye, and the Wilderness Society that he helped to create, the Wilderness Act became law four years ahead of federal protection for the Appalachian Trail. MacKaye was invited to attend the signing ceremony but declined due to his age – he was 85.

At the time of passage of the Act, the U.S. Forest Service believed there were many more areas in the east, beyond the original three, that could be preserved as wilderness. But forest supervisors soon began to think little of the eastern half of the country could meet the wilderness standard as defined by the law. Very little acreage remained undisturbed or unaltered in some way by Americans. Over the preceding centuries of colonial and early American development in the east, most of it had been cleared for agriculture, harvested for timber products, or otherwise impacted. The legal definition of wilderness included such terms as “an area where the earth and its community of life have been untrammelled by man” and “affected by the forces of nature, (where) the imprint of man's work is substantially unnoticeable.”

For us in the east, and particularly along the Appalachian Trail corridor, a more momentous act would be signed into law slightly over 10 years later. On January 3, 1975, the Eastern Wilderness Act was signed by President Gerald Ford, when Congress used its authority to place many more areas east of the 100th meridian under wilderness protection and directed that many others be declared study areas for future inclusion as wilderness. The Eastern Wilderness Act did not change the legal definition of wilderness but allowed less pristine, roadless areas to be considered and designated for preservation and allowed to return to a wilderness character.

Protection for wilderness along the Appalachian Trail would come slowly. The first wilderness area was established along the A.T. in Georgia in 1984. The first areas in the state to be set aside were not along the A.T., but in other areas of the state. Below is a chart showing the slow progression of designated wilderness areas in Georgia.

Wilderness Area	Administrative Agency	Acres	Designation Year	A.T. Miles in Georgia
Okefenokee	Fish & Wildlife Service	353,981	1974	--
Blackbeard Island	Fish & Wildlife Service	3,000	1975	--
Cohutta	U.S. Forest Service	37,033	1975	--
Ellicott Rock	U.S. Forest Service	8,300	1975	--
Wolf Island	Fish & Wildlife Service	5,126	1975	--
Cumberland Island	National Park Service	9,907	1982	--

Big Frog	U.S. Forest Service	8,502	1984	--
Southern Nantahala	U.S. Forest Service	23,364	1984	3.2
Brasstown	U.S. Forest Service	12,583	1986	--
Raven Cliffs	U.S. Forest Service	9,240	1986	6.4
Rich Mountain	U.S. Forest Service	10,791	1986	--
Tray Mountain	U.S. Forest Service	10,343	1986	6.4
Blood Mountain	U.S. Forest Service	7,742	1991	10.6
Mark Trail	U.S. Forest Service	16,618	1991	13.8

Wilderness designation requires that management policies and maintenance methods be more primitive to maintain the wilderness character in concert with the features that made the areas worthy of designation. The Appalachian Trail in these areas requires the lowest level of technology for its construction and maintenance. Power tools are not allowed, so maintainers use hand tools such as crosscut saws to cut and clear blowdowns and sling blades for weed removal. Machinery used to build trails in non-wilderness areas cannot be used. Instead, hand tools, like Pulaskis, McLeods, mattocks, and such, are used to build trails. There are fewer blazes, trail markers, and signs along wilderness portions of the A.T., as well. Shelters are not usually found, except historic structures that predate wilderness designation, requiring more primitive forms of camping for backpackers.

When the roof of the Blood Mountain Shelter, a CCC-built structure in what is today a wilderness area, was replaced a few years ago, materials were hauled in on the backs of mules. Only unpowered hand tools were used on the project.

Today, with the passage of the original Wilderness Act, the Eastern Wilderness Act, and other legislative actions since, preserved wilderness in the United States, in the legal sense, has grown to 112 million acres in 44 states – 5% of the total land area. In Georgia, nearly 517,000 acres are set aside as wilderness in fourteen areas, or about two percent of the state's total area. Across the country, wilderness areas are managed by each of the nation's land management agencies: U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, Fish & Wildlife Service, and the Bureau of Land Management.

A total of 150.6 miles of the A.T. travel through wilderness areas. Nearly one-third of those miles are here in Georgia. Again, ironically, only two of the 105 A.T. miles in Shenandoah National Park travel through designated wilderness.

Our nation was once considered a vast wilderness for our European ancestors to discover. Following a nostalgia for disappearing wild areas that began with the Transcendentalist Movement within fifty years of the American Revolution, wilderness returned as an important American element one hundred forty years later. In the words of the author and educator Wallace Stegner, "We need wilderness preserved ...because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed." Though our land has been disturbed for centuries by Native Americans, colonialists, and more recent Americans, with the Wilderness Act and its successors, we can explore areas that remain similar to those once explored by William Bartram in the 1770s, Lewis and Clark in 1803, and many other early American explorers. For the less adventurous, we can be assured that through the preservation of wilderness areas, the challenges of nature that our ancestors once endured are preserved for future generations to enjoy and experience.