

NELSON KENTER

Forty Years of Wilderness

When Congress passed the Wilderness Act in 1964, millions of acres “untrammelled by man” were preserved for hunting, fishing, hiking, and wildlife watching

By Becky Lomax

ON SEPTEMBER 3, 1964, while I sat in my third grade classroom learning cursive writing, President Lyndon Johnson signed the Wilderness Act, thus preserving Montana’s Bob Marshall Wilderness until I could see it myself many years later.

This spring, from atop Sun Butte in the “Bob,” as it is called by visitors, I stared up a broad, scenic valley at miles of mountains, herds of bighorn sheep, and twisting rivers. It was a place unmarred by human activity,

just as Congress and President Johnson had promised four decades before.

For my generation and those after, wilderness came on a platter, a multimillion-acre legacy of protected wild lands across the United States. In Montana, that legacy has preserved places that add greatly to the state’s enormous allure. Forty years have passed since the controversial Wilderness Act established the National Wilderness Preservation System, which many people

now take for granted. Wilderness designation didn’t just happen, however. It required decades of work by a handful of visionaries who fought to bring a wilderness land ethic into the public’s consciousness. The story of how the Wilderness Act came about is the story of America’s ongoing struggle to see the natural world in a new way.

Roosevelt, Leopold, and others
Wilderness preservation dates back to the



DAVID R. BENNETT



MABLE MANSFIELD, COURTESY THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY

“To us the enjoyment of solitude, complete independence, and the beauty of undefiled panoramas is absolutely essential to happiness.”

—BOB MARSHALL

THE BOB Bob Marshall the wilderness area (Chinese Wall, far left) is a 1-million acre tract used daily by hikers, campers, anglers, and outfitted hunters (above). Bob Marshall the man (left) was an indefatigable forester based in Missoula who, in the 1920s and '30s, helped set the stage for wilderness protection.

early 1900s, when President Theodore Roosevelt established 150 million acres of new national forests. These weren't preserved as wilderness, but "clearly Teddy Roosevelt got the ball rolling," says Tom Flowers, a Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) game warden in Choteau who works on department wilderness activities. "Setting aside those lands as national forest provided the building blocks for future wilderness designation."

In 1922, a forester with the U.S. Forest Service boldly submitted a radical management proposal for New Mexico's Gila National Forest. Aldo Leopold, a hunter and the founder of modern game management principles, pushed the agency until it temporarily designated the forest two years later as the world's first wilderness area.

With that seminal designation, Leopold's concept of wilderness took root. For the next two decades, he preached wildness as something necessary for the human soul.

"Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them," Leopold wrote in a collection of essays titled *A Sand County Almanac*. "Now we face the question whether a still higher 'standard of living' is worth its cost in things natural, wild, and free." *A Sand County Almanac* advocated his new concept, a "land ethic," which obligated humans to the land and provided the wilderness movement with its stewardship spine.

In 1925, a young forester named Robert Marshall had become a local legend in Montana with his marathon 30-mile mountain treks around the Missoula area. Later, when he entered doctoral studies at Johns Hopkins University, in Baltimore, he penned his thoughts into "The Problem of Wilderness," a treatise defining principles that would shape the movement to preserve America's wildlands. Considered by wilderness advocates to be the movement's Magna Carta, the work identified wilderness as containing

two essential traits: no mechanical transport and no permanent human inhabitants.

Gaining a national reputation, Marshall devoted his energy to preserving the nation's last remaining wild places. "Wilderness is melting away," he wrote in *Nature* magazine, "like some last snowbank on some south-facing mountainside during a hot afternoon in June." In a one-man crusade as the Forest Service's Lands Division chief, he placed 5.4 million acres of vulnerable lands under wilderness protection.

To advocate further wildlands preservation, Marshall launched The Wilderness Society in 1935—along with Leopold, Robert Sterling Yard (a National Park Service publicist), and Benton MacKaye (the Massachusetts forester who created the Appalachian Trail). When the independently wealthy Marshall died four years later at the age of 38, his estate provided financially for The Wilderness Society, ensuring it could continue its conservation work.



BEARTOOTH PLATEAU IN THE ABSAROKA-BEARTOOTH WILDERNESS BY BOB KURZENHAUSER

Foremost of the society's concerns at the time was preventing dams from being built in the Dinosaur National Monument of Colorado and Utah. Howard Zahniser, executive secretary of The Wilderness Society, saw a solution in a national wilderness law, previously advocated by both Leopold and Marshall. In 1956, he drafted the Wilderness Bill, using the term "untrammled" to describe wilderness. After 8 years, 66 drafts, and 18 congressional hearings, that word was retained in the final draft of the Wilderness Act. Wilderness, it said, is "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

Wilderness, according to Zahniser, Leopold, and others, was at the heart of a singular American culture, one distinct from Europe, where nature was viewed only as background or raw material, or idealized in pastoral gardens. President Johnson trans-

formed the unique concept into federal law by signing the Wilderness Act and securing 9.1 million acres for permanent protection.

Montanans and the Scapegoat

"By design, the Wilderness Act is a law for all seasons," says Doug Scott of the Washington, D.C.-based Pew Wilderness Center. "It's not a piece of parchment in a musty archive, but a living tool."

For decades, Montanans have been using that tool to establish wilderness areas in their state. Having formed the first state wilderness organization in 1958, while Zahniser was still drafting the act's language, Montanans were ready to put the new federal legislation to use when it became law in 1964. Under the act, citizens could petition to create new wilderness. Cecil Garland, a hardware store owner from Lincoln, teamed up with the Montana Wilderness Association to rally support for the Scapegoat Wilderness. In 1972, the Scapegoat became the nation's first citizen-initiated wilderness area.

"That was so important, because the

local community had ownership in a wilderness area rather than having the feds come in and force it on them," says Flowers, the Montana game warden.

Since then, Congress has added more lands to the nation's wilderness bank, which now totals roughly 5 percent of federal lands. In the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan signed 43 laws designating wilderness areas, more than any other president, and President Bill Clinton followed by dedicating the most wilderness acreage—66 million. To date, 662 wilderness areas have federal protection—ranging from Pelican Island's 5 acres in Florida to Alaska's 9-million-acre Wrangell-St. Elias Wilderness.

Wilderness areas are by definition federal lands that retain their primeval character and are managed to preserve their natural conditions. Only temporary nonmechanical human uses such as hiking, hunting, and camping are allowed.

Restrictions against roads, mining, timber harvest, and other development have created opponents of wilderness designation,

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"We must leave [future generations] a glimpse of the world as it was in the beginning, not just after we got through with it."

—PRESIDENT LYNDON JOHNSON, UPON SIGNING THE WILDERNESS ACT IN 1964

including many timber, mining, energy, and ranching interests that advocate putting the lands to commercial use. Many lawmakers maintain that western states have enough public land, and some believe that even existing wilderness areas are unnecessary and suppress local economies.

Wilderness advocates counter that revenue from recreational use more than makes up for lost income from logging, mining, and other development.

With the advent of the Wilderness Act, Congress placed administration of wilderness lands under four existing agencies: the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service, and National Park Service. Many wilderness borders overlap agency boundaries. For instance, the Bob Marshall Complex, which includes the Great Bear and the Scapegoat, is admin-

istered as one unit by four national forests.

The federal agencies don't, however, manage the fish and wildlife in wilderness areas. That responsibility falls to state conservation agencies, such as Montana FWP. Because fish and wildlife and their habitats are so intertwined, says Flowers, it's essential that FWP maintain a cooperative working relationship with the federal agencies managing Montana's wilderness areas.

"It makes sense, both from an ecological and administrative standpoint, that the different agencies managing different parts of wilderness have a shared vision," he says. "That's the only way the land can be managed in concert with fish, wildlife, and plant communities."

Wildlife and habitat aren't the only aspects of wilderness that receive agency attention. Over the past several decades, millions of



U.S. FOREST SERVICE

GREEN INK When President Johnson signed the Wilderness Act, he made into federal law what hunters, anglers, and other conservationists had been advocating for decades.

hunters, hikers, outfitters, and anglers have enjoyed the nation's wildlands. But that constant use takes its toll. Burgeoning back-country visits during the 1970s and '80s led to degraded campsites, braided trails, littered landscapes, and trampled vegetation. In the 1990s, the Forest Service teamed up with the National Outdoor Leadership School to develop the Leave No Trace ethic. The concept, which advocates properly disposing

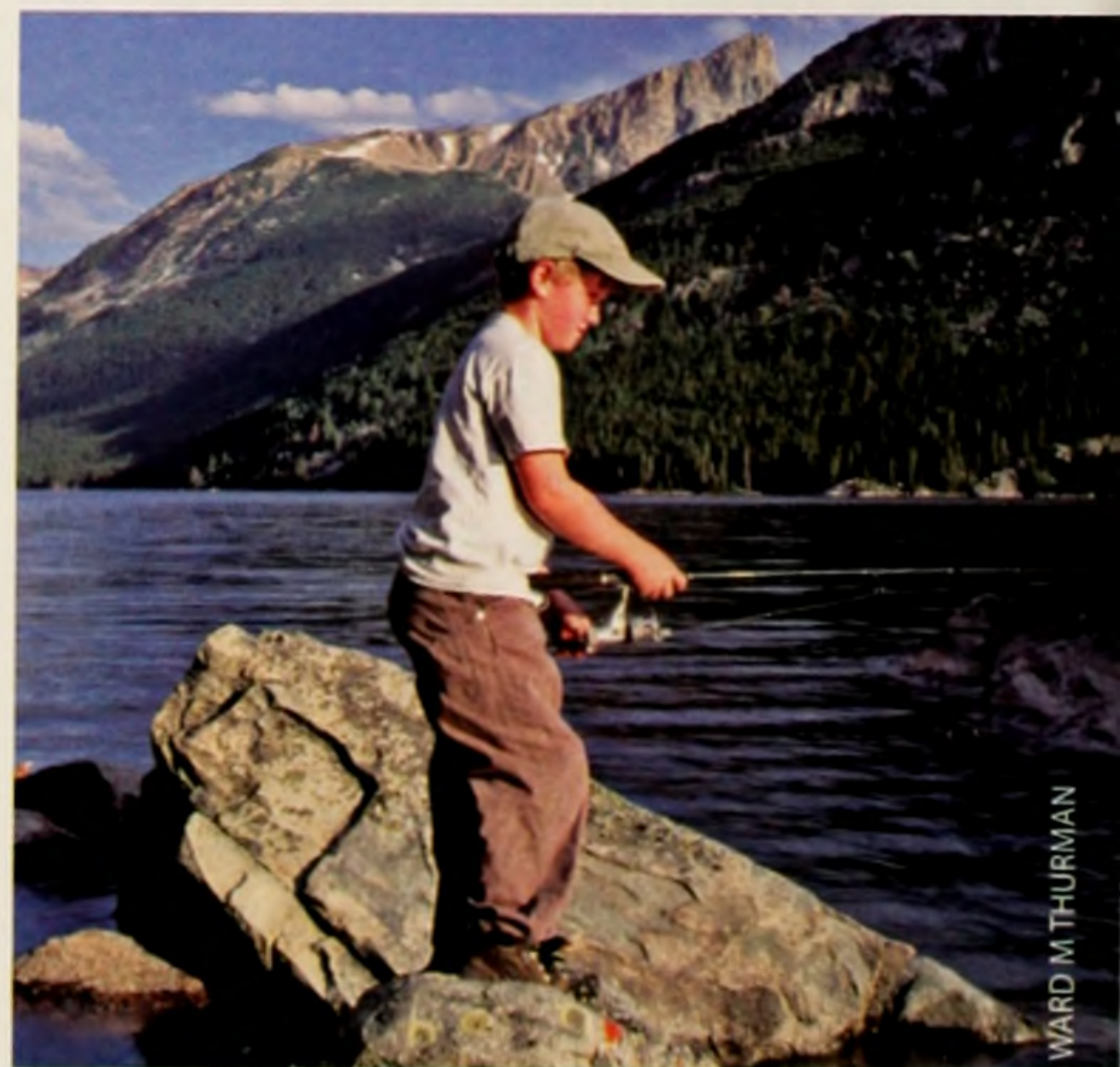


human waste, only using established trails, leaving natural resources alone, and respecting other wilderness users has become the foundation of wilderness education.

“The Leave No Trace ethic has been fantastically successful,” says Bill Schneider, a Helena author of several wilderness area hiking guides. “In my 35 years of hiking, I’ve seen it go from very bad to very good. I don’t find many gum wrappers anymore.”

Among those making use of wilderness areas in Montana are outfitters such as Karen and Jack Hooker, of Ovando. They and their crew take roughly 100 guests into the Bob Marshall each year, some to hunt elk and deer, others to watch wildlife on horseback. According to Chris Ryan, the Forest Service’s regional wilderness program leader in Missoula, outfitters fill an important role in providing access to roadless areas. “Without outfitters, many people would never have the opportunity to experience wilderness,” she says. To lessen their damage to wilderness tracts, the Forest

USER FRIENDLY Montana’s wilderness areas attract thousands of people each year, including backpackers (left) and anglers (below) in the Absaroka-Beartooth. Roughly 3.5 percent of Montana’s land is designated as wilderness, preserving habitat for sensitive wildlife species such as grizzly bears (right).



America’s Wilderness Timeline

Over the past century, the uniquely American concept of wilderness has become established in the nation’s consciousness.



1964: As part of the Wilderness Act, five wilderness areas in Montana are established, comprising 1.5 million square acres: Anaconda-Pintler (158,615 acres), Bob Marshall (1,009,356 acres), Cabinet Mountains (94,272 acres), Gates of the Mountains (28,562 acres), and Selway-Bitterroot (251,443 acres in Montana).

"We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to the edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope."

—WALLACE STEGNER, *THE WILDERNESS LETTER*

Service limits the number of people and pack animals allowed in outfitted groups.

The Treasure State's Wilderness

In Montana, the National Wilderness Preservation System has designated 3.4 million acres of roadless landscape. When the Wilderness Act was enacted, Montana already had five primitive, roadless areas meeting criteria for automatic inclusion: the Anaconda-Pintler, Bob Marshall, Cabinet Mountains, Gates of the Mountains, and Selway-Bitterroot. Since then, 10 more areas scattered across the state have been added. At 1 million acres, the Bob Marshall Wilderness is the state's largest; the smallest is the 11,366-acre Medicine Lake Wilderness, near Plentywood.

Wilderness refuges provide easy wildlife viewing, from raptors and pronghorn at UL Bend to trumpeter swans at Red Rock Lakes. Anglers gravitate to the Anaconda-Pintler's famous trout streams and pursue cutthroats, grayling, rainbows, and brookies in the Lee Metcalf Wilderness.

For hunters, wilderness areas are heaven sent. Paraphrasing Leopold, national hunter

education guru Jim Posewitz says, "They are places to pursue your buck free from the sounds of truck engines."

Those yearning for big mountain scenery head to the Bob Marshall's Chinese Wall, a 22-mile-long, 1,000-foot-tall cliff, or the state's highest peaks in the Absaroka-Beartooth. Rafters head down the Wild and Scenic Middle Fork of the Flathead River in the Great Bear. Those seeking solitude slip off to the Gates of the Mountains, which attracts the fewest visitors of Montana's wilderness tracts.

Less than 4 percent of Montana's land is designated as wilderness, though the public perception is of a much greater amount.

"It's an unfortunate misconception by many people that all public lands are protected wilderness," says Bob Decker, executive director of the Montana Wilderness Association.

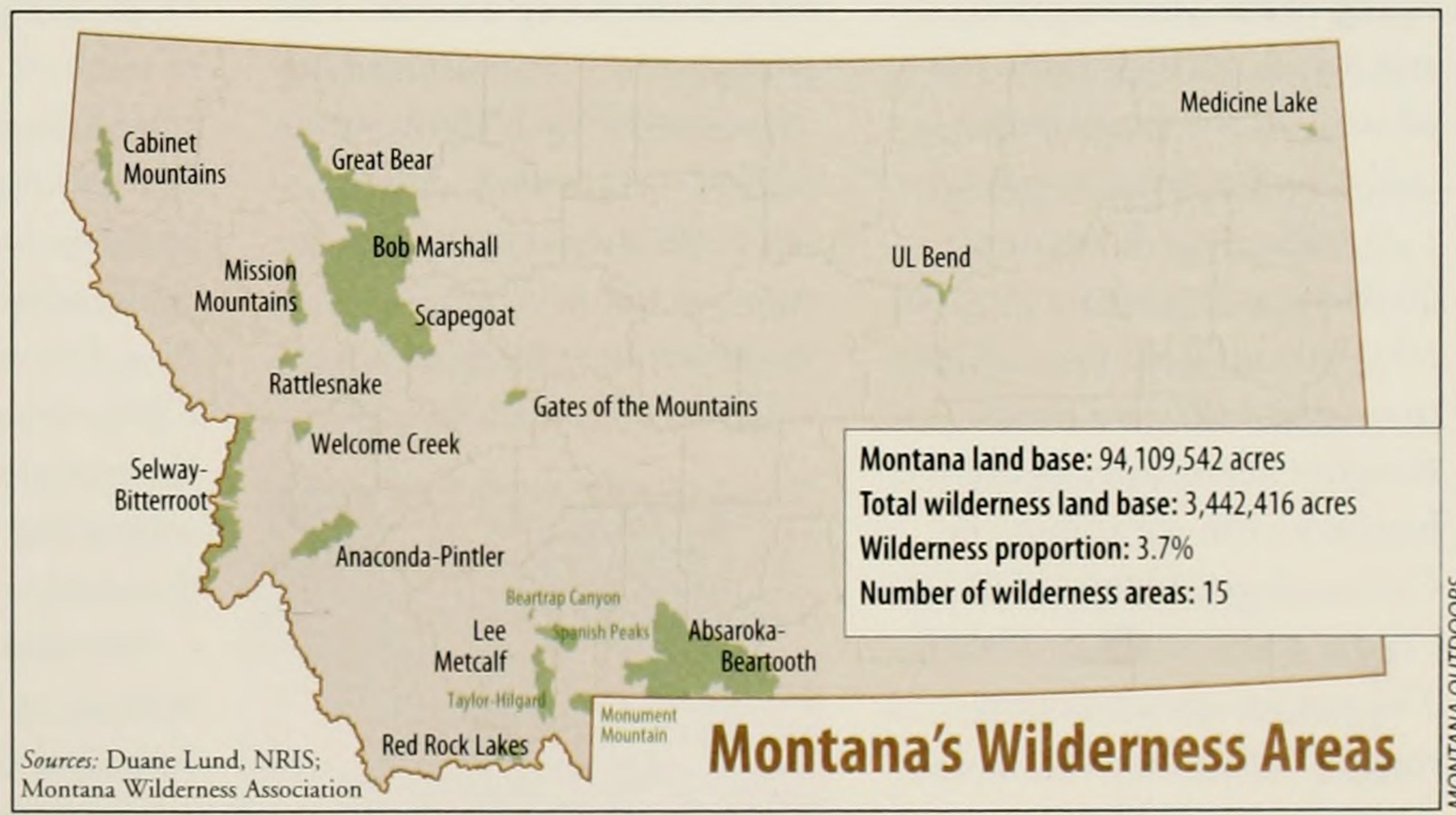
For decades, many of the state's roadless lands have been proposed for wilderness designation, but in fact, says Decker, no new Montana acreage has been added since 1983. In 1988 a popular bill to designate an additional 1.4 million acres failed to become

law. Currently, the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act, designed to add wilderness to Montana and four other states, floats through legislative committees.

The act might have a better chance of becoming law if those in Washington, D.C. could have joined me that day on Sun Butte. There, surrounded by the Wilderness Act's legacy, I could see firsthand the value of protecting roadless lands—the quiet, the solitude, the abundance of wildlife. Understanding the value of wilderness requires little more than visiting one.

"All it takes is to get out in the wilds," says Schneider. "Not flying over in an airplane or thumbing through a coffee-table book, but getting out with a pack and boots. That's when you realize why wilderness is so essential to so many people." 🐻

On September 18, the University of Montana's College of Forestry and Conservation in Missoula is celebrating the Wilderness Act's 40th anniversary with its Wilderness Walk. The walk features family activities such as fly fishing and butterfly identification, as well as an easy stroll. For more information, call (406) 243-5361.



<p>1970: President Richard Nixon signs a bill designating 9 million new acres of wilderness.</p>	<p>1972: Congress designates the Scapegoat Wilderness (239,936 acres) after Montanans lobby to have the roadless area protected.</p>	<p>1975: Mission Mountains Wilderness (73,877 acres) protects historic American Indian hunting and fishing grounds.</p>	<p>1976: Three wilderness areas are added in Montana: Absaroka-Beartooth (920,343 acres), Medicine Lake (11,366 acres), Red Rock Lakes (32,350 acres), and UL Bend (20,819 acres).</p>	<p>1976-80: President Jimmy Carter signs 14 wilderness bills, adding 66 million acres.</p>	<p>1978: Great Bear (286,700 acres), Welcome Creek (28,135 acres).</p>	<p>1980: Rattlesnake (32,976 acres).</p>	<p>1983: Lee Metcalf Wilderness (254,288 acres).</p>	<p>1980s: President Ronald Reagan signs wilderness protection laws designating a total of 10 million acres.</p>	<p>1990s: President Bill Clinton designates more than 66 million acres as protected wilderness areas.</p>	<p>2004: 40th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, celebrating 662 federally protected wilderness areas for a combined total of 105,695,176 acres.</p>
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For more information on Montana's 15 wilderness areas, go to www.wilderness.net or www.wildmontana.org.