

My Wilderness and yours

*New Mexico's Game and Fish
Director examines the Wilderness
concept and standards for future
wilderness areas.*

by LADD S. GORDON

During the early part of the twelfth century, the Persian poet Omar Kahayyam wrote the following lines:

*Here with a Loaf of Bread beneath the
Bough,
A Flask of Wine, a Book of Verse — and
Thou*

*Beside me singing in the Wilderness —
And Wilderness is Paradise enow.*

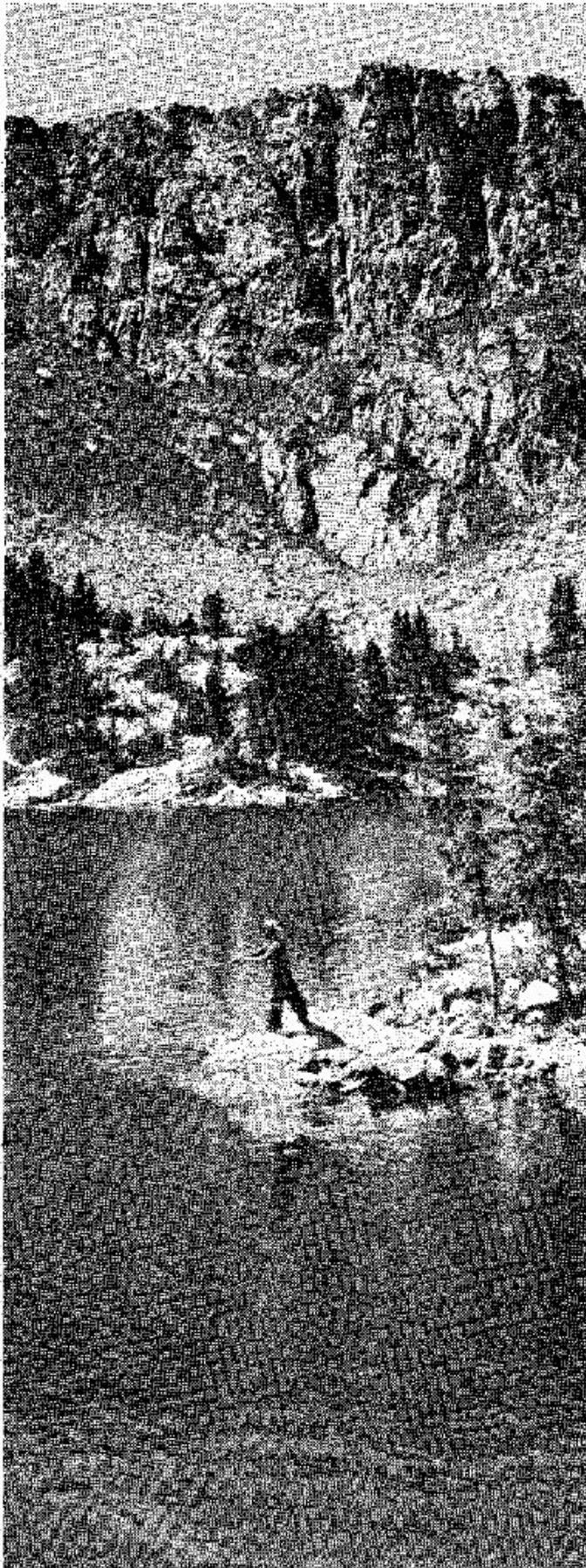
While human needs and interest have greatly changed over the past 800 years, the concept of wilderness still takes on a certain magic meaning of romance, adventure, and even paradise. While we in New Mexico are usually inclined to associate the word wilderness with high and remote mountain terrain, wilderness can be any type of land setting ranging from wild undeveloped sea coast, hardwood forest, prairie grasslands, deserts of lofty mountain ranges. Thus, it should be recognized that wilderness is more than a single type of land. It is, under modern conditions, more of a land ethic, and the term can truly apply to any sizable area which has been relatively untouched by the onslaught and destructiveness of the march of civilization.

With this in mind, we can all accept the idea that at some early time in history the entire earth constituted a wilderness setting. Certainly we can believe that during the years Omar Kahayyam was writing his Rubaiyat, most of the American continent was still wilderness. Even then, however, our New Mexico landscape was beginning to show signs of man's use. Pueblo Indians were beginning to pursue crude agricultural practices, and warfare was flaring between these scattered groups and the Plains Indian tribes. What we now know as the Gila Wilderness in southwestern New Mexico was at that time inhabited by several hundred or perhaps thousands of Cliff Dweller Indians, who were using the land and other natural resources of the area to satisfy their human needs. We must, therefore, recognize that the concept of wilderness is an ever-changing situation.

Contrary to ideas expressed by some of our modern-day supporters of wilderness, nature has never been a static situation. It can pretty safely be said that there is no such

Photos courtesy U.S. Forest Service,
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thing as a natural setting in our environmental complex. Nature is truly a fluid and ever-changing condition constantly undergoing modification from climatic conditions, effects of influences such as erosion and fire on the landscape and the changing pressures brought on by the living community, including man himself. Who then can truly define wilderness?

Each of us may have his own individual definition of a wilderness condition, but this definition must be constantly conditioned and adjusted as the forces of nature, including man, necessitate. Aside from the basic and individual concept of wilderness we are presently oriented toward a second view of wilderness status — that of legally defined and specially administered wilderness areas on federally-owned public lands. While man has destroyed most of the wilderness values on lands throughout the United States and elsewhere on the face of this earth, we here in New Mexico have perhaps been more fortunate in that the modern day land ethic and appreciation of wild and semi-natural land values was conceived prior to our need for the full use of our entire land area. Years ago, large blocks of our national forest lands in New Mexico were set aside as wilderness areas through congressional action and have been administered for their so-called esthetic, scenic, recreational and other wilderness values.

The Gila and Pecos Wilderness areas are perhaps the best known of these legally classified wildernesses in New Mexico, but in more recent years other remote and relatively unspoiled areas have been added to the system including the Black Range, White Mountain, San Pedro Parks and Wheeler Peak Wilderness areas. In addition, certain areas on National Parks and National Wildlife Refuges are, for all practical purposes, being administered for most of the same wilderness values. Management of these areas prohibits the use of motorized vehicles, the construction of cabins and other facilities, the harvest of timber and certain other activities which would tend to interfere with our self-imposed and somewhat artificial values of a natural setting. These areas are administered in a highly efficient, but also highly artificial manner in an effort to maintain the biologically impossible 'natural condition.'

Ever increasing numbers of people are taking advantage of the peace and solitude and high recreational values found in these areas. Hikers, campers, hunters, photographers, naturalists, fishermen and the vast array of people using these areas necessitate sophisticated trail development and stocking of hatchery-reared trout. Intensive fire control and a variety of restrictions and constraints placed upon wildlife management activities in the wilderness areas only add to the artificiality. In a sense, our own individual and collective demands as humans

are destroying or at least rapidly changing the very values which we are trying to preserve. Here again, we must weigh our definition of wilderness in terms of changing values and social and economic needs.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 provides that all roadless blocks of 5,000 acres or larger on lands administered by the U.S. Forest Service or included in National Parks or National Wildlife Refuges be studied and reviewed for possible designation as wilderness areas by no later than 1974. This congressional directive has resulted in numerous proposals for wilderness areas throughout the state. It is the considered opinion of this writer that most of the areas currently under study for possible wilderness designation are of little or marginal value as true wilderness. We must recognize that wilderness is only one of the needed multiple uses of our federal lands and should be kept in proper perspective and balance with man's other needs. We should also recognize that while there is growing public support for such sanctuaries and undisturbed natural areas, there is growing and strong opposition to wilderness restrictions. Any significant addition to the wilderness system of areas of low wilderness value will only tend to lower wilderness standards and strengthen the opposition and perhaps eventually destroy the entire concept.

We in New Mexico are fortunate in having approximately one acre of land of legal wilderness designation for every man, woman and child living in the state. Let's take the necessary steps to hold and preserve these presently established areas for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations and closely and objectively scrutinize proposals for any significant extensions of areas of wilderness classification.

You and I and thousands of other interested citizens will make the final judgement as to our wilderness needs. Those of us who have had the opportunity to enjoy the many values inherent in our New Mexico wilderness areas want to see these values preserved. We must, however, recognize our other needs for the good life and see that all publicly-owned lands best serve our human needs.

The late Aldo Leopold, one of the greatest of modern conservationists wrote as follows: "Man always kills the thing he loves, and so we the pioneers have killed our wilderness. Some say we had to. Be that as it may, I am glad that I shall never be young without wild country to be young in. Of what avail are 40 freedoms without a blank spot on the map?"

In the hope that I shall never be old without the opportunity to occasionally enjoy wild country, let's keep a few properly selected and managed blank spots on the map — my wilderness and yours.

