

Uncle Dave Foreman's Around the Campfire “The Gila Wilderness Area: Resourceism vs. Conservation”

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In the last few issues of “Around the Campfire,” I’ve contrasted the values and policies of resourceism and conservation. Some scholars and agency representatives think I make overmuch of these differences and that I do not give adequate credit to the resourceist movement and resource agencies like the United States Forest Service for America’s conservation legacy, including such things as the National Wilderness Preservation System.

I believe that the best way to buck up my side of the catfight is to look at what the Forest Service has done in a specific case. And what better case could there be than how the Forest Service has cared for its own creation—the Gila Wilderness Area—for over eighty years? Unfortunately, the Gila is not an outrageous case, but a fairly typical one. Wise and scrappy old Mike Frome entitled his book about the wilderness system *Battle for the Wilderness* to make this point, after all.¹

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“A wilderness,” Aldo Leopold wrote, “should be big enough to absorb a two-week pack trip without crossing your own tracks.” To early forester Leopold, *the* wilderness was the pine forest and sheer canyons of the headwaters of the Gila River in the Mogollon Mountains and Black Range in southwestern New Mexico. As I sit imagining myself on Holt Mountain looking into the wilderness, ravens quorking and wheeling below, it is easy to believe that I am sitting with Leopold. His words hang and spangle in the place like fall leaves of aspen.

During the second decade of the last century, he became enthralled with the freedom of the place and yet worried that the freedom would soon vanish without positive action on the part of its manager, the United States Forest Service. With popular articles and through in-house discussions with Forest Service decision makers, Leopold pushed his point that because of the sudden availability and spread of motor-cars in the National Forest backcountry after World War One there would soon be no place left for those so inclined to practice the primitive arts and skills of pioneer travel—primarily horse and mule packing. In 1924, his work bore fruit when Southwest Regional Forester Frank Pooler administratively designated a Gila Wilderness Area of nearly one million acres stretching west to east from Glenwood to Kingston, New Mexico. Like areas were soon set aside in other Forest Service regions and all were renamed as *primitive areas*.

A fair question to ask now, eighty years after Leopold and Pooler’s gift to the future, is how well have later generations of forest supervisors and rangers, politicians, and the public carried out their responsibility of stewardship? I have personally been involved with protecting the Gila Wilderness Area for the last thirty-six years, and have studied its history. In answer to my question, I can say that we have not done a good job.

Had it not been for stout-hearted citizen conservationists and a few principled Forest Service employees at key times, our caring for the Gila Wilderness would have been far, far worse—a travesty, in short.

More than any other single area, the Gila Wilderness epitomizes the never-ending struggle to protect wilderness and fulfills the conservationists' watchword, "A wilderness battle is never won."

The Gila was the first area specifically protected as wilderness by civilization. But within eight years of its designation, the Forest Service cut the North Star Road through it north to south, slicing the Black Range to the east from the rest of the roadless country. Gila National Forest managers claimed the road was needed for quicker communication between its ranger stations at Beaverhead and Mimbres, and for access for fire-fighting, private livestock management, and hunting. A key reason, however, was that this region of the East Fork of the Gila River was dusty, piñon-juniper steppe, and in the aesthetic eye of the Forest Service not pretty enough to be wilderness. Part of the Gila Primitive Area east of the new road was redesignated as the Black Range Primitive Area.

With the road came the extermination of the grizzly and lobo. The North Star Road ripped through high mesa country—gentle land rare in a roadless condition. Ranchers, hunters, and fuelwood cutters in vehicles began to branch off on either side of the North Star Road and push deeper into the Gila Primitive Area to the west and the Black Range Primitive Area to the east during the 1930s, leaving a network of two-track routes. During World War Two, several thousand acres believed to have critical minerals were chopped from the primitive area where the Gila River exited it above the town of

Cliff. After World War Two, army surplus jeeps were brought home and were used to further pioneer two-track routes into the primitive areas while the Forest Service shrugged their shoulders.

The heart of the Gila is where the three forks of the river come together. This valley also held hot springs, private inholdings and ranch headquarters, and the Gila Cliff Dwellings National Monument. Every year Forest Service managers led a jeep caravan *twenty miles through their Gila Primitive Area* to the Gila Cliff Dwellings, officially violating their management standards. This was a big, well-publicized event and attracted a lot of participants. During this time, the Gila NF Supervisor bet that he could drive his jeep some thirty-five miles farther across the Gila from the Cliff Dwellings northwest over Turkeyfeather Pass to Willow Creek. He almost made it.

During the 1940s and 1950s, the Forest Service undertook a program to review all of the primitive areas that had been created during the 1920s and 1930s to determine whether they should remain protected and, if so, to draw firm boundaries for them. After study, the areas were to be called wilderness areas if over 100,000 acres and wild areas if under 100,000 acres. In 1952, the Forest Service issued their recommendations for the Gila. Already cut down from its original near-million to 560,000 acres, Gila NF managers proposed to further reduce the Gila to 300,000 acres by lopping off over 100,000 acres in the east alongside the North Star Road over to the Cliff Dwellings where, said the Forest Service, the gentle topography made defense against vehicles impossible. They would also chop out the Gila Cliff Dwellings, the valley around it, and the access route from the south into it. They planned to build a paved road into the Cliff Dwellings for tourists. In perhaps the most grievous cut of all, another 100,000 acres of

towering old-growth mixed-conifer and ponderosa-pine forest around Iron Creek Mesa in the north would be ripped out for full-on, industrial logging and roading.

The Forest Service's silver-tongued flimflam justifying the "slight" boundary adjustments as removing lands that didn't have (scenic) wilderness qualities almost won over the far-away Wilderness Society and Sierra Club. But local hunters, fishers, hikers, and horse-packers knew better. Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion, gun clubs, women's clubs, gardening clubs, chambers of commerce, and service clubs from southwestern New Mexico didn't just say no. They said, "Hell, No!" and they drew a line in the sand. This brought national groups like The Wilderness Society and Sierra Club around, and New Mexico Senator (and former Secretary of Agriculture) Clinton P. Anderson stepped forward as the conservationists' champion. The Forest Service quickly backtracked and came out with their revised proposal in 1953: a 429,000 acre Gila Wilderness Area (including Iron Creek Mesa), and a 130,000 acre Gila Primitive Area for further study. The locals, including some good boosters, hadn't objected so much to the paved road and exclusion of the Cliff Dwellings, so a twenty-mile-long, one-mile-wide corridor was whittled out between the wilderness and the primitive area.

Alas, the Forest Service took the knife to other primitive areas much as they did to the Gila and some areas did not have stalwarts such as those in Silver City to head 'em off at the pass. The Forest Service attack on primitive areas and its fevered drive to road and log the backcountry led Howard Zahniser of The Wilderness Society and others to call on Congress to protect wilderness areas with a Wilderness Act. An eight-year battle raged, with fierce opposition to the Wilderness Act from the Forest Service and Park

Service alongside traditional landscapers such as the logging, mining, livestock, irrigation, development, oil & gas, and industrial tourism industries.

While the Wilderness Act was being debated, Gila National Forest managers allowed windmills with gasoline-power backup to be installed for cattle watering in both the Gila and Black Range Primitive Areas up to six miles from the North Star Road. Moreover, from 1958 to 1962 Gila NF managers chained several thousand acres of piñon-juniper woodland in the two primitive areas (chaining is done by dragging a ship's anchor chain between two D-9 cats to rip out the vegetation to "improve" cattle pasture).

In 1964 the Wilderness Act became law and all existing national forest wilderness areas became "instant" units of the new National Wilderness Preservation System. The Act directed the Forest Service to study the remaining primitive areas and give Congress recommendations by 1974 on how much should be designated as wilderness. In 1969, the Gila NF Supervisor proposed a paltry 188,179 acre Aldo Leopold Wilderness for the 169,356 acre Black Range Primitive Area and some high-elevation additions. The New Mexico Wilderness Study Committee and other groups, reflecting their high-country, recreational bias, countered with a better but (as we shall see) inadequate 231,000-acre wilderness line.

In 1972, Gila NF staff combined their study of the Gila Primitive Area with an overall boundary revision of the Gila Wilderness. True to history, they proposed most of the gentle mesa country near the North Star Road for deletion once again, just as they had done for the corresponding part of the Black Range Primitive Area in 1969. Their new proposal totaled 543,474 acres of wilderness. We conservationists proposed 614,000 acres. While Congress dragged its feet during the 1970s, conservationists and the Forest

Service enlarged their respective recommendations. The enlargements were significant for the conservationists (with total proposed acreages of around 400,000 acres for the Aldo Leopold Wilderness and around 700,000 acres for the Gila Wilderness) and slight for the agency.

In 1980, Senator Pete Domenici and Representative Manuel Lujan, Jr. were ready to move on a New Mexico wilderness bill for national forest areas. Our other senator at the time, Harrison Schmitt, a geologist and moonwalking astronaut from Silver City was no friend of wilderness and kept acreages small. We ended up with a 570,000-acre Gila Wilderness Area and a 211,300-acre Aldo Leopold Wilderness Area. The significant victory was that the two wilderness boundaries were each brought down to one-half mile from the North Star Road, leaving only one mile between them. Had the Forest Service boundaries prevailed in 1980, the nonwilderness gap would have been up to ten miles. Knowing what we now know about the importance of connectivity for wildlife movement between protected areas, this was a real victory.

Most of the additional lands conservationists proposed for addition to the Aldo Leopold and Gila in 1980 still qualify and are even more important now for biodiversity. The two largest undesignated national forest roadless areas in New Mexico are the 190,000-some acres around the Aldo Leopold Wilderness and the 130,000-some acres around the Gila Wilderness. As political conditions change, New Mexico conservationists must be alert for any opportunities to enlarge the big wilderness complex of the Gila National Forest.

So. I think we can speculate here with some accuracy over the relative roles of resourcism and conservation in shaping wilderness protection in the United States. First of all, without the citizen conservationists who often believed in wild Nature for its own sake, there would be no Wilderness Act and no National Wilderness Preservation System. Left to the Forest Service, there would be a scattered handful of primitive areas whittled down to spectacularly scenic, but largely treeless, “rock and ice.” The battle in the Gila and Black Range was over ancient forest that was quite accessible to road building, and over rolling mesa country that no one is going to pick out as spectacular or very appealing for backpacking. The battle for the forested area was to protect what was likely the finest example of old-growth pine-oak/mixed conifer forest in the Southwest. But what was the battle for in the North Star Mesa country? Already beaten up by cows, the Forest Service had deliberately further degraded it with the gasoline-powered water wells and the piñon-juniper chaining—which they then argued disqualified the area from wilderness consideration! As we conservationists debated in 1972 where to draw our boundary, I brought up the connectivity argument of keeping the Gila and Aldo Leopold Wilderness Areas close to each other with a minimum of nonwilderness lands and intrusions between them both for wildlife movement and for the experience of a 150-mile long hike with only one small dirt road to cross. We also finally decided to include the chaining and gasoline wells for the principle of the matter and to make a point: it was unacceptable for the Forest Service to illegally violate a primitive area and then to later use those violations to argue the area had lost its wilderness character when it came time to consider it for wilderness area designation. Finally, I argued to protect the mesa country for its own sake, simply because it was still mostly wild, it should continue to be

protected. I made that argument with my conservation friends in 1972 and I made it with Senator Pete Domenici in 1980. I am not saying that that argument won Pete over, but it certainly didn't turn him or anyone else off.

We can pick any number of other examples to make the same point. Thank goodness for Nature lovers—whether they are unpaid activists or paid staff in citizen groups or honest, dedicated employees in government agencies. What wilderness and wildlands we have protected in the United States are due to you. And they are due to you because you have loved them and have not been shy about saying so.

Dave Foreman

Abbey's Lost Arch

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