

CHAPTER III

A WILDERNESS RESERVATION POLICY FOR THE FOREST SERVICE

Aldo Leopold Proposes the Gila Wilderness Area

In 1921 a new idea for special and somewhat restricted use of large undeveloped areas in national parks and forests was publicly proposed by a forester who deserves the title, "Father of the National Forest Wilderness System." Aldo Leopold had joined the Forest Service in 1909 and was an ardent advocate of roadless preserves for big game, as well as a professionally trained forester. He had extensive experience in the Southwest and had served on the Datil National Forest in New Mexico. His marriage to the daughter of a prominent local stockman, who was one of the grazing permittees on the Datil Forest, further deepened his roots in the State.

Within the boundaries of the forest was a relatively undeveloped area (now included in the Gila National Forest) of canyons, plateaus and mountains nearly 700,000 acres in size. This topographic maze was by no means completely untouched. Cliff dwellings of prehistoric Indians were found in several locations. It had been roaming ground for the Apache Indians, and in the early nineteenth century was heavily trapped for furs by such adventurers as James Ohio Pattie. Pattie's record of the West Fork of the Gila River within the undeveloped region about 1830 described lush stands of untouched native grasses. In the 1870's Texans had brought longhorn cattle into the region which, together with other

stock grazing after 1900, severely overgrazed certain portions of the Datil and Gila forests. The government had established a military cavalry outpost at Hot Springs well within the region. A crude wagon road had been constructed to this base through Copperas Canyon. Long after the cavalry had departed, this outpost area was settled by homesteaders who obtained legal ownership of land plots through the 1906 Homestead Act. A few other cabins were scattered in the general region.

The area was essentially a wilderness to Leopold who had explored it thoroughly on hunting, fishing, and official trips. It was roughly 50 miles long and 20 miles wide and included over 1,000 square miles of semi-virgin territory. Leopold was an authentic sportsman, a keen observer, and deeply appreciated the recreational values of the Gila wilderness. It was not unusual, therefore, when an auto road was proposed into this area about 1918, that he should protest the opening up of what he considered to be the last great wilderness of the Southwest. To Leopold a large part of the hunting experience was the packing and camping in remote areas entirely dependent on individual effort for survival. He realized that the opportunity for this activity would be diminished by civilized developments and foresaw its disappearance in other sections of the West. His life was so closely attached to the region that he determined to take action against the road plans. He, therefore, proposed that the area, for which there was no existing economic demand except grazing, be officially designated as a wilderness within the national forest and kept free of road construction and recreation developments.

Wilderness Area Size and Purposes Defined

The Congressional appropriation of \$13,900,000 for forest road and

highway development in 1921 stimulated Leopold to express publicly his belief in the need for establishing wilderness recreation areas. The idea, as indicated in his writing,¹ was the result of personal recreation experiences in areas large enough to contain a two-week hunting or fishing trip on horseback, plus a resentment against the possible intrusion of large numbers of tourists into a favorite recreation region. Leopold suggested that one large forest area [over 500,000 acres] of distinctive recreational value in each [western] state should be kept free of roads and other modern developments. It was a practical concept, he believed, since it involved only a small fraction of total national forest acreage, and furthermore, there were sufficient undeveloped areas left which would be naturally difficult to develop for industrial logging purposes. In essence, the idea was a protest against the accompaniments of motorized recreation. When the proposal was made to other foresters (many lukewarm to the idea) in their professional journal, it provoked little response.²

¹Aldo Leopold, "The Wilderness and Its Place in Forest Recreation Policy," Journal of Forestry, XXIX (1921), 718-721.

²Excerpts from the article first proposing wilderness areas on national forest lands follow:

"But it [the Forest Service's early promise to open up and use national forests] has already gone far enough to raise the question of whether the policy of development . . . should continue to govern in absolutely every instance, or whether the principle of highest use does not itself demand that representative portions of some forests be preserved as wilderness. . . . Lamentations over this or that favorite vacation ground being "spoiled by tourists" and becoming more and more frequent. . . .

"Heretofore, we have been inclined to assume that our recreational development policy must be based on the desires and needs of the majority only. . . . Inasmuch as we have plenty of room and plenty of time, it is our duty . . . to meet needs and desires of the minority also. Everyone knows that the National Forests will supply a decreasing but inexhaustible number of small patches of rough country which will remain practically in a wilderness condition. . . . They will always be big enough for camping, but they will tend to grow too small for a real

Nevertheless, Leopold secured the approval of Frank C. W. Pooler, district forester of New Mexico and Arizona, tentatively to draw the boundaries of a Gila Wilderness Area on the forest recreation plans. An area of 695,296 acres was approved by Pooler on June 3, 1924. This new provisional policy of land management was inaugurated by the district office without written approval or disapproval of the plan from Washington; however, it was approved by Pooler as a recreational plan, which was within his authority.

Other forest districts in the West also saw merit in designation of areas which could be entered as "roadless" in recreation plans, and by 1925 there were five similar areas established by district action on national forests. These were the Grand Tetons (now a national park), the Two-Ocean Pass country (now the Teton Primitive Area), the Absaroka Forest between Boulder Creek and Yellowstone Park (now the Absaroka Primitive Area), the Middle Fork country of the Salmon River in central Idaho (now the Idaho Primitive Area), and parts of the Clearwater country

wilderness trip.

"By 'wilderness' I mean a continuous stretch of country preserved in its natural state, open to lawful hunting and fishing, big enough to absorb a two weeks pack trip, and kept devoid of roads, artificial trails, cottages or the works of man. . . . First, such wilderness areas should occupy only a small fraction of the total forest area--probably not to exceed one in each State. Second, only those areas naturally difficult of ordinary industrial development should be chosen. Third, each area should be representative of some kind of country of distinctive recreational value, or afford some distinctive type of outdoor life, opportunity for which might disappear on other forests lands open to industrial development. . . . The man who wants a wilderness trip wants not only scenery, hunting, fishing, isolation, etc., but also the horses, packing, riding, daily movement and variety found only in a trip through a big stretch of wild country. . . .

"The entire area is grazed by cattle, but the cattle rancher would be an asset from the recreational standpoint because of the interest which he attaches to cattle grazing operations under frontier conditions. . . . The Gila is the last typical wilderness in the southwestern mountains."

in Montana (now in the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area). Several others were in the planning stage in northwestern and California national forests. They were selected as areas temporarily restricted from road and summer home development rather than to represent a positive new policy of use. The purpose was to withhold development^d until the wilderness idea had an opportunity to crystallize into a definite policy under which more definite plans could be made.

Despite Leopold's convictions and the unpublicized efforts by supervisors of several national forests to slow down development and await wilderness demand, there was little public reaction. The National Conference on Outdoor Recreation, convening for the first time in 1924 to discuss all phases of outdoor recreation, never mentioned the idea of wilderness reservations.

Leopold's Campaign to Preserve a System of Wilderness Areas

It was 1925 before wilderness as a land use concept began to make headway in the public consciousness and in the thinking of the Forester's office in Washington. This was primarily because of Leopold's efforts. In that year he wrote four articles urging wilderness area establishment; one for the American Forests and Forest Life magazine, later reproduced in the Literary Digest; one for Sunset, a widely read California magazine, another for a professional publication, the Journal of Land and Public Utility Economics; and another for the in-service Bulletin distributed to Forest Service employees. His essays explained the necessity for wilderness area recognition--this time for both park and forest lands. National forest wilderness reservations, he suggested, would be especially valuable to wilderness hunters. Similar designations in national parks would serve all other kinds of wilderness lovers. He asked

for public response either for or against roadless playgrounds since government agencies could not preserve such areas without some indication of general demand.¹ In the magazine *American Forests* and *Forest Life*² specific proposals were made, such as: The wilderness environment is just as important as the hunting and fishing opportunity; timber cutting should not be allowed if it leaves motor roads in its wake; lookouts, trails, and phone lines, but not roads, should be permitted for fire protection of wilderness areas (He qualified this to allow roads in wilderness if fire control was otherwise impossible); timber production and watershed protection must always be the primary purposes of national forests, but recreation is an important public service which should also be provided; private lands inside desirable wilderness areas should be acquired by the public agency concerned; wilderness cannot be re-created once it is destroyed. Domestic stock grazing was not mentioned but had been approved for wilderness areas in 1921 as part of the indigenous

¹ Leopold, "The Last Stand of the Wilderness," *American Forests and Forest Life*, XXXI (1925), 600: "A national policy for the establishment of wilderness recreation grounds would in some instances be easy to put into operation if we act at once. The National Forests and Parks still contain a few splendid areas of relatively low value for other purposes, which could be readily segregated as roadless playgrounds. Wilderness areas in the National Forests would serve especially the wilderness-hunter, since hunting is not and should not be allowed in the Parks. On the other hand, wilderness areas in the National Parks would serve all kinds of wilderness lovers except the hunter. In general, I believe that both the Forest Service and the Park Service would be receptive to the wilderness idea, but neither can be expected to execute it with the vigor and despatch necessary to save the situation, unless they can point to a definite crystallized public demand for such action. The public being still largely unconscious that the end of the wild places is in sight, there is as yet no articulate public expression for or against the wilderness plan. Meanwhile the remaining wild areas in both the Forests and Parks are being pushed back by road construction at a very rapid rate--so rapid that unless something is done, the large areas of wilderness will mostly disappear within the next decade."

² *Ibid.*, pp. 599-604.