

Unspoiled Area Near Missoula Must Be Preserved as Wilderness

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The wildlands of the Upper Selway may soon be lost forever. Surveys for logging roads are in process, and construction of major access roads is already under way.

Conservationists must act now on this critical issue if they are to prevent logging and intensive development that would destroy the wilderness resources of this unique area — an area which from 1936 to 1963 was protected as part of the national forest primitive system.

On Jan. 11, 1963, Secretary of Agriculture Orville Freeman announced the reclassification of the Selway-Bitterroot Primitive Area. Portions of it were designated as wilderness, but one large central section — the 230,000 acres of the headwaters of the Selway River — was eliminated from such designation.

Conservationists had asked that protection of this section (Area E) as wilderness be continued. The U.S. Forest Service justified exclusion of Area E from protection by the existence of the Magruder Road, which traverses the broad corridor from east to west.

Values in Area E include watershed, recreation, wildlife, scientific study, history, and timber production; their relative importance is probably in the order mentioned.

Many Idaho and out-of-state hunters enjoy excellent elk hunting in a wilderness atmosphere that enhances the sport. Trout fishing in these virgin wildlands is also a rewarding experience. The Idaho Fish and Game Department has spent approximately one million dollars on the Selway to restore free passage of anadromous fish to the river's spawning grounds. In a recent news release the Department reports the completion of the fish tunnel at Selway Falls. Due to its clear, silt-free water, the Upper Selway could become one of the most productive chinook- and steelhead-spawning streams in the nation.

Statements of two scientists describe the special attributes of this area with regard to environmental research: Dr. Robert T. Orr, associate director of the California Academy of Sciences, in writing of the Selway watershed, says that "It is essentially a biological island because of its unglaciated condition, and as a result possesses a relict fauna as regards invertebrate organisms." Dr. Kelsey Milner of the Rocky Mountain Laboratory in Hamilton refers to the Upper Selway as a "... great biological museum, the only exhibit of pristine America in its class, big enough to include both highlands and lowlands and to give nature room to operate ..."

The only man-created disturbances in the area at the time of the reclassification and completed to date are a road built by the CCC, fire lookouts, and guard and ranger stations. Out of sight and sound of the road one is in an environment as primeval as that encountered by missionaries, goldseekers and trappers who followed the historic Southern Nez Perce Trail.

An account of some of the Indian trails in the Upper Selway has recently been prepared by Forest Ranger of Hamilton

to one in these same hearings, they failed to influence the decision.

Following declassification in 1963, the Forest Service published its multiple-use management plan for Area E. This included camp- and picnic-site development; roadside, streamside, and lakeside viewing areas; watershed protection; and harvest of 117,600 acres of timber.

With regard to the last point, timber values in Area E are marginal: Stands are of low quality and for the most part on precipitous terrain. The Forest Service proposes to avoid logging in the stream-influence zones, but the costs of any such special treatment would probably outweigh the economic benefits obtained from the timber itself.

Meanwhile, logging by present methods in the loose granitic soils of the region will produce geographic disfiguration, increase fluctuation of streamflow, and cause erosion and siltation detrimental to the area's multiple values.

Efforts of the Idaho Fish and Game Department to restore salmon-spawning in the area will probably be nullified, historic trails will be transected or obliterated, and much of the quality recreation potential will be destroyed by the overuse and abuse made possible by motorized access.

A 1956 study by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reveals that more than 3,000 out-of-state hunters came into the Selway country and other parts of the Clearwater Basin for big-game hunting. More than 90 per cent of these visitors traveled over 500 miles to reach the

area, and 70 per cent of them came from 1,000 miles. They averaged 11 hunter-days each on their trips.

Together with visits by some 12,500 Idaho hunters, a total of more than 120,000 hunter-days was spent in the Clearwater Basin, including the Selway Bitterroot Primitive Area, in that one year. Such use has increased tremendously since 1956, in ratio to the overall expansion of outdoor activities, confirming the importance of quality recreation in the area.

The Save - the - Upper - Selway Committee has requested congressional action to prohibit logging in Area E. It has also asked that wilderness boundaries be extended and the present corridor narrowed to include only the land immediately adjacent to the Magruder Road. The portion of Area E north of the road would thereby be

added to the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness and the portion south of the road added to the Salmon River Breaks Primitive Area awaiting reclassification. The Montana Wilderness Association, meeting in Great Falls last December, adopted a resolution with substantially the same content.

Other conservation groups and individuals must urge introduction of similar legislation by their representatives in Congress. As wilderness, the value of Area E is immeasurable; as a multiple-use development site, its value is questionable.

Congressional action will provide opportunity for full review of the issues and values concerned. To save this unique resource, write your senators and representatives immediately, requesting them to introduce an Upper Selway Wilderness Bill.

