

WHY FOCUS ON WILDERNESS?^{1WS}

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For many people, watching and searching for signs of wildlife contributes immensely to the value of their wilderness experience. Hiking a wilderness trail imagining that a grizzly bear awaits at every turn, hearing the first birds sing in the spring, and searching the forest understory for snakes and salamanders are heart-filling experiences for many wilderness visitors. Wildlife species also contribute to the functioning of wilderness ecosystems, through actions such as seed dispersal, germination, and fertilization. Many wildlife species could not persist in the face of human development without broad expanses of wilderness, and if wilderness areas are too small, species such as the wolf, grizzly, and wolverine disappear from the landscape. Because the persistence of many wildlife species depends on the presence of wilderness, and areas outside wilderness are undergoing increasing developmental pressure, conservation biologists question whether the current distribution of wilderness will allow for the long-term viability of native wildlife species. Questions about the amount and distribution of wilderness needed for wildlife conservation are based on an assumption that wilderness in itself is sufficient refuge for species adversely affected by development. However, there are many threats to wildlife within wilderness, including recreation, pollution, and altered disturbance regimes. While wildlife management is one of the more complex and controversial aspects of overall wilderness administration, it receives relatively little attention. Being explicit about the contribution of wilderness to wildlife conservation, and the threats within and around wilderness, can help biologists and wilderness managers identify gaps in the conservation of wilderness-dependent species.