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Kill Proposal, Not Wildlife

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As we head into the final two years of the Bush administration, it is clear that its plan for dismantling nature includes the wanton destruction of wildlife and wildness in the wildest places.

A prime example: the recently proposed U.S. Forest Service rule that would allow for the expanded trapping, poisoning and aerial gunning of bears, bobcats, coyotes, foxes, mountain lions, wolves and other animals in federally designated wilderness areas and research natural areas.

The plan, open to public comment through Sept. 5, is morally perverse and biologically unsound.

If adopted, this rule would increase the killing of predators in wilderness areas. The use of M44 sodium-cyanide devices that blast a lethal dose of poison when bitten, aerial gunning, and denning—the killing of pups in or extracted from dens— would be allowed.

So would the use of motorized equipment like helicopters and all-terrain vehicles to accomplish the killing. The Wilderness Act prohibits the use of motorized equipment and mechanical transport, in part to provide opportunities for solitude.

Imagine lying in a pristine mountain meadow in your favorite wilderness area enjoying the peace and tranquility of wild nature when a helicopter swoops low, and a gunner hanging out of the open door blasts a coyote. Far fetched? Not if this proposed rule is adopted!

Decision authority for killing predators and the use of motorized equipment in wilderness areas would be delegated to ill-defined local collaborative groups.

Wilderness and research natural area designations offer the highest level of protection for nature and nature-based recreation on our American public lands. Activities that degrade wilderness or natural area ecosystems or wilderness experiences should be allowed only in rare circumstances that are clearly emergencies or where human safety is a factor.

The authority for making such decisions is properly placed at the Regional Forester level to minimize such exceptions. Such decisions should not be delegated to some local group that could be stacked in favor of interests that are opposed to wilderness and nature protection.

Scientific research shows that predators are essential to the health of ecosystems. Recently, we have witnessed the return of cottonwoods, willows, and beavers to the streams of Yellowstone National Park following the return of wolves. These changes beget other changes in a cascade of ecological effects leading to increased biological diversity and stability and health of the ecosystem.

To provide this important service, predators must be allowed to exist at "ecologically effective" levels, which loosely translate to natural levels. The removal of predators could

lead to a reverse cascade of effects which would simplify and degrade wild ecosystems. Wilderness areas and research natural areas are places where nature should be allowed to operate on its own natural, self-willed terms.

The proposed policy changes are philosophically and legally incompatible with the purposes of the Wilderness Act to preserve and protect lands in the National Wilderness Preservation System in their "natural condition."

The Wilderness Act, passed by Congress in 1964, establishes a policy of administering and protecting these lands for "the use and enjoyment of the American people in such a manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness." Wilderness areas are recognized by the Act as areas "where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man." Congress clearly intended that these lands would remain wild.

Conservationists including sportsmen feel strongly that the proposed rule would have significant impacts on the ecological integrity and recreational value of wilderness and research natural areas and the safety of people, and their pets and hunting dogs.

We are astonished that the U.S. Forest Service considers this proposal to be appropriate and consistent with the purposes of the Wilderness Act.

This proposal is not supported by science; rather, it appears to be politically driven and designed to appease and benefit select interests. This is not in the best interest of our National Forests or the American people who love and respect wild lands and wild nature.

Wildlife is part of nature; it is at the heart of the wilderness experience. Mountain lions, wolves, bears, and foxes contribute to stability in nature; their presence is a gift we should cherish and protect. Let us have the maturity, compassion, and generosity of spirit as civilized people to respect their right to share the Earth, especially in our public wild lands.

This proposal should be immediately withdrawn by the Forest Service and never again see the light of day.

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