



God's Gift of a Wild And Wonderful Land



A Christian Declaration on the Spiritual Values of West Virginia's Monongahela National Forest

sponsored by

Christians for the Mountains
Christians Caring for Creation
Commission on Religion in Appalachia
The Religious Campaign for Wilderness
National Religious Coalition on Creation Care
United Methodist Appalachian Ministries
West Virginia Council of Churches

June 15, 2006



A Prayer for Wilderness

“O Lord, our Lord, How majestic is Your name in all the earth!
You have set your glory above the heavens” (Psalm 8:1).

O God, thank you for Your wilderness
and for the many blessings which pour forth
from Your untrammelled creation.

In wild places, You speak, even to me, just as You did
with our Lord and the prophets and saints of old,
and You give me hope through the renewal
that You show in wilderness.

As I pray in this wild and wonderful place,
with its rushing stream and brilliant colors,
perhaps I glimpse something of the world
as You created it.

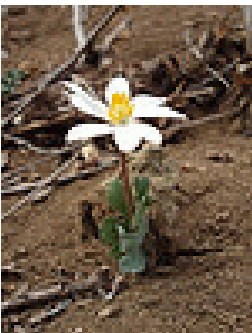
And here I know that You call on me
to protect and preserve what remains of wilderness,
to nurture and expand it, to find my own renewal in the wild.

You have made us to have dominion over all your works,
You have put all things under our feet.

O Lord, help us to be faithful to this lofty commission.
Help us to steward this gift of Your wonderful creation,
And to save some of this beautiful land
for generations of West Virginians yet unborn.

Please help us to treat your good earth as you would treat it!
“O Lord, how excellent is your name in all the earth” (Psalm 8:9).

Amen

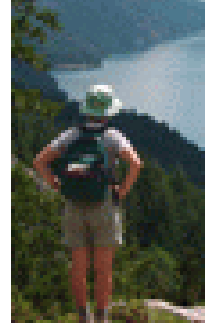


God's Gift of a Wild and Wonderful Land

*And Jesus withdrew himself
into the wilderness and prayed*

Luke 5:16

THE FOLLOWING INSIGHTS DERIVE FROM THE EXPERIENCES and reflections that participants acquired while in the Seneca Creek area of the Monongahela National Forest. They are extracted from rough notes that were recorded around campfires and in frequent discussion times along the trail.



We acknowledge redundancies, overlap and missing elements. Wilderness is too vast and too rich to identify all of its spiritual meanings. The following statement represents basic Christian principles about wilderness and our human spiritual need that emerged from our time of prayer, reflection and wilderness experience on a weekend hike from Spruce Knob down to Seneca Creek during mid-June, 2006. We have added Scriptural citations to show that these insights are not new, but elaborations of ancient although often overlooked Biblical themes.

*O Lord, how wonderful are
your works! In wisdom have
you made them all. The
whole earth is full of your
riches.*

Psalm 104:24

In Wilderness we learn about God

When we leave the crowds of town and city and enter the quiet and peace of wild places, the deep questions of human life rise to the surface. Away from cell phones and computers and the commotion of hurried lives, we find solitude and sense intimations of eternity – even immortality.

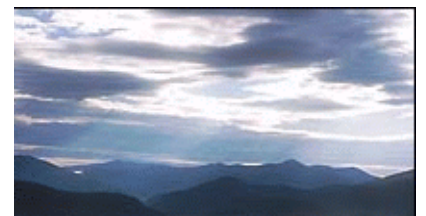
In wilderness we find opportunities for reflection. We more easily focus on values and the basic questions of human purpose that are easily obscured when our lives are surrounded by an overload of distractions. All around us, wilderness declares the eternity and the infinity of God. Wilderness nurtures deep thought and spiritual awareness.

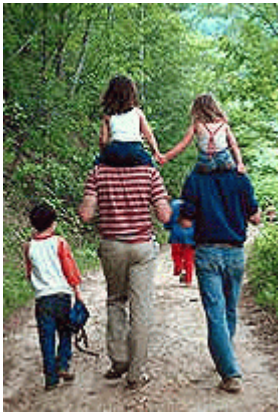
*The visible world is like a
map pointing to heaven...
We learn to see the Creator
by contemplating the beauty
of his creatures.*

- Pope John Paul II

*For since the creation of the world, God's
invisible qualities, his eternal power and divine
nature have been clearly seen, being
understood from what has been made, so that
men are without excuse.*

Romans 1:20





Wilderness cultivates community

In wilderness people cooperate to meet the challenges of existence. We realize our need for each other. Our requirements become simple. We reduce our wants down to essentials. We learn frugality, moderation, and sharing.

When gratefulness to God is added to the wilderness experience, the simple things that we have suddenly become enough. A community of necessity forms out of the need to work together and to cooperate. As we share our spiritual insights and experiences, the bonds of fellowship grow stronger. Deep and enduring personal connections are formed. Old bonds are renewed.

*We used to hold sweet converse together;
within God's house we walked in fellowship.*

Psalm 55:14

*Behold, I am doing a
new thing; now it
springs forth, do you not
perceive it? I will
make a way in the
wilderness and rivers in
the desert.*

Isaiah 43:19



Wilderness is God's gift of creation undefiled

Without wilderness, we lose a reminder of what creation is like in its pristine condition.

In the beginning God called His creation good – even “very good!” Without some wildness, people are impoverished in their ability to know God. We discern the qualities of the Creator through the things which God has made. To experience the depths of wilderness, we have to let go and relinquish control.

The witness of creation is a witness of the Lord. A natural therapy for tired bodies and weary spirits shines forth through natural places. Nature's therapy brings restoration, re-creation, even regeneration. These are among God's many gifts to humanity through wilderness, a gift which needs to be preserved and protected. This is a duty that we all share.

*The wilderness and the solitary place shall
be glad for them; and the desert shall
rejoice and blossom as the rose. It shall
blossom abundantly and rejoice with joy
and singing..., and they shall see the glory
of the Lord and the excellency of our God!*

Isaiah 35:1-2

*Away, away, from men
and towns,
To the wild woods and the
downs – To the silent
wilderness
Where the soul need not
repress Its music, lest it
should not find an echo in
another's mind, while the
touch of Nature's art
Harmonizes heart to heart.*

- Percy Bysshe Shelley

In Wilderness we cleanse our minds and spirits

The clean air, the cold water, the quiet of trees, the moist earth and everything in between help us to clarify our thinking so that we can open to God and the nature of creation. Our senses slowly awaken. Busy minds quiet and relax. Attitudes change. The rhythm of our days and nights, our work and rest, take a cue from the natural world.

Through the cultivation of quiet, unexpected realizations often emerge. Wilderness holds many surprises for the person who seeks God with intentionality. We are renewed by God's presence and a peace that transcends understanding.

And be not conformed to this world, but be you transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God.

Romans 12:2

Wilderness nurtures a sense of beauty and traditional values

A deep and satisfying beauty dwells in wild nature – in contrast with the often superficial human effort to put on glamour. Wilderness is a place where young people learn to camp and fish, to hunt and absorb the outdoor skills and values that formed West Virginia. Around the campfire young folks and old can hear stories about bears and maybe the wolves and elk of old. They learn respect for the past and sense the wonder of these mountains. They come to appreciate the beauty of the land. When we return to our lives elsewhere, we are fortified in our sense of God and His goodness. Then we know that the beauty of the land is a reflection of the beauty of the Lord.

One thing have I desired of the Lord, and that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, and to behold the beauty of the Lord...

Psalms 27:4

We Christians have a responsibility to take the lead in caring for the earth.

- Rev Billy Graham



Without enough wilderness, America will change. Democracy, with its myriad personalities and increasing sophistication, must be fibred and vitalized by regular contact with outdoor growths – animals, trees, sun warmth, and free skies – or it will dwindle and pale.

- Ralph Waldo Emerson



Wilderness teaches humility

The mountains are big and we are small. Surrounded by wildness, we experience God's immense creation as majestic yet intricate in its uncountable details.

Under a canopy of stars and clouds, surrounded by an almost endless stretch of trees and hills, we are astounded at the designs, the beauty and the marvels of creation. We learn that we are not in control.

We realize how great is the Maker of all these things and in comparison how puny and passing are our human creations. We develop new respect and awe for what God has created.

*Hearken unto this, O Job.
Stand still and consider the wondrous
works of God.*

Job 37:14

*In wilderness I sense the
miracle of life, and behind
it our scientific
accomplishments fade to
trivia.*

Charles A. Lindbergh

Wilderness presents contrasting choices

Nature hides subtle yet opposing visions. The simple pace of wilderness quiets our hearts and minds. We peer more perceptively into the issues of God and creation and human culture. Our priorities are called into focus. We are reminded of the choices anciently presented to Adam and Eve. We may choose to obey God and enter into a sacred vision in which His presence sustains all life. This vision carries a responsibility to respect what God has made, to treat all things with love, care and a nurturing touch. In this vision God is the center of creation. Nature is a teacher and a healer. If we love God, we obey his commandments; His grace and supply nurture our lives through the bounty of creation.

In contrast there is another vision – a darker, more grasping way to see the world. In this utilitarian view, nature is merely a storehouse of natural resources, of timber, metals and raw resources. In this materialist vision, we get for ourselves while the getting is good. Greed and selfish desires dominate our use of the land. God is not part of this picture. We become hardened and separated from our neighbors.

The choices before Adam and Eve are still the choices that we face. The way we choose between these alternative ways of seeing and being shapes who and what we become.

*I have set before you life and death,
blessing and cursing; therefore choose life
that both you and your children may live.*

Deuteronomy 30:19



Recommendations for Action

As a result of these insights about wilderness, and especially because wilderness is fast disappearing, we make the following recommendations for the care and permanent keeping of the special wild places in the Monongahela National Forest.

*** Take the time to visit West Virginia's wild places**

You cannot properly appreciate the spiritual values of wilderness from inside a town or city. Take time to visit a wild area. All wild areas can provide rejuvenation and inspiration, especially when approached with reverence for its Maker.

*** Love what God has created**

Respect for the land cultivates an attitude that is thankful to God and careful in its use of the good earth. All things can be used, but nothing should be abused. As stewards of God's earth, we are called to protect the integrity of creation.

*** Encourage others into greater respect for wilderness**

Teach others to enter into a caring regard for creation. Tell clergy about the many reasons to care for wilderness. Hold discussions about the many benefits of wilderness to the community.

*** Bring young people and youth groups into wilderness**

Young people especially need the formative experiences that wild places provide. They will learn the importance of discipline, cooperation, community and right attitude through experiences in wild places.

*** Seek to preserve, protect and expand wilderness**

Think of the future. Wilderness is a form of tithe, a setting aside of what is God's for the benefit of others yet unborn. They too will need to experience the beauties of creation undefiled by the heavy hand of technology and development.

*** Protect the beauty of the land undefiled**

With pride in the works of the Creator and gratitude for the beauty of these wild and wonderful mountains, people of faith should stand up and protect these remaining wild areas for future generations to enjoy.

*** Expand wilderness in West Virginia**

For wilderness to expand, we need to protect those public lands which are suitable for wilderness designation. There are numerous appropriate areas in the Monongahela National Forest, including Seneca Creek, Spice Run, Dolly Sods, Big Draft and the East Fork of the Greenbrier. Let us protect them all.

*** Remember that wilderness protection is service to God and country.**

We honor the Creator and remember our nation's historical journey by preserving wild places. Our ancestors faced the wilderness. The challenge of the mountains shaped West Virginia and gave its people a self-reliant character. This same experience imbued America and all her citizens with vigor, vitality and virtue.

Endorsements

Since this wilderness statement was adopted in 2006, both of the U.S. Senators from West Virginia endorsed this effort. Their support plus the hundreds of churches and individuals who supported this effort helped to pass legislation to make this area a federally designated wilderness area.

A lesson here is that the support of religious organizations can sometimes be vital to efforts to support wilderness. When legislators see that Main Street religious organizations support a measure, they listen with keen intent as that is often the backbone of citizen sentiment.

Thanks to all who helped to make this a successful effort. If you wish to support this effort, please list your organization below. Please include a contact telephone number.

Permission is granted to republish and circulate this statement.
Please return this completed endorsement sheet to

Bob Marshall
The Religious Campaign for Wilderness
886-Z Divide Ridge Road
Kenna, WV

Thank you.