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Title

The Wild Sky Wilderness Proposal: Politics, Process, and Participation in Wilderness Designation

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Document Type

Open Access

Degree Program

Geography

Degree Type

Master of Science (M.S.)

Year Degree Awarded

January 2008

Month Degree Awarded

May

Keywords

Wilderness, Washington State, National Forests, Local Participation, Political Ecology, Conservation

Abstract

Wild Sky, a proposed wilderness in Washington State, has been a source of local contention since its inception. Drawing on the theories of political ecology, international conservation, and actor-based politics, this research seeks to understand the process of public participation in wilderness designation, the arguments both for and against Wild Sky, and how the wilderness proposal process could be improved. The paper begins with an outline of local and public participation in Wild Sky legislation, a discussion of "community," and an account of how the 1964 Wilderness Act has been applied nationally and locally. This is followed by an analysis of interviews conducted with Forest Service employees and many of Wild Sky's proponents and opponents. Advocates hope Wild Sky will boost the local economy, rehabilitate salmon runs, provide increased recreational access, and preserve an ecosystem typically excluded from wilderness – lowland forests and streams. Opponents see the proposal as an elite land grab that would exclude motorized recreation and prohibit the resource extraction historically important in the area. They argue that the land, logged a century ago, does not qualify as wilderness. Ultimately, the Forest Service will be charged with managing the land, but the Wild Sky legislation creates management expectations that will be difficult to achieve due to recent budget cuts and environmental regulations.

My research demonstrates that the lead actors in the wilderness debate have changed, with the voice of the timber industry replaced by more diverse opposition from motorized recreation. Although the Washington Congressional delegation strove to accommodate these various interests through public meetings and negotiations, the process could have been improved. Currently, the 1964 Wilderness Act does not outline a format for public involvement regarding Congressional additions to the National Wilderness Preservation System. However, this legislation should offer specific opportunities for public and local participation. Most importantly, in collaboration with the Forest Service and local communities, wilderness advocates and the federal government must be prepared to offer long-term support for wilderness through budget allocations and volunteer hours in order to ensure that Wild Sky's long-term ecological and economic benefits are achieved.

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