

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
West Virginia Council of Churches
Christians for the Mountains
Christians Caring for Creation
Commission on Religion in Appalachia
The Religious Campaign for Wilderness
United Methodist Appalachian Ministries
Catholic Committee of Appalachia
World Stewardship Institute



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 mad 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



God's Gift of a Wild and Wonderful Land

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. 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.

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.

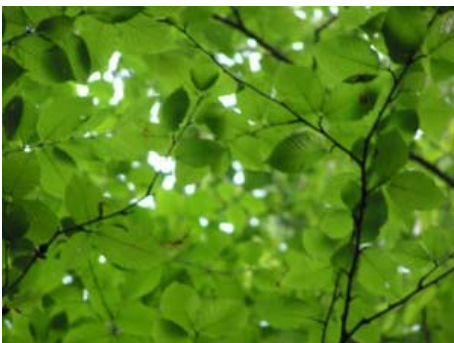


In wilderness we find opportunities for reflection. We more easily focus on values and the basic questions of human purpose that are easily obscured when our lives are surrounded by an overload of distractions. All around us, wilderness declares the eternity and the infinity of God. Wilderness nurtures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

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.



And Jesus withdrew himself into the wilderness and prayed

Luke 5:16

Wilderness is God's gift of creation undefiled



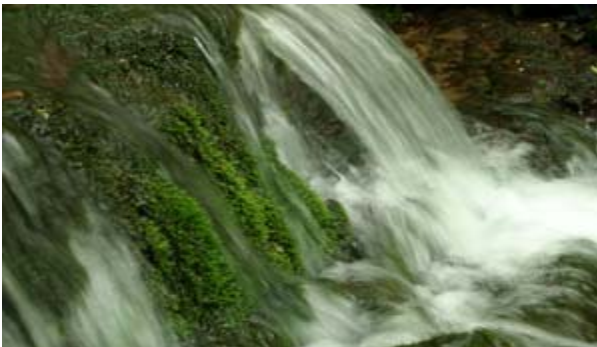
Without wilderness, we lose a reminder of what creation is like in its pristine condition. In the beginning God called His creation good – even “very good!” Without some wildness, people are impoverished in their ability to know God. We discern the qualities of the Creator through the things which God 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.

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.



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

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.



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

The wilderness and the solidarity place shall be glad for them; and 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



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 the 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 vision, there is no concern or thought for stewardship and caring for the land. This vision neglects long term care in favor of short term profit and can have disastrous effects on the wilderness and its values. By protecting wild lands, we are being good stewards and ensuring that others will have the same opportunities and resources we have today.



Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord
God of Hosts, The whole
earth is full of His glory.

Isaiah 6:3

Recommendations for Action

As a result of these insights about the spiritual values of 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 River. 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.



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

The Reverend Billy Graham

Endorsements



I have read the foregoing statement on the spiritual values of wilderness. I wish to support its Christian conclusion and its call to the people of West Virginia to preserve and protect these special areas in the Monongahela National Forest.

Please sign your full name, the name of the church you attend, plus the town or city where you live. Thank you for your support.

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

Dr. Bob Marshall
Christians for the Mountains
868-Z Divide Ridge Road
Kenna, WV 25248

Thank You.