

# Protecting the Endangered Blank Spots on Maps: The Wilderness Names Policy of the United States Board on Geographic Names

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The policy of the United States Board on Geographic Names of discouraging new name proposals for formally designated wilderness areas embodies a radical concept: creating name-restricted zones to protect a specific, culturally defined characteristic of an area. This article traces the evolution and rationale of this policy and, using case studies, examines some of the implications and practicalities of its implementation.

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I am glad I shall never be young  
without wild country to be young in.  
Of what avail are forty freedoms  
without a blank spot on the map?

*Sketches Here and There*

Aldo Leopold

A blank spot on the map—who would have thought such a thing precious? But things acquire value through scarcity, and some things, like innocence, are never reclaimed once lost.

Because wilderness is associated with landscapes void of names, the United States Board on Geographic Names (USBGN) has, since 1985, implemented a policy rejecting new name proposals for federal lands designated or proposed as wilderness. As stated in *Principles, Policies, and Procedures*, the Board's operating manual (Orth and Payne 1997):

Within wilderness areas, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names will not approve proposed names for unnamed features, names in local use but not published on a base series map, or unpublished administrative names used by administering agencies, unless an overriding need exists, such as for purposes of safety, education, or area administration.

A second section of the manual discourages proposals for commemorative names in wilderness areas, while a third states: "All new proposals involving wilderness areas must meet the same basic criteria required of any other names proposal."

In the years since its formulation, the wilderness names policy has frustrated scores of name proponents and remains a persistent issue at USBGN meetings, despite the strong support the policy enjoys among both the public and the federal agencies charged with administering it. Furthermore, the bureaucratic language of *Principles, Policies, and Procedures* obscures a truly radical concept: that the policy creates name-free zones, a policy of exclusion adopted by no other sovereign state or official names authority. How appropriate, for setting aside areas as wilderness also was a radical concept at the time the first wilderness area was designated.

#### The Wilderness Area Concept

Aldo Leopold is regarded as the father of wildlife ecology, the notion of an ecological ethic, and the world's first wilderness area. In 1924 Leopold, a former Gila National Forest ranger, led the movement that persuaded Congress to create the vast Gila Wilderness in southwest New Mexico. Never before anywhere had a society restricted human use of land simply to protect its natural wildness. Yellowstone National Park had been set aside in 1876 to protect its scenic and natural wonders, but not just its wilderness characteristics.

Even into the twentieth century, wilderness preservation was a radical concept. Many people then living had helped "conquer the West." To protect wilderness was like protecting wolves! Or protecting the air and water or passenger pigeons or the American bison—they were inexhaustible! But by the 1920s, decades of rapine and the consequences—forest fires, denuded watersheds, catastrophic floods, precipitous wildlife declines and even extinctions—had led sensitive observers to conclude that wilderness was indeed finite, and that it needed human protection.

Since then, public support for—and use of—wilderness has grown steadily. In 1964 the U.S. Congress passed the Wilderness Act, setting up a national system of wilderness areas.

Today, four federal agencies—the Forest Service, the National Park Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Bureau of Land Management—administer 624 wilderness areas (in 1998), totaling more

than 100 million acres. A Congressional Research Service report (Gorte 1994) tallied:

Nearly 6 percent of all land in the U.S.—and 20 percent of all Federal land—has been designated or recommended as wilderness. More than 55 percent of the designated wilderness and 37 percent of the recommended wilderness, however, is in Alaska. In contrast, less than 4 percent of the U.S. land outside Alaska has been designated as or recommended for wilderness. Of the Lower 48 states with significant wilderness, most are in the West, though of all 50 states only Connecticut, Iowa, Kansas, and Rhode Island have no Federal lands designated as or recommended for wilderness.

What qualifies these lands as wilderness? The 1964 Wilderness Act defined wilderness as:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain....

Keeping blank spots on wilderness maps is implicit in this definition.

#### The USBGN's Wilderness Names Policy Evolution

The National Park Service first broached the issue. According to the USBGN Diary (Orth 1990), it was at the Board's April 5, 1951 meeting that the Park Service "expressed opposition to naming any natural feature in Mount McKinley National Park unless absolutely necessary, because 'the Park is virgin country.'" Placenames became violators. But then no park could better appreciate the consequences of an inappropriate name than McKinley, named in 1917 for the continent's highest summit. It is a majestic mountain that bears the name that a disgruntled miner gave to honor a U.S. Senator from Ohio who championed the prospector's views on the free silver issue (anyone remember that?). Recognizing the mismatch, Mount McKinley National Park and Denali National Monument (1978) were combined in 1980, and incorporated as Denali National Park and Preserve. The mountain, however, is still McKinley and likely will remain so as long as Ohio has congressional representatives.

The Park Service's USBGN admonition was strengthened by the 1964 Wilderness Act, whose wilderness definition made it abundantly

clear that geographic names bear “the imprint of man’s work” and thus detract from the region’s wilderness character. Later, the Board echoed the Wilderness Act when it stated in *Principles, Policies, and Procedures* (Orth and Payne 1997, 16):

Though wilderness designations are a modern invention, a fundamental characteristic of elemental wilderness is that features are nameless and the cultural overlay of civilization is absent. No wilderness is today totally free of placenames and cultural artifacts, but a goal of Federal wilderness area administration is to minimize the impacts and traces of people.

In 1985 the Board formally adopted its Wilderness Names Policy, discouraging new names in wilderness areas. But the core issue persists: Do names trammel the untrammelled?

#### Names on the Land—Moccasin or Lug Sole

Placenames, abstract constructs of language and culture, ironically have the power to effect physical damage in a wilderness area. That is because placenames attract people. A placename almost by definition proclaims that something is at the place. Some names are stronger attractors than others: *Treasure Canyon*, *Massacre Hill*, *Mystery Spring*, *Anasazi Canyon*, *Sacred Arch*, *Cutthroat Lake*, and *Buck-naked Hot Spring*.

In a wilderness area, to label a place is to invite visitors. For this reason names of caves are not released from the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) database. Indeed, the names of wilderness areas themselves have powerful magnetism, e.g., *Superstition Mountains*, *Apache Kid*, *Indian Peaks*, and *Eagles Nest*. Nor can it be denied that names, through their color and history, often enhance rather than detract from some wilderness experiences. Leopold himself likely would have opposed expunging from the Gila Wilderness such names as *Wild Horse Mesa*, *Adobe Canyon*, and *Apache Spring*. But as Roger Payne, current Executive Secretary of the USBGN, points out (2000), none of these names would be affected in any way by the Wilderness Names Policy, which applies only to new name proposals, not to existing names nor to name changes (2000). Rather, the issue is whether new names should be allowed.

Dave Foreman (2000), nationally recognized wilderness activist, chair of the Wildlands Project, and publisher of *Wild Earth*, invokes Leopold in supporting the Wilderness Names Policy:

That was his original idea in establishing the Gila Wilderness—keeping alive the sense of the frontier, the geography of the frontier. And that implies areas where not every feature is named.

Foreman recalls that Bob Marshall, the legendary head of the U.S. Forest Service and passionate lover of wilderness, gravitated to the Brooks Range in Alaska, “because that was the last place he could go without names” (2000). To simulate the experience of namelessness in densely named terrain, Foreman occasionally hikes without a map, giving the features he encounters names personal to him. “It’s important for people to create their own geography. That’s part of what wilderness is” (2000).

Dr. Bob Howard, another longtime wilderness activist, current chair of the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, former national Sierra Club board member and vice president, with his wife, Dr. Philenore Howard, Wilderness Society Environmental Hero of Year 2000, also supports the Wilderness Names Policy. “The general policy of few, if any, new names in wilderness areas is an appropriate one” (2000). He says technology is eroding the geographic reference value of placenames. “In these days of locational satellites and Global Positioning Systems (GPS), there’s no particular need to have new names. It contributes to the wilderness concept not to have every feature named” (2000). Howard says such names as appear in wilderness areas should be ones that sprang from local usage or history.

### Case Study: Mount Blaurock

When Coloradan Carl Blaurock died in 1993, at the age of 99, it was inevitable that someone would propose naming a mountain to commemorate him, because for decades he had symbolized Colorado mountaineering. Two years later, Lowell P. Forbes and Eric Whisenhunt, of Littleton, Colorado, formally proposed the name *Mount Blaurock* for an unnamed peak in Colorado’s Sawatch Range. They described Blaurock as “one of Colorado’s extraordinary early mountain climbers, a legendary mountain climbing figure....” (1995). Also, the peak they proposed was in a region Blaurock had visited often. Furthermore, the peak was near Mount Jackson, south of Mount Holy Cross. The photographer William Henry Jackson, the first person to photograph Mount Holy Cross, had been Blaurock’s personal friend. What could be more appropriate than putting the two friends together in the mountains they loved? But the peak is within the Holy Cross Wilderness in the White River National Forest.

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The proposal had broad popular support in Colorado, but the Eagle County Commissioners, the Colorado State Names Authority, and regional forester Elizabeth Estill recommended against the proposal, citing the USBGN's Wilderness Names Policy. In her letter (1995) to Congressman Dan Schaefer, of Englewood, Colorado, Estill said her Forest Service's Wilderness Management Philosophy notes the "'mystical dimensions of the wilderness experience.' Part of this mystical dimension for wilderness travelers is knowing that they are in a place where most features do not have names, where 'solitude and simplicity' prevail."

By a three to two vote, the USBGN rejected the *Mount Blaurock* proposal.

### The "C" word—Commemorative

Roger Payne has lived with the Wilderness Names Policy since its inception. He has observed that most wilderness name controversies arise from the same source as most non-wilderness name controversies: commemorative names (2000).

Commemorative names are the names toponymists love to hate. Indeed, who would not relish despising such grotesqueries as Peak of the Proletariat Press in the Pamir Mountains in Central Asia and Executive Committee Range in Antarctica?

The USBGN constantly fights the guerilla warfare waged by well-meaning but misguided commemorators. The Board's Commemorative Names Policy is one weapon, and as unnamed features are most likely found in wilderness, the Wilderness Names Policy is another powerful weapon. The likelihood of inappropriate commemorative names is why at least one historian supports the policy. Robert R. White, former New Mexico Historical Society president and longtime New Mexico Geographic Names Committee member, says: "Any name proposed [for a wilderness area] would not likely be related historically to the feature. Instead we'd get political names, like Martin Luther King and César Chavez. The time has passed when it would be useful to apply historical names. Any names applied now would likely be politically motivated" (2000). The USBGN dockets indeed show most wilderness names proposals to be commemorative, not necessarily political in a governmental sense but definitely on someone's agenda.

Yet curiously, the very inappropriateness of many commemorative names in one instance has inspired a sort of toponymic pre-emptive strike.

### Case Study: The Yellowstone Waterfalls

Until recently, the conventional wisdom was that Yellowstone National Park had about 50 waterfalls, all named. But Lee Whittlesey, Paul Rubinstein, and Mike Stevens knew the park included far more than that, so they set out to find them. They found 230. They also knew that as the waterfalls' first documentors, the naming prerogative was theirs—and they felt bound to exercise it.

Many people felt the falls should be left unnamed, for the reasons cited in the Wilderness Names Policy. But Whittlesey, historian, Yellowstone Park archivist, and author of *Yellowstone Place Names*, believed the waterfalls would not remain unnamed forever, and he also feared the features likely would attract inappropriate commemorative names. He felt that he and his co-discoverers at least knew the history and traditions of naming in Yellowstone, and would honor the best of them.

As of this writing in May 2000, the Yellowstone waterfall names have not been submitted to the USBGN.

### A Leaking Dam—and the Innominate Phenomenon

Whittlesey, as a wilderness hiker (he has traversed every trail in Yellowstone National Park), understands the appeal of unnamed regions, but he says names, like water leaking from a dam, always find a way. As he explains in the introduction to *The Guide to Yellowstone Waterfalls and their Discovery* (Rubenstein 2000):

With regard to the giving of names, we understand that there are some wilderness advocates who truly hate the idea of names in wilderness areas and who truly love the idea of large spaces on maps where there are no names. While we sympathize with this idea in theory, there are a number of reality-based reasons why historians recognize that it will not and cannot work.

One reason Whittlesey cites is the perverse irony that choosing not to name a feature sometimes is in itself a kind of naming, as with Yellowstone's *No Name Creek*. Actually, the temptation to be clever with a name seems universal, and so are “No Name” names. The GNIS lists 106 in the U.S., not including such variations as *Sin Nombre*, *Unnamed*, and *Innominate*. It is an international phenomenon: the Himalayan Trango Towers include the Nameless Tower, among the spires of Patagonia is Torre Innominate, and in the Dauphine Alps of France is the Pic Sans Nom.

Referring to Yellowstone, Whittlesey also says that discouraging names “goes against the entire history of the American West” (2000). Actually, western namers are only manifesting a more universal imperative, because placenames are fundamental to how humans interact with the landscape, how we define places, GPS units notwithstanding. As Kelsie Harder summarized, “It is almost a commonplace that a place with no name is not a place” (1976). In his introduction to *Yellowstone Place Names*, Whittlesey agrees with Mark Wexler, who said the human psychological makeup “cannot tolerate a place without a name” (1978).

In Yellowstone Park, Whittlesey says, even park rangers passionate about wilderness nonetheless bestow names upon the features they visit and administer, because names are the simplest and most widely accepted geographic references. Like Foreman, the park rangers create a “personal geography,” complete with names. But sometimes those personal and administrative names leak into common usage and become accepted. And this raises the issue of just how blank are some of the areas on maps.

#### Case Study: Mount Barker

In 1991 Wiley Barker of California proposed renaming 11,180-foot Spring Mountain in the Pecos Wilderness to honor his uncle, Elliott Barker, who had recently died at the age of 101. No person could have been more intimately or memorably connected with the Pecos country than Elliott Barker, who grew up on a ranch there, wrote books and articles about his wilderness experiences, and as longtime state game warden and conservation leader, was mainly responsible for restoring elk and other extirpated wild species to the wilderness.

Because of the Wilderness Names Policy, renaming Spring Mountain was out of the question, but the public was demanding that some mountain honor not just Elliott Barker but the entire illustrious Barker family.

The solution seemed simple: find an unnamed summit outside the wilderness. And indeed, nearby was a supposedly unnamed height that at 11,455 feet was even taller than Spring Mountain. But the local Hispanic population, whose families had grazed cattle in the mountains since long before the Pecos National Forest or the wilderness were created, claimed the height had an unrecorded Spanish name. In fact, they said, all the features there had Spanish names, English maps notwithstanding.



A compromise eventually was found, but the effort illustrated just how rare is a truly unnamed feature, especially in areas within traditional territories of non-English-speaking populations, such as Native American tribes, who characteristically name almost all features, yet whose tribal names rarely appear on maps.

#### Safety, Education, or Area Administration

The USBGN does occasionally approve new-name proposals in wilderness areas, and the most common reason is the policy's clause: "unless an overriding need exists, such as for purposes of safety, education, or area administration." It is a difficult call, especially when opinion is split among agencies and interests. Did *Mount Blaurock* have sufficient educational value to warrant a Wilderness Names Policy exemption? The Colorado Historical Society said yes, the Forest Service said no. Payne agrees the "education" criterion is ambiguous: "Does the name educate about the person being honored, the wilderness area, or both?" (2000).

Such conflicts regularly occur with the safety issue as well. Search-and-rescue groups tend to say that names are useful as geographical references, wilderness advocates say advancing technology is even more useful.

#### Wilderness Values Versus Cultural Values

Ultimately, the conflict in values implicit in the USBGN's Wilderness Names Policy may be irreconcilable. Certainly, no one with the Board expects that controversial wilderness name proposals will cease, especially as the Board considers all name proposals on a case-by-case basis. And it is perhaps a tribute to the complexity and universality of placenames that each person brings their own perspective to them.

Shifting perspectives. They bring to mind the briefing federal land managers now often give to their wilderness volunteers. "Remember, pick up aluminum cans—but not tin ones," they admonish. "Those are now cultural artifacts and not to be removed."

Tin cans—artifacts? Who would have thought it? Like preserving land just to keep it wild. Or protecting blank spots on the map.

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