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Wildlands project visionary, but ultimately infeasible



A group of ecologists and environmentalists, frustrated by the inability of the existing reserve and park system to adequately preserve biodiversity, has banded together to create an ambitious plan for the long-term conservation of North America's native species.

The Wildlands Project, short for the North American Wilderness Recovery Project, is a plan to establish a continentwide network of wildlife reserves connected by wildlife corridors and buffered from human development and activity.

The Wildlands Project mission statement declares, "We are called to our task by the failure of existing wilderness, parks and wildlife refuges to adequately protect life in North America. While these areas preserve landscapes of spectacular scenery and areas ideally suited to non-mechanized forms of recreation, they are too small, too isolated and represent too few types of ecosystems to perpetuate the biodiversity of the continent."

The Wildlands Project is based on the creation of regional wilderness recovery networks, which would preserve the biodiversity of particular regions. Core reserves, biological corridors and buffer zones are the

building blocks for the regional wilderness recovery networks.

The mission statement continues, "Present reserves — parks, wilderness, refuges — exist as discrete islands of natural areas; we seek to develop a system of large, wild core reserves where biodiversity and ecological processes dominate. Core reserves would be linked by biological corridors to allow for the natural dispersal of wide-ranging species, for genetic exchange between populations, and for migration of organisms in response to climate change.

"Buffers would be established around core reserves and corridors to protect their integrity from disruptive human activities. Only human activity compatible with protection of the core reserves and corridors would be allowed. Buffers would also be managed to restore ecological health, extirpated species and natural disturbance regimes. Intensive human activities associated with civilization — agriculture, industrial production, urban centers — could continue outside the buffers."

Supporters of this ambitious project are quick to point out how the current system of reserves often degrades the habitat by dividing land into fragments and not providing buffer zones between reserves and intensive land use.

"Fragmentation isolates the tracts from one another, increases the ratio of edge to interior for each tract, and reduces the total area of habitat," wrote Charles Mann and Mark Plummer. "The effect is to transform the pieces into islands that individually carry fewer members of each native species and experience more invasions by exotic species.

"The brown-headed cowbird, for example, forages in open spaces but often crosses the forest edge to lay its

eggs in other birds' nests. The cowbird chicks, hatching quickly, push their non-cowbird nestmates over the side.... increased habitat fragmentation has aided the spread of this nest parasite. In recent years cowbirds have effectively eliminated three forest bird species: the black-capped vireo, the least Bell's vireo, and Kirtland's warbler."

The scale of the Wildlands project is enormous. For example, one regional plan for the Oregon coast would return 23 percent of the land to wilderness, and another 26 percent would be restricted in use. This is basically an ecological pipe dream.

Beyond the expected critics of the plan — lumber companies, mining interests and developers — some in the conservation community have also criticized the plan because it relies on the idea of isolating species in wilderness areas instead of trying to

find ways that people can live more harmoniously with surrounding species.

The full implementation of the Wildlands Project is obviously not politically or logistically feasible at this time. However, the project offers a clear vision for sustaining North America's biodiversity; a major break from the current stopgap programs that implement recovery programs one species at a time as species become endangered.

For more information on the Wildlands Project, write to PO Box 5365, Tucson, Ariz., 85703.

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