

UC Berkeley

Parks Stewardship Forum

Title

“Wilderness has sometimes been treated as a limitation rather than as a resource”

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1470z2gm>

Journal

Parks Stewardship Forum, 42(3)

Author

Mali, Peter

Publication Date

2026-09-14

DOI

10.5070/P5.69183

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>



RISE DECLARATIONS

Sharing the experience & insights of Recent Involuntarily Separated Employees working in place-based conservation

PETER MALI NATIONAL WILDERNESS PROGRAM MANAGER, USDA FOREST SERVICE

“Wilderness has sometimes been treated as a limitation rather than as a resource”

1. Describe your career trajectory from your education to your last position held.

I graduated with a Master of Science in Natural Resource Policy from the University of Michigan’s School of Natural Resources and Environment (now the School for Environment and Sustainability) in 1996. My first federal job was with the Environmental Protection Agency, after which I moved to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) as a public affairs specialist.

While in Public Affairs, I did a one-year congressional fellowship for US Senator Harry Reid (NV), helping advance a public lands bill that designated more than a half a million acres of wilderness. That was a fantastic moment.

After working in public affairs, I transitioned to the BLM wilderness program, where I spent the next three years. I then took a major detour to become chief of communications for the Office of Surface Mining Reclamation and Enforcement, an office focused on coal mining regulation.

Later, I returned to BLM to manage the agency’s national wilderness program for six years. In 2020, I moved to the US Forest Service, where I managed their national wilderness program, performing a role similar to the one I held at BLM, but with about three times the acreage and a couple hundred more wilderness areas. The Forest Service manages more wilderness areas than any other agency and has a prominent role in wilderness stewardship.

I retired in 2025 after nearly three decades of federal service, about half of it devoted to wilderness conservation and stewardship.

2. What do you consider to be the most important achievements of your career? Why?

My most meaningful accomplishments centered on wilderness stewardship at both BLM and the Forest Service.

At BLM, I worked as the person in the Washington, DC, office helping complete a private land donation that was incorporated into the Sabinoso Wilderness in New Mexico. Before the donation, the wilderness was effectively landlocked—you couldn’t get there without trespassing. The donation created legal public access, allowing the general public the opportunity to visit the area for the first time.

The Wilderness Act requires agencies to preserve “wilderness character” but neither defines the term nor spells out how this is to be done.

I was also proud to help update BLM’s Wilderness Character Monitoring Implementation Guide. The Wilderness Act requires agencies to preserve “wilderness character” but neither defines the term nor spells out how this is to be done. So each agency has created a guide to measure and evaluate wilderness character over time. Updating the guide helps strengthen how BLM assesses whether it is successfully preserving an area’s wilderness character.

What is a RISE Declaration? >>> <https://doi.org/10.5070/P5.62005>

At the Forest Service, I led a major overhaul of the Minimum Requirements Analysis (MRA) process, which all four wilderness-managing agencies use to determine whether an otherwise prohibited activity can be authorized in wilderness. The Wilderness Act prohibits outright permanent roads and commercial enterprise but allows other activities (e.g., motor vehicles) if an agency finds that the activity is the “minimum necessary for the administration of the area as wilderness.” The existing tool used to conduct an MRA had become extremely cumbersome, with the blank form itself running over 60 pages long. Working with representatives from the other wilderness-managing agencies (National Park Service, BLM, and US Fish and Wildlife Service), we cut the form by about 75% without sacrificing the rigor of the overall process.

Another accomplishment was establishing and leading a multi-agency working group focused on whitebark pine, a threatened species whose range overlaps many wilderness areas and is being threatened by disease (primarily white bark blister rust), drought, and other climate-related stressors. The group brought together wilderness specialists, ecologists, and managers to address difficult questions about whitebark-pine conservation actions in wilderness. We began developing guidance that would help managers evaluate proposals while balancing species conservation and wilderness character. I was happy to learn recently that this effort is still moving forward.

I was also proud of partnerships with non-profit organizations, particularly the National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance (NWSA). The Forest Service’s Wilderness Stewardship Performance Program helped wilderness areas improve their management using measurable indicators tied to wilderness character, and NWSA was one of the agency’s principal partners to carry out that program. The whole purpose of the wilderness program was to make sure that areas on the ground were managed to preserve wilderness character. That’s where the rubber meets the road.

It was disappointing to see that agency leadership sometimes seemed to apologize for wilderness protections when responding to requests from users or stakeholders.

One effort that did not get finished was updating the Forest Service Wilderness Manual, which has not been substantially revised since the 1990s and really needed to be updated on issues like climate change and fire management. We made significant progress, but changing priorities resulted in the effort not getting completed. I also helped develop national climbing policy for wilderness areas, but legislative changes and timing issues prevented the policy from advancing as intended.

3. What were the greatest challenges you faced? How did you overcome them, or not?

There were a lot, but I’ll focus on two.

The first was a gradual decline in institutional support for wilderness stewardship. Over time, wilderness was increasingly viewed as an obstacle rather than a core responsibility. All four wilderness-managing agencies had their reasons for resisting having some of their land designated as wilderness because they felt it would hinder their core missions. And it was disappointing to see that agency leadership sometimes seemed to apologize for wilderness protections when responding to requests from users or stakeholders. Wilderness, in other words, has sometimes been treated as a limitation rather than as a resource Congress intended to be managed differently. It was an uphill battle.

To address this, I focused on educating the people I worked with and learning to frame the issue properly. When working with skeptics, I emphasized the reasonableness of the Wilderness Act and the flexibility built into wilderness management. I often explained that wilderness managers are not simply saying “no”; they are asking whether a proposal can be accomplished in a way that still preserves wilderness character. With more supportive audiences, I emphasized that managing wilderness differently is not a flaw in the law—it is its purpose.

The second challenge was coordinating among the four federal agencies that manage the 800+ areas in the National Wilderness Preservation System: BLM, the National Park Service, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Forest Service. Each agency has a different mission and culture, making consistency difficult, particularly when developing new policy.

One example involved efforts to coordinate climbing policy between the Forest Service and National Park Service. Even small differences in wording could create confusion for managers and users. Achieving consistency required extensive communication and collaboration.

The most effective solution was proactive coordination. I found that talking individually with my counterparts before larger meetings significantly improved outcomes. Building relationships, anticipating concerns, and maintaining regular communication helped create consensus and avoid conflicts. The more attention I paid to coordination, the better the outcome.

4. What are your views on how your career served the public, the environment, our cultural heritage, or the greater good?

I feel very proud of my career. Managing two of the nation's four wilderness programs was a tremendous privilege. My goal was always to preserve wilderness character within the areas under my purview so they could continue to benefit future generations.

Former Interior Secretary Sally Jewell often said that public land managers are in the “forever business,” and I think she is exactly right. Wilderness areas are intended to exist in perpetuity, and stewardship decisions made today can affect these places for decades or centuries.

I do not claim that conditions in every wilderness area improved during my tenure, and that was never within my control. But I believe I did the best job I could to support the preservation of wilderness character across the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Former Interior Secretary Sally Jewell often said that public land managers are in the “forever business,” and I think she is exactly right.

I have faith in the American public's support for wilderness. My role was to help ensure that these places remained protected, intact, and available for continued public enjoyment. Knowing that future generations will be able to experience these landscapes is the aspect of my career that gives me the greatest satisfaction.

5. What's the coolest thing you've seen a government do for place-based conservation that you'd want to replicate or expand?

One of the most promising developments I saw was the growing effort to incorporate Traditional Ecological Knowledge and co-stewardship into federal land management.

I became involved with this work in 2022 while leading the revision of the Minimum Requirements Analysis (see above). The concept offers significant opportunities to improve management by bringing Indigenous Knowledge and perspectives into decision-making.

One example occurred in the Black Hills National Forest in South Dakota, where the Forest Service has entered into an agreement with the Great Sioux Nation. Signed in March 2026, the Black Elk Wilderness Co-Stewardship agreement outlines how the Forest Service and the 11 Tribes of the Great Sioux Nation can manage the 13,534-acre wilderness together. I left nearly a year before this agreement was signed, but I was glad to see it come to fruition.

There may be challenges as the concept of co-stewardship moves from concept to reality. Even so, the model holds tremendous promise.

I believe expanding co-stewardship and meaningful incorporation of Traditional Ecological Knowledge could be a positive way forward to strengthen conservation outcomes and improve relationships between federal agencies and Tribal communities.

6. What advice would you give to successors and to young people considering public service?

My first piece of advice is simple: read and reread the Wilderness Act. It is the foundational document for wilderness stewardship. I won't go so far as to equate the Wilderness Act with Shakespeare, but, like reading Shakespeare, I learn

something new every time I read the law. Agency manuals and handbooks on wilderness stewardship are important, but everything begins with the act itself.

Second, maintain a passion for the resource. What I loved about managing wilderness programs was that they were ultimately about places. Staying focused on the wilderness resource helped me keep perspective amid budgets, briefings, and other administrative demands. Whether that passion comes from visiting wilderness areas, reading about them, or some other means, it is important to nurture it. Wilderness stewardship works best when powered by passion.

For young people considering public service, I hope that the current challenges do not discourage them. These turbulent times will pass. Public service can be incredibly rewarding: my nearly 30-year career certainly was. The opportunity to work on issues that matter, contribute to the public good, and help conserve important places for future generations is a privilege. I hope future generations will continue to see public service as a meaningful and worthwhile career.

The opportunity to work on issues that matter, contribute to the public good, and help conserve important places for future generations is a privilege.

7. Please share anything else you think would be of value to fellow RISEs or to the general public.

Go out and experience these nation's wild places!

Wilderness areas provide many ecological values; they are also places meant to be enjoyed. People should take advantage of the opportunity to experience them firsthand.

Wilderness is an important part of America's heritage. Not everyone lives near a wilderness area, but together these places represent some of the nation's most remarkable landscapes.

Wilderness areas, national parks, national forests, marine sanctuaries, and other protected areas are the United States' cathedrals. They are places that connect people to something larger than themselves and help define our national identity.