

The Roadless Traveled

A People's History of Wilderness, edited by Matt Jenkins (High Country News Books, \$22.95, 2004)

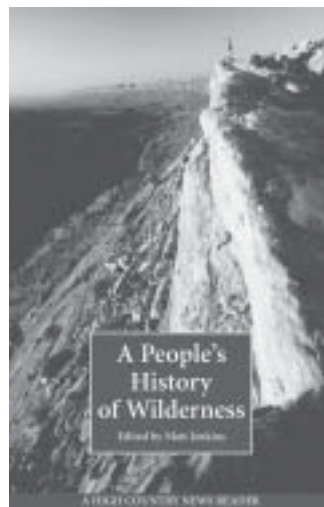
REVIEW BY MADELINE OSTRANDER

High Country News' retrospective on wilderness celebrates the life of a movement that has reached a perplexing middle age (the Wilderness Act celebrated its 40th anniversary last year). Edited by *HCN's* Matt Jenkins, *A People's History of Wilderness* arrives in the same moment in which President Bush has repealed a Clinton-era Roadless Rule formerly protecting 58.5 million acres of roadless forest. The book stitches together dozens of articles from *HCN's* 35-year archive to sound a dubious "Now what?"

The book's title nods to Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*, a 1980 account of America's marginalized voices. Like Zinn's history, *HCN's* book tells a story largely neglected in the mainstream press: the story of citizen-driven wilderness protection. With the exception of a few profiles of early leaders like Aldo Leopold and Bob Marshall, the book focuses almost entirely on the last four decades. At nearly 500 pages, this is no beach read. And if you agree with Bismarck's famous quote—"If you like laws and sausages, you should never watch either one being made"—you may want to brace yourself. The book is primarily political history; it packs a dense collection of articles; and it doesn't spare the gory legislative details.

The articles give clues to how wilderness protection has been accomplished in the past—tenacity, determination and willingness to compromise. The process has never been easy. Take Idaho's Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness as an example. Now among the nation's more celebrated wilderness areas, River of No Return wasn't included in the 9.1 million acres designated in the 1964 Wilderness Act. From the mid-1970s, citizen advocates

campaigning for official wilderness status for the area. In 1975, President Ford's administration bowed to logging interests by stripping Chamberlain Basin, a key wildlife corridor and favorite Idaho haunt, from the wilderness recommendation. Conservationists speculated that timber companies wanted this area as a bargaining chip to



force concessions from wilderness designations elsewhere. Although the final version of River of No Return included Chamberlain, political concessions plagued the wilderness with a convoluted boundary that skirts around multiple-use sections and mineral-rich lands. The wilderness itself contains 28 aircraft landing strips, and jet skis buzz through portions of the Salmon River.

But River of No Return seems a piece of cake compared to wilderness battles elsewhere. The book devotes several sections to Utah's notorious wilderness fracas. Conflict erupted after a 1976 law required the Bureau of Land Management to inventory its lands for potential wilderness. Utah became the headquarters of the "Sagebrush Rebellion," a rowdy outgrowth of rural resentment over

federal land (mis)management, and in 1980 furious locals in Moab bulldozed a section of proposed BLM wilderness. Yielding to political pressures, BLM's statewide inventory in 1980 gaped with unexplained, arbitrary omissions. Conservation groups found the BLM proposal shoddy and unacceptable, but throughout the 1980s could not agree on a unified vision for wilderness. Stymied by Utah's conservative congressional delegation and the likes of Reagan-appointed Interior Secretary James Watt, conservationists bickered over political approaches. A Utah BLM wilderness bill has never passed, and the Bush administration has recently made several attempts to open proposed Utah wilderness areas to energy leasing and exploration.

The political prospects for new wilderness designations have been gloomy since 2000, and the book leaves the reader with more questions than answers. Matt Jenkin's epilogue offers thoughts for the future. The wilderness movement doesn't need to lose its large-scale vision, he insists, but it will have to work incrementally rather than through sweeping legislation. "We need ... to start talking about protecting individual places that people know intimately," he writes.

Considering the political adversity wilderness advocates have faced, we may be encouraged that wilderness has succeeded at all. America's 106-million-acre wilderness system is a triumph of determined citizens and conservationists. The book as a whole may not be the inspiring shot of adrenaline that wilderness advocates need just now, but it offers a healthy perspective on what has worked, what has failed and where the movement's focus could be for the future. ♦

Madeline Ostrander is a writer and environmental professional from Seattle.