

ROADLESS AREA STUDY

West Clear Creek

June 9 - 11, 1972

/Being the first in a series of field studies
conducted by the Saguaro Ecology Club on behalf
of the Wilderness Society/
/The purpose being the determination of wilderness
qualifications for selected Roadless Areas in
the state of Arizona/

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I. GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The West Clear Creek Roadless Area extends for twenty miles from the upper reaches of Willow and Clover Canyons, which converge to form West Clear Creek, to the mouth of the main canyon approximately ten miles east of Camp Verde, Arizona.

The stream, a major tributary of the Verde River, arises from springs at the sources of Willow and Clover Creeks, both permanent waterways. The original volume of water is supplemented by additional springs scattered along the twenty-mile length of the canyon.

West Clear Creek winds its way through a spectacular and precipitous canyon, and passes through ponderosa pine with mixed conifer forests to the transitional pinon-juniper biome to the pure Upper Sonoran desert life zone so characteristic of the central Verde Valley.

THE UPPER REACHES

The eastern-most part of the canyon extends beyond the Mogollon Rim, with lowest elevations near the 6500 foot level. The area is composed of an upper strata of Coconino sandstone with underlying alternate layers of igneous and sedimentary rock.

From the canyon floor, the walls rise up to 1800 feet at a 60° angle until three-quarters of the way to the rim where they yield to sheer sandstone cliffs. The slopes are heavily forested with virgin stands of mixed conifers and Gambel' oak. The conifers reach incredible heights, giving the canyon an awesome primeval appearance. Fortunately, these forests are spared from cutting due to their inaccessability, thus escaping the fate of their neighbors above the rim. There, the forests, consisting primarily of ponderosa pine, are

traversed by myriad logging trails and are sorely scarred by irresponsible "selective" cutting.

The piñon-dominated life zones, located west of the pine-fir forests at somewhat lower elevations, have been, for the most part, cleared by bulldozers to provide forage for cattle and introduced antelope, neither of which occur below the rim.

The streambed in the pine and piñon zones is choked with a thick riparian growth consisting of Gambel's oak, single-leaf ash, maple, and ponderosa pine with assorted firs and spruce in the higher elevations. The undergrowth, an abundant layer of bushes and ground covers such as wild grapevines, wild rose, ferns, nettles, and grasses, is untouched. Evidence of grazing and other abuse, excepting a rare deposit of litter, is totally absent. Occasional dry side canyons add variety to the area. Many are enclosed by high vertical cliffs and support extensive virgin forests which are sometimes so dense that the only ground cover present is a layer of moss and ferns blanket-ing the entire forest floor.

Faunal populations are also healthy and natural with the exception of the fish population which includes introduced rainbow trout that have superceded some of the native fish. At places, beaver ponds offer habitat to larger fishes, among them the Verde bonytail, a local fish confined to a few tributaries of the Verde River.

Hunting is rendered impossible by the rugged canyons, so the deer, elk, mountain lion, bobcat, and coyote concentrations are un-harassed.

The rich riparian growth shelters a large variety of songbirds and raptors. Partial lists of the fauna of West Clear Creek appear in Addendum 1.

2 THE LOWER REACHES

The geologic appearance of this area is essentially the same as the upper area, with the addition of more volcanic material.

Slope vegetation is common to the Upper Sonoran life zone, with juniper being the dominant plant in much of the area. Grasses (severely overgrazed), narmalaris, and small cactus compose the groundcover of the lower elevations, but they disappear as the elevation increases and the juniper growths become denser and intermingled with piñon.

The creek bed is wider than in the upper regions, and the creek bed is covered with large boulders. The groundcover is similar to the upper reaches, but has damaged by cattle. The pine-fir stands are replaced mainly by cottonwood, sycamore, and Arizona walnut.

Differences in wildlife include the absence of elk and beaver, and the addition of javelina.

Visible damage from heavy recreational use is minimal considering the great number of people (approximately 100) which descend on the Bull Pen Ranch vicinity at weekenderly intervals. The water near the campgrounds at the extreme western end is impure and possibly undrinkable because of cattle fecal matter.

OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

There are many outside factors which may effect wilderness designation for West Clear Creek. These fall under the general headings of private inholdings, archeological considerations, and public usage.

PRIVATE INHOLDINGS, ETC.

Grazing- is present on the rim, on the slopes, and in the canyon at the lower end. Three allotments, Hackberry, Fossil Creek, and Cottonwood Basin, run substantial winter herds in the area. Although use is overly heavy, it is not incompatible with wilderness. Perhaps a soil survey would convince the Forest Service to decrease future cattle numbers.

Timber- at no point in the canyon is the timber harvestable. However, the rim area is badly damaged by logging activity.

Minerals- no known claims exist.

Water Rights- unknown.

Private Land- exists at either end of the canyon, within the roadless area. The Bull Pen Ranch at the western border has slightly affected the quality of the mouth of the canyon by depositing large volumes of garbage at various points. The land is marred by numerous abandoned shacks and delapidated fences; neither enter the roadless unit but are visible from it. The only intrusion is a no-longer used water pipe extending about a mile into the roadless area on the north bank of the stream. All in all, these "improvements" detract from the wilderness quality but do not interfere with wilderness designation since they are mostly confined to land outside its borders.

Additional Improvements- three Government improvements under the direction of the Game and Fish Department, the United States Geological

Survey, and the Forest Service lie within or near the Roadless Area. These are, respectively, a tramway three-quarters of a mile west of the mouths of Willow and Clover Canyons, used for fish implantations; a gauging station and a tramway within a mile of Bull Pen Ranch, used by the USGS for access into the canyon; and a twenty-unit public campground near Bull Pen Ranch. Only the campground is of significance to this discussion. Since it provides easy access to the Roadless Area, trouble may arise in the future when recreational use increases past healthful levels.

Power Lines- supported by towers on either side of the rim cross the roadless unit about five miles west of the junction of Willow and Clover Canyons. However, impact is insignificant. The towers are outside the roadless area and the lines are barely visible from the canyon floor.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to a Forest Service representative, several ancient cliff dwellings exist within the Roadless Area, including one huge one of great importance. These ruins are scattered along the north rim of the canyon. The exact locations are not available to the public for obvious reasons. In addition, a wall of petroglyphs was found by our team near the Game and Fish tramway. These were defaced by vandalous initials and scurrilous characters. A wilderness designation would undoubtedly save other, more important archeological sites from similar damage.

PUBLIC USE

Most public use is confined to the area near the campground, although several seldom-used access trails exist along the length of the canyon. Hunting is not feasible, so the majority of users consists of hikers, picnickers, and fishermen. Impact is still slight, but increased use, especially in the higher lands, could harm the delicate streambed plant community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The West Clear Creek Roadless Area is found to be eminently qualified for wilderness designation. Its importance lies not only in its recreational value but also in its ecological significance. It is far from being ecologically unique; contrariwise, it encompasses the three most common life zones in northern Arizona, and to us therein lies its true value, as a single remaining undisturbed example of all southwestern wilderness. The canyon spans the pine-spruce-fir biome, the piñon-juniper biome, and the desert shrub biome, providing a pristine living laboratory for future scientists and nature enthusiasts to observe unaltered the three major ecosystems of the area.

Protected within its boundaries are not only the familiar Arizona wildlife species, but also many less abundant creatures. Refugees of the quickly diminishing populations of beaver, elk, mountain lion, bobcat, and eagles would find permanent sanctuary in a Clear Creek Wilderness. (Also present are animals not yet endangered but of very localized range. These include the Verde bonytail and the black-tailed rattlesnake. Osprey and black hawks, both quite rare, are not normally thought to frequent the area, but our group recorded two definite sightings of each during our short stay.)

We are led to the conclusion that wilderness for West Clear Creek would benefit both the people and wildlife of the United States, while adding much needed diversification to the National Wilderness Preservation System. For these reasons we urge the Wilderness Society to support wilderness study and approval of a 15,021 acre wilderness as suggested by the Forest Service preliminary plan.

In our opinion, an increase in use would interfere with the animal and plant life of the canyon. Therefore we suggest that access

remain limited and public use be passively discouraged. The major area of use should remain at the mouth of the canyon, preferably at the campground outside the wilderness. To achieve this goal it is necessary to insure that no improved roads or trails leading to the Roadless Area be constructed east of Bull Pen Ranch.

Because of the devastation above the rim and Forest Service management preferences, we suggest that boundaries be set to coincide with the rim of the canyon running from Bull Pen Ranch east approximately twenty miles to the farthest reaches of Willow and Clover Canyons. All roadless side canyons in the interim should be included, as well as Devil's Windpipe, a parallel to West Clear Creek that will probably be excluded from the Forest Service plan. By excluding any land above the rim, we are also excluding nearly all private inholdings with damaging potential, leaving the area with only two apparent impediments to its becoming wilderness:

- 1) Private acreage in Willow and Clover Canyons; and
- 2) The Forest Service.

The former, we were assured by Beaver Creek District Ranger Robert Gillies, will present little problem since plans are already underway to trade the private lands for Forest land elsewhere, and are expected to be successful.

The second impediment, however, is not so easily dismissed. During our interview with Ranger Gillies, it became obvious that the Forest Service is hostile to all wilderness, their reasons being that it is contrary to the sacred principle of multiple use and is excessively restrictive as regards management practices. Both of these allegations are factual to some extent, but disagreement arises between our factions as to whether these arguments are evidence against wilderness or actually justifications thereof. Our group

believes the latter and hopes that the Wilderness Society will
persue wilderness designation for West Clear Creek with even greater
vigor in light of the obstacle posed by the Forest Service bias.

ADDENDUM

Some wildlife occurring within the Roadless Area:

MAMMALS

Muskrat
*Beaver
*Elk
Deer
+Coyote
*Mountain lion
*Bobcat
Skunk (striped, hooded, hog-nosed)
Raccoon
Ringtail cats
Javelina

FISH

Rainbow trout
*Verde bonytail
Carp (suckers)
Bullhead
Bluegill
Catfish

BIRDS

Dipper
Raven
• Morning, white-winged dove
*Osprey
Turkey vulture
Stellar's jay
Hummingbirds
*Waterfowl (mallards, American coots)
Violet green swallow
Rough-winged swallow
*Golden eagle
*Bald eagle
*Black hawk
Band-tailed pigeon
Western tanager

REPTILES, AMPHIBIANS

Leopard frog
Western garter
Santa Cruz garter
Eastern fence lizards
Whiptail lizards
*Black-tailed rattlesnake
(presence assumed)
Toads
Western racer
Collared lizard

* of special importance

+ Az. Game and Fish plans to resume coyote eradication as soon as legally possible.