

Protection, acre by acre

Couple's long fight to preserve backcountry aided by powerful ally

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JOHN GASTALDO / Union-Tribune

Geoffrey Smith and his wife, Camille Armstrong, are longtime San Diego County environmentalists and advocates of increasing protected wilderness areas in Southern California.

For the past decade, San Diego conservationist Camille Armstrong and her colleagues have combed California for pristine parcels that might deserve the nation's most restrictive land-use designation.

- [Wilderness issues frame many land-use battles](#)

They've poured over maps, snapped stacks of photographs, camped far and wide across the backcountry, consulted managers of land-use agencies and lobbied politicians.

They've found a big-time backer in Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., head of the Senate's environment committee.

Recently, Boxer introduced her statewide wilderness blueprint for the fourth time. It proposes that more than 2.4 million acres of California – including about 45,000 acres in San Diego County – be designated as federal wilderness.

It's the largest of several wilderness bills introduced in Congress this year. Still, it covers only half of the lands in California that some conservationists say could qualify for the status, which generally prohibits buildings and mechanized transportation – including bicycles – in favor of fishing, hiking, canoeing and other nonmotorized activities.

Given the Bush administration's opposition to previous versions of Boxer's statewide plan, a bipartisan alliance in Congress is pursuing a more modest goal of marking some 125,000 acres as wilderness in Riverside County. It's all part of a decades-old strategy to secure new land protections wherever they can be had.

Graphic:



Proposed wilderness additions

“Every history book that you read about California starts off with its natural beauty,” Boxer said. “We designate (wilderness) to make sure that the population gets to enjoy God's gift to our state.”

Boxer credits the persistence of volunteers like Armstrong for helping forge her California Wild Heritage Act.

“They have been my eyes and ears on the ground,” she said. “Without them, I certainly couldn't have gotten as far as I have.”

Armstrong attended her first wilderness meeting in 1987 hoping to protect oak trees and chaparral near Valley Center, where she grew up and now works as an elementary schoolteacher.

“I was so disturbed by what I saw going on with the San Diego County development in the late '70s and '80s that I finally couldn't take it anymore,” she said.

But the Sierra Club's gathering was about something else: generating support for a bill by then-Sen. Alan Cranston, D-Calif., that targeted huge swaths of the California desert as wilderness.

To qualify for wilderness status, the lands must already be federal property controlled by the Forest Service, the National Park Service and other agencies. They generally exclude roads, buildings and power lines.

Wilderness in America

Most acreage by state

1. **Alaska:** 57.4 million acres
2. **California:** 14.3 million acres
3. **Arizona:** 4.6 million acres
4. **Washington:** 4.3 million acres
5. **Idaho:** 4 million acres

Source: www.wilderness.net

After an area is designated as wilderness, the agencies can no longer reconfigure land-use plans to include development such as off-road vehicle courses, backcountry resorts and logging operations.

Federal land managers typically step up their patrols to ban snowmobiling, mountain biking and other outlawed activities. They mark the territory with signs, block user-created roads and beef up walking trails to accommodate more visitors interested in exploring the newly christened wilderness terrain. They sometimes limit the number of people who can enter such zones in an attempt to retain their unspoiled character.

Such restrictions resonated with Armstrong during that meeting two decades ago. She was tapped to lead the club's wilderness-organizing effort in San Diego County.

Seven years later, President Clinton signed the Desert Protection Act, adding about 7.7 million acres of wilderness on California's eastern edge and establishing the Death Valley and Joshua Tree national parks.

“We discovered that a few people can make a difference,” Armstrong said. “It was such an amazing experience to be part of something so big.”

Armstrong later married Geoffrey Smith, another longtime San

Diego County environmentalist who had worked on the desert act. The couple focused on finding more untrammelled parcels for the next wilderness push.

“In 1994, we all celebrated . . . but we never let up,” said Smith, now executive director of The Escondido Creek Conservancy.

In fits and starts, about 107 million acres nationwide have been classified as wilderness through the 1964 Wilderness Act. It's considered a permanent designation.

Wilderness advocates survive political swings in part because they see the issue in moral terms, said Mark Harvey, a history professor at North Dakota State University and author of a book about the man who drafted the Wilderness Act.

“From their point of view, wilderness preservation would manifest the highest commitment that human beings could have to land protection,” Harvey said. “These are some of the best landscapes we have and we need to protect them . . . for the integrity of our own souls.”

By the late 1990s, hundreds of volunteers – including dozens from San Diego County – gathered under the umbrella of the California Wild Heritage Campaign and fanned out across the state to inventory roadless areas.

People assigned to specific parcels became known as “adoptive parents” because they became so familiar with the lands they studied.

“What's so special about the Wild Heritage Campaign is that we truly have done it from the ground up,” said Steve Evans, conservation director for Friends of the River, an advocacy group in Sacramento. “It wasn't done by lobbyists in D.C.”

Smith said the survey crews focused on lands between the desert and mountain parcels already secured as wilderness. “What was left over are lands that are pretty close to urbanized areas,” Smith said.

The wilderness alliance identified several million acres for further consideration, then turned its list over to Boxer's staff.

“We could only hope and cross our fingers that most of the . . . acres

would get through in the legislation. About half of them did,” Smith said.

The conservationists hoped that excluding some of the potentially controversial parcels, particularly in congressional districts likely to draw opposition from lawmakers, would speed the bill's passage.

Things didn't turn out that way.

One challenge is that even some groups sympathetic to environmental protections remain skeptical of new wilderness areas. Among them are legions of outdoor enthusiasts represented by the International Mountain Bicycling Association, based in Boulder, Colo.

“A lot more conservation could be accomplished if there wasn't a single-minded focus on the federal wilderness designation at the exclusion of other designations,” said Daniel Greenstadt, who represents the association in San Diego.

“A wilderness proposal in some cases locks out the No. 1 user group,” he said. “It puts mountain bikers in a very difficult, unfortunate and unnecessary position. We care deeply about conservation, but we're asked to ban our own access to the backcountry.”

Such sentiments are common to debates about wilderness.

In San Diego County, most of the proposed wilderness land is in the district of Rep. Duncan Hunter, R-Alpine. The largest parcel is in the Eagle Peak area of the Cleveland National Forest, with smaller segments at Hauser Mountain, Carrizo Gorge and the Sawtooth Mountains.

“Far too often, areas are given strict environmental designations that prevent outdoor and nature enthusiasts from enjoying our natural resources,” said a statement issued by Hunter's office.

Boxer's statewide bill – she calls it a “marker” of her intentions – is likely to linger until there's a pro-wilderness president. The senator and others are focusing on areas with clear political support for wilderness designations.

“I am a pragmatist,” Boxer said. “I will get done what I can get done.”

Last year, for example, more than 273,000 acres of the Northern California coast gained wilderness status after Boxer teamed up with Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., and Rep. Mike Thompson, D-St. Helena.

In Riverside County, Rep. Mary Bono, R-Palm Springs, is preparing to submit a bill that would add about 125,000 acres to the wilderness list. Her staff is working out the details before it's introduced, likely in April or May.

Meanwhile, Armstrong and Smith can be found tramping through the backcountry from as far away as Blythe, ground-truthing maps for potential wilderness additions.

“We will just keep going . . . until these areas get protected,” Armstrong said.

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