

**William Meadows, President  
Wilderness Society**

Interviewer-John Howe

OK Bill, let's start by talking about--Wallace Stegner described a "geography of hope." Why do you think wilderness is important to Americans?

William Meadows

Well, wilderness is really special for so many people for different reasons, I think. There are many who look at it as a place for solitude, a place to retreat. That's its history. It's a place for one to get away and to think, contemplate. But it's also a place for recreation. I think a lot of people want to be out, want to be able to walk in wild places, be undisturbed. Wilderness provides that opportunity.

Interviewer-John Howe

What is your response to those who say there's too much wilderness, and the land is being locked up?

William Meadows

The United States has 107 million acres set aside permanently as wilderness designation. We think that's about half of what is possible. There are about another hundred million acres of potential wilderness in the continental United States and probably a hundred million acres of potential wilderness in Alaska. These are places that are extraordinarily important, for water, for wildlife, and for people. People who say we're locking up wilderness are not thinking about the opportunities that wilderness provides for our society. In fact, the places that are locked up are the places that are being used for mining, for logging, for oil and gas exploration. Those are the places you can't go. Wilderness is a place where you can go and you can enjoy nature in its own realm.

Interviewer-John Howe

Talk a little bit about the Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument. As you know, some of the local residents were upset when that area was created. What would your response be to them?

William Meadows

I came to work at the Wilderness Society twelve years ago, in 1996, immediately following the establishment of the Grand Staircase Escalante National Monument. That's one of the best things that President Clinton did, and it was something he did in his first term, and it carried over. It was such a positive experience for him and for Bruce Babbitt, who was Secretary of Interior, that they decided ultimately over the next four years to set aside twenty-five more national monuments. I know there were people in Utah who disapproved of the establishment of that monument, but it has proved to be a very important center for activity. It's a center for research, a center for recreation. It's become a tourist destination. There's still people who don't like it, but it has proved to be, and the twenty-five other monuments that were established, have proved to be absolutely critical to our national conservation heritage.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you think about President Bush's last minute, if you will, oil and gas lease situation adjacent to national parks? Was that a proper thing to do, and what should have been done?

William Meadows

One of the things that concerned The Wilderness Society greatly in the last months of the Bush Administration, was the wholesale attack on environmental policies and speeding up resource management plans so they could actually lease places for oil and gas development. Fortunately, we were able to challenge some of those leases, and one of the best things we think the current administration has done early is withdrawn leases that were granted by the Bush administration. So that we've been able to address some of those issues, not all, but this was typical of the Bush Administration. There was not a single place that was not available for oil and gas exploration, and they wanted to speed as many lease sales as they possibly could.

Interviewer-John Howe

One mining executive called Utah, "The Saudi Arabia of Coal." Is there such a thing as clean coal, and what do you think about coal development in the West?

William Meadows

The country is clearly moving toward a clean and green environment, and the investments that are, that the current administration are making in renewable energy sources are encouraging. It is going to take time to move from a fossil fuel energy development that we've seen in the past, with coal and oil and gas, to one that is dominated by solar, wind and geothermal. We need to take those steps right now. We need to move as quickly as possible. There is no doubt that there will continue to be coal-fired power plants. We need to find ways to clean those up as best we can, but we'll never find clean coal, in my opinion. There's certainly no technology now that's promising for total clean coal. We can do a better job of capturing carbon, but I don't think we'll ever have it totally clean.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you think the common ground is between those who would preserve wilderness, and those who would develop it?

William Meadows

One of the things that I've found in working in rural America, in local communities, we've found that in order to gain political traction for wilderness designations, and it is political, congress has to pass the bills to designate wilderness, and we need to find support locally. So when I sit down with local people, I find that they love the land as much as I do. They're afraid of designations or something that is permanent. But once you sit down and talk about the natural values that need to be protected, and if you can do that in the context of what's necessary for economic development, how do you honor social and cultural values in those communities? You can find a way to come to common ground. And it's surprising how many people agree that certain places should be set aside permanently, and they're willing to support that. They also want to know that there are going to be places where economic development can occur, and if we can agree there are places that, where that's appropriate, that's great.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you see for the future of wilderness in the West? What do you think is going to happen over the next decade or so?

William Meadows

I don't think we've ever been in a better place for wilderness designation. Right now there's a bill before Congress that would designate 2.1 million acres of wilderness. It would be the largest, single wilderness designation in twenty-five years. We think that's really just a start. What we have found is that our ability to sit and to sit with people--different stakeholders--we can work with ranchers, we can work with the timber industry, we work with energy companies even. We work with the off-road vehicle communities. If you can find a political leader who's willing to bring everyone together to talk about where are the places that need to be protected? What are the places that are of such conservation value we should never, never develop them? We can find that common ground, and it is, by doing that, it takes a lot of time, a lot of resources, but by doing that we can build a larger constituency for wilderness, and I think the wilderness designations in the future are going to far outstrip anything we've seen in the past.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you say to ranchers and others that maybe are impacted by wolves and grizzly bears, as far as delisting, and the Endangered Species Act?

William Meadows

One of the great things about the United States is that we still have large predators. It's unfortunate that there are so few grizzly bears in the lower forty-eight, but the wolf reintroductions in Yellowstone National Park, for example, have really helped build a new ecosystem there. There certainly is a place, an important place, in the natural world for these large predators. I think there's a challenge to be able to work with the ranching community. There's fear still about wolves and grizzlies, but there are enough examples, and we can speak to those examples, of positive interactions where the domestic cattle and sheep loss is modest, and the Defenders of Wildlife, a sister organization, has a program where they reimburse ranchers for the loss of domestic stock. I'm confident that we can find a way to maintain a balance between traditional ways of ranching and wildlife and predators in wild places. Many do need to be protected. There is still a threat of overhunting. There's a threat to ranchers shooting on-site. We need to find a way to continue to protect, particularly wolves and grizzlies. I am anxious about the current status of that. There is effort to de-list the wolves in Montana, Idaho and Wyoming. My guess is that the Secretary will make a choice to approve the delisting in two of the states, but the Wyoming plan that is currently configured is not strong enough, and he will ultimately say, "That's not good enough. We still need some protection for the wolves in Wyoming."

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you see as the biggest threats to wilderness in the West?

William Meadows

Wilderness continues to have numerous threats. I think in the last eight years we've seen threats

from oil and gas development, but the constant threat that we have seen over the last ten years is the proliferation of off-road vehicles. The off-trail use of off-road vehicles is just really extraordinary. In the state of Idaho, for example, in 1980, there were 704 ATVs, all-terrain vehicles registered. In 2005, that number had grown to 104,000, so from 700 to 104,000. Just a remarkable change. That damages the land. There's no greater threat to the land than putting in these user-created routes. It fragments the land. It damages the soil. It frightens the wildlife. It just creates havoc in wild places.

Interviewer-John Howe

Let me ask you about the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and whether that should be developed.

William Meadows

The Wilderness Society has been working in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge before it was the refuge. One of our early, early leaders, Olaus Murie, did the original scientific works, studied wolves, studied caribou in the Arctic regions, and actually personally convinced Dwight Eisenhower to set it aside as a wildlife range. It is really an extraordinary place. There are 130,000 caribou that migrate there each spring. They calve. They have their young. If you think about this 24-hour sun, it gives you a lush, plethora of plants, so it's a great place for young caribou to grow and thrive. They migrate back into the mountains during the summer, when the mosquitoes get to be too great; but we have found that it's such an extraordinary place for the caribou, and there's no other place for them to be than this coastal plain. Development would disrupt that wildlife migration pattern in a very significant way. Secondly, you've got polar bear dens that would be disrupted when their ice roads and ice fields developed. This is one of the special places in the United States. This is one--it's an iconic wilderness area, and one that deserves to be protected. If our country cannot afford to protect the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, what can it afford to protect?

Interviewer-John Howe

How about the lands of southern Utah? Tell me about their risk and their value.

William Meadows

One of the great experiences being at The Wilderness Society is being able to travel to places that are of great wilderness value. I don't think there's any place in the lower forty-eight that's more spectacular than the red rock canyons of southern Utah. This has been a high priority for wilderness designation for The Wilderness Society and for many organizations in the state of Utah. We fortunately are moving slowly, but surely to designate places. Looks like we may be able to gain wilderness protection for about 300,000 acres this year, and we'll move forward. I am excited about the opportunities to protect, what I think, is one of the really extraordinary, unique places in the United States.

Interviewer-John Howe

We were asking about Senator Bennett's role, and then, wilderness being polarized in this state.

William Meadows

Utah has some of the most spectacular potential wilderness areas in the country. The issue of

wilderness has been highly polarized in this state for years. I think that's changing. We have worked closely with Senator Bennett over the last four years developing legislation that would protect about 300,000 acres of wilderness in Washington County, southwest Utah. That's almost ready to pass the Congress. We've developed a template for wilderness discussion and legislation that we'll take to different counties. Senator Bennett wants to lead that. I'm very encouraged by the future of wilderness in the state of Utah.

Interviewer-John Howe

What's unique about that land down there, and I'm talking about some of the land that they're talking about, like the Red Cliffs?

William Meadows

Now, what makes Utah special is the rock formations, just the--it's such an extraordinary scenic site. It's really, really wild too. There are very few people in most places in southern Utah and very few roads, so it's one of the wildest places in the country. If you look at a light map, you'll see that there are large patches of dark in southern Utah at night, and that doesn't exist very many places. So, the lack of roads, the lack of people, the spectacular rock formations make that a really unique place.