



Cover Photograph: Lee McMullen



A community dedicated to preserving this place of rare beauty and power

Winter 2021

# Keeping Big Bend Wild

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One of the things that makes visiting Big Bend National Park such a powerful experience is the rare opportunity to experience the vast expanse of undeveloped, wild lands, and the almost-unlimited vistas. Those who are capable of venturing deep into the backcountry safely can do so for days, or even weeks, without encountering the sights or sounds of modern civilization. Even though most of us enjoy the park without leaving the road network or the better-known trails, the knowledge that these undeveloped lands are protected forever is one of the reasons we love our park.

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# Keeping Big Bend Wild

The Big Bend Conservancy posted a poll on our Facebook site in June 2021, asking what do people think of the mix of developed and undeveloped lands within the park. It's clear that the respondents overwhelmingly want to see the existing facilities maintained, but not increased:

- **It's a great balance. I hope the NPS maintains the facilities that currently exist but I don't want to see more areas developed. (69%)**
- **I'd like to see more roads, campgrounds, and lodging to accommodate growing visitation. (10%)**
- **There's too much development in the park already. (9%)**
- **We need development outside of the park to support visitors while minimizing disturbance in the park. (7%)**
- **Other (5%)**

But are those currently wild lands truly protected from future development? Visitation to Big Bend is rapidly increasing. Is there anything that would absolutely prohibit the development of new roads and new developments in the future, dissecting those vast open spaces?

**Believe it or not, the answer to those questions is no.**

The good news is that park management is absolutely committed to protecting wild Big Bend, and has been officially, at least since the 1970s. In 1978, in fact, the NPS completed a multi-year planning effort that recommended that about 2/3 of the area of the park as it then existed be permanently protected by the Congress as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. But Congress has never taken up the issue, leaving it unresolved, yet only Congress can make those protections permanent.

Currently, National Park Service policy at the national level supports that protection, mandating that local managers preserve the wilderness values of those wild lands until Congress acts. It is important to

understand though that the protections we take for granted are not as permanent as we may think—vast areas of Big Bend could be opened for additional infrastructure development, and the character and experience of the park could be changed forever if policy changes. Official wilderness designation would formalize protections against such changes and provide permanent protection of the beauty of the park that we all value so highly.

## Defining Wilderness

After years of debate, Congress overwhelmingly passed the 1964 Wilderness Act on a bipartisan basis. This is one of the most eloquent laws ever written, clearly defining wilderness and why it is important to protect it:

**A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.** An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of **undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation**, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with **the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable;** (2) has **outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation;** (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value. (§2(c))

Sometimes people who are opposed to, or concerned about the impact of, designation of lands as wilderness will argue that wilderness "locks up" the public lands, but the introductory paragraph of the Wilderness Act

says the opposite, twice using the phrase "use and enjoyment":

**"wilderness areas" ... shall be administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness.**

§4(b) of the Act further defines the purposes of wilderness, which clearly serve people:

**wilderness areas shall be devoted to the public purposes of recreational, scenic, scientific, educational, conservation, and historical use.**

Federal wilderness areas exist in national park units, national forests, national wildlife refuges, and on the federal lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management. They are subject to the laws and regulations of the managing agencies, but in every case are protected from the development of any additional roads, the use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment or motorboats, no landing of aircraft, no other form of mechanical transport, and no structures or installations except under limited emergency and administrative exceptions.

Trails, primitive campsites, and human-powered, non-mechanized travel are allowed within wilderness areas.

Every president since 1964 has signed laws creating new wilderness areas.

## Wilderness at Big Bend

The NPS 1978 wilderness recommendation identified over 538,000 acres that met the criteria for wilderness – these are the areas between the roads. All public roads, paved and unpaved, would not be changed by wilderness designation of nearby undeveloped areas. Existing roads would be corridors of non-wilderness, often with wilderness boundaries beginning at a designated distance away from the road edge. The Keep Big Bend Wild effort would not close the Black Gap Road, which has occasionally been suggested in the past.

The Rio Grande is also outside of the recommended wilderness, hence river use would not be affected in any way. The 1978 wilderness map did not include the river, nor roads that provide access to the river. A new proposal would be consistent, and not include the river in wilderness. While some access roads have changed since 1978, no existing access roads or routes would be within wilderness, and almost all the lands south of River Road (aside from the three major canyons) are also outside of the recommended wilderness boundary, allowing continued use and maintenance of unpaved roads that provide essential river access.

The NPS would still maintain and, with appropriate environmental and cultural compliance and public involvement, be able to improve facilities within the existing developed areas of the Park. NPS is about to invest as much as \$50 million dollars in replacing the

Chisos Mountain Lodge and the potable water systems in the Chisos Basin, clearly indicating their commitment to maintaining, and improving this popular developed area in the heart of the park.

Border security at Big Bend is obviously a consideration. Wilderness management and border security can and do co-exist. NPS and the U.S. Border Patrol have an excellent relationship in our park and work together to assure that each agency's mission is accomplished. Agreements and policies are in place to guide the agencies through any border security issues or needs that should arise, such as accommodating required border security infrastructure that cannot be placed outside of wilderness, while minimizing that infrastructure's impact upon wilderness values and the visitor experience. Additionally, Wilderness does not preclude NPS or the Border Patrol from using necessary means to ensure life safety and respond to emergencies.

Wilderness designation has two major advantages, too, that aren't always considered:

First, it creates a framework for future management that can't change by the whim of the day; in so doing, it assures that our grandchildren can have the best hope of having a similar experience at Big Bend National Park that we have today.

Second, as visitation increases, it will assure that any additional visitor services that are needed are accommodated outside the park, which would have a direct positive economic impact on the private sector and gateway communities, while limiting any negative environmental or aesthetic impact on the park itself, which is what draws so many people to the area.

**Wilderness designation would have absolutely no impact on any lands or land uses outside the national park.**

Peer-reviewed economics studies overwhelmingly show that protection of wild areas, including formal designation as wilderness, benefits local economies.

Wilderness at Big Bend is also completely consistent with parallel efforts which have great public support to protect the dark skies of West Texas. No new development, no new lights – it's that simple.

## The Opportunity We Have Now

We have an opportunity to fulfill an unrealized vision of previous generations at Big Bend National Park which has been around for over 40 years without any resolution. A number of long-time park lovers locally and from across Texas and nearby states are looking to raise the visibility of this issue, loosely organizing as "Keep Big Bend Wild" (KBBW). The Big Bend Conservancy is a key member of that coalition. And while the NPS did not initiate the KBBW effort, Park Superintendent Bob Krumenaker and Deputy Superintendent David Elkowitz are working closely with the KBBW group, but NPS employees also cannot lobby for legislation.

Ultimately, KBBW hopes for congressional action in this Congress with a target date of the end of 2022. The Big



# Executive Director and CEO's LETTER

Bend Conservancy is not a lobbying organization either, but the Board feels very comfortable communicating about values and how permanent wilderness designation would positively impact the park and the visitor experience in the future. Hence the current KBBW effort focus to build support for the concept, have one-on-one and small group conversations with people who care about the park, focusing primarily on local businesses, local officials, nearby landowners, and anyone who might have questions or concerns. KBBW is building a coalition by building relationships, and listening to stakeholders. Concurrently, park management is working with the Border Patrol and others to assuage any concerns that wilderness would change things on the ground.

The paradox, but also the opportunity, is that since the NPS has protected these lands from development for decades, this effort is not about changing things in the park, but reducing uncertainty about the future management direction.

The group has asked NPS to review the boundaries that were proposed in 1978. While the 1978 map is a good place to start, Congress is not bound by the lines drawn on a map 40+ years ago. There are a number of places that were not recommended for wilderness then but have remained undeveloped and would be good candidates to add to the wilderness proposal without changing any current uses. The North Rosillos area has also been added to the park since the 1978 recommendation was made, and the park is currently studying which lands in that area meet the wilderness eligibility criteria. The Keep Big Bend Wild effort will put together a consensus map and recommend to Congress boundaries for a wilderness bill that would protect the existing developed areas and roads but preserve forever as much of the undeveloped core of the park as federal wilderness.

Everyone involved absolutely agrees that everything that is currently developed (including all paved and unpaved public roads) and all uses that are currently allowed, would continue in any proposal that the group would ask Congress to act upon. None of the Chisos Basin development, and none of the Rio Grande, would be included in the wilderness, or affected by this proposal. Hence, Congressional action would assure continuity of management into the future, regardless of NPS or political leadership changes at the local or national level.

## For More Information – and How to Help

Spend some time looking at [www.KeepBigBendWild.org](http://www.KeepBigBendWild.org), where the issues are laid out and questions are answered in more detail than we can do here. The website will be updated as things evolve and as the list of supporters grows. The KBBW group asks that those who want to support this effort expand their network and inform friends and colleagues; ultimately, elected officials will be more likely to be responsive if they understand that there is a wide coalition of people across the state of Texas that believe protecting Big Bend forever is in the public interest. If you want to add your name or company as supporters, there's a link on the supporters' tab for you to let the group know.

If you have concerns or questions, you can ask them on the KBBW website or call BBC's Executive Director, Loren Riemer. Park Superintendent Bob Krumenaker, who has more experience with wilderness across the National Park System than any other superintendent we've ever had, has also said he's more than willing to talk with anyone about this effort. If COVID travel restrictions abate, he's also eager to meet with groups across the state to discuss wilderness and other park issues. More information about federal wilderness law, policy, and management can be found at [www.wilderness.net](http://www.wilderness.net).



Holiday greetings! Hoping this season finds you celebrating with those you love. As I began to consider my gift list this year, I realized that I wanted to give meaningful gifts that made a real impact. I've been exploring organizations and causes with missions that are meaningful to my family and friends and making gifts or purchasing memberships in their honor.

As you consider your own gift lists, please remember the Big Bend Conservancy on behalf of those in your life who love the Park. Whether contributing a gift in their honor or purchasing them an annual membership for 2022, your loved ones will be thrilled at the positive impact made by your gift.

Recently, Big Bend Conservancy and Park staff had the opportunity to host supporters on a tour of the upgraded sustainability efforts taking place at Big Bend National Park. With visitation numbers higher than ever before, the human impact on the Park has the ability to be astronomical. In addition to encouraging visitors to pack out the trash they bring in, the Park has updated the way in which they process recyclables and educate visitors about how to sort their recyclables from their trash.

Throughout the park, you will find BearSaver bins that accept #1 and #2 plastics, aluminum, and glass. These materials are collected and baled in the Park's very own on-site recycling center before being shipped to processing centers. Did you know most plastic bottle tops are not recyclable? Remove those caps before you recycle – this saves park staff countless manual labor hours ensuring clean plastics are sent to the recycling center.

A recent waste stream audit conducted in the Park revealed that a large percentage of landfill waste being thrown away in the Park may actually be compostable. This finding has led BBC to begin conversations with Park staff about implementation of a composting program at Big Bend. We are excited about the opportunity to offset landfill waste in a way that creates usable organic materials.

During a recent sustainability summit co-hosted between park leadership and the Big Bend Conservancy, many stakeholders including the park's concessioner, the on-site San Vicente school, Big Bend Natural History Association, and Park staff had

the opportunity to collaborate and share ideas about implementing and continuing to adopt best practices at Big Bend. These conversations have led to positive information-sharing and a collective vision of minimizing impact on the Park's landfill.

In continuing sustainability efforts, BBC recently identified funding to cover the cost of implementing the Park's first new construction project including a solar energy component. These solar panels, which will be installed on top of parking shade structures at Headquarters, will offset the energy use for all of the Panther Junction Visitor Center. Keep your eye out for this exciting development in the Park in 2022.

These projects are only made possible by your support. Through your membership renewals and gifts to the BBC annual fund and special projects, you ensure our continued ability to preserve, enrich, and conserve the unique resources of the Park. Thank you! Remember to visit [www.bigbendconservancy.org/donate](http://www.bigbendconservancy.org/donate) to check off every name on your gift list this year.

Wishing you and yours the very brightest of holiday seasons and an adventure-filled new year!

Stay wild,

  
Loren Riemer  
Executive Director and CEO



Photograph: Rick Gupman