

Have protection designations outpaced management?

David C. Chojnacky, PhD and Cindy C. Chojnacky, MA
Wilderness Need Association, Hailey, Idaho, USA

Abstract

Many protected areas have been established worldwide, but initial observations in two dissimilar countries indicate more emphasis on acreage and protection policy than administering these areas to meet legal mandates. We sampled the National Wilderness Preservation System in the United States of America (USA), a highly developed nation with a complex series of protected areas; and protected areas in Cambodia, an emerging country with minimal resources and governance but important tropical forests and a large percentage of protected areas reported. In both countries, non-government organizations (NGOs) have stepped in the gap but lack coordination or accountability.



Eagle Cap Wilderness typical of United States glaciated alpine wilderness.

Background

- 1959: UN Economic and Social Council called for a list of national parks and equivalent resources
- 1962: first UN List of Protected Areas
- Today >200,000 Protected Areas cover about 9% of the world's land, 10% in USA
- Two countries** compared:

USA: Most highly protected designation established 1964; now 803 areas in National Wilderness Preservation System, more than 45 million ha, about 5% of USA (almost half in Alaska)¹

Cambodia: 49 protected areas and corridors cover about 7 million ha or 40% of Cambodia's land area²



Dense tropical forest, Keo Seima Wildlife Sanctuary, Cambodia: paradoxically, recent road opened access but added complication to protection enforcement.

Question

How much of *protected wild nature* is being managed according to its protected area designation, meeting intent of governing laws?



Many rules to "protect" Sawtooth Wilderness in Idaho, USA on trailhead sign but no information to help visitors enjoy area—purpose for wilderness.

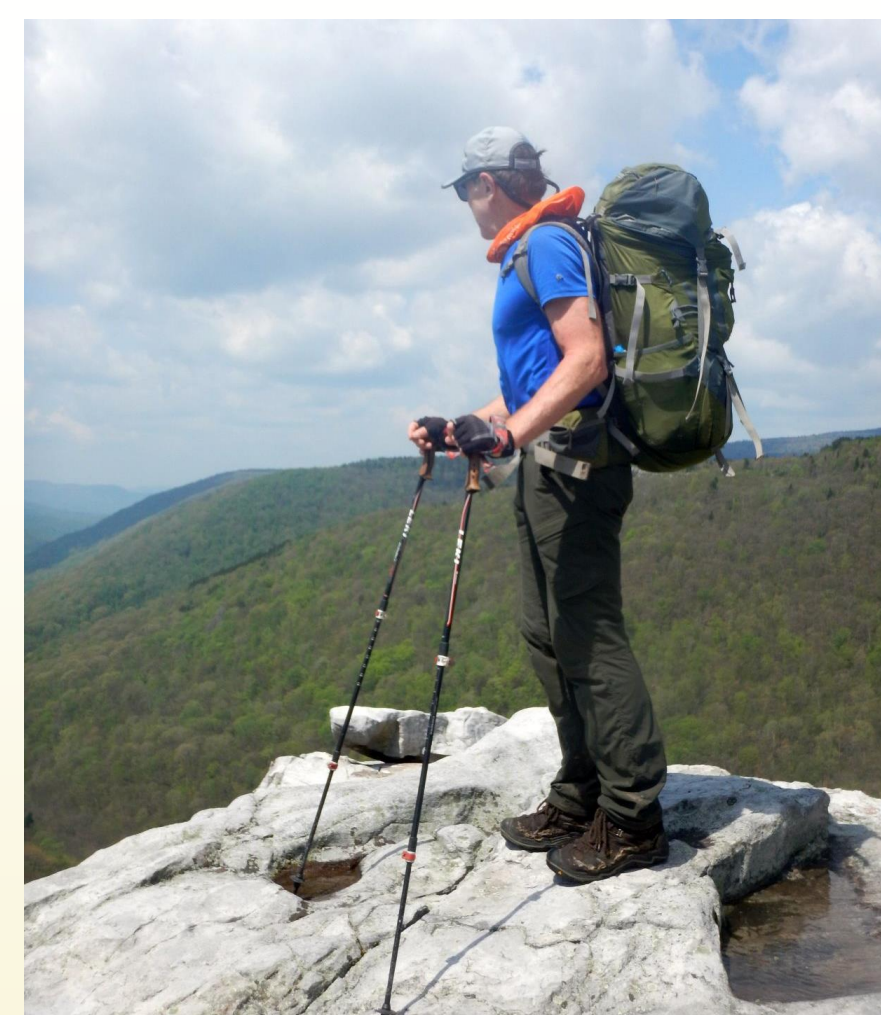


Cambodia protected areas may be cleared for plantation concessions.

Observations

USA: In 2012, & 2014–2020, we visited 60 wilderness areas, including backpacking about 3,500 miles. Subsequently, we examined relevant policy and governance.

Cambodia: In 2012–2013, we worked in Phnom Penh (with UN and national staff in the Forestry Administration [FA]) designing a national forest inventory using pilot data collected in protected areas by non-governmental organizations (NGOs). We also compiled anecdotal observations from visits to several protected areas and community forests.



Dolly Sods Wilderness visit in West Virginia, USA.

Findings

1. Policy

USA: Wilderness Act of 1964 mandates wilderness administered for purpose of "public use and enjoyment" present and future (e.g., recreation) by means of preserving "wilderness character." Law allows some historic uses that could undermine both public enjoyment and wilderness character such as livestock grazing.

Cambodia: Most protected areas were created by Royal Decree in 1993; the Nature Protection Areas Law of 2008 provides legal foundation for management goals. Protected areas are intended to contribute to economic & sustainable development.

2. Official entities

USA: 4 land-management agencies had wilderness management added to initial missions with minimal additional staff.

Cambodia: 1 agency was recently assigned authority for protected area management but poorly paid staff supplement income through contracts with UN and international aid agencies, and with NGOs—which shifts work emphasis to whatever is being funded.



NGO helps stop illegal logging, confiscates logging vehicles.

3. NGO role

USA: NGOs were key to establishing wilderness and continue to extend acreage; many use litigation to enforce protection.

Cambodia: NGOs (among the 3,500 registered³) assist the minimally funded government in protected area administration—mostly policing illegal activities, e.g., stealth logging of luxury-wood species & wildlife poaching.

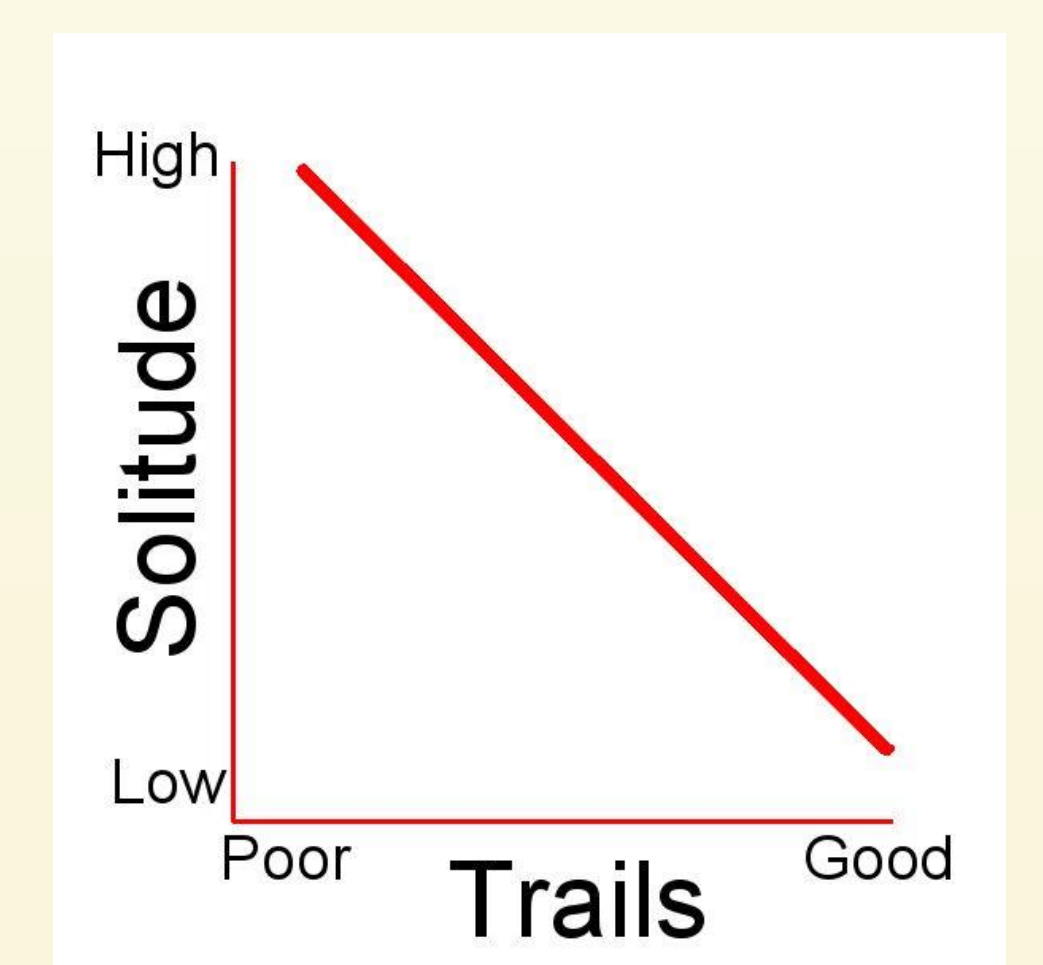
4. Status

USA:

- Visitors overuse areas with good trails & information; but most little visited—"solitude/trails inverse."
- Climate-change increasing trail damage while federal presence/funding declines reducing wilderness access.
- Some small NGOs maintain trails for specific areas.
- Some larger NGOs have distracted managers from public use/enjoyment mission with extreme focus on "wilderness character" management and monitoring.

Cambodia:

- Protected areas are threatened by illegal activities & land conversion pressures.
- NGOs assist but mechanisms are lacking to coordinate activities towards unified goals.



USA visitors overuse a few areas with good trails while much wilderness rarely visited.

Conclusions

- Designation of protected areas is important, but more thought, study, and evaluation needs to be given to managing them.
- NGOs have stepped into the gap as important advocates for protected areas but are not necessarily accountable to laws or public interest.
- New mission-focused protection entities are needed to evaluate current status, trends, threats, and management of existing protected areas. **We should not continue to administer protected areas by default!**

References

¹ Wilderness Connect. <https://wilderness.net>

² Ministry of Environment, Royal Government of Cambodia. 2017. National Protected Area Strategic Management Plan 2017–2031.

³ Domashneva H. 2013. NGOs in Cambodia: it's complicated. <https://thedi diplomat.com/2013/12/ngos-in-cambodia-its-complicated/>

