Boundary Waters Canoe Area Encyclopedia Article

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Boundary Waters Canoe Area

The Boundary Waters Canoe Area (BWCA), a federally designated **wilderness** area in northern Minnesota, includes approximately one million acres (410,000 ha) stretching some 200 mi (322 km) along the United States-Canadian border. The BWCA contains more than 1,200 mi (1,932 km) of canoe routes and portages. The second largest expanse in the National Wilderness Preservation system, the BWCA is administered by the United States **Forest Service**. Constituting about one-third of the Superior **National Forest** (established in 1909), the BWCA was set apart as wilderness by an act of Congress in 1958. The 1964 **Wilderness Act** allowed limited **logging** in some parts of the BWCA and the use of motorboats on 60% of the water area. Under pressure from environmental groups—and over objections by developers, logging interests, and many local residents—the Congress finally passed the BWCA Wilderness Act of 1978, which outlawed all logging and limited motorboats to 33% of the water surface area (due to drop to 24% by 1999), and added 45,000 acres (18,450 ha), bringing the total area to 1,075,000 acres (440,750 ha).

Many area residents and resort owners continue to resent and resist efforts to reduce the areas open to motorized watercraft and snowmobile traffic. They have pressed unsuccessfully for federal legislation to that effect. At the urging of Senator Paul Wellstone (D-MN), a mediation panel was convened in 1996 to consider the future of the BWCA. Environmentalists, resort owners, local residents, and representatives of other groups met for several months to try to reconcile competing interests in the area. Unable to reach agreement and arrive at a compromise, the panel disbanded in 1997. The fierce and continuing political quarrels over the future of the BWCA contrast markedly with the silence and serenity of this land of sky-blue waters and green forests.

Further Reading

Beymer R. *The Boundary Waters Canoe Area*, vol. 1: "The Western Region" and vol. 2: "The Eastern Region." Berkeley: Wilderness Press, 1978.