

*“Lonely and unusual charm” of Craters of the Moon Wilderness make it among most unique in National Wilderness Preservation System*

*Craig Gehrke*

*Note: This is the third in a series of six Guest Opinions commemorating the Craters of the Moon National Monument Centennial*

On the northern edge of Idaho’s Snake River Plain, one of the most developed landscapes in the state, lies an area that in contrast remains as it has been for thousands of years, a wilderness area often overshadowed by better known, larger wildernesses like the Sawtooth and Frank Church – River of No Return Wilderness. But it’s a mistake to overlook the Craters of the Moon Wilderness Area, because here visitors can explore one of the most incredibly diverse and ruggedly wild landscapes in Idaho.

The Craters of the Moon Wilderness showcases a remarkable display of the geologic forces that shaped much of Southern Idaho. Lava flows, tubes, fissures and craters stretch off into the horizon. Even in a state like Idaho, whose wilderness areas run the gamut of rugged alpine peaks to sheer walled desert river canyons, the Craters of the Moon Wilderness stands out as one of the most unique areas in the National Wilderness Preservation System.

Initially, the idea of wilderness often didn’t include many landscapes like Craters of the Moon. The initial nine million acres of wilderness designated by the 1964 Wilderness Act were managed by the U.S. Forest Service. But the Wilderness Act directed all federal lands 5,000 acres or more in size be studied for possible wilderness designation. That mandate was the genesis of the Craters of the Moon Wilderness.

A wilderness study of the Craters of the Moon National Monument was undertaken and finished by the National Park Service in 1965, recommending a wilderness area of 41,000 acres. Craters of the Moon National Monument Superintendent Roger Contor recommended naming the wilderness the “Tu’Timbaba,” a Shoshoni term for “Black Rock Overpass” which referred to the thousand feet the lava landscape rises above the adjacent valleys. Contor wrote an article on the special values of the proposed wilderness area for the Winter 1966-67 issue of *The Living Wilderness*, the magazine published by The Wilderness Society. Contor wrote that the proposed wilderness “... remains the most interesting and least disturbed segment of the entire Snake River Plain. Those who spend time here will soon feel its lonely and unusual charm.”

The National Park Service conducted public hearings on its Craters of the Moon proposed wilderness, and groups like The Wilderness Society recommended expanding the proposed area slightly to include more features of the landscape.

In April 1969 Senator Frank Church introduced legislation to designate a Craters of the Moon Wilderness Area. In his floor statement Church included for the congressional record Superintendent Contor’s article from *The Living Wilderness* to document the uniqueness of the area. Church stated “... there is no doubt... that this is one of the most astonishing landscapes in America.” In June the Senate passed the legislation. The House of Representatives, responding to

advocates to include more features like Big Cinder Butte and the lava tree molds within the wilderness area, increased the size of the wilderness to 43,000 acres and passed legislation in September 1970. The Senate concurred and in October President Nixon signed the bill into law, making Craters of the Moon Wilderness, along with the Petrified Forest Wilderness, the first designated wilderness areas managed by the National Park Service.

Like Idaho's other wilderness areas, the Craters of the Moon Wilderness represents a commitment to future generations that there are places in Idaho that deserve to be respected and preserved just like they are, just like they've been, for millennia. Wilderness recognizes that society need not extract minerals, timber, or other finite resources from a landscape for that landscape to have a value.

Each wilderness in Idaho has come about because Idahoans who know and love these lands didn't want them lost to development and so came together to advocate for their permanent protection. It's always been this way. Every landscape in Idaho that people want to see preserved in its natural state requires advocacy to make it happen.

That's why there'll be future wilderness areas in Idaho. Idahoans love wild places. Whether it's Scotchman Peak, the Great Burn, or Borah Peak, people from all backgrounds will work to ensure these lands stay wild, just like they've always been, where future generations will have the opportunity to savor, just like we do today, the wild character that defines much of Idaho.

*Craig Gehrke is an Idaho native who served as the Director of the Idaho Office of The Wilderness Society for over three decades, and helped lead the efforts to establish the Owyhee Canyonlands and Boulder-White Clouds Wilderness Areas.*