

Title: **Visions of Wilderness in the North Bay Communities of California**

Running Head: Visions of Wilderness

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### **Introduction**

In the United States, the concept of Wilderness has a distinct legal foundation in the Wilderness Act of 1964. The original Act designated distinct areas, mostly already held within federal lands, as wilderness, and future amendments added more. Managing these areas crosses federal agencies and unifies branches of government in a way few other laws can. Yet, the language of the Act is rooted in a particular kind of wilderness experience, which over the intervening years has been characterized as racialized, unethical, and impossible (DeLuca & Demo 2001). On a local scale, implementing wilderness in landscape of multiple land uses causes conflict when stakeholders do not negotiate with the same wilderness experience in mind (e.g. Jacques & Ostergren 2006). This case study contributes to evidence that these critiques remain relevant and need to be considered in contemporary management under the Act, as they remain a source of conflict.

Over the 50 years since establishment of the Wilderness Act, several phrases that epitomize the law have become synonymous with the wilderness concept. The purpose of the Act is for “the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, and so as to provide for the protection of these areas, the preservation of their wilderness character, and for the gathering and dissemination of information regarding their use and enjoyment as wilderness” (Wilderness Act 1964). The Act goes on to define wilderness “as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain... an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent

28 improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural  
29 conditions” (Wilderness Act 1964).

30 The words untrammeled and primeval have been the source of major controversy  
31 (Friskics 2008; Cole 2000), and are therefore important to contextualize, especially in terms of  
32 Native American history on the land and current ecological changes and restoration. The Act  
33 also prescribes how to implement and manage wilderness areas: “wilderness areas shall be  
34 devoted to the public purposes of recreational, scenic, scientific, educational, conservation and  
35 historic use... there shall be no commercial enterprise and no permanent road within any  
36 wilderness area designated by this Act” (Wilderness Act 1964). This clause leads to the  
37 nickname for wilderness as ‘roadless areas’ in many management frameworks.

### 38 Critiques of wilderness

39 The concept of wilderness as made concrete through the Wilderness Act has been  
40 critiqued heavily since 1964 for a wide variety of reasons ranging from implementation to core  
41 philosophy. Many of these critiques remain relevant today in contemporary wilderness  
42 management like those highlighted here: the construction of wilderness through a privileged  
43 white lens, the impossible paradox of managing wilderness as separate and pristine from  
44 humans, and the paradoxes created in managing for a static wilderness in a world with a rapidly  
45 changing climate.

46 Since William Cronon’s (1996) work introduced the idea of wilderness as a social  
47 construction, there is more recognition of the fact that people were removed to physically create  
48 American wilderness and many more kinds of voices are still left out of the discourse managing  
49 contemporary wilderness. In particular, the silence surrounding the overt racism of the early  
50 wilderness movement produces profoundly problematic environmental politics today (Kosek  
51 2006). In elevating early advocates of wilderness as national heroes without recognizing their  
52 flaws (which all heroes have) does a disservice to attempts at diversifying the modern  
53 environmental movement and use of wilderness spaces by today’s diverse population (Finney  
54 2014). This is also true for the activities that have come to be associated with wilderness, as  
55 promoted by early wilderness activists that are not valued by or possible for a significant  
56 segment of the population (Ray 2009). In addition, federal programs to manage public lands like

57 Smokey the Bear removed power from local knowledge holders to let distant, privileged men  
58 make decisions over what wilderness should look like and who should be allowed in (Kosek  
59 2006). This is especially true where colonial interests physically removed indigenous people  
60 from wilderness along with their conceptions of nature and related successful management  
61 schemes (Whyte 2016).

62 Linked to the racial nature of wilderness, the dominant culture's distance from nature  
63 helped establish wilderness and humans as something diametrically opposed (Nash 1963). This  
64 divide first flared into public view before the Wilderness Act in the arguments between John  
65 Muir and Gifford Pinchot over conservation versus preservation (Nash 1963). This philosophical  
66 divide continues to this day in the same spaces of Northern California, where different cultures  
67 of wilderness are directly implicated as the cause of conflict. This includes indigenous groups  
68 and early Mexican immigrants (Ziser 2011), more recent immigrants primarily for southeast Asia  
69 (Johnson et al. 2004), especially a large population of Filipino immigrants (Arano & Persoon  
70 1997). Each of these groups has a different – and more integrated – perception of how nature and  
71 culture are connected than the predominantly white, male view of Wilderness Act authors.

72 Muir's 'pristine' wilderness devoid of humans is ecologically untrue. In a textbook  
73 example, the underlying cause of crown fires that destroy large swaths of forest in western parks  
74 is the cessation of maintenance fires once set by human residents forcibly removed and largely  
75 erased from history (Spence 2000). Decades of fire suppression policy to protect 'wild and  
76 ancient trees' allowed an abundance of fuel to build up, able to light a fire far hotter and stronger  
77 than historical fires under the region's natural fire regime (Garmestani & Benson 2013). Forest  
78 managers now recognize the role of prescribed fire in reducing fuel, maintaining a natural fire  
79 regime of frequent, small fires and allowing fire-germinated trees to maintain their dominance  
80 (Mangel et al. 1996; Garmestani & Benson 2013). Members of once-removed tribes are now  
81 viewed by forest managers as living repositories of information on how to manage such forests  
82 (Freitag 2014). In fact, the landscapes we call 'wild' today were shaped over millennia of  
83 carefully timed fires to facilitate human habitation and healthy production of the forests  
84 (Anderson 2006).

85 While the discussion about wilderness is often a theoretical one unfolding slowly over  
86 decades, the immediate impact of wilderness – and different perceptions and definitions of the

87 concept – is felt in the daily lives of Northern Californians and the racial overtones are still  
88 present given the diversity of the region. Over the space of a single year, the concept arose in  
89 three public discourses upon which important management decisions would be grounded. These  
90 were a festival celebration of the Wilderness Act’s 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, highway planning, and  
91 permitting an oyster farm in federal water. The underlying differences in how people  
92 conceptualize wilderness brought both happy celebration and long legal battles to the region.

### 93 **Methods**

94 This is an ethnographic study covering 15 months living in one of the North Bay  
95 communities while working professionally to engage citizens in California’s Marine Protected  
96 Area network. Data collection was entirely passive, watching what emerged unsolicited from  
97 both the high-profile celebration of the Wilderness Act and community action around protected  
98 area negotiation (the second two events described below). Forums for observation and data  
99 collection included public community meetings, protests, celebrations, local newspapers, radio,  
100 and informal interviews discussing wilderness with leaders of grassroots organizations working  
101 on wilderness campaigns. All were documented and archived with the help of event organizers  
102 and analyzed in Dedoose according to grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss 2008).

103 Three main events (highlighted as results) are important nexus points where citizen  
104 philosophies of wilderness determined the landscape, controversy and confusion over how  
105 wilderness is implemented. These events are not the only wilderness-related debates going on at  
106 the time, but ones in which local residents were directly called upon to comment on wilderness,  
107 either in celebration or as part of a public planning process. They therefore represent  
108 management opportunities where diverse views of wilderness are specifically invited, and in  
109 some cases directly incorporated into management decisions. Presented together, they portray the  
110 collective experience of stakeholders in managing wilderness –discourse crossed between the  
111 three events, as they happened simultaneously.

### 112 **Case Studies**

113 Each of the three case studies occurred simultaneously and address different aspects of the  
114 wilderness critiques described in the introduction. Together, they represent the collective

115 wilderness discourse presented to constituents, who are then asked to participate in policy to  
116 determine future wilderness policy and implementation.

### 117 **Visions of the Wild: a festival celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Wilderness Act**

118 *“We didn’t know what wilderness was until someone told us we live there”* – Chief Caleen Sisk

119 In celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Wilderness Act, the US Forest Service  
120 organized the Visions of the Wild festival celebrating wilderness in what they determined was  
121 the most diverse city in America - Vallejo. Organizers strove to make the festival events a  
122 cultural celebration of wilderness, inclusive of the diverse citizenry. They solicited diverse  
123 perspectives on wilderness for panel discussions and presentations (including local academic  
124 Carolyn Finney, one of the most outspoken authors on race and wilderness), but also encouraged  
125 different forms of expression as theater, film, and art, directly asking people to describe their  
126 wilderness philosophy.

127 Many of the cultural celebrations of wilderness were actually focused on natural, open  
128 areas and parks. People attending the festival seemed aware that some of the open spaces they  
129 frequented were designated wilderness, but many stories also focused on city parks, agricultural  
130 easements, and working federal lands. One of the most popular exhibits was a map depicting all  
131 of the public spaces in the region, regardless of management designation. Making this map was  
132 difficult and controversial, requiring collaboration from unusual land management partners.

133 The kid’s area was another of the most popular exhibits. Here, agencies and local  
134 community groups shared their regional efforts for young audiences and hosted related arts and  
135 craft activities. The Forest Service regional manager was pleased with the popularity of the kid’s  
136 area, remarking he thought it is great to show kids that people find rewarding work in  
137 wilderness; it’s not a space devoid of humans. He highlighted the popular foresters from Tahoe  
138 and Shasta National Forests that helped festivalgoers cut tree cookies.

139 [insert figure 1]

140 The other popular part of the festival was the art walk on Friday night, part of the regular  
141 downtown Vallejo schedule but wilderness-themed. Several artists unveiled wilderness-inspired  
142 collections while others welcomed festival attendees to their regular studios. At each gallery, one

143 could hear a similar conversation along the lines of how great it is to bring nature into the city  
144 and take advantage of the excitement behind two of Vallejo's greatest assets – arts and nature.

145 The less well-attended events were also those that encouraged the most in-depth  
146 discussions on people's differing perceptions of wilderness. One event started with local  
147 Congressman Mike Thompson's call for wilderness to regain its power as a unifying force,  
148 reminding festival-goers that the Wilderness Act was born in the divided time of the Civil Rights  
149 Era out of a wide base of bipartisan support. The panel discussion following between scholars of  
150 the wilderness concept reminded the audience that many of the big wilderness luminaries are  
151 documented racists and that the historical mistakes of racial insensitivity throughout establishing  
152 the wilderness legacy shape people's relationship with wilderness today. Remaining optimistic,  
153 however, the speakers emphasized that today's youngest generations need to actively create their  
154 own environmental identity just as these luminaries once did.

155 The festival demonstrated both a cultural love of wilderness and a less nuanced definition  
156 of wilderness than the law. This phenomenon was most clearly demonstrated by the popularity of  
157 the map depicting all of the regional open space, regardless of managing agency. In addition,  
158 festival attendees looked to this map for wilderness both within the city and far outside its  
159 borders, demonstrating the need for representations of wilderness both as city parks and large  
160 swaths of distant federal land. Finally, as the invited speakers stressed, wilderness is part of  
161 home, not a distant area managed from afar. Instead, wilderness creation and management is  
162 about directing human behavior so resources needed for healthy wilderness remain (especially  
163 water), and – most importantly – creating a healthy relationship with nature that encompasses the  
164 diverse relationships with nature residents of the region already have (namely, a non-white  
165 perspective).

### 166 **Route 37: a marshy highway, rebuilding and accessing wilderness**

167 *“As anyone who has traveled that highway ... knows, it isn't really built ON land at all, it's built*  
168 *UP from the marshes at the edge of San Pablo Bay” – Gaye Lebaron in The Damp and Difficult*  
169 *History of Highway 37*

170 Planning for the highway connecting the West Coast's major shipbuilding port to workers  
171 in Sonoma County has a legendarily complicated history leading to modern conflict. Wilderness

172 added itself to the list of complicating factors in 1977, when heavy rains burst a levee on the  
173 Napa River, restoring the surrounding White Slough to natural wetland and bounding the  
174 highway on both sides by endangered, protected salt mice (Gafni 2005). The new wilderness  
175 required additional permitting, including environmental impact statements for all proposed  
176 actions.

177 Owners of the Cullinan Ranch surrounding much of the highway near White Slough also  
178 took the flooding as a sign that they should cease commercial hay farming and restore their land  
179 to a natural hydrologic regime. Returning tidal flows to the area meant any new highway plans  
180 also had to include erosion control and impact to restoration efforts. The Cullinan Ranch sits on  
181 Fish and Wildlife Service land, and once converted back to wilderness, also required following  
182 federal guidelines and priorities for public access to wildlife resources. The final environmental  
183 impact statement for the restoration states “accessibility within the site will vary as the habitat  
184 evolves” and offered a menu of solutions to ensure safe access to trails, fishing, and boating  
185 areas utilizing Route 37.

186 In the intervening years, the area has undergone intermittent construction as funding  
187 becomes available. The most dangerous and most frequently flooded sections were lifted and  
188 widened, but salt mouse habitat restricts completion of the entire widening plan. Cullinan Ranch  
189 is currently undergoing construction to protect the highway from erosion during storms and high  
190 tides and provide access to new recreation activities in the area. Seeing the piecemeal approach  
191 to construction, a team led by Fraser Shilling at the University of California, Davis, organized a  
192 community visioning process to help prioritize and shape future actions to plan for the corridor  
193 as a whole. The stakeholder group collectively characterized wildlife resources in the area and  
194 helped develop a decision analytic tool for planners to choose between alternate scenarios  
195 (Campbell et al. 2010) and continues to guide construction.

196 [insert figure 2]

197 Planning for Highway 37 took almost 60 years before someone invested the time, money,  
198 and energy into a comprehensive, coordinated planning effort. This coordinated effort was able  
199 to move forward immediate actions by bringing restoration and transportation planning in  
200 conversation with one another. However, they also identified a key ongoing problem with little



201 or no information to work from: the impact of sea level rise in both transportation and wilderness  
202 planning. When Route 37 was first designated a highway during World War 1, the area was not  
203 surrounded by wetland, but rising seas in the intervening century pushed the Bay over Route 37  
204 and projections looking forward reveal that recent work on both Cullinan Ranch and Route 37  
205 will be inundated, so all the work thus far can be considered temporary.

206 Restoration and preservation efforts are using targets – and a vision of the area – that are  
207 consistent with White Slough after its levee fell in 1977. The wilderness people are working so  
208 hard to save is entirely reconstructed, based on that vision and attempts to restore natural  
209 hydrodynamic flow. If sea level rise trends continue, the wetlands may push further up the Napa  
210 River to winery land, squeezing the endangered mouse and its habitat needs into new territory.  
211 According to the UC Davis study, we have no mechanisms for deciding how to account for this  
212 wandering wilderness. The whole case calls into question a temporal component of defining  
213 wilderness and how we protect it in a highly dynamic system.

#### 214 **Drakes Bay oyster farm: restructuring park alliances**

215 *“In letting the permit lapse, the Secretary emphasized the importance of the long-term*  
216 *environmental impact of the decision on Drakes Estero, which is located in an area designated*  
217 *as potential wilderness... Drakes Bay’s disagreement with the value judgments made by the*  
218 *Secretary is not a legitimate basis on which to set aside the decision” – Order and Amended*  
219 *Opinion, Case 13-15227, pg. 6*

220 The Drakes Bay Oyster Farm is located inside Point Reyes National Seashore alongside  
221 historic cattle ranches. These uses of land inside a national park may seem odd, but they received  
222 special use permits as part of the process that created the National Seashore where land prices  
223 exceeded the ability of Congress to buy the area outright. According to the most recent decision  
224 by the 9<sup>th</sup> Circuit Appeals Court, the Secretary of the Department of Interior was authorized, but  
225 not required, to renew this 40-year permit when it expired in 2012. The judges decided that the  
226 Point Reyes Wilderness Act of 1976, which designates wilderness areas within Point Reyes, left  
227 the Secretary appropriate grounds to deny the permit based on allowed uses in the Wilderness  
228 Act (which explicitly prohibits commercial uses).

229 Wilderness as invoked in this legal case delves into the wording and intent of the Act as  
230 written in 1964. The Park Service states that they are trying to restore the area to wilderness, as  
231 intended when it was designated in 1976 (MacFarlane et al. 2013). In order to decide whether to  
232 renew the special use permit for aquaculture, the Park Service commissioned an environmental  
233 impact statement (EIS) according to National Environmental Policy Act standards, but did not  
234 complete the procedural requirements as the EIS was not technically required by law. This EIS  
235 was intended to establish a scientific foundation for decisions about the Drakes Estero potential  
236 wilderness, but ended mired in controversy, investigated for criminal misconduct, and virtually  
237 unused. Instead, the Department of Justice writes “in effect, the Secretary – who is charged by  
238 statute with administering the national park system for the public good – made a policy judgment  
239 that the public was better served by wilderness in Drakes Estero than by a private commercial  
240 oyster operation” (MacFarlane et al. 2013).

241 The 1,000-page EIS and complex legal documents were translated to residents of the park  
242 and other local stakeholders primarily through regional newspapers, the value judgment  
243 implemented by the Secretary included. Only one article in support of Secretary Salazar was  
244 written during the 2-year legal battle, claiming that the oyster farm’s case is really one of  
245 neoliberal over-reach into federal lands (Kovner 2013). Others demonstrated sympathy for farm  
246 workers, the loss of a historic business in the area, and the shrinking market for local oysters.  
247 Several asserted that the case divided the environmental community into those supporting  
248 wilderness creation and those supporting the local food and sustainable living movements  
249 (Duggan 2014).

250 [insert figure 3]

251 While wilderness is intended to benefit the public, that same public must perceive of the  
252 process of creating that wilderness as fair. In this case, public opinion does not support  
253 sacrificing a historic oyster farm in order to create additional wilderness in what is already a  
254 national park. Some of this public opinion is directly tied to the process the Secretary used – one  
255 with an investigation of scientific misconduct, no chance for public input during EIS review, and  
256 concerns over validity of other existing arrangements within the park. Point Reyes was  
257 established as a national seashore only with the support of and permits for local ranchers, making  
258 the arrangement unusual. That trajectory of unusualness (and some would say, progress in

259 maintaining justice in wilderness creation) was shattered when the Secretary returned to the  
260 Wilderness Act to support an admitted value judgment, and continue a history of creating  
261 wilderness by forcibly removing humans from the landscape.

## 262 **Discussion**

263 Since the days of Muir, American society has developed some nuance in its conception of  
264 wilderness as a result of critiques. We have largely come to adhere to Cronon and Nash's  
265 understanding of wilderness as a social construction, reflecting the values of a particular set of  
266 activists at a particular time (Cronon 1996; Nash 1963). While the written law of wilderness has  
267 not changed, activist groups like EarthFirst have changed their strategy in the region to  
268 incorporate allies who hold use values (London 1998), which changes how the law is  
269 implemented.

270 The North Bay hosts almost as many kinds of green space as it does philosophies of  
271 wilderness— a diversity of nature, culture, and management - creating a sometimes confusing  
272 landscape. In addition, increasing conservation attention goes to projects like Cullinan Ranch,  
273 seeking to restore critical ecosystems and ecosystem services, and where human decisions will  
274 literally define the shape of the landscape in the future – what the next generation will know as  
275 protected wilderness. These are very different, integrated understandings of wilderness from  
276 when the Wilderness Act was written. Wilderness is part of daily life.

277 Green spaces, including wilderness, are an important and desired part of the North Bay  
278 landscape. But the term 'wilderness' is not widely understood in the restrictive way the law is  
279 written. Attempting to base current planning decisions on our historical (problematic)  
280 understanding of wilderness misses how people fundamentally interact with and depend on these  
281 spaces. Therefore, such attempts have caused and will continue to cause millions of dollars spent  
282 on litigation, years of struggle, and much heartbreak in areas where wilderness is fundamentally  
283 being contested. A more systematic attempt at stakeholder engagement, beginning with their  
284 vision of wilderness in the region like those shared at the Visions of the Wild festival, may help  
285 to alleviate future conflict and end ongoing disputes. Future amendments to the Wilderness Act  
286 need to include the ecological and cultural diversity and dynamism present in the world.

## 287 **Conclusions**

288 The concept of wilderness as codified in the Wilderness Act is critiqued by recognition of  
289 its overt racism, its false divide of nature and culture, and mismatch with the dynamics of natural  
290 ecology and climate change. All three of these veins of critique are present throughout the  
291 wilderness discourse of the residents of the North Bay region. Racial diversity and the need to  
292 increase its representation in wilderness was called into the spotlight and celebrated with the  
293 Visions of the Wild festival, complete with a call for young people to form their own relationship  
294 with nature and manage wilderness of the future according to that relationship (Finney 2014 and  
295 at festival). The controversy over oyster farming in Drakes Estero directly calls into question  
296 whether wilderness can exist with a human footprint or whether modern management will  
297 continue the tradition of creating wilderness by erasing humans from the landscape (Friskics  
298 2008). And the restoration and community visioning of the Route 37 corridor raises some  
299 fundamentally new questions about defining and managing wilderness in an area that will look  
300 very different under future climate scenarios, calling out the need for dynamic wilderness  
301 management that will remain robust through centuries (Anderson 2006).

302 A new conceptualization will acknowledge the social construction of the space to ensure  
303 residents and visitors can use wilderness to help define their relationship with nature, and in turn,  
304 leverage that relationship to help the challenges of preservation and conservation in the era of a  
305 rapidly changing environment. One might envision this continuing from the successes of the  
306 festival – utilizing a map like the one participants enjoyed to reclaim what wilderness is in a  
307 modern context and allowing the diverse forms of green space to collectively preserve residents’  
308 wilderness experiences.

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310 Please see title page.

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376

### 377 **Figure Captions**

378 Figure 1: Kid’s murals. Contributors of all ages added their favorite thing about wilderness to  
379 the outline of a butterfly, representing a popular local endangered species, the Lange’s  
380 metalmark butterfly. A finished version of a salmon hangs in a gallery window during the art  
381 walk.

382 Figure 2: Aerial photographs of one of the most hotly contested areas around White Slough.  
383 Note the wide variety of habitat types and how close the Bay is to the highway. Courtesy of  
384 Caltrans District 4.

385 Figure 3: Cartoons in the Marin Independent Journal by George Russell, demonstrating public  
386 opinion on the EIS performed by the Park Service.



Figure 1 Kid's murals. Contributors of all ages added their favorite thing about wilderness to the outline of a butterfly, representing a popular local endangered species, the Lange's metalmark butterfly. A finished version of a salmon hangs in a gallery window during the art walk.

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**Figure 1: Aerial photographs of one of the most hotly contested areas around White Slough. Note the wide variety of habitat types and how close the Bay is to the highway. Courtesy of Caltrans District 4.**

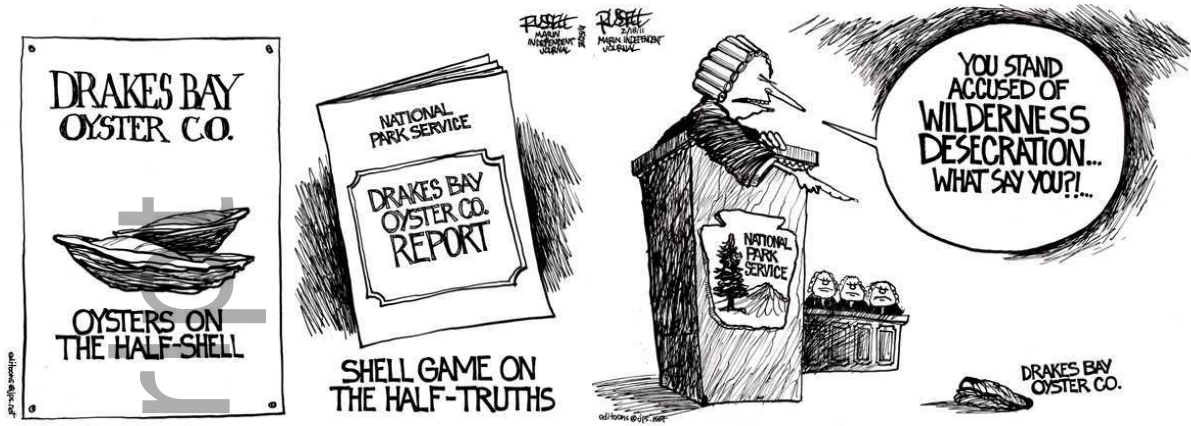


Figure 3 Cartoons in a local newspaper by George Russell, demonstrating public opinion on the EIS performed by the Park Service. Originally printed in the Marin Independent Journal.

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