

# Marin Voice: Why Point Reyes wilderness matters -- here and nationally

By Amy Meyer  
Guest op-ed column

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SAVING Point Reyes National Seashore was built on the legacies of farsighted 19th-century environmental heroes like Teddy Roosevelt and John Muir. As did his forebears, Marin's wonderful congressman, Clem Miller, recognized that a broad area of Marin needed to become a national park to preserve its natural heritage.

That happened in 1962.

Congress passed the Wilderness Act in 1964 to give diverse landscapes all around the United States extra protection for their natural conditions. Central to "wilderness" is the integrity of habitat and of ecosystems functioning naturally, not subject to motorized, business, or development activities. People's use of wilderness is secondary to respect for that sanctuary. It is as far from commerce as you can get.

When people here studied the Wilderness Act, they saw that a large part of the seashore qualified for this special protection.

One special area for the public was Drakes Estero, an estuary with such uniquely high habitat and wildlife value that they declared its highest and best purpose should be a marine wilderness.

I was vice-chair of the federal advisory commission for the Golden Gate National Recreation Area and the seashore when, in 1975 at a commission hearing, several hundred people supported a big wilderness area and the commission voted its agreement with them. Our recommendation to the Secretary of the Interior was accepted.

No one suggested that the Johnson Oyster Co. should receive any protection beyond the humanitarian "grandfathering" of the remaining 36 years of operating rights. The public accepted it would have to wait until Johnson's non-renewable operating rights expired in 2012 for nature, not motorboats and non-native oysters, to be the heartbeat in the estero.

The public has waited nearly four decades for rare marine wilderness protections to be implemented there — an immense compromise in itself.

Everyone, from the National Park Service to the Sierra Club to legislators, understood that in 2012 Americans would be rewarded with the legacy feat of a protected marine wilderness area, the only one on the West Coast.

Accordingly, in 1976, Congress designated 33,373 acres of Point Reyes National Seashore as wilderness, including Drakes Estero as potential wilderness, with instructions to terminate the commercial oyster operation once the rights expired.

The public didn't request and Congress didn't provide any special exemption for the oyster company to operate past 2012.

What is particularly troubling to me is the potential damage to the National Wilderness Preservation System if Interior Secretary Ken Salazar breaks the promise with present and future generations by permitting the commercial use past its designated closure. It would be a betrayal and sets a terrible precedent for the park service and the Department of Interior.

The "owners" of this national park and the designated wilderness are the people of the United States, not the Drakes Bay Oyster Co.

This battle suggests that a promise of the Congress to the American people, whether for wilderness designation or a national park, may be broken for any number of personal or commercial reasons.

It is important to understand what wilderness means and to stand up for it. Wilderness is a way of keeping alive the very origins of our place on our planet. The people of this part of Northern California are rightly and admirably intent on doing the best they can for the environment.

They need to show that they understand that the environmental integrity of the Point Reyes wilderness and prospective erosion of the entire national wilderness preservation system are at stake in this confrontation.

Amy Meyer of San Francisco served as vice-chairwoman of the former federal advisory commission for Golden Gate National Recreation Area and the Point Reyes National Seashore.