



ARTICLE

Celebrating and Creating (Marine) Wilderness

Glacier Bay National Park & Preserve (<https://www.nps.gov/glba/>), Point Reyes National Seashore (<https://www.nps.gov/pore/>)

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Point Reyes National Seashore is one of just two parks on the Pacific to include marine waters within its wilderness boundary.

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September 2022 - [The Wilderness Act](https://www.nps.gov/pore/learn/management/wildernessact.htm) (<https://www.nps.gov/pore/learn/management/wildernessact.htm>) has been a leading instrument of conservation for nearly 60 years, providing the highest level of protection for federal lands. Interpretation of the Act has focused on preserving the “wildness” of ecosystems so that natural processes are unaltered, natural sounds are preserved, and no commercial footprint is left on the landscape. By 2019, congress designated 803 wilderness areas encompassing >100 million acres of minimally developed federal lands with high conservation, educational, scientific, or historical value. National parks account for more than half of those lands, offering protection first as a park and then as wilderness.

But what portion of these wilderness areas are marine? Nation-wide, several parks have terrestrial-marine interfaces designated as wilderness. For example, both [Olympic](https://www.nps.gov/olym/index.htm) (<https://www.nps.gov/olym/index.htm>) and [Redwood](https://www.nps.gov/redw/index.htm) (<https://www.nps.gov/redw/index.htm>) National Parks together include more than 120 miles of wilderness shoreline. Yet their boundaries do not extend beyond the water’s edge into subtidal and truly oceanic waters. Just two parks on the Pacific include marine waters within their wilderness boundaries: Glacier Bay National Park & Preserve and Point Reyes National Seashore.

Designations of marine protections are confusing. We have marine protected areas (MPAs), which provide marine and estuarine ecosystems with different levels of protection, ranging from few restrictions on fishing gear to extensive limits on access and activities. So what does the marine wilderness designation mean? It represents the highest level of marine protection. You can kayak through wilderness waters, and perhaps even fish recreationally. But no motorized vessels/equipment and no commercial extraction are permitted, thereby preserving natural sounds above and below the water's surface. Glacier Bay's wilderness protects 13% (598,611 acres of water acres) of the waters of Glacier Bay, preserved "to be wild, untrammeled, and primeval."

In California, [state MPAs \(https://wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Marine/MPAs\)](https://wildlife.ca.gov/Conservation/Marine/MPAs) protect only ~15% of the state's marine and estuarine waters. Point Reyes is the only state MPA that also includes a federal boundary of marine wilderness. The park wilderness boundary includes ~33,000 acres of land and water, extending a quarter mile offshore and into Drakes Estero (< 10,000 marine acres), where propellers leave no tracks through eelgrass beds.



Point Reyes' wilderness boundary includes ~33,000 acres of land and water, extending a quarter mile offshore and into Drakes Estero (< 10,000 marine acres), where propellers leave no tracks through eelgrass beds.

NPS / Jessica Weinberg McClosky

The celebration of the Wilderness Act as we approach its 60th anniversary on September 3, 2024, is a time to reexamine the inclusion of marine waters. One way to do so would be to extend wilderness protection to National Marine Sanctuaries and National Estuarine Research Reserve sites under the umbrella of the Act, and then to identify new wilderness areas within them. Can you imagine a marine wilderness area that encompasses Point Reyes and extends offshore to include oceanic waters within the [Greater Farallones \(http://farallones.noaa.gov/\)](http://farallones.noaa.gov/) and [Cordell Bank \(https://cordellbank.noaa.gov/\)](https://cordellbank.noaa.gov/) National Marine Sanctuaries?

Further Reading

- Explore subjects: [Wilderness \(https://www.nps.gov/subjects/wilderness/index.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/subjects/wilderness/index.htm)
- [Point Reyes' Phillip Burton Wilderness \(https://www.nps.gov/pore/learn/wilderness.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/pore/learn/wilderness.htm)
 - Video: [Restoring the Marine Wilderness of Point Reyes National Seashore \(https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvVsJMkVAlI\)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uvVsJMkVAlI)
- [Glacier Bay Wilderness \(https://www.nps.gov/glba/learn/wilderness.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/glba/learn/wilderness.htm)
- *Smithsonian Magazine*: [Why the Ocean Needs Wilderness \(https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/why-ocean-needs-wilderness-180969875/\)](https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/why-ocean-needs-wilderness-180969875/)
- KCET.org: [The Idea of Wilderness Erases Native People. Here's How To Fix It. \(https://www.kcet.org/shows/tending-the-wild/the-idea-of-wilderness-erases-native-people-heres-how-to-fix-it\)](https://www.kcet.org/shows/tending-the-wild/the-idea-of-wilderness-erases-native-people-heres-how-to-fix-it)

[See more from the Bay Area Nature & Science Blog \(https://www.nps.gov/rlc/pacificcoast/blog.htm\)](https://www.nps.gov/rlc/pacificcoast/blog.htm)



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