

One of last remaining development threats removed from New Mexico's Gila Wilderness

The Wilderness Land Trust completes purchase of private inholding in America's first wilderness

This year marks the centennial of the Gila, America's first wilderness area, as well as the 60th anniversary of passage of The Wilderness Act. Yet even today, 100 years after it was founded, protection of the Gila is not complete. Within it, and hundreds of other wilderness areas across the country, are islands of private land known as inholdings. These properties don't carry any of the protections of the surrounding wilderness, and can be developed with homes, resorts, roads and even mining operations. Each represents a tear in the fabric of wilderness protection.

In 1912 at the age of 24, Aldo Leopold, one of the grandfathers of American conservation, took a job with the US Forest Service in southern New Mexico, and fell in love with the mesas and canyons surrounding the Gila River. When cattle ranchers proposed building a road through the half-million acre area, Leopold made a proposal of his own: for "a continuous stretch of country preserved in its natural state" as wilderness. In 1924 Leopold's proposal was accepted and the Gila became the first designated wilderness area. 40 years later, The Wilderness Act was passed to replicate its conservation model across the country and codify it into what remains as our highest level of protection for public lands.

In celebration of the Gila Wilderness centennial, The Wilderness Land Trust has acquired one of the last remaining inholdings in the Gila, the 40-acre Spring Canyon property. Spring Canyon has outstanding wilderness and ecological values, including an important year-round water source which feeds into the East Fork of the Gila River. The area provides important habitat for rare species like the Gila Trout, Southwest Willow Flycatcher, Mexican spotted owl, and several packs of reintroduced endangered Mexican wolves. Learn more about the property in this short virtual site visit video.

Now that Spring Canyon has been acquired and protected, the Trust will work with Gila National Forest to transfer it to public ownership to be added to the Gila Wilderness. "As America's first wilderness area, the Gila Wilderness is both an incredible landscape and important part of our public lands history. We're proud to be stewards of it, and look forward to working with The Wilderness Land Trust to add the Spring Canyon property to the forest for future generations to enjoy" says Brian Stultz, District Ranger of Wilderness Ranger District, Gila National Forest.

Spring Canyon is the 27th property, totaling 5,032 acres, protected by the Trust in New Mexico. In the organization's 32-year history, The Wilderness Land Trust has worked to keep the promise of wilderness by acquiring these private inholdings from willing landowners and transferring them to federal ownership to become designated wilderness. In this time we have purchased and transferred 587 properties totaling over 57,900 acres from Arizona to Alaska. Along the way, we've completed 17 wilderness areas by removing their last remaining private

inholdings. With each transfer, we come one step closer to completing the vision of the Wilderness Act. Each project we work on carries the story of a place that has inspired countless people and communities, a family that has chosen to give up what is theirs to protect its future, and a vibrant, and often breathtaking, landscape supporting rich biodiversity.