

# The 9th World Wilderness Congress

*Mexico, 2009*

BY VANCE G. MARTIN

The status of wilderness as a protected area category of international importance took another big step forward in 2009 when WILD9, the 9th World Wilderness Congress (WWC) convened in Mérida, Mexico, during November 6 to 13, 2009. More than 1,800 delegates from some 50 nations came to “the White City” of Mérida in Mexico’s Yucatan, and an additional 10,000 people from 100 nations participated through an intensive, Internet-based conferencing initiative. Many practical conservation outcomes were accomplished and are summarized herein. Of equal importance was the tangible spirit of hope and enthusiasm among the delegates. This ever-growing community of professionals and the public around the world understands the central role of wild nature in a prosperous society and healthy world, and the important, positive results from increased collaboration and cooperation for people and the planet.

A WILD9 strategy and objectives were established, funds raised, and a structure of collaborating organizations and people created during two years of planning coordinated by The WILD Foundation (founder and steward of the WWC) and its principal partner in Mexico, Unidos para la Conservación, with intensive involvement by the International League of Conservation Photographers. Before reviewing the actual results of WILD9, it’s best to understand both the general approach taken by the WWC since its inception in 1977 and the historical context of international wilderness recognition in which the WWC operates.

## The WWC Approach—Diversity and Results

The WWC’s main goals are to investigate, clarify, and communicate the many and varied values of wild nature to human society, and make measureable progress toward more protection and stewardship of wilderness globally. Several aspects of programming and philosophical approach make



Vance G. Martin, president of The WILD Foundation, and Jaime Rojo, executive director of WILD9. Photo by Barca/Garcia Naranjo.

the WWC distinct from other environmental conferences.

First, though there are conference-like aspects to part of the process (especially when the delegates actually convene), *the WWC is actually an ongoing conservation project (more than 30 years) implemented in a series of two- to four-year cycles.* During each WWC cycle, The WILD Foundation and its partners determine the location for the next Congress, identify potential practical results, and establish the regional and international networks that collaborate to achieve the goals, and convene the WWC toward the end of that particular project cycle.

Second, the WWC emphasizes diversity of people, professions, and perspectives. It is a public process and series of events, open to and welcoming the many different viewpoints on how wild nature needs to be protected as human society develops on planet Earth. Such viewpoints can be political, scientific, economic, industrial, spiritual, philosophical, and cultural. They can be modern or traditional viewpoints.



President of Mexico, Felipe Calderon, opened the proceedings by endorsing the concept of *tierras silvestres*, confirming its importance for climate change strategy, announcing the first international agreement on wilderness, and inaugurating the first postage stamp series on international wilderness areas (seen here). Photo by Government of Mexico.

Third, although the WWC process is meant to inspire and inform people, it also targets practical results. Therefore, each Congress cycle has a list of specific outcomes. These are as varied as being an instrumental force in creating the Global Environmental Facility of the World Bank (that has since injected more than US\$12 billion into environmental projects worldwide); prompting new wilderness laws and protected areas in many countries and regions; creating new organizations such as the International League



Dr. Pavan Sukdhev, Director, The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB), UNEP; Senior Banker, Deutsche Bank. Photo by Barca/García Naranjo.

of Conservation Photographers; and many more. For a good summary of WWC outcomes, please visit [www.wild.org/main/world-wilderness-congress/a-30-year-success-story](http://www.wild.org/main/world-wilderness-congress/a-30-year-success-story).

Finally, although the WWC involves governments, corporations, scientists, traditional communities, artists, and more, it is not a legally constituted organization, nor does it seek to perpetuate itself institutionally. It is best thought of as an ever-growing global community of people and groups who understand that wilderness is essential to a healthy, prosperous, and sane human society, and which is committed to action that integrates the needs of wild nature and people. The WWC process continues when there is such a need, a request from a region or country, willing collaborators, and funding.

The WWC is now the world's longest-running international public forum on the environment.

### The Historical Context

Wilderness as a specific type of protected area was pioneered in the United States in the mid-20th century, culminating in the 1964 Wilderness Act that created the

National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS), and led to many subsequent pieces of legislation that, on an area-by-area basis, are still expanding the NWPS. Today, the NWPS includes 756 areas and 109.5 million acres (44.3 million ha) in 44 states and Puerto Rico ([www.wilderness.net](http://www.wilderness.net)).

This initiative in the United States was a global, watershed event. It formally marked the transition of wilderness in modern, developed society from being uniformly regarded as something to be subdued and conquered, to something having a wide range of practical and cultural values in its own right, and important for the health and well-being of a nation.

This wilderness initiative in the United States sparked similar interest and action in other countries. By 1990, there were six countries with legislation establishing a special protected area classification for wilderness. Today, there are nine countries with wilderness protection laws, two more with laws pending, and at least 10 countries with wilderness policies or zoning mechanisms (Kormos 2008; Martin and Watson 2009). Wilderness legislation and/or recognition has been implemented in indigenous communities in Zimbabwe and the United States, and is being considered or has been adopted in many countries where the term has no direct translation (e.g., Italy, Ukraine, Mexico, Turkey) (Kormos 2008). The wilderness concept is growing in international and cross-cultural interest and application.

There have been and continue to be challenges and misconceptions. For example, as the wilderness concept first began to spread it was commonly associated with affluent people who could afford leisure time in the wilderness. As a result, legislators in developing nations often felt that wilderness policy would deny access to wild resources by local,

subsistence-oriented communities, and was inimical to economic development. The prevalence of this argument has declined (but certainly not disappeared) as the WWC continued to involve many different modern and traditional nations, and as the knowledge has increased of ecosystem services assured by large intact natural areas.

However, because of this misunderstanding, during the 1970s and 1980s it became clear that a more universal definition of *wilderness* was needed, one that could address multiple economic and cultural realities (for a brief summary visit [www.wild.org/main/about/what-is-a-wilderness-area](http://www.wild.org/main/about/what-is-a-wilderness-area)). The international political acceptance of wilderness has been achieved primarily through the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the policy guidelines for protected areas developed and maintained by its World Commission on Protected Areas (WCPA). Because wilderness was not originally included in the IUCN guidelines, a group of conservationists worked through the WWC to develop an internationally accepted definition of *wilderness*, and to generate a plenary resolution at the 3rd WWC (Scotland, 1980) requesting the IUCN to create a wilderness category. This was finally achieved when the IUCN guidelines were reorganized in 1988–1990. Dr. Ed Wayburn and Mike McCloskey, representing the Sierra Club, spearheaded this effort with others such as Hal Eidsvik from Canada (then chair of the WCPA's predecessor commission), and that story is summarized in Dr. Wayburn's memoir (Wayburn 2005).

A Wilderness Task Force (since upgraded to a Wilderness Specialist Group) was proposed by The WILD Foundation in 2002 and organized within the WCPA to further integrate the importance of wilderness within the IUCN, to maintain the wilderness "cat-

egory" (category 1b; IUCN 2010), and to create an official linkage between the WWC and the IUCN. This group was especially important when the WCPA formally reviewed its guidelines for protected areas from 2005 through 2008, during which one of the suggestions was that the words *wilderness* and *national park* be eliminated in favor of a numerical reference. After a concerted campaign coordinated by WILD and members of the WWC executive committee, such as Harvey Locke and Cyril Kormos, the wilderness name and category (and that of national park) remained, with its definition actually strengthened.

### Planning WILD9

The WILD Foundation recognized that more significant cross-cultural progress was needed to further advance the wilderness concept internationally. Prior to WILD9, the WWC had convened eight times around the world—South Africa, 1977 and 2001; Australia, 1980; Scotland, 1983; United States (Colorado, 1987 and Alaska, 2005); Norway, 1995; and India, 1998. The WWC planning and implementation could occur easily in English because it was the primary language of business in all those countries. Simultaneous interpretation was only provided on an as-needed basis if specific delegates required it to participate (especially for indigenous representatives). It was not an ideal situation, but one dictated by finances—simultaneous interpretation is very expensive.

WILD provides financial support between each Congress and must stand behind the financial outcome. Planning for each starts at a zero budget and most of the funds need to be raised within the host region in order to maximize local ownership and involvement of this global process. Also, the WWC works best when it has a wide range of sponsors and supporters—corporate, government, NGO, individual, foun-



Youth and Young Professionals were well represented in all aspects of the WILD9 program. Siti Zuraida Abidin of WWF–Malaysia addresses the plenary. Photo by Barca/Garcia Naranjo.

dation—to expand collaboration and effective networking.

As a result, budgets are always very tight, and are significantly impacted by major global events, such as the September 11, 2001, attacks on New York City and other U.S. locations that occurred just two months before the 7th WWC. WILD9 was impacted by the dramatic global financial recession that started suddenly after WILD9 planning was well underway and which considerably affected its budget.

It was clear during the planning of WILD9 that a significant cross-cultural step for wilderness would require



Thousands of local people from the Yucatan, including many hundreds of children and youth, visited WILD9 Expo for free. The many photo galleries by International League of Conservation Photographers, National Geographic, and others, were favorite destinations. Also, WILDSpeak, the largest-ever gathering of conservation photographers, was organized by iLCP and Cristina Mittermeier. Photo by Barca/Garcia Naranjo.





A life-sized matriarch elephant made of recycled tire rubber on a steel frame was made by South African sculptor Andries Botha, transported to WILD9 by sponsored shipping, and trucked throughout Mexico to raise awareness of *tierra silvestres* before she was installed in the WILD9 Expo. Photo by Jaime Rojo.

increased funding and more emphasis on marketing and communications than in previous WWCs. For example, Spanish is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, but it has no official or commonly accepted word or phrase for wilderness. Therefore, the WILD9 needed to choose and popularize a term for wilderness; budget for bilingual proceedings, web site, and reporting; and develop a type of “branding” campaign with a logo, tagline, and significant media exposure to attract attention, make the term culturally relevant, and generate interest and involvement.

Of all Spanish-speaking countries, some wilderness progress had been made in Mexico through the work of Patricio Robles Gill of Unidos para la Conservación, and Oscar Moctezuma of Naturalia. Some of these results were reported at the 8th WWC (Alaska, 2005) when Patricio and the CEMEX corporation presented their stunning achievement at El Carmen, in the Chihuahuan desert of Coahuila across the river from Big Bend National Park in Texas, their intention to declare the first wilderness area in Latin America, and the potential of wilderness legislation in Mexico (see December 2005

and August 2006 issues of *IJW*).

The WILD Foundation and Unidos met on numerous occasions after the 8th WWC and formed a committed but informal partnership to explore the possibility of convening the 9th WWC in Mexico. After six months of meetings it was determined that there was sufficient potential for fundraising and substantive involvement in Mexico. After considering two or three other Latin countries the decision was made to convene the 9th WWC in Mexico. Part of this process was meeting with potential advisors from business, conservation, government, and the arts to determine what term to use for wilderness, and what to call the 9th WWC so that it would be easily understood, culturally relevant, and marketable. A location was chosen, an executive committee and advisory groups were formed, and work started in earnest to identify practical outcomes, create collaborative networks to accomplish them, and raise the finance to support more than two years of concerted activity. *Tierras silvestres* was the consensus choice for a Spanish term for wilderness. Dr. Exequiel Ezcurra—the renowned, highly regarded, and popular Mexican biologist and ecological thinker—agreed to chair the 9th WWC.

WILD Nueve—Siente, Piensa, Actúa (WILD9: Feel, Think, Act) was underway.

## WILD9 Results

Opened by Mexico’s President Felipe Calderón, the WILD9 program was a diverse range of plenary and working sessions, and a large exposition of educational, commercial, and cultural displays. The plenary sessions featured 50 world leaders such as Dr. Jane Goodall; Dr. Sylvia Earle; Dr. Pavan Sukhdev; Chief Tashka Yawanawa; Grand Chief Samuel Gargan; government ministers; the heads of land management agencies from North America and other regions; Heinz Center director Dr. Thomas Lovejoy; Nobel laureate Mario Molina; Dr. Amory Lovins; Dr. Exequiel Ezcurra; leaders from Coca-Cola, Grupo Bimbo, and others.

- ▼ Forty-four targeted resolutions were adopted, and are available online at [www.wild.org](http://www.wild.org) for discussion and reporting on outcomes.
- ▼ The “Message from Mérida (El Mensaje de Mérida)” is an international call to action with specific policy guidelines to integrate wilderness and biodiversity conservation into global climate change strategy. The message was delivered to the Copenhagen climate



Native people and traditional communities are an essential part of protecting wildlands and diverse cultures throughout the world. Tashka Yawanawa (Chief of the Yawanawa, Brazil) and wife Laura Soriano are key figures in this important movement. Photo by Vance G. Martin.

change negotiations with 85 organizational cosigners; it is still growing and will now target the next climate change negotiations in Mexico in 2010.

- ▼ The first international agreement on wilderness conservation, initiated by WILD and signed by the governments of Mexico, Canada and the United States.
- ▼ Launch of “Nature Needs Half,” a science and common-sense based conservation vision and campaign that positions nature as a core concern of global development and human well-being (see below).
- ▼ The first-ever Corporate Commitment to Wilderness, a results-oriented initiative for wilderness, signed initially by 15 corporations and with others to follow.
- ▼ New protected areas in Mexico and elsewhere, including a new private sector commitment of 50,000 hectares (20,242 acres) in the Carpathian Mountains (Romania); the intention to create the first marine wilderness areas in the United States and territories; a new coastal mangrove protected area in Mexico; and the commitment to significantly increase protected area coverage in the Yucatan.
- ▼ Creation of six new intergovernmental working groups involving U.S., Canadian, Mexican, and other government agencies to stimulate ongoing collaboration on conservation matters concerning payments for ecosystem services; marine wilderness; recreation and visitor experience; fire management; wildlife and biodiversity; and public-private partnerships.
- ▼ Extensive government agency collaboration with NGO and indigenous partners to strengthen peer-to-peer networks and produce numerous targeted trainings, including:
  - The 2nd Global Wilderness Forum for Government Agencies
  - Wilderness management training (for 25 professionals from 15 countries and 4 tribal communities), plus the first accredited wilderness conservation training in Mexico (30 days with 25 NGO and government professionals)
  - Four-part payments for ecosystem services workshop



Conservation heroines and renowned scientists, Dr Sylvia Earle and Dr Jane Goodall, confer over one of Jane's “friends”. Photo by Barca/Garcia Naranjo.

- Climate change training for protected area managers
- Wilderness policy for Latin American attorneys
- Four-part global wildlands connectivity workshop
- The second meeting of the Native Lands and Wilderness Council
- Four two-day training sessions on wildlands and water
- Science and stewardship sessions involving 200 professionals.
- ▼ Marine wilderness—The formal launch of the Marine Wilderness Collaborative to engage stakeholders in a consensus-driven process to define the term *marine wilderness* and set common objectives for the management of marine wilderness protected areas; launch of a New Vision for Protecting the Marine Wilderness of the Gulf of California.
- ▼ Wilderness and water—announcements by the Government of Mexico including:
  - A new and important national standard starting in 2010 that sets minimum standards of adequate water flow in rivers to support wild lands and natural systems
  - A national inventory of wetlands to determine the current state of these ecosystems, learn about the goods and services they provide, and consider measures for conservation and sustainable management.
- ▼ Engaging young professionals on substantive issues of wilderness, biodiversity, and climate change
- ▼ Communications and conservation—Integrating media, culture, public opinion, science, and policy:
  - Launching the new concept of wilderness as *tierras silvestres* (wilderness) in Latin American public awareness and for professional use
  - The International League of Conservation Photographers (established at the 8th WWC in 2005) convened WiLDSPEAK, the largest-ever assembled gathering of conservation photographers and their work; coordinated a four-day symposium; managed four large exhibit galleries; and implemented the Yucatan RAVE, in which 32 international photographers documented the Yucatan ecosystem for seven weeks prior to WILD9 and presented their work at the WILD9 opening, illustrating the unique features of this ecologically, biologically, and culturally important area.
  - Extensive use of new web-based communications tools to reach a large and diverse group of international participants beyond the delegates at WILD9
  - The world's first series of postage stamps dedicated to international wilderness (featuring Russia, South Africa, Mexico, and the United States) produced by Unidos para la Conservación/WILD and the Mexican Postal Service, and initiated at WILD9 by Mexico President Felipe Calderón

- Establishment of the International League of Conservation Writers
- Extraordinarily wide media coverage of WILD9 in national newspapers and mainstream magazines (such as *Este País*, *Elle*, *National Geographic*, in-flight magazines, etc.)
- The public launch of three new books on wilderness and protected areas, published in Spanish and English
- Local outreach, including daily participation in the WILD9 Expo and WildScreen film festival by thousands of Mérida residents, including local school groups of all ages; a project with local charities to create 20 life-size jaguar sculptures which now decorate the city of Mérida
- Body Painting—Applying the Ancient Art to Endangered Species and Spaces, a stunning evening exhibition by 20 artists and models documented by five of the world's top conservation photographers.

## The Next Step—Nature Needs Half

For the first time in a WWC, WILD9 ended by outlining a new vision for WWC as it moves forward. Coordinated by The WILD Foundation, the Nature Needs Half initiative (originally “At Least Half Wild”): A science and common-sense based conservation vision and campaign that positions nature as a core concern of global development and

human well-being, with a goal of protecting and interconnecting at least half of the world's lands and seas.

The mechanisms for such protection should be culturally appropriate and be implemented at a variety of scales, including international, national, provincial, aboriginal, regional, and municipal, as well as private individual, corporate, and NGO landowners. This is the right thing to do for ourselves and for everything that shares this beautiful planet with us. Wild nature is as necessary to our psychological well-being as it is to our ability to breathe clean air, drink pure water, and have a livable climate. The love of nature exists in every culture but it has been relegated to secondary status by the idea of “progress,” modeled on the Industrial Revolution.

The “at least half” idea moves nature to the center of the human endeavor in the 21st century and away from being treated simply as another competing interest. Achieving it will require a global movement for the reintegration of the arts, sciences, business, efforts to address the climate and biodiversity loss, and the integration of the needs of wild nature with those of human society (see [www.wild.org](http://www.wild.org)).

As the science, policy, and communications involved in Nature Needs Half are organized and underway with many

collaborators, information will be collated and made available initially at [www.wild.org](http://www.wild.org), then on a dedicated website.

## Acknowledgments

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