

Lee Metcalf

1911 – 1978



Senator Lee W. Metcalf was one of the most instrumental U.S. congressmen for the creation and passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964.

Born in 1911 in Stevensville, Montana to a well-known Ravalli County family, he attended the University of Montana in 1928 before transferring to Stanford where he earned a bachelor's degree in history and economics. In 1936, he returned to the University of Montana and obtained a law degree.

He was a lawyer, state representative from Ravalli County (1937), Montana assistant attorney general (1937-1941), World War II veteran (1942-1946), Montana Supreme Court associate justice (1947-1952), U.S. Representative (1953-1960) and U.S. Senator (1961-1978).

Lee worked from 1953 to 1964 for the passage of a national wilderness preservation system act. On June 13, 1956, he introduced one of the first national wilderness bills in the U.S. House of Representatives, H.R. 11751. His political legacy is clear today.

In 1964, Montana had 1.5 million acres of Wilderness and wild areas included in the Wilderness Act, with about 400,000 more acres pending various studies. Following the act's passage, he declared the 1960s the "Decade of Conservation."

But Lee's work didn't stop there. At the time of his death in 1978, Montana had a total of 3,155,796 acres of Wilderness areas. In 2014, Montana has 3,443,407 acres of Wilderness areas.

He sponsored, co-sponsored, or wrote the following conservation legislation: the Clean Air Act of 1963; the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act of 1964; the Water Resources

Recreation Act; the Water Quality Act of 1965; the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968; the Clean Water Act of 1972; the Missouri River Breaks study bill; and the Montana Wilderness Study Act of 1977.

Over the years, Lee would be called the "Patron Saint of Wilderness," a champion of conservation and one of the first modern environmentalists.

In a November 20, 1965, during a Walsh lecture series at Carroll College in Helena, Lee noted the vital need for conserving Montana's natural resources: "We cannot any longer enjoy the luxury of controversy between the hunters and the fishermen over the use of our land; we cannot permit fragile lands to be overgrazed; we cannot have our last remaining power sites underdeveloped; we cannot let our air and water continue to be polluted, or else we need not fear the atomic bomb as in T. S. Eliot's *The Hollow Men*—'Not with a bang, but a whimper.'"

The Lee Metcalf Wilderness in Madison and Gallatin Counties, Montana, was created and named in the senator's honor by the U.S. Congress following his death.

Lee Metcalf's legacy is clear today. Among many other pieces of key conservation legislation, he introduced one of the first national Wilderness bills in 1956. As of 2014, Montana has almost 3.5 million acres of Wilderness areas.
