

Above 4,000 feet, the big cone Douglas-fir becomes common. This tree is found in other ranges, too, but in the San Gabriels its droopy branches take on the character of a trademark.

Still higher, above 6,000 feet or so, the chaparral gives way to open stands of coulter, jeffrey, and sugar pine, and other conifers. These slopes are usually gentle, probably because there is little chaparral to help them stay steep. The ground is carpeted with a layer of dead needles, and, except for some foot-high manzanita, there isn't much in your way when you want to go from here to there.

It is pleasant and free to walk around in this upper forest, and if you do, you are likely to encounter a bighorn sheep doing the same thing.

Everything I have described is found in the proposed San Gabriel Wilderness, but this is not all of the unique character of the San Gabriel Mountains. These are extreme mountains. If the wind blows, it is apt to be a gale. If it rains, it is apt to be a deluge. And if there is a fire, it is probably going to be a massive conflagration.

All of these things are natural for the San Gabriel Mountains. They are a part of what makes them unique. It is almost as if this mountain range is dedicated to the proposition that anything worth doing is worth overdoing.

There is another important uniqueness. Several million people live right at the base of these extreme slopes. Understandably, they get very unhappy when a fire toasts their back yards and floods move their homes to lower ground.

There is plenty of motive for taming these mountains, and at first it may seem like an expensive luxury to leave a part of them undisturbed. But it isn't. In this case, preservation under the admittedly restrictive Wilderness Act is inexpensive.

The geography of the proposed San Gabriel Wilderness is very fortunate. Nobody lives at the base of it. There are at least two major flood control reservoirs between the proposed wilderness and populated area. There is fast access by good road all around the area, and the boundary is located at places where it is practical to try to stop fires.

Undeniably, wilderness classification implies some greater risk of uncontrolled fire, but this is the one place in this area where fire would do the least damage. Even so, the Forest Service has cleared small helicopter landing spots in the area for quick access to kill fires while they are small.

This control technique is in use throughout the Angeles National Forest, and, if these small heliports are not overdone, they are a tolerable intrusion in the wilderness.

Generally, the proposed wilderness boundaries include as much land as possible, while being administratively defensible. Perhaps the one exception to this is along the southern edge, where the West Fork of the San Gabriel River has existing flood control developments, and a dirt road alongside it.

Here, the proposed boundary is drawn at a fixed vertical elevation above the river. This excludes a substantial length of the bottoms of the larger side canyons, which have gentle gradients.

Before supporting the Forest Service's proposal, local conservationists looked at this southern boundary in detail. We were satisfied that this setback, which is actually more extensive than necessary,