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Group: Wild Lands Need More Protection

By Associated Press

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WASHINGTON -- Nearly half of the world's land surface is still "wilderness" where 70 percent of the original vegetation is still in place, according to a study released by Conservation International.

While these areas remain largely intact, they also are "increasingly threatened by population growth, encroaching agriculture and resource extraction," the environmental group said in releasing the study Wednesday.

And barely 7 percent of these areas have any form of protection such as the areas in the United States that have been officially designated as wilderness by Congress, the study said.

The 37 geographic areas identified in the study account for 46 percent of the Earth's land surface, but contain only 2.4 percent of the world's population, said the study. Nine of the areas cited by the study are in the United States.

"These very low density areas represent a land mass equivalent to the six largest countries on Earth combined," said Russell Mittermeier, president of Conservation International. "But they have within them the population of only three large cities."

The areas represent widely diverse habitat including:

- The Miombo-Mopane Woodlands in southern Africa, which contains the world's largest remaining population of African elephants.
- The Sonoran and Baja California desert areas in Mexico and southern California and Arizona, with its giant cacti and Gila woodpeckers.
- The Amazon rain forest that is teeming with 30,000 endemic plant species and 122 endemic primate species and subspecies.
- The Congo forests of central Africa; jungles of New Guinea; and the grasslands of southern Africa.

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