

Get Wild: Can we save our wilderness areas?

Dave Brewster



The Holy Cross Wilderness is pictured in 2021.

Guy Warren/Courtesy photo

What is a wilderness? When Europeans reached America, they believed the land was almost untouched by humans — a true wilderness. Compared to heavily populated Europe, they were right. Nevertheless, Native Americans were managing much of the landscape across the Americas. Lacking steel for axes and saws, they managed using a variety of tools, including carefully setting fires to remove brush and encourage food plants.

Still, the romantic view of pristine wilderness became engrained in our culture through literature, painting and music. Although the roots of wilderness may be based on a misunderstanding, the concept of wilderness has been invaluable, leading us to embrace nature and better understand our role in the global ecosystem.

When the United States passed the Wilderness Act in 1964, it declared “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an

area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” To help reduce our impact and preserve designated wilderness areas, all mechanized devices are banned, including wheels and chainsaws. Recognizing the history and value of hunting, the Wilderness Act allows guns, but not drones. Preserving wilderness for future generations is one of the primary goals of the Wilderness Act.

Summit County’s ever-increasing popularity threatens our local Wilderness Areas — Eagles Nest and Ptarmigan Peak. Do we add more parking spaces for more visitors? Should we carve out more trails for more hikers? Dogs must be leashed, but should they be banned to reduce the impact on wildlife and the toxic dog droppings? How many trail signs and bridges should we add? What about handicap access with paved trails? Should we continue to allow ground campfires despite the scars left behind and the risk of wildfires?

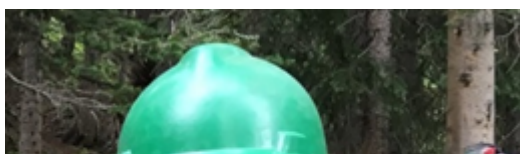
Off-trail travel shared on phone apps encourages development of unsanctioned trails. Adjacent neighborhoods want to reduce the fuel load by thinning and clearing the forest. Development threatens key winter wildlife habitat. The Forest Service is pulled in many directions as it follows its multiple-use mandates. Involvement of the public and volunteer organizations, such as the Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance and Friends of the Dillon Ranger District, is essential to balance the demands and preservation.

To help manage this challenging task, the local Forest Service has divided our wilderness into three zones: semi-primitive, primitive, and pristine. The heavily used Lily Pad Lakes Trail with numerous boardwalks, a wide bridge with handrails, and numerous signs lies in the semi-primitive zone. The Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance, with its focus on protecting designated wilderness areas, helps build boardwalks, improve trails and clear trees in these areas. Their efforts make the trail more accessible and help keep hikers on the trail to preserve the adjacent forest.

Further in the wilderness, the Gore Range trail is narrow, with log bridges or rock steps across the creeks. Most of it is in the primitive zone. Volunteers help clear trees and maintain trails in this area.

The pristine zone has no development, and is a true sanctuary for wildlife when it feels threatened by human encroachment. The pristine zone sets the standard by which we can judge our impact elsewhere.

Yet, all these zones are part of a larger ecosystem. Wildlife depends on the adjacent areas for food and shelter as the seasons change. Invasive and noxious weeds, insects and diseases introduced from other areas threaten plants, trees and wildlife. For our wilderness areas to remain healthy, we must nurture nature throughout Summit County and its environs.





Dave Brewster

Dave Brewster is a volunteer with the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, Friends of the Dillon Ranger District and several other organizations dedicated to helping preserve our forests.