

Get Wild: Tales of trails

Columns [FOLLOW COLUMNS](#) | 16h ago

Drea Sanchez
Get Wild





A hiker walks along a trail in the Eagles Nest Wilderness.
Photo by Drea Sanchez



Trails give off the distinct sense of permanence and durability because of their prevalence and emblematic status across our wild landscapes. After all, people come to live and visit our region because of the recreational opportunities and remote access that these trail systems provide. But as trail traffic increases, it is important to reflect on what factors influence a trail's ability to sustain record levels of recreation.

Seemingly harmless actions like cutting a shortcut between switchbacks, or stepping off the trail to circumvent muddy tread or a fallen tree, can have detrimental impacts as these behaviors are repeated by multiple users over time. Such actions trample native vegetation that help stabilize soil, create space for the introduction of invasive species and undermine drainage features that allow water to sheet across the trail and limit erosion.

Mitigating natural resource impacts caused by trail degradation is a time-consuming and expensive process. For this reason, local groups are stepping in to help supplement U.S. Forest Service efforts to enhance the sustainability of new and existing trails.

Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance organizes volunteer projects, including backcountry trail work and the removal of noxious weeds and illegal campsites rings. The alliance also organizes volunteer rangers who educate visitors about the principles of Leave No Trace. This summer my role as an Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance volunteer is to help identify areas in the Eagle's Nest Wilderness that are most susceptible to degradation. Collecting this baseline data will hopefully help the alliance develop plans for trail maintenance, repair and funding in the future.

Having grown up in the Vail Valley I have witnessed a surge in trail popularity, as I'm sure many other Summit Daily readers have.

Over the years, my academic interests have centered around resource management and forest science, contributing to a keen awareness about how that influx of outdoor recreation has impacted wildlife habitats and mountain ecosystem functions. The opportunity to be involved in Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance's strategic trails project has allowed me to move away from theoretical understandings about how professional stewards evaluate levels of acceptable change and towards a more boots-on-the-ground application of sustainable trail assessment.

Based on my observations, the greatest user-driven impacts are more obvious and more concentrated within the first few miles of the trailhead. I frequently recorded stone steps and water bars being bypassed by foot traffic. Some breakdown of these structures can be attributed to inevitable wear and tear, however, many of the impacts I documented can easily be avoided with collaborative and conscious effort on our part.

As we venture out to enjoy the recreational value our public lands have to offer, it is important to know there are deliberate features designed into trail systems that help protect natural resources and our cumulative behaviors can impede the function of those designs.

For instance, usually the edge on the downslope side of the trail is built lower than the upslope edge, and it is rounded to help water flow off the trail. The natural tendency of animals and people is to follow these outside edges. This can cause the edge to flatten, the trail to widen or the trail to move from its original location, all of which can result in water collecting on the tread surface creating puddles or channels of erosion.

So, do your best to traverse in the center of the path and avoid following any side paths. And remember there are many organizations, including Volunteers for Outdoor Colorado, Friends of the Dillon Ranger District, Wildland Restoration Volunteers and Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, who provide opportunities to play a proactive role in preserving our wild landscapes and maintaining trail systems.



“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Drea Sanchez has been working as a volunteer improving trail conditions over the summer, for Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit EagleSummitWilderness.org.



Drea Sanchez

Support Local Journalism

As a Summit Daily News reader, you make our work possible.

Now more than ever, your financial support is critical to help us keep our communities informed about the evolving coronavirus pandemic and the impact it is having on our residents and businesses. Every contribution, no matter the size, will make a difference.

Your donation will be used exclusively to support quality, local journalism.

DONATE

