

Get Wild: Why are wilderness areas unique?

Mike Browning



A peak rises above a lake near Gore Lake in the Eagles Nest Wilderness.

Frances Hartogh/Courtesy photo

I've been fortunate in my life to climb in some of the most spectacular areas in the world, including the Andes, Alps, Himalayas and Hindu Kush. Yet, whenever I come home to Colorado, I find Wilderness Areas — especially our local ones in Summit and Eagle Counties — to be uniquely alluring.

America's National Wilderness Preservation System was created in 1964 by the Wilderness Act. Only Congress can create wilderness areas, and only Congress can alter them. In the lower 48 States, less than 2.7% of the land is congressionally designated wilderness.

The lofty purpose of the Wilderness Act is “to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition.” The act defines wilderness 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 achieve this purpose and ensure that wilderness areas remain wild, the act provides that within wilderness areas there can be no roads, motor vehicles, motorized equipment or motorboats, landing of aircraft, and “no other form of mechanical transport, and no structure or installation.”

The Wilderness Act is a remarkable self-imposed restriction on human hubris. Throughout history, humans have seen wilderness as something to exploit, to use for their own purposes and to bend to their own desires. All of America was once wilderness, but in 1964 Congress recognized that we should save some of the last vestiges of that wilderness for the enjoyment of future generations — as a reminder of our heritage, as islands of nature within an ever-more industrialized world, and as a final haven for plants and animals. It was a recognition that some small portion of our nation should be set apart to be experienced and enjoyed in a more historic, primitive way.

Since 1964, the population of Summit County has increased tenfold. Our desire to exploit wild areas is undiminished. Mountain bikers, sport climbers and other recreationalists all clamor to use our wilderness areas for their own sport. Some are even pushing legislation to change how wilderness areas are managed, to open them to higher-impact activities.

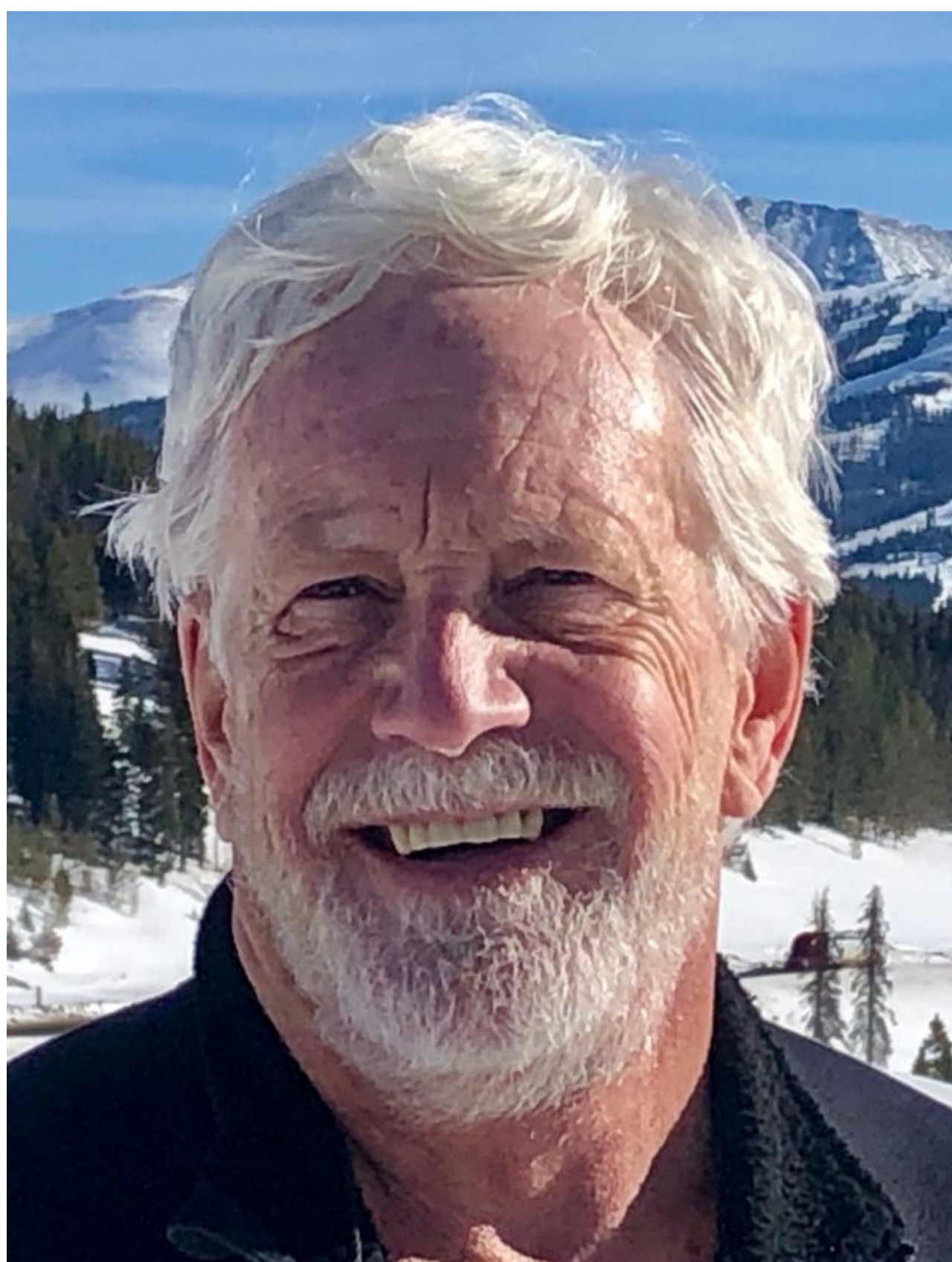
It is to be hoped that such shortsightedness will not guide how we protect these precious areas. Wilderness areas were created to be preserved in their natural state. They were established not to allow us to do whatever we want wherever we want, but rather “to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.”

America’s wilderness areas are special because they represent the best instincts of Americans — to restrain ourselves for the good of future generations, and for the benefit of the flora and fauna that have largely been eradicated in our push for “progress” and our shortsighted desires.

As stated by President Lyndon B. Johnson when signing the Wilderness Act: “If future generations are to remember us with gratitude rather than contempt, we must leave them something more than the miracles of technology. We must leave them a glimpse of the world as it was in the beginning, not just after we got through with it.”

For more information about the history of wilderness in America, read “Wilderness and the America Mind” by Robert Nash and “Driven Wild” by Paul Sutter. To help protect our local wilderness areas, consider volunteering for the [Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance](#)

or other groups that work to preserve them. Wilderness areas deserve our support and protection.



Mike Browning
Mike Browning/Courtesy photo

Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Mike Browning has climbed Mt. Everest and the other Seven Summits. He is a board member of the Eagle River Watershed Council, Wilderness Watch and the 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.