

Get Wild: Measuring wilderness 'character'

Jim Alexander



One “over-loved” part of the Eagles Nest Wilderness in Summit County.

Courtesy photo

Wilderness is not a given. Wilderness must be preserved by a lot of work. The U.S. Forest Service and several Summit County groups have ongoing projects to “keep Wilderness Areas ‘untrammled,’ yet open to the public,” as required by the 1964 Wilderness Act. In Summit County, we are fortunate to have two designated Wilderness Areas: Eagles Nest and Ptarmigan Peak.

In our busy county, you can see varying levels of success preserving “wilderness character.” Some of our local wilderness is pristine, such as the slopes of Red Mountain. Others have lovely trails — Acorn Creek is an example. Yet other areas bear deep scars of overuse: Lily Pad Lake is “loved to death,” and Uneva Peak is tracked with unofficial trails across delicate tundra.

Nationwide, the Forest Service and other land management agencies are evaluating the character of more than 800 wilderness areas. This program, the Wilderness Stewardship Performance program, identifies key elements that define successful wilderness stewardship based on the Wilderness Act. These elements combine the essential qualities of wilderness character: untrammled, natural, undeveloped, solitude, and other features of value (such as cultural sites). These characteristics are evaluated by a set framework, involving selecting indicators and answering monitoring questions, to set a baseline unique to each wilderness to track changes in wilderness character.

One monitoring question for solitude is: “What are the trends in outstanding opportunities for solitude.” One measure of this is whether there are intrusive sounds from inside the wilderness area (like barking dogs or boom boxes), or intrusive sounds from outside the wilderness area (like traffic noise from Interstate 70). Each of these is measured by the acres affected by the intrusions. Every national forest is required to produce Wilderness Character Baseline Assessment documents for each of their congressionally designated Wilderness Areas to track trends in wilderness character.

This summer, the U.S. Forest Service and the Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance have joined together to complete the Wilderness Character

Baseline Assessment for the Eagles Nest and Ptarmigan Peak wilderness areas, as well as the Holy Cross Wilderness Area in Eagle County. Funded by the Forest Service and a generous grant from the National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance, this program will set the bar for Summit County's precious natural resources, which are so important to our economy, our way of life and the wellbeing of our wildlife and plant neighbors.

Establishing a baseline for an area's wilderness character may help to justify and identify opportunities to preserve or improve wilderness character over time — this is especially important for places like Summit and Eagle counties, with our three extremely popular wilderness Areas Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance and the U.S. Forest Service have been gathering data to inform Wilderness Stewardship Performance measures for years. Volunteer and paid wilderness rangers alike gather important data including: numbers of hikers, dogs (on and off leash), illegal fire rings, invasive plants, campsites found and overall trail condition. The data tracks the condition of wilderness character, from solitude (groups encountered and campsites) to natural (invasive weeds). To track solitude, the Forest Service selects specific areas to track every five years.

This summer, Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance volunteers will gather solitude data in the Holy Cross Wilderness, by hiking two trails on five weekdays and five weekend days. During these hikes, they will report hiking groups encountered, campsites encountered, as well as the human-made sights and sounds at the campsites. A consistent, complete data set allows us to accurately determine trends in solitude in our beloved wilderness areas. This year's Wilderness Character Baseline Assessment will be completed in the fall and reported early next year.



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Jim Alexander is a Silverthorne resident who has worked with Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance for six years. He leads the Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance WeedSpotter program and the Eagle-Summit Wilderness Alliance Grant program, which funds several wilderness projects.