

Opinion | Mike Browning: Let's celebrate and work to protect America's wilderness areas

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Mike Browning
Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance

Wilderness lovers rejoiced to see the [Aug. 31 presidential proclamation](#) declaring September National Wilderness Month. The Wilderness Act has led to the creation of more than 800 wilderness areas containing over 111 million acres. Colorado has 44 wilderness areas, totaling over 3.7 million acres, and stands to acquire more if the CORE Act becomes law.

In Summit County, we are blessed to have two spectacular wilderness areas – Eagles Nest and Ptarmigan Peak – totaling over 146,000 acres. The 122,797-acre Holy Cross Wilderness Area is also nearby in Eagle County.

These wilderness areas attract visitors, support businesses and drive economic growth. It's said that our ski areas bring people here, but our wilderness areas make them stay.

The proclamation recognizes that during “the COVID-19 pandemic, many Americans turned to these areas for physical recreation, mental well-being and inspiration, and our public lands and waters became places of healing and sanctuary.”

While this resonates, in Summit County, we know that increased use of our wilderness areas started long before COVID-19. What used to be peaceful trails can feel overrun with people and dogs. Gone are the days when you were the sole camper by your favorite Alpine lake. Wildlife we used to see is more rare.

Participate in The Longevity Project



The Longevity Project is an annual campaign to help educate readers about what it takes to live a long, fulfilling life in our valley. This year Kevin shares his story of hope and celebration of life with his presentation *Cracked, Not Broken* as we explore the critical and relevant topic of mental health.

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Summit County's population was about 8,000 when the Eagles Nest Wilderness Area was established in 1978. By 2020, it had increased almost fourfold to 31,000. The projected 2030 population is 43,702, which doesn't begin to take into account the 5 million tourists from around the globe and Front Range cities who regularly head to the High Country. 6

What used to be remote wilderness areas are now backyard wilderness areas. Yet, we must remember that our local wilderness areas are not city parks or dog runs. They are lands with the highest level of protection and environmental values of all public lands. These fragile areas need to be treated with respect, and we must recognize our cumulative impact.

As stated in Biden's proclamation: "Our natural wonders are at risk. Now more than ever, we must come together to combat the climate crisis and unprecedented acceleration of species extinction to protect and conserve our great outdoors before it is too late. ... These diverse landscapes and waterways are vital in so many ways: They provide homes to fish and wildlife, and hold resources that sustain our own lives, counteract the damaging impacts of climate change and underpin our global economy."

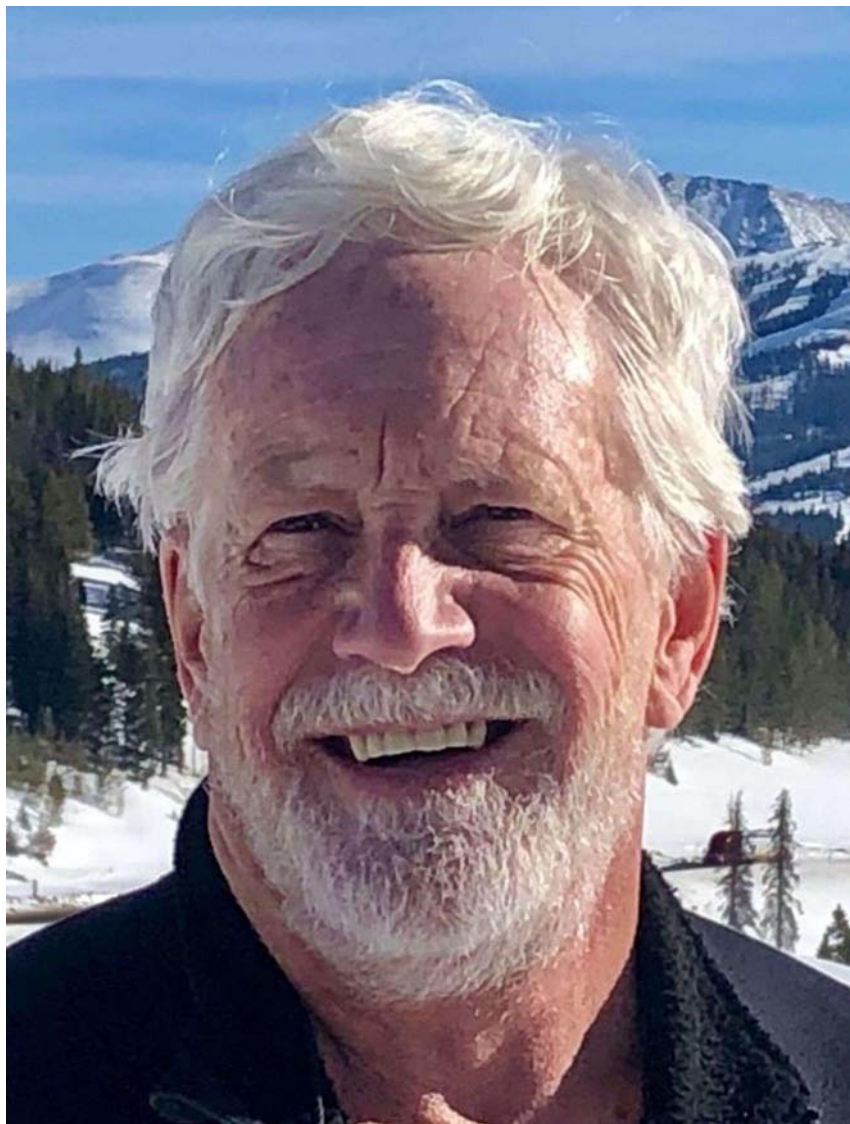
There are many ways you can help. Leash your dog in wilderness to protect wildlife, your dog and the experience of other users. Learn and practice Leave No Trace principles and be aware of cumulative impact on fragile landscapes. Urge your representatives to enact policies to fight climate change, and do your part to minimize your own carbon footprint. Support passage of the CORE Act. Join and support local conservation groups.

One of those local groups is the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance. The alliance is a local, all-volunteer nonprofit whose members hike local wilderness trails as volunteer wilderness rangers and serve as trailhead hosts to educate people about wilderness and Leave No Trace. They also use hand saws to clear trails of fallen trees (mechanized saws aren't allowed in wilderness), identify and help eradicate outbreaks of invasive weeds and help inform the public about preserving wilderness.


Get involved. Join the alliance or a similar organization, and give back to our local wilderness areas that give us so much.

As stated by Biden, "We affirm ... that our lands and waters can revitalize the soul and solidify our respect for the natural wonders that surround us and the earth we all share, and we recommit to their preservation and protection, today and for future generations."






Mike Browning

Mike Browning is the 2021 chair of 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. Contact him at mfrowning1952@gmail.com .

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