

Get Wild: Let's make resolutions for caretaking our precious backcountry and wilderness lands

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Karn Stiegelmeier
Get Wild



Elk are pictured in the Lower Blue Valley.

Richard Seeley/Get Wild

After holiday cheer and relishing in our backyard winter wonderlands, the new year is almost here! It's that time of year to consider 2023 New Year's resolutions, a practice for some of us. I choose to make resolutions that are very easy to accomplish, like take three deep breaths every day and look up at the sky every night. Resolutions are generally focused on improving ourselves. However, at this time when we read about the massive loss of wildlife numbers and natural habitats, more endangered species and ocean life full of



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We are so fortunate to live where there is an abundance of trails into the backcountry of our beautiful wild lands. Summit County is 79% National Forest land, and we also have many acres of county open space lands and numerous miles of recreation paths. The Dillon Ranger District, which has the same boundaries as Summit County, is also the most visited ranger district in the United States.

We have visitors from all over the world and many from the Front Range cities and towns. Of course, our four major ski areas on National Forest land draw many visitors. Year-round recreation in the backcountry continues to gain in popularity. The Dillon Ranger District is also at the top for economic benefit due to these forest lands. Many local and regional recreation businesses thrive because of these wild lands, including restaurants and lodging, as well as recreational equipment, guiding and transportation services.

Many visitors are well informed and understand the value of pristine lands, but others are not aware of the impacts they may have on our backcountry trails, habitat and wildlife. The U.S. Forest Service is aware of the continuing upward trend of visitors recreating here every year and that it is not sustainable to continue increasing these numbers. The U.S. Forest Service is in quite a continuing conundrum with constantly increasing visitation and lack of adequate funding for staff. Greater numbers and intensity of wildfires every year also takes away from regular funding for recreation management. This lack of funding underscores the need for our local volunteer organizations to pick up the slack. Our wilderness areas are being loved to death.

Most people are familiar with the saying, and pretty good at “leave no trace”, but how about “leave it better”? Pick up a piece of trash or bag of dog poop that someone left for the poop fairy to pick up, or clean up a campsite or fire ring left by ill-informed campers.

This time of year, you can often indulge in clean fresh snow, with no trash in sight. Most of that is probably hidden under the snow.



You can also join a team doing trail work, clearing fallen trees, campsite cleanup, trail patrols and trailhead hosting, talking with people, or noxious weed removal. There is something for everyone. Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance and Friends of Dillon Ranger District are always looking for more volunteers to do this essential work.

Happy new year for all!



Karn Stiegelmeier

Karn Stiegelmeier is a board member of 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.



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