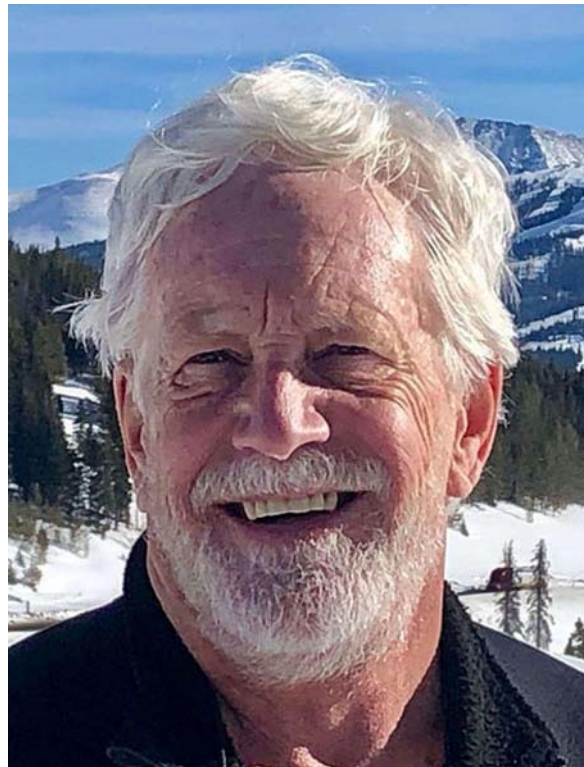


Browning: Let's celebrate and protect America's Wilderness Areas

Opinion [FOLLOW OPINION](#) | September 9, 2021

Mike Browning
Valley Voices

Wilderness lovers rejoiced to see the Aug. 31 proclamation by President Biden declaring September “National Wilderness Month.” The 1964 Wilderness Act has led to the creation of over 800 Wilderness Areas containing over 111 million acres.



Mike Browning

Colorado has 44 Wilderness Areas totaling over 3.7 million acres and will acquire more if the Colorado Outdoor Recreation and Economy Act becomes law. In Eagle County, we are blessed to have two spectacular wilderness areas — Eagles Nest and Holy Cross — totaling over 256,00 acres (403 square miles).

These Wilderness Areas attract visitors and drive our economy. It's said that our ski areas bring people here, but our Wilderness Areas make them stay. The presidential proclamation recognizes that “[d]uring 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 here in Eagle 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 you were the sole camper by your favorite alpine lake.

We used to see wildlife on our hikes, but now it is a rarity. Eagle County's population in 1970 was 7,498. Now it is over 55,000 — a more than seven-fold increase — and it is still growing. We are putting more and more pressure on wilderness and the wildlife that call it home.

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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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're 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 President 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."

There are many ways you can help. Leash your dog in Wilderness to protect wildlife, 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 is the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, a local, all-volunteer nonprofit whose members serve as volunteer Wilderness Rangers and trailhead hosts to educate people about Wilderness and Leave No Trace. They use hand saws to clear trails of fallen trees (mechanized saws aren't allowed in Wilderness), identify and help eradicate invasive weeds, and educate the public about protecting Wilderness.

Get involved in the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance or a similar organization. Give back to the Wilderness Areas that give you so much.

Mike Browning is the 2021 Chair of the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance. More information can be found at EagleSummitWilderness.org.

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