

# Get Wild: What is untrammeled wilderness?

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**Mike Browning**  
Get Wild



Pitkin Lake Trail is pictured in August in Eagles Nest Wilderness Area.  
*Frances Hartogh/Courtesy photo*

Our three wilderness areas in Summit and Eagle counties — Eagles Nest, Ptarmigan Peak and Holy Cross — were created by Congress under the 1964 Wilderness Act. The act defines wilderness “as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” But what does untrammeled mean? This question is at the heart of many of the disputes between recreationists and preservationists about use and management of wilderness areas.

Merriam Webster Dictionary defines untrammeled as “not confined, limited or impeded.” Recreationists argue that untrammeled means that the U.S. Forest Service should impose as few restrictions as possible. In contrast, preservationists argue that untrammeled means wilderness areas should be affected as little as possible by human activity and that restrictions and regulations to ensure this are necessary and proper. Which approach is adopted can have a dramatic impact on how the Forest Service manages our local wilderness areas. For instance, can the Forest Service require dogs to be on leash in wilderness areas to protect the health of wildlife, plants or the wilderness experience of other users, or does such a restriction unduly limit, or trammel upon, the use of an area?

To attempt resolve this issue, let’s look at the context in which untrammeled is used in the wilderness act. Who or what is to be untrammeled? The act is clear about this: It says wilderness is “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man” — not vice versa. It is the “earth and its community of life” that are to be untrammeled, not man’s use of them.

This point is further made clear by other provisions in the Wilderness Act. The act states that wilderness areas are created “in order 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 does allow recreational use of wilderness areas, but only “in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, and so as to provide for the protection of these areas, the preservation of their wilderness character, and for the gathering and dissemination of information regarding their use and enjoyment as wilderness.”

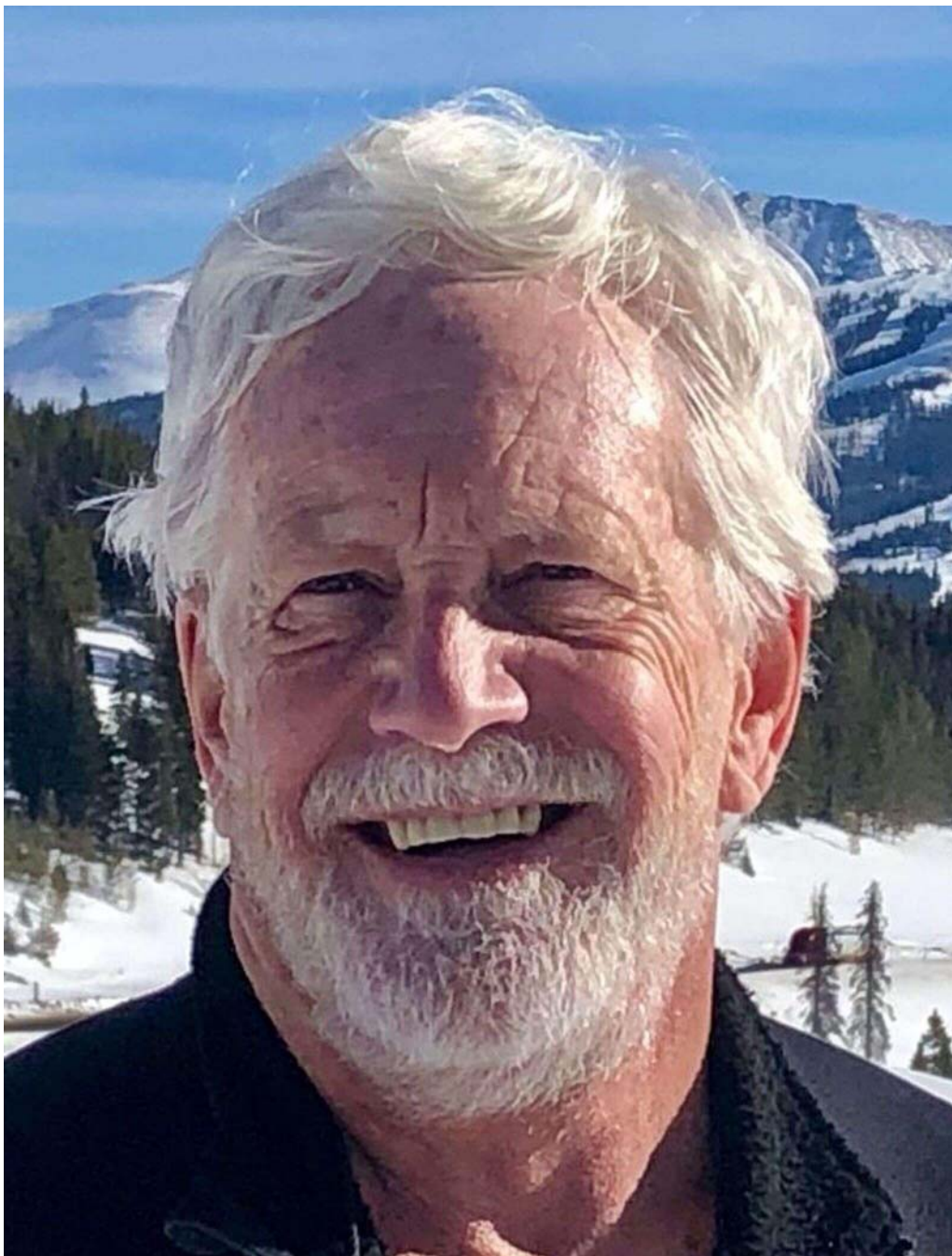
The act further defines wilderness as “an area of undeveloped federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which ... generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable.”

Aldo Leopold, a founder of The Wilderness Society, saw wilderness as a “land laboratory” – an ecological baseline against which to measure human impacts. Leopold urged that wilderness areas be created as ecological islands where nature could evolve without the interference of man.


Humankind has shaped, often destroying, natural ecosystems across the world. Wilderness areas have been called “America’s best idea” for the very reason that Americans paused for once and saw the benefit of allowing some of our country to remain untrammelled by man.

Signing the act in 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson said: “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.”





Mike Browning

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Mike Browning is the chair 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](https://EagleSummitWilderness.org) .

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