

Get Wild: But we still need wilderness

Mike Browning



A peak rises above a lake near Gore Lake in the Eagles Nest Wilderness.

Frances Hartogh/Courtesy photo

This week I enjoyed a multiday backcountry ski trip with friends and family at Walter's Hut. Located at the base of Shrine Ridge above Vail Pass, Walter's and its two neighboring huts provide a fine base for ski touring in this beautiful segment of the White River National Forest.

For over 20 years, we've returned each winter. Easy access provides our friend with physical disabilities a backcountry experience. We are grateful to the hut owners who allow access to their beautiful cabins through the 10th Mountain Division Hut Association.

Views from Shrine Ridge to the Eagles Nest Wilderness and the Holy Cross Wilderness are spectacular. But as I gaze at these wilderness areas, I'm reminded how very different a wilderness experience is from recreating in a multiple-use part of our national forests.

Vail Pass is a popular winter recreation area. Accessible from Interstate 70, snowmobiles, snow bikes and other motorized users share the area with skiers and snowshoers. The U.S. Forest Service tries to maintain a safe and peaceful corridor for nonmotorized travel to and around the huts and up Shrine Ridge, but the sound of motors revving is omnipresent, and incursions are frequent. Over the years, wildlife that we used to enjoy glimpsing, like ermine and even lynx, no longer make an appearance.

At night, the lights of Copper Mountain Resort's snow-grooming cats are visible, and I-70 and its constant traffic aren't far away.

The concept of multiple use is central to the management of our national forests. However, it is anathema to the concept of wilderness areas, which are congressionally designated portions of our public lands. Within these special areas, many uses are prohibited, including mechanized/wheeled vehicles such as mountain bikes, off-road recreational vehicles and chainsaws. How is this justified?

Even the drafters of the 1964 Wilderness Act struggled with this question. There are several answers.

First, some people seek solitude and find spiritual healing in wilderness. As the world becomes more and more developed, places for quiet contemplation become harder to find.

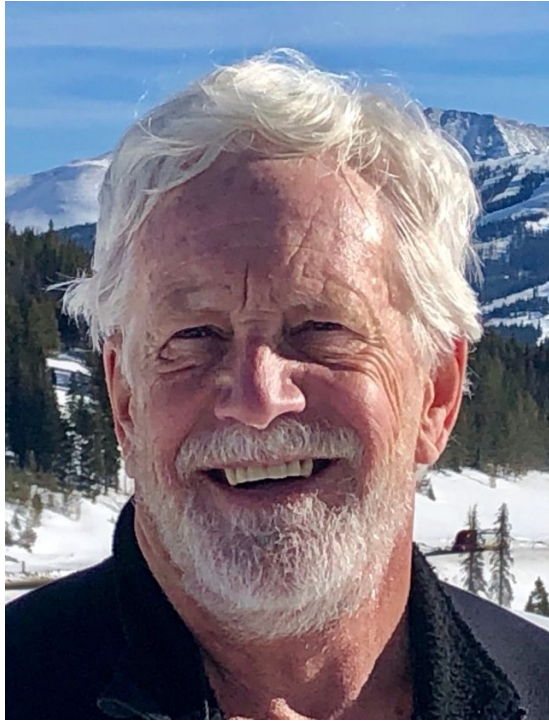
Second, as humans manipulate and alter nature to meet their own goals, areas where natural forces still govern become fewer and fewer. They are islands where humans can still learn from nature.

Third, natural ecosystems are needed to support all life on earth. Wild places capture and clean the water we drink, produce the oxygen we breath, protect coastal areas from destructive storms and produce healing medicines that are still being discovered.

Lastly, wilderness areas are often the last refugees for the wildlife that enrich our lives, but whose very existence is now threatened.

We evolved in wilderness, but today we are increasingly alienated from it. Wilderness ties us to our past, grounds us to reality and allows us to experience a power and complexity far greater than ourselves. It teaches us respect and humility.

Multiple use does not mean that all areas can or should be used for all uses. Some uses are antithetical to and preclude other uses. Wilderness is one such use. Less than 18% percent of our national forest land is protected as wilderness areas — a mere 2.7% of the contiguous United States. The rest is available for other uses.



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Mike Browning/Courtesy photo

As we celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, let's cherish and protect these lands — for ourselves, our children and generations to come. Let's support the creation of new wilderness areas, even where it means that certain uses may be discontinued. Once lost, wilderness is lost forever, and we may be lost without it.

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Mike is a board member of the Eagle River Watershed Council, Wilderness Watch and the Eagle the 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.