

Supporting Gems, but with a caveat

An Aspen Times Editorial
Nov. 6, 2009

In 1960, Wallace Stegner argued that wilderness is more than just a parcel of ground; wilderness helped to shape the American character, Stegner wrote, and we need it today — as both a physical reality and a cultural ideal — to remember who we are.

“We need wilderness preserved — as much of it as is still left, and as many kinds — because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed,” he wrote.

Stegner's Wilderness Letter articulated perhaps the most compelling reasons for wilderness designation, and the letter is still relevant today. With demand for Colorado's natural gas running high, and with people venturing deeper into the wild on ever more powerful machines, wilderness designation is the best tool Americans have to protect large swaths of federal land from the noise, pollution, machinery and disruption of modern life.

Of course, that makes wilderness designation controversial. It restricts how people and commercial interests can use public land. The 450,000-acre Hidden Gems wilderness proposal put forth by the Wilderness Workshop in Carbondale has triggered a huge backlash from those who want to ride bikes, ATVs and snowmobiles in certain areas of the White River National Forest and other public lands. They feel wilderness designation takes away rights and privileges that they have enjoyed on their public lands — and they're right. Many activities won't be allowed on these lands if Congress enacts the Hidden Gems proposal into law.

We've listened for weeks to the arguments on both sides of the Hidden Gems debate, and we come down in favor of Stegner over the recreationists. This debate is not about people and what they can do with their toys. It's about the land and the wildlife, and we would rather err on the side of protection.

That said, we're not quite ready to rubber-stamp the Hidden Gems as proposed. First, the proposal has generated enough opposition that it's unlikely to make it through Congress as is. Wilderness Workshop still has some convincing to do, lest it trigger an ideological fight in Washington. Second — and we think this is part of the reason for the opposition — it's unclear what biological or aesthetic criteria the Workshop used to select the Gems parcels. The Workshop has essentially said, “Trust us — we've chosen the right spots.” But it's hard to trust someone who is restricting your activities.

We believe in the wilderness ideal, and we think most of the Workshop's proposed parcels are worthy of designation. But we also think Hidden Gems advocates have additional work to do — working with their critics to identify the most important, most scenic, most biologically rich areas, and then clearly explaining how those areas were identified. And yes, that may mean whittling some acreage.

If Wilderness Workshop can do these things, then the Hidden Gems should rightly earn federal protection.