

A NEW VIEW OF SHRINKING VASTNESS

Hidden Gems wants the public to weigh the possibilities



[STORY BY SETH MENSING - PHOTOS BY KURT REISE]

After more than 20 years of taking people over some of the nation's most remote areas in a small plane, Bruce Gordon has learned that in those situations silence is sometimes the best communicator. He lets the land speak for itself.

So over the drone of a Cessna on a sunny day he invited a small group of journalists and advocates to see what the land was saying in locations where wilderness areas are being proposed around Gunnison County, from Powderhorn south of Blue Mesa Reservoir to Treasure Mountain north of Crested Butte.

If successful, the Hidden Gems proposal would add wilderness protection to more than 300,000 acres in the Gunnison and White River National Forests. After being divided into congressional districts – with Gunnison and Pitkin Counties paired in the 3rd Congressional District – the proposal went to the state's political delegates this week for consideration. For the plan to be passed by an act of Congress, a congressman will have to sponsor it.

The area north of the Reservoir is vast and largely empty. But around Powderhorn, the very thing that the Hidden Gems Wilderness Campaign is trying to publicize is fully on display. Roads creep up to the edges of the current wilderness boundary from all directions before being stopped by an invisible line drawn in legislation.

Many of the roads around the 61,500-acre Powderhorn Wilderness connect somehow to a single ranch, and the owner is all for Hidden Gems proposal to add nearly 3,400 completely roadless acres, which might be some of the last to preserve.

According to Gunnison County campaign organizer Laura Yale, an expanded wilderness area would also provide protection to some of the areas most sensitive mid-elevation habitat where pine and patches of aspen support populations of elk, bear and even an occasional moose.

When the Wilderness Act of 1964 was passed, most of the land being preserved was in the land of rock and ice, above or around tree line, which is something Hidden Gems would change. The campaign's proposal areas, which make up more than

300,000 acres in Gunnison County, lie mostly in mid-elevation areas that would benefit a wider variety of wildlife and protect many of the areas that are slipping away, Yale says.

Among the first areas protected by the 1964 legislation was the West Elk Wilderness that Hidden Gems wants to stretch to the northern shores of Blue Mesa. As the plane took the group further from the reservoir and deeper into the volcanic ridges, snowcapped peaks and valleys, the area changed from looking as if it might be at risk from overuse to looking like what you'd imagine wilderness to be.

It would be hard to find a wilderness area in the lower 48 states that is as dramatic and rugged as the West Elk Wilderness. The peaks push 14,000 feet and the valleys lies open and empty, with an occasional game track as the only sign of disturbance.

It's a contrast through comparison that Gordon likes to show on his flights. In lieu of oil fields and gas pads, he was able to show how the recreational access roads that so many people in the valley like to use are encroaching on the pristine areas that draw them to recreate.

While another area of the proposal around the Raggeds Wilderness and Treasure Mountain looks like a quintessential wilderness, as the plane crested a ridge it became clear that development in even the most remote places wasn't out of the question, with industrial buildings associated with the proposed molybdenum mine perched on the flanks of nearby Mt. Emmons.

In an area closer to the town of Crested Butte, the Hidden Gems Campaign has proposed a 16,060-acre wilderness where none has existed before. But the idea isn't going without opposition, with mountain bike riders and snowmobilers speaking out against what they see as an excessive taking of public land.

But what is evident on the ground around the Gunnison Valley, and even more so from the air, is that the area is vast, with no shortage of recreational land—and interests are encroaching on it from every side. It is a question of which interest should move in next door.

