

Redneck Tree-Hugger's take on the Hidden Gems



The Redneck Tree-hugger

Gary Hubbell

As a ranch real estate broker, I deal with people and their dreams on a daily basis. I talk to guys in Ohio and Florida who have always dreamed of being an outfitter, riding into the high country, leading elk hunters on an expedition. I send packets out to folks looking to buy a horse property, so they can ride onto vast stretches of federal land. I hear from locals who want to build a cabin so they can ride their mountain bikes into Lead King Basin; I talk to backcountry skiers who like to earn their turns on wilderness routes, and I visit with snowmobilers who want to criss-cross the high mesas over the winter.

When we're laboring away at our jobs and routines, we all daydream. We dream about where we'd really like to be, and quite often that involves our nearby National Forest lands. When you think you may lose your dream through somebody's new rules, it raises your hackles.

The proposed Hidden Gems wilderness proposal would add 450,000 acres of lower-elevation lands — in most cases aspen, Gambel oak, pinyon-juniper, and Douglas fir transitional terrain — to the existing 750,000 acres of high montane "rock and ice" wilderness lands in the White River National Forest.

This proposal has brought howls of protest, particularly from motorized groups. ATV riders, four-wheel-drive clubs, motocross riders and snowmobilers see this as an intrinsic threat to their weekend fun.

(As an aside, my observation is that mountain bikers have been thrown a big fat bone with this proposal, with nice little routes interspersed where vehicles cannot go. No single group is more selfish than the mountain bikers, and they're allied with the wilderness crowd and very vocal.)

Let me tell you my experience with our public lands. As a former horseback outfitter, I've been on both sides of the artificial line between wilderness and the outside world. I've spent hundreds of days inside the wilderness. Sure, you'll encounter people — hikers, backpackers, fishermen, horseback riders, hunters — but the overall

experience is peaceful and relaxing.

There are problems with wilderness, too. I've cut hundreds of deadfall logs off the trails with a bow saw, and it's backbreaking work. I used to joke with my clients that I could call the Forest Service and they'd be right up to do their job — in about three years. I spent days and days spraying noxious weeds with a horseback weed spraying unit that I purchased at my own cost — again, doing the government's job for them. I packed out load after packhorse load of trash left behind by slob. In my opinion, when there's a huge

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windstorm and 200 trees fall across the trail, they should send in a crew of three guys with chainsaws to clear the trail. But no, in wilderness you have to use a bucksaw. Who wants to sign up?

On the other side of the wilderness boundary was a howling throng of motorized madness. I observed more dumbshits on four-wheelers in my eight years of outfitting than any person should have to suffer. They're like a bunch of monkeys turned loose in a museum. Of course, there's the elderly crowd just out to enjoy the scenery on a Sunday afternoon, putting along on their four-wheelers, and I understand and appreciate that. Then there are the morons screaming along in their shorts and T-shirts, spinning donuts in pristine meadows of wildflowers, pioneering

new routes into wilderness areas, leaving a glittering trail of beer cans in their wake. The last time I was in Lead King Basin, we could hear screaming motors long after we hiked into the timber to hunt blue grouse. It sounded like the start of the Baja 500, with different pitches of revved-up motors echoing off the mountain peaks.

Meanwhile, there's an arms race going on with ATV manufacturers, building ever-bigger, more powerful machines, and the number of new trails expands every summer. America's waistline grows, and the number of roadless acres shrinks.

I understand the people who like snowmobiling in the winter, and don't want to be told they can't take their machine across a mountain meadow where the elk won't return until well past spring. I know some people really get off on climbing rocks with their Jeeps. I watch people riding their motocross bikes over to Crested Butte, and it looks like a lot of fun.

There will still be plenty of miles of roads and trails for that. In the meantime, the best thing the motorized vehicle crowd can do is to start acting responsibly. Anytime they see one of their googans starting his own version of a mud bog race, anytime they see a couple of mountain bikers pedaling into the wilderness, anytime they see people driving into the wildflowers, they should lower the boom on them. And the Forest Service should do so, too — instead of writing warnings and \$50 tickets, it should be \$500 for a first offense. That would get people's attention.

The pressure on our roadless areas is intense. And once we've allowed the spiderweb of bandit trails to proliferate, once we've given the go-ahead to drilling rigs to despoil the habitat for perpetuity, once we've allowed mining to occur, we lose these wild places forever.

More wilderness? I support it.

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