

Berwyn: Summit lands are wilderness worthy

BY BOB BERWYN
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This summer, conservation advocates will once again lead a series of hikes in Summit County to introduce residents to some of the high country's wildest places ? areas that are part of a citizen proposal for wilderness designation.

The Hidden Gems campaign has been under way for a few years. My hope is that a progressive, conservation-minded administration and Congress will find the gumption to act before some of the last pristine lands in Summit County and Eagle County are sacrificed for short-term economic gain. I'm sure they will have support from citizens and local governments in Summit County, who understand the long-term value of protecting our region's natural resources.

Some of the areas under consideration include about 5,000 acres along Eliot Ridge, at the north end of the Gore Range, about 10,000 acres on Tenderfoot Mountain, between Straight Creek and Loveland Pass, and another 13,000 acres in the Tenmile Range, near Breckenridge.

This is not just a willy-nilly deal. The parcels have all been carefully selected because they meet the criteria of the Wilderness Act. Not just any piece of ground qualifies for the lofty designation. Only terrain that remains relatively untouched by human activities fits the bill. All the proposed new wilderness areas have other wilderness values, including wildlife habitat, spectacular scenery and the opportunity for solitude.

Backers of the proposed new wilderness areas have taken a cautious, grassroots path toward their goal. This is not a top-down proposal from environmental overlords in Washington, D.C. The Hidden Gems plan was developed by people who live in western Colorado. They know where elk drop their antlers, how to find secret waterfalls and the trails leading to patches of mossy ground flecked with wildflowers hidden deep in the forest.

For the past few years, they've patiently been scouring these areas to make sure they measure up to the strict standards of the Wilderness Act. At the same time, they're building a constituency for the plan at a very local level by getting people out on the ground, to see for themselves what the areas are about.



A proposal to expand existing wilderness and add new areas in Summit County could include pristine mountain tarns and wildflower meadows like these between Straight Creek and Loveland Pass. Summit Daily/Bob Berwyn

A little more behind the scenes, the wilderness backers have been working with other groups ? mountain bikers, for example ? to make sure everybody's viewpoint is considered.

The beauty of this approach is it really does give everyone a chance to participate at the earliest stages of the process. To be sure, some people will show up at the last minute kicking and screaming. They'll complain they just found out about the plan and will try to put the entire proposal on hold. But in this case, the wilderness plan has been public and transparent from the very beginning.

And this summer offers even more chance for public input. It's an opportunity not just for wilderness backers, but for potential critics to get involved and speak up in the context of a collaborative process, not in a courtroom or legislative showdown at high noon.

Wilderness designation can, but doesn't have to be, controversial. Critics sometimes accuse the wilderness movement of wanting to lock away public lands as elitist reserves for yuppie backpackers with fancy outdoor gear. At other times, wilderness proposals are painted as threats to American energy independence.

Nothing could be further from the truth. What's more egalitarian than putting on a pair of boots, hoisting a pack on your shoulders and walking to your destination? Overall, only about 2 percent of the total land mass in the U.S. is set aside as wilderness, about 4 percent if you include Alaska. That doesn't seem unreasonable, given the headlong rush toward development, extraction and exploitation outside those wilderness zones.

In other cases, you might hear old-time ranchers, loggers or miners grumbling about "the feds," who just don't know anything about how to use the land. In the case of wilderness, it's not about using the land. It's about not using it, or at least not abusing it. We really only get one chance at this, at least in our lifetime, so it's worth taking the time and doing it right. Once we commit an area to resource extraction or energy development, that's it.

Sometimes we need to look at the land through a different prism, one that doesn't see it for what can be gained monetarily, but that recognizes the intrinsic values inherent to unspoiled nature.

For detailed information on the Hidden Gems plan, including the schedule of planned local hikes, go to www.whiteriverwild.org.

Bob Berwyn has been reporting from Summit County since 1996 and spends as much time as he can in local wilderness areas. Contact him at bberwyn@summitdaily.com.