

Cassidy Brush: Mountain bikers for Hidden Gems Wilderness

Guest column

CASSIDY BRUSH

SUMMIT DAILY- JULY 30, 2009

For 17 years I've lived in Summit County, enjoying an outdoor lifestyle that has transformed me from a "transient" taking the infamous year off from college, to a committed business owner with no intention of leaving.

I am an avid mountain biker who fully supports the Hidden Gems proposal for additional wilderness designation in Summit County. These outstanding areas exemplify everything that matters here, and why a lot of us came here in the first place. Pristine, environmentally important and providing critical habitat for a variety of species, they are extremely rare. These wild places deserve stewardship and the highest, most permanent protection we can give them rather than a "fight" based on competing values and our own special interests.

The wilderness proposal is advocated by the Hidden Gems Campaign which is a coalition of conservation and recreational organizations endorsed by 34 outfitters, businesses and organizations. Cooperatively, they promote additional Congressional Wilderness designations in the White River National Forest region. I represent them as both a business owner and citizen, most recently hiking with Congressman Polis in the proposed Acorn Creek area.

For the last two years, the Hidden Gems campaign has been working with the Summit Fat Tire Society to address concerns regarding the proposed wilderness areas. It is my hope that the gap that divides us can be bridged quickly so agreements can be reached. The media has implied that steps in the process have been overlooked. However, Hidden Gems has been communicating and listening closely to what is being asked of them. For example, several proposed wilderness areas have been removed or modified to accommodate mountain biking. The spectacular northern portion of the Tenmile Range was not included so that we can continue to ride the Peaks and Wheeler trails. The proposed Ptarmigan Hill wilderness area on the west side of Vail Pass was removed from the wilderness proposal to allow mountain biking to continue on the Wilder Gulch Trail. Hoosier Ridge proposed wilderness was reduced in size to accommodate both mountain bikes and motorized recreation in Pennsylvania Creek. The Ptarmigan A proposal has excluded the Ptarmigan trail. In the southern part of the Tenmile, the proposal was again compromised to include mountain biking on the Lower Crystal Lakes and Wheeler Recreation trails. Both groups can be happy, so let's move forward with the process so these incredible areas receive the status they deserve.

Wilderness designation isn't easy. There are criteria that need to be met to qualify. It has to be a roadless area having natural character with outstanding opportunities for "primitive" forms of recreation. An Act of Congress is needed, making this no easy feat. We are fortunate to have some of these remaining wilderness-quality lands left in Summit County. Yes, it's strict, but it needs to be for any ecological integrity to survive. National Recreation Areas and National Conservation Areas may allow mountain biking and other types of recreation, but they don't necessarily guarantee mitigation of exploitative activities like timber production, mining or road building. No one wants that in their back yard, so why wouldn't we take the best action possible to prevent it?

Wilderness speaks to a broader group than just mountain biking. Hunting, hiking, horseback riding, fishing, camping and backcountry skiing are all allowed in Wilderness areas, and these voices count. If we toe the line here and allow provisions for one group, where will it end? And then of course there is wildlife. Animals need corridors to move through to continuing living in our midst. We can easily compromise their space and should consider our obligation to maintaining their critical habitat as well; they have no say in this.

Now, we have a window of opportunity to do the right thing. Who knows what might happen in two to four years when the political climate may not be as favorable to protect what we have. Worse yet, these areas could become ineligible because they are degraded by our individual recreational needs which often compete with one another. Throw into the equation projected population increases, and we may be at risk of "loving it to death", which would be a sad reality for these true Gems. Once they are gone we can't get them back. I love mountain biking, but a lot more is at stake here than a few bike trails. It is a small price to pay, so why chance it?