

Vail Daily

Vail Valley Voices: Let's protect the Gems

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What landscapes do you want your great, great grandchildren to see in this valley? The same beautiful ones we experience today? If so, I urge you to support the Hidden Gems Wilderness Campaign.

The campaign is working to have proposed areas in the White River National Forest officially designated as wilderness. This is the best chance we have to make sure these areas are protected and preserved forever, for our children and our children's children.

Recently I had the good fortune to visit a number of the beautiful, undisturbed areas that are being considered for protection. I hiked to Castle Peak, West Lake Creek, Lower Piney, Spraddle Creek and Elliot Ridge.

I think it is wonderful and uplifting to be able to enjoy all of the sights, sounds, and smells of nature in its undisturbed beauty. It is thrilling to be able to see elk, bluebirds, eagles, ptarmigans, foxes, marmots, and other wild creatures in their natural habitats, rather than in zoos.

As stewards of the Earth, I feel that we have to protect these species, protect their migration corridors and habitats. It is important to give them, as well as the plants and vegetation, areas that as the Wilderness Act of 1964 says, "are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

What I have also learned on my hikes is that a great deal of our existing wilderness areas in the White River National Forest are at high elevation (rocky and icy), rather than at mid-elevation.

The mid-elevation areas that would be protected by the Hidden Gems proposal play important roles in our lives. They are the source of our clean drinking water. Forests in the mid-elevation areas help filter our air as well. And they provide vital habitat, migration and winter feeding areas for deer, elk and many other animals.

The Hidden Gems areas are most suitable for us humans for such recreational activities as wildlife viewing, hiking, backpacking, camping, cross country skiing, snowshoeing, rock climbing, kayaking, hunting, fishing, bird watching and so forth.

With an official wilderness designation by Congress, these areas will forever remain peaceful, quiet and undisturbed by construction, extraction and vehicular traffic. After visiting these areas, I, a hiker, personally feel uplifted, refreshed, and, to sum it up in a word: joyful.

Let's do all we can to make sure the nature that makes this place we live so magical is preserved forever, for our great-great grandchildren and beyond. That may mean we have to compromise, giving up a mountain bike trail here or an ATV access there, but we can use our legs and walk into wilderness, which I have found often deepens the connection to nature.

I urge everyone to go to www.whiteriverwild.org to get more specifics about the Hidden Gems wilderness proposal. And think about why you love our backyard, the White River National Forest,

why you settled here in the first place.

What are your favorite outdoor recreational activities? What would happen if our special lands were no longer wild and untamed, no longer the amazing attraction and economic driver they are today?

Please contact your local elected officials about saving these lands before it is too late. The bill will be presented to Congress in just a couple of months. The time is now. Or, sadly, never.

It's up to each of us!

Susan Kaemmerlen is a resident of Vail. Her commitment to the Hidden Gems Wilderness Proposal has developed over the last several months, as she's hiked into the areas that it would protect.