Land, Water and People

Wilderness: Our Gift to the Future

By Mike Blakeman

I'll never forget my first wilderness experience. I was hiking down a trail in a dense forest and came upon a tree tangled with vines. I worked my way through the vines and found myself standing inside a "tepee" that included a vine swing. It was an amazing discovery. I was six years old and was exploring my backyard.

Different folks will define wilderness in different ways, but on September 3, 1964, Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Wilderness Act, which included the definition of designated wilderness. The Wilderness Act states, "Wilderness, in contrast to those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

The Upper Rio Grande Basin includes part or all of five designated wilderness areas: The Weminuche, La Garita, South San Juan, Sangre De Cristo and Great Sand Dunes Wilderness areas. Four of these wilderness areas are found on the Rio Grande National Forest and make up about 22% of the Forest (almost 400,000 acres).

Our wilderness areas provide us with clean air and water, offer superb recreation opportunities, and protect habitat for a wonderful diversity of plants and wildlife.

This sounds great on the surface, but there are many issues that surround designated wilderness. For example, in most wilderness areas, motorized and mechanized vehicles and equipment are not allowed. That means all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), chainsaws, generators, mountain bikes and even wheel barrels are forbidden. Wheelchairs are allowed if they are necessary for a person's mobility. These restrictions aren't embraced by everyone, which is why some consider wilderness to be "elitist" recreation zones.

Wilderness is not just for "elitists" though, but just one of many multiple recreation opportunities offered on public lands. Those people that hike and ride in wilderness enjoy being able to get away from the hustle and bustle of humanity. They like to be able to sit quietly and watch a cow elk and calf feed in a meadow without the threat of an ATV or motorcycle disturbing the silence.

Others take issue with the fact that timber cannot be harvested and minerals cannot be mined in wilderness (except on inholdings of existing patented mining claims). The belief is that wilderness locks up valuable resources that people should be able to use. Additionally, some would argue that the restrictions prevent land managers from caring for the land properly, which leads to more severe fires and insect epidemics that spill out onto non-wilderness land.

Certainly there is some validity to these concerns as everything we use on a daily basis comes from somewhere. If it's not grown, it's dug. Also, in some wilderness areas, we could reduce the threat of fires or insect epidemics escaping onto non-wilderness.

But, there is also something to be said for preserving areas, so that they can *mostly* function naturally. We don't understand how everything works in nature and how

our actions can disrupt the very ecological systems on which all life depends. As Aldo Leopold said, “The first rule of intelligent tinkering is to save all the parts.”

Designated wilderness areas help us save all the parts, which is why Wilderness is truly our gift to the future.

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