

Get Wild: 60 years of wilderness

Frances Hartogh



Hikers walk on the Gore Lake Trail in the Eagle's Nest Wilderness. This year marks the 60th anniversary of the U.S. Wilderness Act of 1964.
Ian Zimmer/Courtesy photo

“Look, a park ranger!” As a volunteer wilderness ranger for the U.S. Forest Service, I get called park ranger a lot. I welcome the moniker, not only because park rangers generally are excellent humans, but even more so because it provides an opportunity to inform people about the differences between parks and our congressionally-protected wilderness areas.

Many people who visit Eagle and Summit counties and go hiking are not aware that they are walking in one of the four official wilderness areas in these counties: Eagles Nest, Flat Tops, Holy Cross, and Ptarmigan Peak. Even some of our local residents don't recognize that when they pass the unique wilderness area sign (with the “Keep Pets On Leash” placard underneath), they are entering an area that is specially protected and regulated under the US Wilderness Act of 1964.

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the act. But, what's so special about wilderness areas anyway?

Wilderness areas are unique. Only Congress can create or alter them, and only a tiny part of our country consists of wilderness areas — less than 2.7% of the contiguous U.S.

But what really makes wilderness areas unique is why they were created and how they are managed: to preserve areas “in their natural condition ... where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”

This represented a remarkable change in public lands management. Throughout history, humans had seen “wilderness” as something to conquer and exploit. But the Wilderness Act was the culmination of a growing recognition that, in our increasingly industrialized world, we needed to preserve at least some vestiges of our country's historic wild lands for future generations to experience and as a haven for wildlife and plants.

Given the lofty aspiration to keep our wilderness areas “untrammelled by man,” the Wilderness Act includes protections. You can't build a concession to sell t-shirts and burgers. No “permanent installation” is allowed. You can't build roads, or ride a mountain bike or other mechanized, mechanical, wheeled, or motorized device.

Needless to say, these restrictions frustrate some people and special interest groups. Sports climbers argue that the ban on “permanent installations” shouldn't apply to drilling bolts, anchors, and other sport-climbing installations into pristine rock faces. Mountain bikers seek more terrain. ATV and snow machine enthusiasts want access, too. Feeling their favorite sport constrained, some groups have even fought to stop creation of new wilderness areas and expansion of existing ones, and to alter the way wilderness areas are managed so as to open them to higher-impact activities.

Accessible from Interstate 70 and with a Front Range population of over 5 million nearby, our local wilderness areas are uniquely challenged. And in the 60 years since the Act was passed, the population of Summit County alone has increased tenfold.

As a volunteer wilderness ranger, I ask visitors what different experiences they can enjoy in our wilderness areas, thanks to the protections enacted six decades ago to ensure “an enduring resource of wilderness.” Bird song unimpaired by noise from mechanized equipment. Alpine vistas unchanged by centuries of human population. A quiet escape from our modern lives.

In signing the Wilderness Act, President Lyndon B. Johnson stated, “If future generations are to remember us with gratitude rather than contempt, we must leave them something more than the miracles of technology. We must leave them a glimpse of the world as it was in the beginning, not just after we got through with it.”

Happy 60th birthday, wilderness.

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Frances Hartogh is a volunteer wilderness ranger for [ESWA](#)

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