

On Behalf of Wilderness

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It was almost 11 years ago when I first wrote a letter in support of Wilderness designation for the Scotchman Peaks area. It wasn't a controversial position at the time. The idea had already received wide support, from both sides of the political aisle, and was particularly popular with my home in Clark Fork.

The Scotchman Peaks, you see, are our back yard in Clark Fork. It's where generations of families have tested their endurance by hiking up to the top, and where hundreds of young men and women hiked out into the back country in order to fill the larder before a hard winter kept them home.

Through the years we have seen a lot of changes in our surrounding county as more and more people "head for the hills" for various reasons. Some have become good neighbors, and essential members of our communities. Others build their fancy homes in our forests, put up their fences and no-trespassing signs, let their dogs run loose and terrorize the wildlife while piling out the deer corn and creating a nuisance for everyone else in the neighborhood who is trying to bring their garden to harvest. Regardless of which type of neighbor they are, each new arrival brings change to what it is we all love about living here—our essential "wild"ness—simply because every year brings more of them.

So when a group of people got together, hoping the power of numbers would convince our elected representatives to keep this special piece of our backyard off limits to the types of changes we were seeing, many of us got on board. As Clark Fork's Bob Hays put it in his own letter of support, "It should stay as it is. It's still like it was when man first came through here and I think that's the way it should always be."

The Scotchman Peaks proposed wilderness area first came about as part of the 1987 Forest Plan. It seemed there were dozens of meetings back then, and coming out of those meetings was the idea that the area around the Scotchman Peaks was particularly suitable for

wilderness designation and should be managed that way. In part, this was due to the terrain. This is no "Disneyland" wilderness, but instead will try the legs, lungs and boots of anyone who heads out into it. No one was clamoring for roads to be built into this area of our forest, particularly when there are so many other areas that are easier to reach.

In the early part of the 2000s, the Forest Service revisited the plan (they have to every 15 years) and again, the



overwhelming response from anyone who bothered to show up to the meetings was that Scotchman Peaks is best managed as if it were already declared a wilderness.

It's worth taking a minute to talk about what that kind of management looks like.

Two years ago, during the summer of Mordor, areas in the proposed wilderness were burning. The incident team that fought those fires was truly staggering in size, especially given the fact that most of the Northwest seemed to be on fire at the time. So yes, fires in wilderness areas are not allowed to burn out of control.

Wildlife also continues to be managed in wilderness areas. Permits have been and will still be given to hunt elk, deer, moose, wolves and many other critters that call this area home. Traps can still be set. What *is* true, now and in the future, is that if you hunt in this area, you're going to have to haul your catch out on your back, the same way the locals have been doing it for the last

150 years.

If you head into the wilderness and are unable to get out again, search parties can still go in and find you. If you're hurt bad enough, helicopters can come in to fly you out. In fact, there have been three helicopter rescues in the area in recent years — something I would have thought our local sheriff might have been aware of.

In fact, if Scotchman Peaks were to receive official wilderness designation, nothing much would change, given the area has been managed as wilderness for going on 30 years now.

So why not leave it like that? Why bother seeking wilderness designation at all?

Henry David Thoreau, one of my favorite writers thanks to his belief in building castles in the air, said that "In the wildness is the preservation of the world." Maybe he was right about that and maybe not, but in the wildness of Scotchman Peaks is, I believe, the preservation of *our* world. It reminds us that this place isn't easy, wasn't *ever* easy, and that making a home here, building the community we love, was the result of an awful lot of hard work done by men and women whose faces I will only ever know as faded, sepia toned images, frozen in time.

We take a lot for granted because we don't always have much opportunity today to understand just how hard life used to be. But out in the Scotchmans we get at least a hint.

I have been privileged to be out in the Scotchmans; my children have had that privilege as well, and I hope and pray that their children, and their children's children, will be able to follow our footsteps into wild places here at home. But we need to keep them wild. And wilderness designation is our best chance to keep the Scotchmans the way it is.

Politically Incorrect



Trish Gannon is the owner/publisher of the River Journal. Despite the suggestion of many friends, she will never knit a sweater for her chickens to wear.