

In the 1964 Wilderness Preservation Act Congress defined wilderness “as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”¹ These guidelines are used to choose and set aside areas where man has had little or no permanent impact, and to protect an area from future impact. The Congressional definition is just one of many; the ways individuals relate to wilderness will effect their personal definitions. In spite of its many embodiments, wilderness, and its protection, is an important and controversial issue, especially for the Scotchman Peaks area.

The Scotchman Peaks Proposed Wilderness Area is a _____ acre area of land in the _____ mountains of northern Idaho and Montana. The amount of land in this area without roads has been severely depleted in the last several decades, similar to most wilderness areas in the world. Undeveloped land is under increasing amounts of pressure from extractive industries, such as logging and mining, and less extractive ones. These include land developers who would build homes or resorts for those who want to enjoy the beauty of the area. While such development is less harmful than mining or logging, it still has a significant effect on the health of an ecosystem.

One of the most important reasons for protecting wilderness from economic development is the protection of biodiversity. The Scotchman Peaks have an abundance of flora and fauna, many of which have not been catalogued. This ecosystem has evolved over time to achieve balance; disruption by humans could lead to domination by one species, or the extinction of another. Protecting biodiversity is important because studying the biological functions of plants and animals can lead to greater understanding of human functions. Many plants have unexplored medicinal properties, who knows, the cure for cancer could come from a plant derivative. Protecting the Scotchman Peaks area would ensure that biodiversity endures for future generations’ enjoyment and education.

Protecting wilderness has many social benefits as well as environmental ones. Areas of high plant density provide better air and water quality to surrounding populations. People also have the opportunity to explore wilderness areas near them. The available recreation opportunities help people lead healthier lives, an important aspect given today's increasing rates of obesity. In addition to physical benefits, wilderness offers psychological ones; wilderness is often a relaxing place for people to spend time, especially in contrast with the fast pace of city life.

It would seem that with so many benefits, the protection of wilderness would be easy; however, for several reasons this is not the case. First, the above-mentioned economic developers could lobby against protective legislation. Fortunately, the Scotchman Peaks are not suited to most types of development. The bigger obstacle is a strong anti-government sentiment, especially in rural areas where the proposed wilderness areas are. This sentiment has a strong presence throughout America's history. From the drafting of the Constitution, to the recent lack of regulation on Wall Street, there has been a tendency for Americans to prefer less government rather than more. Attempts to protect wilderness are viewed as an infringement on their rights, even though nothing is being taken away.