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Comments:

I grew up in Montana and graduated from MSU in 1986. I currently reside in Massachusetts, am fortunate to visit Montana 4-12 weeks per year, and plan to return home to live someday. I value spending time in Montana's great outdoors, hiking, biking, skiing and taking in nature. Most precious to me are Montana's pristine Wilderness areas - a truly limited national resource. The solitude and primitive experience offered in Wilderness is increasingly unique and essential as outdoor recreation becomes ever more popular nation-wide and the use of our national forests and parks intensifies. As a mental health counselor in urban New England, I am increasingly aware of the health benefits of slowing down, leaving behind technology, and experiencing the wilderness (something not really possible in New England as roadless areas are too small and populations too large). The seemingly more intangible social benefits listed in Table 9: inspiration, preservation and scenery, may actually contribute most greatly to health and well-being in our modern society.

Thus, I support Alternative D of the Forest Plan with the addition that the entire 230,000 wild, roadless acres of the Gallatin Range be included as Recommended Wilderness in the final plan. The expanding populations in Gallatin Valley and the continuing development and urbanization of Big Sky require balancing the increased use of outdoor recreation areas with significantly increasing the amount of land designated as Wilderness. I've backpacked in the Absaroka-Beartooth since the early seventies and the experience of solitude and the pristine landscape is now compromised by the number of visitors and size of groups, particularly in the last 10 years. I anticipate that the number of Wilderness users will continue to increase and am concerned about issues such as campsite over use and feces contamination. Perhaps new management practices can mitigate impacts in the long term, but increasing available Wilderness acreage should help as well.

I was dismayed to see that Option D is given the lowest rating for Air Quality due to the potential number of acres for prescribed burns. Perhaps over the long term, more Wilderness acres could mitigate the effects of climate change and possibly reduce wildfire smoke?

As a final point, opportunities for mechanized and motorized outdoor experiences are increasingly available in places much less vulnerable and pristine than Montana's high alpine country and wildlife corridors. Let's provide the best protections to our most precious areas. I appreciate the complexity of the plan, the work and consideration that went into the alternatives, and the clarity of the presentation. Thank you for the good work.

I've attached a photo from a family backpack in 1974 and another from 2017 in the Absaroka Beartooth.