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First name: Nikki

Last name: Naiser

Organization:

Title:

Official Representative/Member Indicator:

Address1: 12 E Garfield St

Address2: D3

City: BOZEMAN

State:

Province/Region: MT

Zip/Postal Code: 59715

Country: United States

Email: nikkinaiser@msn.com

Phone: 4065807798

Comments:

Regarding the Custer Gallatin National Forest Plan, I am strongly in support of Alternative D, 230,000 acres of wilderness.

Although I am also a bike enthusiast, and I am supportive of the rights of motorized recreationists, those activities are allowed on thousands of miles of public trails outside of the wilderness study areas that should be protected with wilderness status.

Wilderness has shaped me. Its solitude and the comfort of wild places is a treasure that must be preserved for future generations. Wilderness is fragile, and once it's gone there's no turning back.

As our population grows and more and more of our citizens are discovering the joys of the back country, we are beginning to love it to death. It is our duty to protect the character of wilderness in the areas that are critical to wildlife. Many would argue that non-motorized vehicular traffic is no more invasive than foot traffic, but numerous studies have shown the speed of movement and amount of ground covered by mountain bikes is substantially more harmful to soils, plants and wildlife than the impact of hikers ("The Impacts of Mountain Biking on Wildlife and People: A Review of the Literature by Michael J. Vandeman, Culture Change, July 3, 2004, culturechange.org/mountain_biking_impacts.htm).

One can argue that this literature review is dated, but what has changed since 2004 is the sheer volume of mountain bikers on our forest trails, making the consequences even more impactful today. As mountain biking has become more popular and bikers are moving onto landscapes where they've never been before.

The studies that argue for responsible, "environmentally friendly" biking fail to compute the management costs of minimizing bikers' negative impacts on vegetation, soil, water, and wildlife. Those studies do not acknowledge the limited budgets, manpower, and other resources to enforce the necessary restrictions for environmentally friendly biking in a wilderness. Restrictions do not yet exist for that, enforcement does not exist for that, and combination of restrictions and enforcement would only lessen rather than remove harmful impacts of biking in a wilderness.

Throughout the northern Gallatins, including the WSA, increasing numbers of ORV recreationists have damaged the land, stressed wildlife, and shattered the silence. Scientists have documented erosion, stream sedimentation, destruction of native vegetation, soil compaction, an increasing profusion of unmanaged user-created motor and biking trails, wildlife harassment, poaching and the disruption of wilderness-dependent species like lynx and wolverine.

The unique wildlands in the Custer Gallatin deserves full protection from damaging uses, not a bit here and a bit there. Without Wilderness designation, large-scale logging proposals with associated roads, timber landings and heavy machinery are nearly inevitable. History has proven, time and again, that public wildlands lacking statutory protection almost invariably become utilized for industrial resource extraction and development.

I ask you to support Alternative D with at least 230,000 acres of wilderness, including the Lionhead, along with the 150,000-acre Hyalite Porcupine Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Area in the Gallatin Range. Mountain bikes, motor bikes, and other mechanized vehicles have no place here if we are to preserve this precious treasure.

Sincerely,