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Comments:

comment draft plan GCNF

Dear Forest Plan Revision Team,

As someone who has spent the majority of my career working with field projects in Yellowstone and Glacier National parks, as well as a naturalist guide in these areas, almost all my recreation takes place in either National Parks or National Forests. The natural world is my passion. With Big Sky as my residence, much of this time outside has been in GCNF. The undertaking of creating a new Forest management plan by the Gallatin Custer National forest is a huge undertaking. 2 summers ago, I was camped in the beautiful Bighorn Mountains of Wyoming and was reminded how far reaching this Forest is when I wrote a check for my campground fee to GCNF.

My favorite activities are non- motorized, such as hiking and backpacking, Nordic skiing, kayaking, photographing wildflowers, landscapes, habitats and wildlife, as well as basking in the silence (or hearing nothing else but sounds of the natural world) one can experience nowhere else.

The Gallatin and Madison Mountains need permanent conservation designations to replace the WSA designation, strengthening protection and ensuring permanent protection of the Gallatins. The proposal of 102,000 acres of Recommended Wilderness in the Gallatin Range, running continuously from Yellowstone National Park to Hyalite Peak, ensuring north-south connectivity is one I choose. The proposed area encompasses the entire Big Creek drainage, Rock Creek, and Tom Miner basins - all of which include a diversity of lower elevation habitat and significant densities of grizzly bears. I personally have had the opportunities to see Grizzlies and Black bears, wolves, 4 wolverines, huge herds of elk, bighorn sheep, moose, deer, and a myriad of bird species including owls, dippers, and so many more. These areas are being threatened by unprecedented growth and demands on the resources in many ways and these species future is being threatened. At a time when many recommended Wilderness areas around the country are losing their protected status because of established uses by bikes, motorcycles, and snowmobiles, this is significant. I agree with the Gallatin Forest Partnership's point:

The opportunity for diverse, quality recreation on our public lands is highly valued by our community, and in order to get widespread community support for new Wilderness we need to work with our communities. With that in mind, the GFP felt it was important to maintain the current recreation access that exists. In the areas of the WSA where motorcycle, snowmobile, and mountain bike use have been established for decades and continue to this day, the GFP proposes special management areas, with management recommendations tailored to each specific landscape.

In the forest plan I see many references to desired conditions to protect including air quality, habitat needs for individual species, watersheds, aquatic and riparian ecosystems, and preventing more danger from invasive species. I believe the Gallatin Range needs to replace the WSA and create the protected Wilderness. Also,

the Madison Range should have additional acreage added to the Lee Metcalf Wilderness . These ideas are most closely reflected in Alternative C.

The Henry's Lake Mountains are also wild places where I've experienced some of the most unique vegetation, nesting birds, riparian areas and landscapes with such a diverse range of habitats. The Continental Divide NST passes through this area and it's critical to protect not only the integrity of the trail, but the viewshed. Mountain biking has been established in this area and could threaten the potential of potential Wilderness. My feeling is that Alternative A is the best, but should allow hiking and horses only. I have spent many years on National Scenic Trails, including the CDT, PCT and AT. These places are close to my heart.

The Absaroka Beartooth region is a uniquely wild and high landscape that is one of the most stunning areas in our nation. Geologically, scenically, diversity of species, and the summit of Montana, where some of the tallest mountains are found are all reasons we need to move toward protecting, areas currently recommended for Wilderness. I've seen some of the most spectacular night skies on backpacking trips, gone for days without seeing others, ( which is a good thing!) and seen for the first time ( for me) some of the most spectacular alpine species in these mountains. The alternative D is the best choice here. It also recommends protecting adjacent lands as wilderness such as Dome Mountain, Emigrant Peak, Chico Peak, Woodbine, East Rosebud to Stillwater, and Red Lodge Creek.

The Island Range, the Crazy Mountains are unique geologically and closely affiliated historically and spiritually with Crow and Cheyenne Indian people. In the Forest plan it appears as though this fact has been addressed and Native peoples will continue to have access and influence with management decisions. The heart of the Crazys certainly deserve wilderness protection. These mountains, along with the Bridgers are important parts of migration corridors for large and small predators and well as bird migration.

These areas see a lot of use as they are close to population centers. They require special management direction to ensure that recreation within these areas is sustainable - both in terms of the public enjoying specific recreation opportunities, but also so that recreation uses do not degrade the natural environment.

I support the proposal of Winter Wildlands which is supportive of all of the Recreation Emphasis Areas in Alternative E with two modifications. The Hyalite Recreation Emphasis Area mapped in Alternative C matches what we, and the Gallatin Forest Partnership, have previously proposed and we'd like to see this version incorporated into the final plan. We'd also like to see the proposed Bridger Winter Recreation Emphasis Area expanded to include north from Bridger Bowl to Fairy Lake. The northern Bridgers are very popular with backcountry snowsports enthusiasts, from snowshoers to snowmobilers and receive a lot of use throughout the snow season. Each of the alternatives includes a different winter ROS map and all of them show a lot of places as suitable for over-snow vehicle use where we don't believe that use is appropriate - either because it's an area that doesn't see enough snow for snowmobiling to be feasible, or because the area is an important refuge for skiers and snowshoers. In the final plan, the winter ROS maps must show desired future conditions reflecting where over-snow vehicles are ecologically, socially, and physically suitable, and not simply map where snowmobiles are currently allowed.

I have spent quite a bit of time going through the management plan and proposals. It's clear we cannot create a plan that leans exclusively in the direction of wilderness with so many different interests about how to use these lands. My perspective comes from the point of view that these spectacular natural landscapes and the beauty, diversity, richness of possible experiences and rarity anymore, are what makes Montana the "last best place". Once these places are used for activities that mar their integrity, we can't get it back.

Thank you for your thoughtfulness in how to best manage these lands,

Leslie Stoltz

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"The natural world is where we evolved.  
It's where our minds evolved.  
It's where we became who we truly are,  
and it's where we are most at home."  
- Michael McCarthy -