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Comments:

In July, 2016, our best friends from the Venezuelan Andes arrived on a US tourist visa to Florida. In honor of Avilio's retirement from public school teaching, I invited the 3 of them to MT. to hike, fish and camp. We hiked into the Beartooths for 2 days and he caught over 30 trout in one day (most of the small ones were catch and release). That night we were apparently visited by a hungry bear who stole 5 trout from our stringer. They were astounded to see the footprints close to their tent, just as they were to witness a black bear cross the road in front of us in western Glacier NP near Polebridge. Most foreign visitors to the backcountry are amazed and mesmerized at the natural blessings we have including untouched backcountry areas and wilderness. This is one of Montana's greatest treasures which must be preserved at all costs for future generations.

Although I was not born in MT. (like most of us), I have lived in Bozeman for almost 40 years. In addition to dozens of hikes together, my wife enjoys hiking with the Bozeman Women's Activity Group every week, as I do with the BMAGs for the boys. We have hiked dozens of trails in the Gallatin and Madison ranges over the years and enjoy the peace, serenity and amazing views these mountain areas offer. Several WSAs (Wilderness Study areas) are found in these critical areas which must be protected in perpetuity. Designating these areas as Wilderness is the only way to preserve them in their most natural state for our future generations to enjoy and recreate as well.

We own a small, primitive cabin, off the grid in the Tobacco Roots. Some of the trail damage we have witnessed was caused by mountain bikes, esp. early in the summer. Perhaps Mtn. bikers should pay a modest fee for trip use, just as horse packers do. This way, FWP authorities can better monitor backcountry use (or abuse) and only issue permits after the snowmelt runoff and heavy rains have concluded.

In addition to the Beartooths, and Tobacco Roots we have camped and hiked in the Pryor Mtns, the Crazyes, Absarokee, Big Belts, Snowcrest, E. Pioneers, Gravelly Range, CDT, MadisonRange and many others farther afield. Each range has its own unique and amazing characteristics. We have often seen wildlife during our hikes, but sadly on fewer occasions than before. Without wilderness protection, the wild animals will suffer even more as they are squeezed out of their traditional environments.

In summary, we MUST be more vigilant in managing our irreplaceable environmental jewels for future generations and present usage. Access to these wild areas must be non-motorized to reduce damage to the land and provide wildlife a better chance to survive and co-exist with humans.

Please include my comments in your Environmental Impact Statement to be posted with other outdoor wildlands advocates for maintaining and improving the management of the Custer Gallatin Forest Plan. Thank you for this opportunity to share a few experiences and comments with your office.

Sincerely,

Tom Waldorf

World Language Educator (retired)

Bozeman Public Schools.