

Guest opinion: Pryors vision — Toward roads less traveled

PAUL SNEED Montana Wilderness Association | Posted: Friday, April 30, 2004 11:00 pm

The Pryor Mountains can be of tremendous economic and recreational value to the people of Billings and other nearby communities into the future - or we can damage them beyond repair.

Imagine a place for quiet family walks, challenging hikes, mountain bike and horseback rides, abundant wildlife habitat and prime hunting opportunities; a place that has adequate motor vehicle access to spectacular viewpoints, picnic and camping areas; a place for bird watching, wildflower viewing and quiet solitude. Alternatively, imagine a place infested with too many roads, noise, noxious weeds overwhelming the unique natural vegetation, no secure habitat for wildlife and no solitude for quiet recreation.

It is time to choose what we want the Pryors to be 10 and 50 years into the future. Custer National Forest is developing a travel plan for the Beartooth District including about 120 square miles of the Pryors. They have asked for comments from the public.

Disappointing plan

The forest's travel proposal is disappointing in its lack of vision for conserving the landscapes of the Beartooth District (especially the Pryors), its inadequate protection of wildlife habitat and for its almost exclusive emphasis on motorized recreation. This is an unbalanced plan that needs to be modified before it will be acceptable to most Montanans. It includes more than 100 miles of roads and explicitly states that the goal is to emphasize motorized recreation. The plan does not mention quiet recreation, and there are no areas designated for hiking and riding. This new proposal is largely identical to the existing travel plan with just over 100 miles of legal roads (mostly the same ones), which was written in 1987.

Amazingly, some off-road vehicle enthusiasts are upset, in spite of the forest's emphasis on motorized recreation, that the forest is proposing to limit them to these designated roads. They also want to drive on the additional 100 miles of illegal user-created roads. Their proposal for the travel plan seems to be "Don't ever tell us no." With the total of more than 200 miles of legal and illegal roads, only 23 percent of the land is secure wildlife habitat (more than half a mile from a road by USFS definition) and that "secure habitat" is severely fragmented.

Damaging forests

Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth has identified unmanaged recreation, particularly off-road vehicle use, as one of the four great threats to our national forests. The damage caused by off-road vehicles is extensive and well established in published scientific literature. ORVs destroy plant life and cause soil erosion. Motorized cross-country travel causes the spread of invasive weeds, fragments valuable wildlife habitat and degrades entire ecosystems. Vehicle noise can directly impede the ability of wildlife to find prey, avoid predators and reproduce. Uncontrolled ORV use adversely affects other users of public lands including ranchers, hikers, horseback riders and hunters.

The ORV enthusiasts argue that increased access is needed for growing motorized recreational use. But the increasing demand for motorized use doesn't trump the increasing demand for nonmotorized use - or the needs of wildlife. Responsible land management doesn't accommodate all demands without limits. When demand exceeds capacity of the land, then limits and restrictions are required. The increasing motorized use is precisely why the USFS must tighten up and enforce travel restrictions - and create protected, quiet hiking and riding areas for other users.

MWA's plan

With support from other conservation groups, the Eastern Wildlands Chapter of the Montana Wilderness Association has developed a plan for the area that includes more than 50 miles of roads for motorized access, and four hiking and riding areas where quiet recreationists and wildlife can get away from the roads. In our plan 70 percent of the area is within one mile of a road. We believe this is a balanced approach that will protect a treasured landscape for all types of users and future generations.

We believe that properly managed motorized use is legitimate and have allowed for it in our proposal. However, we also believe that protection of the resource and providing opportunities for nonmotorized recreation requires designation of significant hiking and

riding areas.

We encourage people with vision to write to the Custer National Forest asking it to protect the irreplaceable natural treasures of these public lands in the Pryors and Beartooths. For more information on our analysis of the plan and our proposal, contact the Montana Wilderness Association at 256-3874 or mwaeast@wildmontana.org.

Paul Sneed, president of Eastern Wildlands Chapter, Montana Wilderness Association, lives in Billings.