

# A Citizens' "VISION" for the Pryor Mountains of Montana

developed by  
The Pryors Coalition

*A coalition consisting of, but not limited to: the Eastern Wildlands Chapter of the Montana Wilderness Association; the Yellowstone Valley Audubon Society; the Frontier Heritage Alliance; Our Montana, Inc.; the Beartooth Back Country Horsemen; and assorted unaffiliated individuals. Other interested groups are invited to join the Coalition.*

The key to understanding the proposed Pryor Coalition's "Vision" will be to picture a strategically placed network of more than 75 miles of **motorized corridors** crisscrossing the relatively small 78,000-acre part of Montana's Pryor Mountains administered by the Forest Service.

The **corridors** are designed to achieve three important objectives: 1) afford appropriate access by all visitors to nearly all of the Pryors and 2) enhance protection of a wide array of area resources through 3) creation of five **non-motorized recreation areas** where virtually none now exist.

By their definition as legal travelways, the **corridors** will provide for the needs of motorized recreation. They will offer to motor vehicle enthusiasts legal access to the most superb vistas as well as unhindered travel through the total variety of landscapes in the Pryor Mountains.

The corridors/zones will make it easier for the Forest Service to manage all resources. They will permit agency resource professionals to ply their specialties without the constant stress of attending to problems posed by illegally driven motor vehicles.

The five **non-motorized hiking and riding areas** defined by the travelways will allow for all manner of quiet pursuits as well as critically needed resource protection. The "resources" deserving of protection include not only the fauna, flora, terrain and cultural legacy of the area but also less tangible assets such as solitude and spiritual well-being. Creation of **non-motorized recreation zones** will do much to ensure fair distribution of recreational opportunities for those simply seeking areas of escape. And it will achieve the critical goal of minimizing conflict between motorized and non-motorized uses of the land.

## I. INTRODUCTION

### **Pryors Coalition: Who We Are**

We, the members of the Pryors Coalition, represent several hundred residents of south-central Montana and Northern Wyoming while the rolls of our parent organizations number in the thousands. We have united behind a pledge to preserve and protect the unique resources of the Pryor Mountains through evidence-based education of the public, the press, government officials and fellow visitors to the area.

Our moderate, civic-minded members span the spectrum of outdoor interests and of those who simply want to see natural landscapes preserved for their own sake. Among a great many other activities, we hike, ski, camp, fish, ride horses and off-highway vehicles, explore caves, observe and/or hunt wildlife, enjoy bird watching and star gazing, study native plants, view wild flowers, climb cliffs and photograph the area's beauty -- in short, we engage in and appreciate the entire gamut of public land use.

Our bedrock common denominator, however, is a deep and abiding love for the unique qualities of the Pryor Mountains and a wish to see those amenities preserved for the wider community. We believe the land and its resources come first – and our personal gratification later. To that end, we have devised what we bill as a 50-year "Vision" for the Greater Pryor Mountain Ecosystem. Its purpose is to ensure that the resources of the Pryors will be enhanced and conserved for current visitors and their descendants.

## **Pryors Coalition: Why We Care**

Barely 50 miles south of Billings and a few miles north of the Wyoming border lies a mountain range unlike any other in Montana. It is no exaggeration to apply the word “unique” to the Pryor Mountains whether one discusses geology, plant life or a multitude of other resources.

The Pryors, which are about 90 million years old, are a northwest extension of a geologic formation that is prominent in Wyoming, Utah and points south. Their rocks record an almost complete history of the area from the Precambrian (about a billion years ago) to the present Cenozoic Era. The geologist will find abundant fossils, ripple marks, mud cracks and other fragile indicators of the area’s history. Whereas other Montana mountain ranges feature towering peaks of hard granite and basalt, the main building material in the Pryors is relatively soft, easy-to-erode limestone. Precipitation generally runs in, not off, thus producing rounded peaks and a honeycombed landscape of many caves and rugged ravines and canyons. The rain shadows of nearby mountain ranges give key parts of the Pryors the driest lands in the states of Montana and Wyoming. Being arid, they are by their make-up *truly fragile*. In some areas much of the soil is cryptobiotic. This shallow biological crust is relatively impervious to moisture but becomes particularly vulnerable to erosion when crushed by a tire track. It might take hundreds of years to recover.

The Pryor Mountains represent perhaps the most ecologically diverse area of its size in Montana. The surrounding dry lands uplift through deep isolated canyons to sub-alpine forests and meadows – from whose heights the visitor can see mountain ranges, vast stretches of prairie lands, the Big Horn Basin and breathtaking vistas of exceptional quality. The Pryors contains 10 distinct ecological systems which support a variety of wildlife, including bighorn sheep, black bears and mule deer, a variety of bats and small mammals and more than 200 species of birds. They also contain truly rare plants, some found nowhere else on the planet.

The Pryor Mountains, lying in the path of the first North Americans whose southward migration populated the entire Western Hemisphere, are extraordinarily rich in cultural sites that tell of their passage. Discerning visitors will discover the camping sites, rock art, tools and trails of those first humans to look out from these heights onto untrammelled landscapes. Many limestone caves sheltered these people, the smoky soot of long-dead warming fires still covering walls and ceilings a reminder of their presence. Native Americans continue to use the area for spiritual retreats and vision quests.

The Pryors are a valuable *community* resource. Their principal value lies in an abundant storehouse of life forms, the rich cultural history of Native American users and a variety of magnificent scenes and vistas. They constitute a veritable scientific laboratory for a variety of disciplines. Because they attract such a multiplicity of users, they also represent an *economic engine* for the community. Business and civic leaders hoping to entice job-producing companies to this area can and do use the attractions of the Pryor Mountains as a life-style lure. Since nearly 90 per cent of Americans prefer to recreate on the public lands on foot or horseback, a growing army of quiet-trail visitors can contribute to survival of outdoor recreation businesses in the area. Properly managed – as anticipated by the Coalition’s “Vision” -- the flow of benefits can be self-sustaining to the profit of future generations. If, however, no policy course correction is made, sustainability will collapse and with it the radiant promise of a rich community asset.

## **II. VEHICLE USE IN THE PRYORS**

This document is focused on the 78,000-acre mostly-high-mountain zone managed by the Beartooth District of Custer National Forest of the U.S. Forest Service. Custer National Forest released the last formal travel management plan for its portion of the Pryors in 1987. That plan designated about 100 miles of official roads. All travelways not designated were to be strictly off-limits to motorized traffic. Unfortunately, the *virtual absence of law enforcement* in ensuing years created a vacuum into which off-road vehicles plunged with relative impunity. The result? Overall mileage has *more than doubled* with addition of some 100 miles of user-created, illegal roads. How do we know? The Pryors Coalition devoted five years to crafting a long-range solution, including two seasons of satellite-based GPS work by a large group of volunteers. When the GPS results are combined with the Forest Service’s own road inventory, the evidence is indisputable. Virtually all of the special qualities of the Pryors have been adversely affected and *many are disappearing under off-road tire tracks*.

This is the second attempt to revise the 1987 Beartooth District Travel Management Plan that still governs vehicle use in the Pryors. The first effort was aborted in 2004 but has started anew. As we strive for a 2007 plan, we find the situation in the Pryors approaching crisis status. Indeed, *it is no exaggeration to state that a “perfect storm” of too many vehicles and little or no law enforcement set against damaged finite resources threatens to sweep the Pryors beyond a point of no return.*

Custer National Forest has two national planning directives that carry the force of law: 1) A 1972 Presidential edict that directs agencies to develop “... policies that will ensure that the use of off-road vehicles on public lands will be controlled and directed so as to protect the resources of those lands ...”, “ 2) The Bush Administration’s own 2005 Travel Management Rule for national forests that says the agency should provide user access “... in a manner that is environmentally sustainable over the long term” and that Forest Service officials “*must ... consider effects on ... natural and cultural resources.*” That document’s summary specifically states the agency “... will preserve areas of opportunity ... for non-motorized travel and experiences.” (Emphasis added in all cases).

The Pryor Mountains, while unique in the variety of their resources, are part of the national scene and hence share many of the pressures facing other national forests. The threat posed by motorized traffic to effective management and protection of public resources is at the top of the list. This is recognized at all levels of the agency although concern is seldom matched by the necessary degree of action.

Consider the public utterances of the last two long-serving chiefs of the U.S. Forest Service. Chief Mike Dombeck (President Bill Clinton) repeatedly singled out off-road vehicles as a major threat to the integrity of the nation’s public lands. His successor, Chief Dale Bosworth (President George W. Bush) named unmanaged recreation – especially as regards off-road vehicle use – as one of the four top threats plaguing agency managers. The other three threats – fire, invasive species and habitat fragmentation – flow in great part directly from improper vehicle use. There is indisputable evidence that all four have been visited upon the Pryors by the growing network of unauthorized (i.e., illegal) roads there.

Damage caused by motorized vehicles, much of which occurs whether “on road” or “off road,” is well-documented by a large body of published scientific literature. Major casualties include destruction of plant life and soil erosion. Motorized travel along poorly planned routes causes the spread of invasive weeds, fragments valuable wildlife habitat and degrades entire ecosystems. Off-highway vehicles can disturb and be used to harass wildlife. Large mammals such as elk, big horn sheep and bears suffer the greatest harm. Vehicle noise can directly impede the ability of wildlife to find prey, avoid predators and successfully reproduce. Last, but not least, uncontrolled vehicle use adversely affects other users of public lands, including ranchers, outfitters and guides, hikers, horseback riders, bike riders, hunters and anglers.

The Pryor Coalition’s “Vision” essentially calls for a healing of the land by confining motorized recreation to a generous *network of more than 75 miles* (plus additional connecting roads on BLM-administered land) that provide access to *five enclaves* designed to restore peace, quiet and predictability to resource management, thus providing multiple benefits for the agency, taxpayers, recreationists, wildlife, cultural resources, native plants, noxious weed control and more.

### III. THE VISION: RESTORING BALANCE

#### Natural Resources of Significant Public Value

The Coalition has identified areas of special and significant resource and cultural values. We also looked for opportunities for resource restoration such as wildlife. The areas, whose boundaries are defined by the proposed corridors, naturally aggregate themselves into **five special enclaves**. The **protected resource areas** (also known as “hiking and riding areas” or “quiet areas”) have been **arbitrarily named** by the Coalition *for ease of identification*. Some of their *important characteristics are listed below*.

- Areas that can provide quality quiet recreation such as hiking and horseback riding.
- Areas that have excellent “walk-in” hunting potential (subject to more robust huntable populations of deer, elk and big horned sheep).

- Areas that could provide greater depth of wildlife habitat and escape cover. Most of the Forest Service portion of the Pryors now has *less than one-half mile* of separation from motorized traffic and is highly susceptible to disturbance and poaching.
- Areas that are relatively weed free.
- Areas that have substantial cultural resources.
- Areas of great interest to the scientific community.
- Areas that have sensitive species of plant and animal life.
- Areas that have watershed and soil erosion vulnerability.
- Areas that have a variety of important scientific and research opportunities.

## Travel Corridors

Protection of the resources described above is absolutely dependant on creation of a fair, sensible, carefully placed and enforceable network of access roads. The corridors proposed by the Pryors Coalition have been subjected to great study and are key to all the benefits that flow from the “Vision.”

Among a great many other things, these identified *corridors* will:

- Provide for motorized recreation on what have historically been the most popular routes.
- Provide excellent opportunities for loop day-trips where vehicle riders can experience the huge change in ecological systems while exploring the Vision’s road system.
- Help assure the long-term sustainability of motorized recreation in the Pryors.
- Serve the now-largely-unmet needs for legally protective public access to walk-in hunting, camping, bird watching, horseback riding and a myriad of other quiet recreation uses.
- Give the managing agency the ability to concentrate its road maintenance and law enforcement efforts where most needed.
- Facilitate administration by the Forest Service through basic signage at key locations for general management, interpretive education and fire control.

## Vision Map

One of the strengths of the Pryor Mountain Coalition’s “Vision” is its simplicity: a strategically placed, manageable network of roads that provides for abundant vehicular access while setting off five zones for resource protection and quiet recreation.

The theme of simplicity extends also to the Coalition’s *map* of the Pryors. A single map suffices to convey the “big picture:” roads identified by name and Forest Service numerical designation; depiction of the five proposed hiking and riding areas, and identification of those “place names” most recognizable to the public.

All roads proposed by the Coalition to remain open are already contained in the Forest Service’s inventory of legal roads. All are easily identified by number and by name.

## IV. THE FIVE HIKING, RIDING AND RESOURCE PROTECTION AREAS

*The Forest Service portion of the Greater Pryor Mountain Ecosystem includes the region’s high ground and features **two main blocs**, Big Pryor Mountain and East Pryor Mountain, **separated by Crooked Creek Canyon.***

*The eastern bloc contains the proposed **Punchbowl and Lost Water Canyon Hiking and Riding Areas.***

*The western uplift bloc contains **three** of the proposed protective zones: **Big Pryor North, Bear Canyon and Southwest Slope Hiking and Riding Areas.***

*When reviewing commentary on the individual hiking and riding areas, the reader should remember that recent and current abuse of the land in the Pryors by motor vehicles is layered over similar abuses that may be decades old: old abandoned uranium mines and roads, timber harvesting roads, legal and illegal roads that cross or connect them, and so on. The current alarm stems from roading pressure that is much more pervasive and therefore more damaging than ever.*

*Note also that because cultural and natural resources throughout the Pryors face varying degrees of threat, it is not always practical – or, in some cases, prudent – to list all of those at risk. Identifying even generally the placement of sensitive archaeological sites or, for example, the location of the extremely rare plant species **shoshonea pulvinata**, could prove to be a disservice to the resource. Therefore, for purposes of consistency, the reader interested in specific at-risk plants, animals or other assets is asked to approach the Forest Service for more information. The Coalition insists, however, that the threats it documents are both real and growing.*

*The following descriptions of the five hiking/quiet areas will highlight **some** of the problems specific to each but in the main, the reader may apply generic problems on the two mountains to all of them.*

## **1. Punch Bowl Area**

The Punch Bowl, located in the northeast corner of Forest Service territory, is an area rich in natural resources and beauty. It is closely associated with the Crow reservation. This area lends itself nicely to walk-in and quiet recreation. A single road now traverses the area; it can serve quite adequately as access for non-motorized pursuits such as hunting, hiking and riding. Presently, it receives light motor vehicle use.

The area has excellent habitat for elk and deer. Unfortunately the population of both are at low ebb. At one time, the Punch Bowl supported calving and winter range for a more robust elk population. A major goal is to restore numbers of deer and elk that can link up with those on the Crow Reservation. The area can also serve as habitat for mountain lions and winter dens for bears.

A single access site for posting signs would assist in law enforcement and management control. The Coalition does not object to existing road being managed seasonally for walk-in hunting and middle-of-the-day motorized access for game retrieval during dry conditions. We assume here that hunting and retrieval will be tied to the goal of establishing viable populations of elk and deer.

The Punch Bowl Area also provides habitat for Townsend's Big-eared Bat and hosts a large population of the rare plant Platte Cinquefoil (S1, G4, BLM Sensitive). Finally, it is officially designated as lynx habitat for both denning and foraging.

## **2. Lost Water Canyon Area**

For reader information, Lost Water Canyon dominates the eastern portion of the above-named hiking and riding area; Commissary Ridge is situated on the western edge.

Much of Lost Water Canyon Area has already been recognized and protected for its outstanding natural resources. This area includes a small Research Natural Area and a potential addition to the National Wilderness System. The one infringement of roads into the wilderness study area is the Forest Service 2308G series which are subject to serious erosion. They are illegal motor routes that fortunately are rarely traveled.

The general area is rich in plant life with some species that are designated as sensitive. Commissary Ridge, located on its western edge, carries current and prehistoric importance for resource and plant gathering by Native Americans. Important cultural sites have been inventoried in the area. Past clear-cutting of timber has resulted in locales that are resistant to reforestation. This has transformed significant areas into excellent elk and deer habitat. Road abandonment and species management will help to reestablish these important ungulates as well as secure the area for lynx and other species. Upper timbered slopes facing east and north are likely significant sites for bear

denning. Bear harvest from hunting indicates the average age of bears killed at about three years as opposed to five to six years in areas that receive less bear-hunting pressure.

Commissary Ridge is a high-quality and popular area for hiking and non-motorized recreation. We recommend that specifically identified roads be abandoned, including the far, or southern, end of the main road now traversing Commissary Ridge, which should terminate at an appropriate and manageable location.

Biologically, our main concern is concentrated on the southern end of current Commissary Ridge Road, overlooking the Crooked Creek drainage. Crooked Creek has been the only area in the Pryors noted to have recently hosted a peregrine falcon nest. Peregrine falcons should be using the area more consistently, and may be being driven off by noise. As a Threatened Species, peregrine falcons deserve some breathing room if they are to repopulate the Pryor Mountains. Part of the restoration should involve *conversion* of *at least* the southern part of Commissary Ridge Road to public non-motorized use.

### 3. Big Pryor North Area

Big Pryor North is a spectacular expanse encompassing much of the upper portion of Big Pryor Mountain. Wet season use of roads is causing considerable damage to soil, water and archeological resources. Some of this damage is being done during spring bear-hunting season. The upper slopes of the mountain contain numerous cultural sites, some of which are sustaining continuing damage from motorized traffic. The more protected, inaccessible north side of the mountain is under heavy forest cover and is relatively road free.

Elk populations on Big Pryor are non-existent in spite of good habitat on the top of the mountain. The area has potential for bighorn sheep introduction. Buck and doe deer ratios have been a problem for the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Lack of escape cover is a probable cause of over harvest of bucks due to largely open country and the huge road network that crisscrosses the area.

The Coalition believes that road system abuses on Big Pryor North must be brought under control by the Forest Service. We recommend that the higher elevation segments of major travelways of Miller Trail/Stockman Trail/Red Pryor Divide Road be used for motorized recreation only if it can be limited to dry road conditions. These roads cross areas with organic soils, natural springs and late spring snowdrifts. A proliferation of side-by-side road tracks is causing serious damage to cultural sites, watershed, visual resources as well as flora.

Big Pryor North provides extensive denning and foraging habitat for lynx all the way down to and in some cases across Miller Trail on the western forest boundary.

Beartooth Large-Flowered Goldenweed (S1S2, G4G5T2T3, USFS Sensitive) grows in Big Pryor North in the vicinity of Forest Service Road 2500. The travel plan should call for monitoring damage to this plant and immediate remedial steps to be taken to protect it.

### 4. Bear Canyon Area

The extensive Bear Canyon area, located on lower Big Pryor Mountain, is a network of steep, narrow drainages speckled with caves. It includes most of the Bear Creek watershed. The unique riparian ecosystem at its floor hosts a number of agency-recognized rare species, including several rare birds. Bear Canyon is thus a popular birding area because of its unusual bird life. Songbirds can be extremely vulnerable to noise, especially in shrub habitats, where noise carries farther than in forests. And between the walls of Bear Canyon, noise is especially amplified. Furthermore, Bear Canyon provides good peregrine falcon habitat. Yet the Montana Natural Heritage Program does not list a single sighting of peregrine falcon. Noise from off-highway vehicles may be keeping the peregrine falcon from inhabiting this area. Biologically, Bear Canyon is one of the most important areas on the Pryors and one easily disturbed by motorized travel.

Many existing, but often unauthorized, roads on the lower reaches of Big Pryor Mountain (both in Bear Canyon and Southwest Slope Areas) should not be opened to motorized use so as to provide protection for wildlife, watershed, cultural sites, quiet recreation and natural resource conservation. The Pryors Coalition has identified several roads that may be left open for motorized recreation. Some not opened to motorized vehicles can be made available for

hiking, riding, pack stock and other quiet pursuits. Whether left open or not, all roads needing rehabilitation, drainage and in some cases restoration, should receive it to ensure sustainability of the landscape.

## 5. Southwest Slope Area

The appropriately named Southwest Slope protection area differs from its companion areas mainly in the number and depth of the spectacular ravines that cut paths up to the high country. It is also an extremely arid area, featuring widespread and fragile biological soil crusts that are extremely susceptible to erosion by tire track. In many cases, these crusts are the only agent holding the soil together after past eras of overgrazing. The ever-widening network of unauthorized trails remains a threat to its cryptobiotic soils.

Wildlife in the Southwest Slope area suffer similar overall pressures. The brushy ravines can provide protective habitat for deer drifting up from the lowlands if the animals are not stressed by a constant human presence. Hunters understand that motorized traffic through open country of the Pryors results in a poor hunting experience. There are motorized trails up every one of the major canyon ridges in the Southwest Slope Area, putting noisy vehicles and humans above the animals no matter where they attempt to hide. Most of the roads leading up the canyon ridges of the Southwest Slope are also redundant. The Coalition feels a single travelway, preferably on the western fringe, is more than adequate.

As to specific trouble areas, the geology, topography and soil science related to the steeper portions of Forest Service roads 2496 (Miller Trail) and 2850 (Stockman Trail) combine to create a soil erosion and water quality problem. The soil underlying these roads easily ruts and erodes. When it is carrying water, Ingraham Creek runs down onto Stockman Trail and alongside it for a quarter- to a half-mile, picking up sedimentation from the erosion and washing it downstream. The Forest Service should study this and perform corrective maintenance before marking the road open.

The notoriously sensitive greater sage grouse (USFS Sensitive, BLM Sensitive), which many states are fighting to keep off the Endangered Species List, should inhabit the area. It does not. The sage thrasher (S3B, G5, BLM Sensitive), a rare bird in dwindling numbers, does manage to survive in the area. The Forest service can make room for these animals by eliminating redundant roads in the area.

## V. CONCLUSION/SUMMARY

The Pryors Coalition “Vision” asserts that clearly designated, mapped and widely publicized quiet recreation areas and motorized corridors will be a significant economic and lifestyle asset to surrounding communities and will enhance the region’s quality of life.

It further holds that the resulting resource protection and recreational opportunities – not to mention the economic engine fueled by these developments -- will be sustainable into future generations.

Beneficiaries of the “Vision” will extend throughout society – from the managing agency and taxpayer to scientists and nature lovers to casual or serious visitors, no matter whether they choose to explore on foot or by vehicle.

One mark of the truly advanced society is the ability of its citizens not only to take the long view in public policy but to act upon it. An opportunity to do exactly that now presents itself with the imminent adoption by the Forest Service of a critical Pryor Mountain travel management plan.

Most area residents – including those in local chambers of commerce and leadership positions – now comfortably take for granted the visionary and practical success of the magnificent nearby Absaroka-Beartooth Wilderness Area. The nearly one-million-acre preserve protects ecosystems and their inhabitants and stands out as a beacon to our fellow Americans about what is best in Montana.

The Pryor Mountains are far smaller – but securing their well-being presents parallel opportunities and rewards. Linking as they do to extensive south-ranging “non-Montana” mountains, they harbor incredibly rich and diverse

life forms, geology and history. Their protection is no less important – or rewarding – than that of their more “traditional” counterparts in the Absaroka-Beartooths and elsewhere.

**Adoption of the Pryors Coalition “Vision” would represent a win-win-win position for all persons / organizations / entities with an interest in the area. A partial but important list would include:**

\*\* The Forest Service would benefit in multiple ways. With a lessening of the preoccupation with vehicle-related problems, precious human and financial resources could be transferred to areas now neglected. The corridor concept would lend itself to ease of administration and heightened law and order. Management focus would become more universal; time, attention and money would be shifted to serving a wider array of user groups. Agency professionals would spend more time on their specialties with the nagging issues of vehicles largely under control.

\*\* The taxpayer would benefit from any efficiencies resulting from the “Vision.” Agency budgets are always tight. Any savings would be welcome.

\*\* Law and order would become a major beneficiary. Unregulated use is at the base of most the problems in the Pryors. In a country whose citizens prize the rule of law, there is no place for the habitual scofflaw. A major feature of the “Vision” is its insistence that rules be established and tightly enforced. A precisely defined and yet transparent road system in the Pryors would approach the level of self-enforcement. Fewer traffic “pressure points,” more comprehensive signing positions and peer pressure would complement gentle patrolling by the Forest Service to drive the scofflaw out of the Pryors. [The Coalition recommends employment of a corresponding cadre of volunteers – chosen by the agency from non-motor and motor vehicle enthusiasts who have shown in speech and deed that they value the health of Pryors above their own personal concerns.]

\*\* Recreation would at last be enhanced for the vast majority of visitors to the Pryors. Creation of distinct non-motorized recreation zones would mean “something for everyone.” The peace and quiet that used to be the main attraction in the Pryors would be partially restored; the growing demand by individuals and families for quiet outings would be served. Resources previously devoted to mitigating damages caused by the few could be devoted to improving the outdoor experience for everyone.

\*\* Motorized recreation would – contrary perhaps to the view of many current users – also be served. If the present trend of resource destruction continues, *everyone* who uses the Pryors will eventually lose. Corridors would establish predictability for motorized use. They would guarantee that the children and grandchildren of today’s users will be privileged to see the same magnificent vistas and motor along exactly the same trails as did their parents and grandparents.

\*\* Wildlife habitat would be immeasurably enhanced. Indeed, wildlife would be the single largest beneficiary (other than the land in general). The Forest Service defines “secure wildlife habitat” as any terrain located more than a half-mile from a road. Using this definition, the Pryors Coalition estimates that barely 23 per cent of the Pryors overall offer “secure” habitat for wildlife. Of course, where one encounters illegal spiderweb roads, the percentage presumably drops to zero or near-zero. Large mammals are most affected by these numbers but the pressures on wildlife affect every species.

\*\* Vegetation would be given a chance to recover in high-use areas. However, the greatest benefit of regulated vehicle traffic would be to slow down – and perhaps help reverse – the spread of noxious weeds. The bane of open land everywhere in the West, noxious weeds are spreading at an alarming rate. The principal method of proliferation is by vehicle. Seeds are carried in the mud of tires; plant parts are transported on bumpers and running boards. A single vehicle can crisscross its way to the top of a mountain with its pernicious cargo without the driver being aware of its existence. With the Vision’s corridor system, the spread of seeds to virgin areas would be drastically reduced.

\*\* Fire management would likewise be enhanced in several ways. Not only would the strengthening of the road system in the Pryors contribute to the agency’s ability to fight fires but it would do much to prevent fires in the first place. If indeed the 2002 “Red Waffle” fire – the most destructive in recent memory – was “human-caused” as alleged by the Forest Service, the likely culprit was a vehicle. More specifically, as there were several ATVs in the

area where the blaze began, one can suspect a stray spark from a single machine. If so, it greatly strengthens the case for creation of non-motorized recreation zones and the confinement of most vehicles to standard roadways.

\*\* Heritage resources would finally get the protection they deserve. The Pryor Mountains, like the nearby Weatherman's Draw, have hosted Native American travelers for thousands of years. Many of the cultural sites in the Pryors are known; many have yet to be discovered. Hiking and riding trails in the proposed non-motorized recreation areas could be routed in such a way as to avoid sensitive areas. Placing the substantial acreage of the five zones off-limits to motorized vehicles would both protect the cultural sites and greatly enhance the professionalism of the agency in this critical subject area.

**The Pryor Mountains are a truly unique community asset. However, expanding motorized use in an area of shrinking resources threatens to destroy what nature has taken eons to create. A serious policy change is urgently needed. The Pryors Coalition has formulated a sensible proposal based on scientific evidence designed to solve current problems and to anticipate future ones. Its goal is to provide diverse recreational opportunities for the growing and equally diverse population of the region – and to protect the resources of this spectacular landscape. We ask that the public become involved in the crusade to reclaim what rightfully belongs to all of us.**

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