

# *On the Path*

## *Maintaining Our Wilderness Character*

By Keith Hammer

July 15, 2010, Lakeshore Country Journal

I was blessed to work maintaining Forest Service trails during my college summers in what is now the Great Bear Wilderness. I remember once sitting atop the Middle Fork/South Fork Flathead River divide at the head end of Long Creek and feeling utterly insignificant in all the beauty that surrounded me.

It was a true wilderness moment when one's ego vanishes completely and neither time nor place is divided into parts small enough to be understood by the mind. Indeed it is an opening of the heart that is required to take it all in. I am forever thankful for that experience, thankful the area is now protected as Congressionally designated Wilderness so others may have similar experiences, and thankful to the many citizens that convinced Congress to act wisely.

There are many public roadless lands deserving of protection as Wilderness. Some of them are recommended for Wilderness designation by the Forest Service. The Flathead Forest Plan, for example, recommends Wilderness designation for a double-sized Jewel Basin along the Swan Crest, as well as areas adjacent to the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Forest Service regulations require it protect these areas' wilderness attributes and potential until Congress decides their fate.

Maintaining the physical character of wilderness is perhaps more easily described and understood than protecting the psychological attributes of wilderness. It's clear that roads, the removal of commodities like timber, and motorized vehicles are not allowed in Wilderness - though the Forest Service often fails in the latter by allowing ATV and snowmobile use to become engrained in areas recommended instead for Wilderness. Removing these motorized vehicles then proves a difficult obstacle in securing Congressional designation of these areas as Wilderness.

Describing and maintaining the psychological character of wilderness is somewhat more elusive. As Roger Kaye writes, "This is the challenge of wilderness management, preserving what is unseen and unmeasurable . . . wilderness character, like personal character, is much more than a physical condition. It is an unseen presence capable of refocusing our perception of nature and our relationship to it . . . It emerges from the circumstances we impose upon ourselves. It emerges from the decisions we make that test our commitment to our ideals."

TinaMarie Ekker expands on the idea of restraint and reflection: "All cultures across history set places apart from the routines and common behaviors of daily life. The purpose of these special places is to reorient our focus and perceptions in a setting that is conducive to reflection. We approach such places differently than we do the usual places in our daily lives, and it is the restraint in this interaction that makes them special, enabling us to experience the unique values these places provide in nurturing the human spirit. Examples include shrines, memorials, and ceremonial sites. Wilderness also is such a place."

It is easy to destroy wilderness character. We can disrupt an area's opportunities for thoughtful reflection through unnecessary noise, unnecessary haste, and other actions that tend to dominate the landscape. We treat wilderness as a commodity when we become too goal-oriented, either in hurrying to "bag the next peak" or to accomplish some arbitrary trail mileage. Indeed, our egos and minds can all too easily reduce wilderness character in the same way elevation profile graphs found in many hiking guides reduce a 3-D mountain hike into 2-D "elevation over distance."

Reverence is key to maintaining wilderness character, both in the outdoors and in ourselves. It is a conscious decision to not carry the habits of our daily lives into the backcountry with us, to leave our ATVs, bicycles and egos behind, and to meet the physical challenges without haste or the need to "conquer" them. It is a heart felt effort to preserve for ourselves and others the sanctity of increasingly rare places for soulful contemplation.

It is for these and other reasons that federal regulations to not allow competitive events in Wilderness areas. Once established, foot races, not just ATVs and snowmobiles, make it difficult for Congress to designate Wilderness without making exception for these uses to continue in spite of their non-conformance with the maintenance of wilderness character required by the Wilderness Act.

Howard Zahniser, son of a minister and primary author of the 1964 Wilderness Act put it this way: "We deeply need the humility to know ourselves as the dependent members of a great community of life, and this can indeed be one of the spiritual benefits of a wilderness experience...to know the wilderness is to know a profound humility . . . to sense dependence and interdependence, indebtedness and responsibility."

The need for wilderness and humility has increased since 1964 and we could benefit from more of both along the Swan Crest.

*Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column appears regularly in this paper and is archived at [www.swanrange.org](http://www.swanrange.org). Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or [keith@swanview.org](mailto:keith@swanview.org).*

PHOTO ON NEXT PAGE



Broken Leg Mountain in the Greater Jewel Basin Recommended Wilderness. Keith Hammer Photo.