

Introduction for the book COLORADO: Our Wilderness Future by T. A. Barron

Mountain water whispers, splashing over shining stones, gurgling and bubbling through this alpine meadow like a trail of liquid sky. Wind rises at my back, bearing the fragrance of eagle's nest and ragged canyon, sweet sage and snowy peak. Colorado wilderness surrounds me, and I take a deep breath of cold, crystalline air.

I sit upon an ancient slab of rock, wet from the misty spray of the stream, and study the endlessly interwoven patterns of lichen on its face. I wonder what this rock has witnessed over the stretch of geologic time: ages when the earth, still young and savage, surged skyward and split apart, collapsed, cooled, sagged to support an inland ocean, rose again as the waters receded, flamed and froze, buckled and folded, cracked and compressed, trembled with the footsteps of dinosaurs, received the dying dinosaurs' bones, fought against advancing glaciers, saw them melt into turquoise lakes, hardened into a ridge whose melting snows spawned this coursing stream that has quenched the Ute huntsman's thirst and fed the flowers of 10,000 Julys.

Then, in the wet soil by the stream, I spot a single paw print. Might it be a mountain lion?

Along with many other Coloradans, I feel lucky to have experienced a few moments like this in the still-wild places portrayed in this magnificent book by John Fielder. I hope that many more people will also have the opportunity to experience these places—but that is by no means a certainty. A fierce battle is being fought over some of Colorado's most important wild areas, a battle that will decide whether they are to be ultimately opened for development or protected, intact, for all time.

The battle is over whether these lands, the 20 remarkable places depicted in John Fielder's unforgettable photographs, will be designated as wilderness areas under the National Wilderness Preservation System. Together they comprise 841,280 acres, little more than 1 percent of Colorado's total land area. But their relatively small size does not mean that the controversy surrounding them is also small. It is large, it is heated and it is likely to be resolved one way or another in the near future.

To understand the Colorado wilderness battle, we must know something about the lands that are at stake—and at risk. We must understand what wilderness is and what the Congress meant it to be when it created the National Wilderness Preservation System just over 25 years ago. And we must know equally well what wilderness is not: myths about wilderness abound, especially regarding its role in our state's economy.

What is a designated wilderness area?

After decades of effort by concerned citizens from around the country, the Wilderness Act of 1964 was passed by the United States Congress and signed into law. It described wilderness as an area "where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." The Wilderness Act should be seen as the continuation of a great American tradition: conserving some of our most precious and fragile wild areas. This tradition reaches

back to the creation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872—the first national park to be established anywhere in the world. Despite the existence of national parks, however, it soon became clear that our nation’s wild and roadless areas were a rapidly vanishing species, succumbing to the relentless pressures of expanding cities, improved transportation and resource development. Something more was needed, and that something was called designated wilderness.

The Wilderness Act, designed to protect at least a fragment of primeval America for future generations, originally designated 9.1 million acres of federal land as wilderness, including 493,000 acres in Colorado. During the next 15 years, additional acreage was added to the Colorado system. By 1980, the year of Colorado’s most recent wilderness legislation, our wilderness lands totaled 2.7 million acres, or 4 percent of the state.

What are the most common myths about wilderness?

Myth Number One: We already have vast amounts of wilderness in Colorado and don’t need any more. With only 4 percent of Colorado’s lands designated as wilderness, this claim is difficult to support. Colorado has 96 percent of its land, and 90 percent of its federal land, in non-wilderness categories. We rank only seventh out of the 11 western states in terms of the acreage currently protected, even though Colorado holds some of the West’s most spectacular wild areas. The 20 areas portrayed by John Fielder’s photographs in this book would add only an additional 1.3 percent to the state’s wilderness total. Is 5 percent of our land too much to set aside for future generations?

Myth Number Two: Wilderness designation means that lands will be “locked up,” making them unavailable for people to use. On the contrary, people in wilderness areas can hunt, fish, hike, float, canoe, travel on horseback, camp, picnic, cross-country ski, graze livestock and generally do anything else that does not destroy the wilderness character of the land. In order to preserve the unique qualities of wilderness areas, people are not allowed to use motorized equipment, build dams, harvest timber, dig new mines or otherwise alter the original landscape. Wilderness is preserved not only for ourselves; it guarantees that our sons and daughters and their sons and daughters will also be able to know these places. In addition to allowing recreational pursuits, scientific research and protection of clean sources of water, wilderness areas play an important role in our state’s economy. They are an irreplaceable part of our heritage, and protecting them ensures they will be available for us all to use and enjoy.

Myth Number Three: Wilderness costs Colorado jobs and income. As a businessman, I have little patience with this particular myth, since the facts are clearly otherwise. Recreation and tourism is Colorado’s second largest industry, representing \$5.6 billion in annual revenues, more than 100,000 direct jobs and many additional, indirect jobs. During the summer of 1989, Colorado hosted 18.5 million visitors who spent \$3.5 billion—more than \$50 per person per day during the average five-day stay. Of this total, hunting and fishing contributed more than \$1.2 billion to the state’s economy. Almost one million fishing licenses and 500,000 hunting licenses are sold annually in Colorado, leading to nearly \$600 million in spending by hunters and another \$687 million by fishermen. Fishermen alone are responsible for generating more than 12,000 jobs in Colorado. Each year two million people visit Colorado’s wilderness areas, which is more than 15 percent of total visitations nationally.

These economic facts are especially important in the current debate over the 20 areas highlighted by this book, because so many of the proposed wilderness areas

contain important wildlife habitat and prime hunting, fishing and recreation opportunities. Whether or not a particular species may be hunted, protecting its habitat is important for its survival in Colorado. For example, Buffalo Peaks is one of the most productive bighorn sheep areas in the state, providing the only area in Colorado with all the seasonal ranges for a bighorn herd. Fossil Ridge hosts an estimated 800 to 1,200 elk every year for migration and calving. In the Piedra, there are black bear, mountain lion, deer, elk, and even river otter, a rare species in Colorado. The Sangre de Cristo Range supports more than 20 major species, including elk, bighorn sheep, black bear, cougar, and peregrine falcon. Roubideau is rich in native cutthroat trout, beaver, black bear, deer and golden eagle.

During my years as president of a publicly traded venture capital firm, I learned that a healthy economy and a healthy environment go hand in hand. This principle is especially true of Colorado's remaining wilderness areas, because these lands represent a key competitive advantage for our state. If we harm them, we damage our economic base for the future. If we protect them, we invest in the future.

In addition to creating jobs and bringing revenues from tourism, recreation, hunting and fishing, wilderness means economic value for Colorado because of its role in our state's tradition. We might well call wilderness areas our "scenic ambassadors." No one doubts that most of the visitors to Colorado—visitors who spent \$5.6 billion in 1989—are drawn here by Colorado's distinctive image of pristine mountains, lush alpine meadows and sparkling streams. Similarly, people who bring their families and businesses to this state are attracted by our remarkable heritage of natural areas. The message is clear: if we are to continue to market Colorado successfully in the future, we must preserve some of our finest unspoiled lands.

The value of wilderness cannot be expressed in purely financial terms—much like the value of good health or friends or a strong family. Our willingness to set aside some of our most remarkable places says something about the kind of people we are. But wilderness can also be a significant source of long-term economic strength, if only we are farsighted enough to protect it.

Colorado's magnificent wealth of wilderness is, in business terms, an important part of our capital base. To protect these natural assets is not folly, it is prudent. Our economy's long-term strength depends on these areas remaining intact. To allow them to be developed for some potential short-term gain is analogous to devouring our capital base—and robbing the future.

What lands are being proposed for wilderness, and why are they important?

The 20 areas featured in this book include all but one of the places named in the three Colorado wilderness proposals made recently by members of our congressional delegation. Together they amount to 841,280 acres, using the acreages proposed by Senator Tim Wirth for 18 of the areas, plus the acreages proposed by Representative Ben Nighthorse Campbell for Roubideau and Tabeguache.

A full 252,080 acres, comprising nearly one-third of the lands in question, is included in the proposed Sangre de Cristo wilderness area. This is a land of dramatic contrasts, where towering 14,000-foot peaks rise sharply from the floor of the San Luis Valley, home to some of Colorado's oldest families, where the Great Sand Dunes are neighbors to snow-fed sparkling streams. Yet another special attribute of the Sangre de

Cristo is its proximity to the urban areas of the southern Front Range, providing valuable recreational access to the people of this region.

In addition to the Sangre de Cristo, the 20 proposed wilderness areas include others near the cities of the Front Range. Greenhorn Mountain and Spanish Peaks are also in the southern part of the state. Williams Fork (near the Eisenhower Tunnel), Saint Louis and Vasquez peaks (not far from Berthoud Pass) and Buffalo Peaks (close to South Park) are readily accessible to the bulk of Colorado's population. The American Flats area and the Williams Fork area both provide unusual opportunities for access by the elderly and the physically disabled, making them valuable additions to Colorado's wilderness system.

Approximately 131,000 acres of this total are proposed additions—lands adjacent to existing wilderness areas. They are integral pieces of the wilderness ecosystems that were not included in the original designations. These areas would help to complete each wilderness unit in terms of wildlife habitat, biological diversity and aesthetic integrity. They include Davis Peak, Lost Creek addition, Oh! Be Joyful, South San Juan additions, Spruce Creek, Weminuche additions, Wheeler Geologic Gulch, Larson Creek and American Flats.

Another group of proposed areas would add significant lower-elevation forests to the wilderness system in Colorado. Forests of this type are now largely absent from our wilderness lands. The Piedra, Service Creek, Buffalo Peaks, Roubideau and Tabeguache areas contain pristine forests and streams under 10,000 feet in elevation. Heavily forested canyons like Roubideau and Tabeguache are very important to the ecological integrity of their regions, and are increasingly rare in Colorado.

Each of the proposed areas represents a significant contribution to our wilderness heritage. Cannibal Plateau (named in honor of Alfred Packer, its most famous visitor) comprises the largest continuous expanse of tundra in the lower 48 states. Oh! Be Joyful is so spectacular that the residents of nearby Crested Butte have, in the words of Representative Campbell, "*demand*ed that it be included" in any wilderness legislation, despite the loss of use of their motorized vehicles that would result. Service Creek, south of Rabbit Ears Pass, and Piedra, in the San Juan Mountains, hold some of the last virgin spruce and fir forests left in Colorado.

The clock is ticking for all of these areas, as development pressure intensifies. The Forest Service estimates that in the Sangre de Cristo area alone, at least 20,000 acres have lost their wilderness qualities during the past few years as the wilderness debate has dragged on.

How do the three Colorado wilderness proposals differ from one another?

There are major differences among the three wilderness proposals made during the past year by members of Colorado's congressional delegation. Senator Wirth, Senator Bill Armstrong and Representative Campbell have each offered proposals with divergent philosophies, acreage amounts and attitudes toward wilderness water.

Senator Wirth's bill seeks to protect 751,260 acres, including 252,080 acres in the Sangre de Cristo area, but excluding the 60,000-acre Piedra, which remains in wilderness study status. His underlying philosophy is that wilderness is important for Colorado's economic health and quality of life, now and in the future. His bill takes into careful consideration the boundaries of affected ecosystems in each region. The Wirth bill would give wilderness areas a federal water right that would be adjudicated in

Colorado water court under Colorado law, guaranteeing them a sufficient quantity of water to preserve wilderness values.

By contrast, Senator Armstrong's bill would protect 471,875 acres, including 195,100 acres in the Sangre de Cristo area. His underlying philosophy is that traditional forms of economic development always take precedence, regardless of their potentially damaging effects on the long-term economic health and environmental quality of a particular region. His bill would prohibit a federal water right and would leave no guarantee that wilderness areas would be able to retain enough water to protect their wilderness qualities. The Armstrong bill would require the federal government to ask the Colorado Water Conservation Board, a state water development agency, to file for a minimum streamflow under Colorado water law.

Representative Campbell's proposal includes 641,410 acres of wilderness, which includes Roubideau and Tabeguache, two areas not mentioned in the Wirth bill but excludes the 41,500-acre Piedra which remains in wilderness study status. His proposal, like Senator Wirth's, would provide a federal water right to wilderness, although with a much lower quantification standard, preserving only enough water so that the primary purpose of wilderness would not be entirely defeated. This water right, like Senator Wirth's, would be adjudicated in Colorado water court.

We in Colorado are blessed with an extraordinary array of wilderness lands. The question before us now is whether we have the wisdom to keep some of them, for ourselves and for the generations that follow. Whether or not we are fortunate enough to visit all of the places featured in this book, we can always benefit from the peace of mind that comes from knowing that they are there. If these lands can be protected, unspoiled and intact, it will lift our spirits just to know that we can explore them any time we choose.

Wilderness provides Coloradans with the means to make a living as well as the chance to have a life worth living. The Greek word *ecos* is the root of both of our words *economy* and *ecology*, reminding us that keeping our economy in business over the long term means keeping our environment healthy. The bottom line is this: the opposite of conservation is destruction, the opposite of preservation is waste.

I, for one, hope that my grandchildren will have the same opportunity that I have had to sit on a rock by an alpine stream, spy a paw print in the wet earth and wonder...might it be a mountain lion?