

The Roadless Realms of My Heart

By T.A. Barron
The Los Angeles Times
March 20, 2006

Last summer in Colorado, I asked my ten-year-old son, Ross, where we should hike that morning. Should we take the old road up the ridge, climbing to alpine meadows that overlook the Maroon Bells Wilderness? Or should we take “the road less traveled by,” a rutted track leading into a forest of mossy spruce?

He glanced up at the blindingly blue sky for a moment, considering. Then he turned to me and declared: “I have a better idea. Let’s go where there’s no road at all.”

No road at all. Such a powerful phrase! Those words evoke an endless, open, free-spirited place that exists not just on the land, but in our hearts.

Despite all the land-eating sprawl, oil and gas development, and population growth we see around us, America still has a bounty of unprotected roadless areas, totaling almost sixty million acres. That amounts to one acre for every five people in this country. It is a precious gift, that open land, both for ourselves and for future generations. The great question we face today is whether we will keep it—or squander it.

Starting almost three decades ago, the U.S. Forest Service began a process to determine the fate of those sixty million acres. Unlike the majority of our national forests, which are already open for industrial uses, these lands lacked any roads. But they also lacked any long-term protection as designated wilderness areas. They were the last of America’s untouched, unplanned, unzoned real estate. And the time to decide their fate had finally arrived.

What ensued was a remarkable exercise in democracy. Spanning more than 20 years, the process included official review and broad citizen participation. More Americans took part in this process than in any other federal rulemaking in history: The Forest Service held more than 600 public meetings across the country and received a record-breaking 1.7 million official comments. This totaled five times more comments than our nation had ever witnessed in the development of any other federal rule. More than 95 percent of these comments supported the strongest possible protection of our nation’s remaining roadless lands.

The result? The Roadless Area Conservation Rule was issued in 2001. It firmly protected the sixty million acres in question. But take note: This amounts to only 30 percent of our national forests, leaving most of America’s forests open for timbering, extractive industries, and energy development. No one could reasonably claim that this wide-open public process had produced anything but a thoughtful result that balanced energy needs, economics, water quality, health, and conservation.

In the officially designated Roadless Areas, swaths of forests would be left undeveloped, so that they could produce clean air as well as clean water for millions of Americans. In addition, recreational opportunities—and the many businesses who depend on them—could thrive. Hiking, camping, canoeing, birding, stargazing ... the list is endless. Just as the tranquility and solitude of these places is endless.

Enter the current Bush administration. On May 13, 2005, the administration announced that it would summarily repeal the Roadless Areas Conservation Rule. Why? The official reason was to give control to state and local authorities (even though these lands belong to all Americans.) The real reason, however, was to encourage more aggressive timbering, oil and gas drilling, and mining. All those years of democratic debate, hearings, and public comments went right out the window—and into the ever-growing scrap heap of Bush administration efforts to undermine our nation's environmental laws and natural heritage.

The new Bush rule eliminates the Roadless Area Conservation Rule. Instead, the new rule invites states to file petitions describing their own management plans, which opens the door to development of these areas. And if the statewide plans turn out to be too favorable to conservation, the Forest Service isn't obligated to approve the petitions. Why not? Because the Bush administration also gutted the forest planning rules in a blatant effort to make the agency less accountable to citizen concerns.

Even so, the people of this country have pushed back with remarkable force. More than 250,000 people have signed a citizens' petition to restore the 2001 Roadless Rule. In California, Oregon, Washington, New Mexico, Maine, and Montana, a group of state leaders are legally challenging the administration's short-sighted policy.

Outrage at the Bush reversal is steadily growing. Many people cherish their roadless places and want to protect them. Just as important, they understand something that Bush and his allies do not: These lands belong to the *entire* population of America, not just those who happen to live in the state where the public land is found. Such places are the heritage of us all—including children as young as my son, and yes, children yet unborn.

And the opposition to eliminating federal protection isn't just energetic. It's also widespread, bringing together many diverse slices of the American political pie. In the state of Washington alone, Gov. Gregoire's recent news conference on roadless areas included the chairman of the Northwest Intertribal Fish Commission, the head of the Washington Association of Churches, the CEO of Recreation Equipment Inc. and the president of the Washington Wildlife Federation. When elected leaders, native peoples, religious groups, business interests and wildlife advocates all join forces, can even an entrenched administration long resist?

I doubt it. Too many Americans are now aware of this shameful raid on our shared natural heritage. And more people every day understand the plight of those majestic trees whose true value greatly exceeds what can be measured in board feet. Trees who, like

our sons and daughters and dearest friends, have names of their own—ancient cedar, graceful willow, pine of the dancing boughs, sturdy fir, elegant redwood.

Impatient to start our hike that morning, Ross tugged my arm and started off. We trekked for a while on an old dirt road, then turned onto a winding deer trail. After a few hundred paces, we veered off the path, following the gaps between the stately spruce trees—and following the winds of our own whimsy.

After exploring the dark, mossy groves for some time, we came to a sunlit knoll. A fallen spruce, toppled by recent storms, left a wide opening. Upward we gazed into the boundless blue, savoring the limitless reach of the sky. The forest. The soul.

Now, recalling that moment, I feel strangely hopeful for our forests. Not because of our current leadership, mind you. But because there is, in most of us, a yearning to follow a ten-year-old into terrain where there are no roads at all. There is also a yearning to know, even if we cannot go there ourselves, that such untrammelled places still exist. And above all, there is a yearning to cherish forever the roadless realms of our hearts.

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