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Comments:

Custer-Gallatin National Forest Plan Comments:

I have lived near and recreated in the Custer-Gallatin National Forest for many decades, and I strongly support Alternative D of the CGNF Plan.

We are at a crucial time in the history of humankind and our planet, and the decisions we make now concerning how we use our public and private lands will affect generations to come. We can no longer view land-use issues in a vacuum and ignore the larger threats we are facing. In a recent Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services Report, scientists around the world warned of the coming mass extinctions of animal and plant species due in large part to land use changes, habitat loss, climate change, and invasive species. They note that 3/4 of the land-based environment has been significantly altered by human actions, which is leading to a massive loss of biodiversity that directly threatens human existence.

Scientists have been warning for years that climate change will lead to collapsing ecosystems and a catastrophic loss of biodiversity worldwide. In the western US, scientists have long been documenting the detrimental effects of habitat loss, increasing growth and development, unsustainable resource extraction, and ever-growing recreational pressures. In Montana, climate change has led to shrinking alpine habitats, increasing wildlife diseases, beetle-killed trees, weeds, wildfires, and multiple other stresses on wildlife and plants. Housing developments and roads have burgeoned along the edges of our forests, fragmenting important wildlife habitat. Locally, these threats are directly affecting grizzlies, wolverines, lynx, pikas, moose, whitebark pine, and many other species. When we are making decisions about how we use our lands here in the CGNF (including the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem-the American Serengeti-one of the largest intact temperate ecosystems in the world), we should pay attention to the scientists. The best way to counteract these human-caused changes is to increase designated wilderness areas to provide a reservoir for biodiversity and to act as a buffer zone where stressed wildlife and vegetation have a better chance of surviving our detrimental actions.

I and my family have been hiking, camping, backpacking, biking, hunting, fishing, snowmobiling, and ATVing, etc. in the CGNF for decades, but we do so with the understanding that not everywhere is appropriate for all uses. I have friends and family who are avid mountain bikers, but they understand the need to protect wild roadless areas from motorized/mechanized travel. I think it is a small but vocal minority of mountain bikers who are demanding access into wild areas such as the Porcupine Buffalo Horn area and other areas in the CGNF that are crucial wildlife habitats for many species, including a number of Species of Concern. The Hyalite Porcupine Buffalo Horn Wilderness Study Area should have the full protection of wilderness designation. It is a Wilderness Study Area because it was deemed worthy of wilderness designation.

Mountain biking is a sport that requires concentration, skill, and speed, but not attention to surroundings other than the ground beneath the tires. That speed and concentration means that mountain bikers often don't notice the wildlife they're biking through. Speed is the number one problem with allowing mountain bikes in the wild backcountry of our forests. A fast-moving mountain biker will not have the opportunity to avoid or de-escalate a wildlife encounter in the way a slow-moving hiker might. A mountain bike barreling down a mountainside trail will be perceived as a threat by wildlife, and the animals will either be forced to retreat further into the rapidly

shrinking non motorized/mechanized areas, or they will be forced to attack to protect themselves or their offspring. Speed can also trigger a predatory response by grizzlies or mountain lions. We are always told not to run from a lion or bear during an encounter, and in their eyes a fast-moving mountain bike will appear to be running. (A mountain biker in Montana was recently killed by a grizzly, and a mountain biker in Washington was recently killed by a mountain lion. Bear attack expert Dr. Stephen Herrero says mountain biker/bear encounters are more likely to result in injury or death. Grizzly expert Dr. Christopher Servheen says that mountain bikes are a grave threat to grizzlies and black bears.) Moose are notoriously cantankerous and aren't likely to take kindly to a bike speeding up on them. Animals tend to move a little ways off the trail for a slow-moving hiker, but much further off the trail (and sometimes completely out of the area) for a faster-moving bike or ATV. Speed also gets people more quickly into backcountry areas, increasing usage in remote areas and critical wildlife habitat. That "more miles more quickly" mode of travel also means bikes are likely to spread weeds into the backcountry at a rate somewhere between ATVs (very rapidly) and hikers (slowly). No matter how much we talk about weed management, I have never seen an area that has been logged, roaded or has had ATV usage that doesn't have a weed problem.

I have ridden ATVs and snowmobiles on forest service roads many times, but I believe they do not belong in the backcountry. The speed, noise, weeds, trash, and ease of access leading to overuse in critical wildlife habitats are all documented problems in areas with ATV use. Anyone who spends much time in our national forests can see the difference between wilderness areas and areas accessed by ORVs. ATVs and mountain bikers should not be rewarded for busting illegal roads and trails into the backcountry. All such roads and trails should be closed. There are plenty of trails as well as hundreds of miles of forest service/logging roads that are open to mountain bikers, ATVs and Snowmobilers. Many of those forest service/logging roads are rough roads that get very little car usage, which makes them ideal for ATVs and mountain bikes. Most hikers, backpackers and horse riders won't use areas with bikes and ORVs, so they become single-use areas and they lose their traditional land usages. With all the threats our forestlands are facing right now, we don't need to add to it by encouraging more industrial recreation in the wildest, most remote parts of our forests. And these recreational demands are just going to keep growing. If you provide easy access, they will come. And come. And come. We all want something from our forestlands. Loggers want logs, miners want minerals, drillers and frackers want oil and gas, ranchers want grazing, and, increasingly, more and more people want more and more recreational opportunities. The only entity left out of this battle for the forest is the forest itself. We live in one of the largest intact temperate ecosystems in the world, with all the animals that existed here in the time of Lewis and Clark, which makes this place truly unique. If anywhere is worth protecting, the Absaroka Beartooth, Gallatin Range, Crazy Mountains, Bangtail and Bridger Mountains are. These areas act as crucial corridors for grizzlies, wolverines, and other animals, and they shouldn't be further fragmented. Now is the time to put limits on where motorized and mechanized vehicles can travel off road. The best and most lasting way to do that is with wilderness designation.

When we talk about designating wilderness, we aren't talking about increasing wilderness, we are talking about not destroying the last remnants of wilderness that are still in existence on our continent. There are many maps that show the loss of wildlands over time, and they are shocking. The idea of designated wilderness is not about having a place where backpackers and hikers can commune with nature. Wilderness is essentially an ecosystem where human wants and desires (whether personal, political or commercial) take a back seat to the habitat needs of the plants and animals that evolved together over millions of years. Ironically, this ecocentric point of view benefits us greatly by maintaining biodiversity, providing clean air and water, and keeping the ecosystems we all depend on healthy and functioning.

Indigenous people should have a significant say in the management of lands (such as the Crazy Mountains) and animals (such as the grizzly) that have been important to their cultures since long before Europeans came to this area. They should have a seat at the head of the table.

Some people have labeled Alternative D and the idea of more designated wilderness as an extreme option. It is not extreme to protect the last remnants of the original wildlands on our continent. It is extreme NOT to protect the last wild areas on our continent. If we were a rational, practical, scientific, ethical, compassionate, and wise species, we would preserve all of the wilderness we have left at this point in time. Alternative D is a good starting point for doing that.

Thank you.

