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Organization: Backcountry United

Title:

Comments: I am writing to express my deep concern for the future of humanity.

This is the fourth public comment that I have submitted to the US Forest Service in regards to the havoc and division that heavily funded groups like the Sierra Club and Winter Wildlands Alliance have created in regional and local communities, with their frivolous lawsuits aimed at turning our Public Lands into Wilderness (with a capital W).

My biggest problem with Wilderness is that it excludes everyone except the healthiest and wealthiest people from experiencing the great outdoors. For many people, Chugach National Forest is more profound than church. It is their temple, their livelihood, their food source, and it is their home. It goes much further than just being a "playground." The Chugach is the very essence of the Alaskan way of life. And it's heartbreaking that a 1 BILLION dollar a year super-funded extremist organization based in California can hire a lawyer and with the stroke of a pen work to close the Public from the Lands they own.

I have been traveling to Alaska since 2013, after many years of being told that I have to come snowmobiling in the Chugach. My close friend and Native Alaskan guide has lived on these lands all his life. He has a beautiful wife and two young children who embody the beauty of a culture who is still deeply rooted and connected to the Earth and their natural environment. He has had me up several times for weeks at a time over the last 5 years, and I have been changed from these experiences. The Chugach has tested my physical and mental strength and endurance. But more importantly, it has affected me to my very core, and has profoundly impacted me on a deep, meaningful, spiritual level. This is why I am writing you today.

You see, snowmobiling is so much more than a piece of mechanized equipment. Snowmobiling is a way of life. It is a tool, just like a pair of skis, and the community and culture that revolves their lives around the ability to go deep into the outdoors is better for being able to do so. The Chugach is a place where people can push themselves and discover their potential. It's a place where people can heal and grow out of pain, abuse, disability, PTSD, and addiction. It's a place where families can connect and spend the most precious moments of their lives together. Fathers can teach sons and daughters. Grandparents can spend the most quality time of their lives on motorized vehicles, with their children and grandchildren. Motorized vehicles allow people to hunt and carry their harvest efficiently back to their freezers. I could go on and on here, but my point is that when you start removing the people from the land, NOBODY wins. The economy loses. Multigenerational families lose. And the spirit of humanity will eventually start to die, if we continue to remove the Public from their Lands. From this perspective, I would call the Wilderness agenda a human epidemic. Particularly in a place like Alaska-where the vastness and wildness of the lands define so many vital aspects of life for the people who live there.

I'm writing today for the sake of my Native Alaskan friend and his young children. I'm writing for my own children,

to hopefully have the opportunity to come back to Alaska when we can afford to, so that they can experience the Chugach. And I'm writing for the snowmobile community, because they deserve a voice.

I will also acknowledge that the snowmobile industry and community need to hear the feedback from the human-powered folks. We need to work on making stewardship "cool". We need to work on etiquette and respectful beliefs and behaviors. We need to pressure each other to influence the 1% of our community that poaches the Wilderness boundaries, is rude to other users on the trails and in the parking lots, and we need to abolish the loud aftermarket exhaust systems that continue to get us driven out of our Public Lands.

We also need to acknowledge that snowmobile technology is a rapidly evolving industry, and I wouldn't be surprised if we are all riding silent, electric-powered snowmobiles in the next five years. It just doesn't make sense to close the Public from our Lands into perpetuity based on the past state of the industry, when we know that today's technology will be obsolete faster than we can even keep up with it.

The last thing I want to touch on, is that I believe that Wilderness is a tragic default for environmentalists to push for, if they truly care about the environment. Wilderness is not management, and with the continuation of climate change, there will come a time when Alaska is faced with the same type of problems that we are facing in places like Colorado, Wyoming, Utah, Montana and Idaho with dead forests and forest fires. We have seen time and time again, forests getting closed down as Wilderness designations, only for those forests to die and burn due to the loss of healthy Forest Management. Access is critical to the health of our forests, to fire mitigation, and firefighting.

In short, access to our Public Lands is vital for the forests, the wildlife, and most-importantly, our communities, our economies, and humanity!

Besides, think about it. Humanity is already so disconnected to the environment AND one another! How much uglier can humanity get? Remove them from the natural world, and let's find out! Furthermore, do you believe that anyone is going to care about protecting the environment in a generation, if they no longer have access to it?

Wilderness is myopic, selfish, and shortsighted, and we oppose any new Wilderness designations anywhere in our country. If we want to protect our Public Lands from industrial extraction, I believe we can do it in a way that doesn't shut the Public out of our Lands.

Now that you can understand where I am coming from, and how important I believe this is, I am writing specifically to OPPOSE Alternatives C and D. Losing more access to the Kenai Peninsula is unacceptable. I believe that access to places like the South Fork of Snow River and 20 mile are vital for both recreational purposes, as well as being obviously beneficial to Forest Management.

Of the alternative Travel Management proposals currently available for review, we are writing in support of Alternative B.

Snowmobile and motorized access should also be understood as a positive and vital aspect for all backcountry recreationists. Our trail systems serve human powered and motorized users alike. They give access to avalanche research and reporting. They allow for emergency access for first responders. And lastly, this access allows the Public to have oversight over how OUR Public Lands are being managed and used. This is vital to our democracy as a nation.

From what I have read, there was an initial recommendation for 1.4 million acres in the 2002 Forest Plan. We are happy that there is 1.4 million acres of protected lands, but we don't believe that it is acceptable to strike out another acre from motorized or mechanized access. The more we displace motorized users into narrower and narrower corridors, we start to put too much stress on the areas that remain open. Spreading out users is a good thing for all users. It is good for the lands, the vegetation, and the wildlife-especially in a place like Alaska.

In closing, I submit to you, as public servants who have sworn an oath to defend the words of Gifford Pinchot. "Conservation is a foresighted utilization, preservation and/or renewal of forest, waters, lands and minerals, for the greatest good of the greatest number for the longest time." We must hold true to the idea of CONSERVATION, and consider the purpose and implications of the ethic of conservation. In contrast, PRESERVATION, while it has its place, does not take into consideration the health and welfare of the people, and the human vitality that is sustained when there is ACCESS FOR ALL PEOPLE.

Please don't allow a distant minority to destroy the lives and livelihood of the People of Alaska-in this generation, and for future generations.

Submitted with great love and respect for the Chugach National Forest.

Thank you.

Jon Miller

Thornton, Colorado, USA

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