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Organization:

Title:

Comments: Comment AK Roadless Rule = No Action

Dear Secretary Perdue and Chief Christensen,

Please select the "no-action" alternative on the Alaska-specific Roadless Rule

An Alaskan Point of View

I pulled over to the sight of the crashing waves of the Pacific Ocean. It meant the end of quest for me. From Portland, Maine to Portland, Oregon I had completed my journey I started two months, 5000 miles, and multiples parks ago in Vermont. There I bought a camper van and headed off to see what America was all about. It was fueled by curiosity from reading about it from my life long home of Alaska.

I grew up in Ketchikan Alaska, on an island with no roads in or out and surrounded by uninhabited lands. My family has lived here for nearly a hundred years. I know what real wilderness feels like, I am one of the few people who has been to most of them in Alaska. What I didn't know what wilderness places outside of Alaska were about, or what the expectations were of visitors who came to visit. So I set out to see for myself what separates Alaska from anywhere else in the world

What I learned quickly is that the automobile is the driver of how we manage access to wilderness in places outside of Alaska. People are accustomed to visiting parks in their automobiles. So since the beginning of the park system came after the proliferation of the automobile, it was not surprising that the expectation existed that national parks should be accessed by the automobile. But I wonder if the experience of the discovery that the original explorers had when they laid eyes on these special places still exist.

Year after year over 30,000 people are killed in automobile accidents in the United States. It's a fact that more people have been killed in automobile accidents than have died in all the wars the US has been involved with including both sides of the civil war. Despite this sobering fact somehow, somewhere, some time ago, we as a people have come to the general consensus that the right to drive a car is a human right. Once you obtain a license you are granted access to an almost endless system of roads reaching to everyplace in the world. We need to re-evaluate this mindset about how we view cars, roads, and the right to freedom of movement. The first place to start is our nations park system.

There is no doubt that we are attached to the idea that owning a vehicle and being able to take it everywhere. We have made tremendous engineering feats in order to extend the range of the automobile. Massive bridges and tunnels carved out of the rock without much real consideration of alternatives. When these engineering feats were proposed, there was little discussion on the merit of should they be built. But it is becoming clear that spaces and places that lack roads are becoming increasingly rare and valuable.

The relationship between the automobile and wilderness is at the center of this dilemma. Americans love their automobiles and cringe at the notion of anything limiting their ability to use them to go anywhere. The most popular vehicles these days are vehicles that claim to be off-road. They promise to take you off the crowded highways and into the wilderness that is just beyond. Carving up the land in order to view it from your car was not a problem when these parks were created. What they didn't know is that they were destroying the very thing that they recognized in its discovery.

Norwegian Erling Kagge was the first man to walk to the south pole and back alone. This man knew silence. He wrote a book "In the Age of Noise." In it he proposes that silence is a luxury that wealth can buy. The quiet car, the remote home, and the serene work environment are examples of the silence we desire and associate with the rewards of success. The "sound of silence" is a commodity that few people even know that they have given up in concession to our current transportation system. It is an inherent quality of true wilderness.

In 1991 I was trekking a new circular route through the mountains called the Annapurna Circuit. The route took us deep into the mountains bordering Tibet, and far from roads left behind. It would take three weeks to traverse the trail. For the duration of the hike we never heard or saw any vehicles or roads. Instead we heard the natural sounds around us. Even when villagers and trekkers were gathered in the evenings, the sound of human voices in conversation sounded quiet. What was missing was the noise caused by mechanical objects like cars, refrigerators, TV's. Most of the villages were without electricity.

All this became apparent to us when we exited the trail and were shocked to hear the sound of one truck in the far distance. It was only one truck engine but it was audible everywhere in the valley. I tried to imagine what a four lane freeway at rush hour would sound like. Whatever that was I know most people today accept it as part of everyday life- oblivious to the alternative.

My journey began in Montpelier Vermont where I picked up my camper van that will be my home for the next year as I cross the country and then head home for the Alaska summer. It was October and the colors of the season were everything they promised it would be. I ventured to the coast to view the Maine lighthouses. In doing so I crossed the white mountains. The white mountains look to be as remote a place as you can be on the east coast but any claim to bring wilderness is debunked by the semi trucks roaring across the highway that runs through the middle of it. Even its highest point, Mt Washington, has a train to its summit. To its credit, it doesn't claim to be wilderness. I doubt there is very little land east of the Mississippi River that can claim that status.

My definition of wilderness is one where nature has the upper hand. That's what wilderness used to be - a land where the "wild beast" lived. A place where you watch yourself because getting lost or getting eaten is a real possibility. The feeling you get when you find yourself in true wilderness is not unlike stepping into the deep end of the pool for the first time and realizing you better start swimming. It demands respect and it hands out hard lessons to the unrespectful. Our ancestors respected and feared the wilderness and tested their courage against it. There are very few places today that exist that have these qualities today. The East coast has long ago lost those qualifications.

My journey took me through Maine, New York, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, California, and Oregon where I reached the West Coast. I ventured into parks and wild lands in each state I came to but in the end I could find nothing to compare to the wild places of my Alaskan home.

Alaska contains the few last places where true wilderness exist. In the southeast panhandle there exists a total of 19 wilderness areas encompassed by the Tongass National Forest. None of these truly wild places are reachable by road. They are our nation's best kept secrets.

Thank you

Larry Johansen

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[POSITION]