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First name: Sydney

Last name: Morical

Organization:

Title:

Comments: Dear Amanda Milburn,

My name is Sydney Morical and I have been a board member of the Western Montana Mycological Association since 2018 and co-own Wild Wanders, a small business that provides herbal foraging education and small-batch foraged products. I firstly wanted to thank you for your time in professionally considering the massive amount of information and commentary that you and your staff are receiving regarding the Lolo National Forest Draft Land Management Plan. It is an incredible undertaking that leaves such a tangible impact, and I am glad that we all have the opportunity to contribute to better stewardship of our forests and what that will look like for many years to come.

There are a few suggestions that I have for this plan that I wanted to bring to your attention that I think would support the forest service in their endeavoring to care for our forests with long-ranging vision and-hopefully-regeneration in mind.

Presently, there is little to no mention of fungi in this plan, which is unfortunate given that they are a whole kingdom of beings that perform innumerable "ecosystemic services" (aka earthly gifts) on behalf of our forests. Without fungi, Lolo National Forest wouldn't exist. Period. At minimum, I would like to see funga given the same consideration and protection as the flora and fauna of the district. I am sure some of my myco-colleagues will have enumerated this more thoroughly than I, given I am 5 days postpartum(!) but I wanted to sum up a few general earthly gifts that fungi provide to our forest.

--Fungi are the primary decomposers of our forests and the main producers of soil via brown cuboidal rot. Brown cuboidal rot holds five times its weight in water and is the critical key for how our Northern Rockies forests, with their minimal topsoil and low rainfall, retain water through the seasons. This increases our forest's resiliency to catastrophic fire by giving trees a source of water even when rainfall is absent. Brown cuboidal rot and its protection should be a management priority so that we work with one of our best forest allies to decrease out of control burns and maintain forest health.

-- Our forests have a very thin layer of topsoil that doesn't retain massive amounts of water. In this era of climate chaos and global warming, we are and will continue to see temperatures rising both in our air and our soils. Fungi, while very adaptable, do not respond well to soils that are too warm or too compacted, and given their important role in forest resiliency, this should be included in forest management objectives. The practices around Some of our present fire management strategies include building big slash piles, thinning/eliminating underbrush, but I think it would be very wise to incorporate fungi into fire management in our district. Inoculating piles of wood instead of burning, or burning at more selective temperatures to curate for biochar (which can then be added back into soil with most of the carbon going back into the earth) would go a long way to helping keep our soils robust.

--Fungi are amazing allies in our quest to naturally sequester carbon back into the soil. This is old technology, if you will. In exchange for minerals and proteins, trees and plants share massive amounts of carbon with fungi through their roots, placing that carbon into underground mycelium and out of the atmosphere. Fungi should be considered as an ally in the need for carbon sequestration in our forests to mitigate the effects of climate change.

I am an educator, mother, forager, and herbalist. My life is dedicated to helping people far and wide have a richer, and more intact relationship with the non-human beings that make up their larger community, to help people return to a place of gratitude and love for the land that nourishes us all. I ultimately hope that by helping people lean into what it means to really love a place, that they will care for that place like it is their own mother, and recognize that while she has a very different face than we, that we owe our existence to this land. My hope is that people will reprioritize what they can extract from the land to how they can nourish the land.

I have volunteered countless hours of my time for years to the WMMA to educate, coordinate events, and run communications because I get to share this vision, as well as my love of finding food and medicine in the forest.

This very tangible act of finding your own food and medicine is one of the ways I choose to empower others to palpably experience the richness of relationship with our forests, because eating is believing! And to know and understand is the beginning of appreciation and love.

This is no different in my business, Wild Wanders, where our focus is more floral in nature. We take people out into the woods to learn about what plants live here, what their properties are, and how we enjoy them AND we also talk about reciprocity, right relationship, and ethical harvesting that hinges on paying attention to the conditions the land and plants are dealing with to make a decision that is best for the land. All of the medicines we make are made with foraged plants and mushrooms from our forests, and this is how we care for our human community and families throughout the year.

I know much of our forest policy has historically been dictated by the timber industry, and that we have an opportunity here to pivot away from a highly extractive lens to one that focuses on stewardship. This lens has room for timber as well as the innumerable other non-timber 'forest products' like mushrooms and plants that are more regenerative in nature. This forest plan is one of the many ways we get to impart our legacy, and I would urge you and your team to consider how we can co-create a future for our forests that leaves them stronger and more resilient, and allies our efforts with the natural systems that are already in place therein.

Thank you so much for all you do and for considering my two cents!

Sincerely,
Sydney Morical