



THE TAOS NEWS

Best U.S. Weekly Paper- NNA 2007, 2008, 2010
Inland Press Nation's Best Weekly Newspaper 2009

My Turn

Biking, Columbine Hondo: The case for wilderness

JOHN OLIVAS

The Taos News, 1/19/12

I would like to clear up any misconceptions about efforts to designate the Columbine Hondo Wilderness Study Area (WSA) as wilderness, as well as respond to the recent My Turn, "Keep biking where it has been historically allowed". The title of the My Turn is very misleading, because mountain biking has never been allowed in the Columbine Hondo WSA. The Carson National Forest manages the Columbine Hondo as wilderness, which prohibits the use of motorized and mechanized vehicles. To say that if the area is designated as wilderness, that cyclists would "lose access" to certain trails within the Columbine Hondo, is also misleading, because the activity has never been permitted.

The history of (illegal) mechanized use by some local cyclists stems from the fact that the Carson has stated difficulties in keeping signs up and enforcing restrictions, which some folks have taken as "permission" to ride in the WSA. This is not grounds to claim legal access to the area.

Some cyclists argue mountain bikes didn't exist when the area was designated as a Wilderness Study Area in 1980, and that it was not foreseen as an activity. The Wilderness Act clearly states, "...there shall be no temporary road, no use of motorized vehicles, motorized equipment ... and no other form of mechanical transport." The Wilderness Act of 1964 is the only legislation that addresses our spiritual need to commune with nature in its most primitive state. The framers of the Wilderness Act in the 1930s believed that mechanization in all of its forms was an encroachment by the civilized world .

In 1897, Benton MacKaye, the father of the Appalachian Trail, on a backpacking trip in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, wrote in his journal, "We said good-bye to the bicycles and civilization...", and said his first "true encounter with wilderness" was when they parked their bikes and continued on foot.

With all that said, mountain biking is a great recreational activity, and is a valuable potential for economic development. There are currently over 250 miles of mountain bike trails in the Carson National Forest, as well as over 3,000 miles of Forest Road for cycling. In addition, the recently passed Ski Area Recreational Opportunity Enhancement Act of 2011 now allows for mountain biking as an activity at both Taos Ski Valley and Red River Ski Area. This does not include all the BLM trails available for mountain biking in the Taos area. By contrast, only 6 percent of the Carson is protected as wilderness, meaning more than 90 percent of the Carson National Forest is accessible to mountain bikes.

The cyclists' proposal to remove nearly 20 percent of the Columbine Hondo WSA, and turn it into a National Recreation Area (NRA) for mountain biking, would set a dangerous precedent that would threaten wilderness areas across the country, by taking lands from the highest level of protection and lessening those protections.

The Columbine Hondo does not meet several of mandatory federal criteria for establishment of national recreation areas. The trails in question (Long Canyon, Gold Hill, and Goose Creek) are all steep, expert trails that do not appeal to a wide range of cyclists; and the Taos region does not have any real deficiency of recreational opportunities for mountain biking.

Even if the area was considered for an NRA, the process would take several years, and there are no guarantees that the area would only be open to mountain biking. It could very well include motorized use, as well, which the cyclists claim they do not want for the area. In addition, if the area is found that it does not warrant NRA designation, there is a good chance the area would revert back to regular National Forest, opening the area up not only to mountain bikes, but also, motorized use, timber sales, and other forms of development.

It is clear that the only way to permanently protect the Columbine Hondo is through wilderness designation.

The real threat to the Columbine Hondo WSA is HR 1581, known as the Wilderness and Roadless Area Removal Act, which seeks to remove wilderness protections from all WSAs across the nation. This is why time is of the essence, and we need to act now, to elevate the Columbine Hondo from a WSA to designated wilderness.

I ask all conservation minded Taose-os, including those in the cycling community to write Sen. Jeff Bingaman, and urge him to introduce wilderness legislation that would permanently protect the entire Columbine Hondo for future generations to enjoy.

John Olivas is the northern director of the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance.