

My Turn

Find common ground in debate on wilderness expansion

John Miles

The Taos News, 9/1/2016

The recent exchange over proposed additions to the Pecos Wilderness, of which I have been part, raises issues of concern to me.

First, in these debates we sometimes overlook the essence of the wilderness idea, which is that we humans can and must practice restraint in our relationship to nature. We can and must, in a small part of the natural world, let nature be nature, as much as possible. There are many reasons why we should do this: so we have a “baseline” of nature from which to measure, understand, and evaluate the changes we make in it; so we have a place where threatened species can survive, where nature can flourish for, as philosopher Kathleen Dean Moore and others have said, flourishing is mutual and as nature flourishes, so do we; so we can preserve beauty, health and permanence of nature; and so there will be a few places where we, any of us, can escape for a time the rush and roar of modern life.

Second, in Taos, Rio Arriba, and Santa Fe counties, land use debates are very personal, fraught with accusations that one group is “taking” this wilderness land from another. Once, the land proposed to be added to the Pecos Wilderness was Pueblo land, then Spanish land grant, then private land and now U.S. public land. It is part of the commons of the U.S., it belongs to us all, we benefit from it, and we share the responsibility to care for it. While each previous group of “owners” would like exclusive ownership of it today, the outcome of its long history seems to me to be optimal for our community in the 21st century. We all have a stake in an important part of our land resource and an opportunity to work together for our mutual well-being.

Third, wilderness is a very small part of the whole of the land in the southern Sangre de Cristo mountain region and in the continental U.S. In both contexts it is about 2 percent. The Pecos additions around the edges of the current wilderness only slightly increase the portion of this region that would be protected from development if it were added to the National Wilderness Preservation System. One might think, when listening to the rhetoric in the debate, that vast acreages are involved. This is not so – we would be practicing restraint on development in only a small fraction of our land base, as we are now. And we would be doing so in an area still roadless, and thus eligible for wilderness protection, after more than four centuries of development and at least a millennium of human presence in the region.

Fourth, communities have legitimate concerns about the threat of wildfire and cultural heritage values of the lands in question, but additional wilderness does not pose an all-or-nothing choice. Proponents of wilderness additions have recognized the need to protect cultural heritage values and included a “cultural heritage special management area” of 14,612 acres in addition to the 20,406 acres of wilderness additions in Taos County. Some cultural and economic values, such as grazing, will continue in wilderness additions where they have been practiced in the past. Investment in wildfire protection must be made for the human

community in the area, but it should be close to that community, not miles away in roadless areas. Mechanical treatment of tens of thousands of acres for wildfire pre-suppression will simply not be affordable or practical. Minimizing human sources of ignition, as wilderness does, will likely be the best we can do to reduce the threat of wildfire.

Finally, as I wrote in a column last February, wilderness is an asset to our community in many ways, economically not the least of them. This is undeniable. As in any choice we make, there will be costs and benefits. If the affected communities are willing and able to compromise and explore options in good faith, we can have our wilderness with its many benefits and protect cultural heritage too.

Miles lives in El Prado.

Copyright (c)2016 The Taos News 9/1/2016, Powered by TECNAVIA