

## My Turn

### **‘Once a wilderness is lost, it is lost forever’**

**Eric E. Patterson**

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The article by Matt van Buren on the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study Area in *The Taos News* (Nov. 17) really struck a nerve.

Almost 40 years ago, when I was teaching at Taos High School, I went backpacking for the first time with two good friends who were very experienced and capable hikers.

We went up Long Canyon and camped overnight at Goose Lake.

It was incredibly difficult for me, but unbelievably beautiful. The scenery was spectacular. The June wildflowers were in full, breathtaking bloom, while much of the north and east slopes were still covered with snow. When we returned the next day, we sat at my kitchen table and wrote letters to the National Forest Service, urging them to consider this beautiful, pristine, roadless area for wilderness designation. A few years later, this area was designated a “Wilderness Study Area” (WSA), to be considered by Congress for permanent wilderness protection.

After all these decades, numerous public hearings, and public comment periods, it is heartwarming to know that a broad-based local coalition is working with our legislators to finalize permanent protective designation of this pristine place as a Wilderness Area.

After almost 40 years of hoping, I am elated that this may finally come to pass.

I currently live in Valdez and get my acequia water from the R'o Hondo watershed, much of which is located in the Columbine-Hondo Wilderness Study area. Permanent wilderness designation will protect both the source and purity of my irrigation water that is used to grow organic fruit and vegetables. As a resident of Taos County, I want the hunting, fishing and hiking possibilities of this wilderness area to bring vacationers here to enjoy the wonders of Northern New Mexico and to help drive our largest industry — outdoor recreation.

As a fisherman, I want the waters of the R'o Hondo to be clean and pure enough to support a healthy trout population. As a parent and grandparent, I want my children and grandchildren to be able to spend time in that pristine place that I first enjoyed almost four decades ago. Contrary to what some would have us believe, wilderness designation does not lock people out from their public lands but, rather, ensures that very special places like the Columbine-Hondo will be permanently protected from development and inappropriate uses that may do great harm to this fragile ecosystem. Wilderness designation will guarantee that those of us living in Northern New Mexico — and the many visitors to our area — will continue to be able to take pleasure in the

Columbine-Hondo just as we do today — hiking, horseback riding, hunting and fishing, wildlife watching, and getting away to a special place of peace and beauty.

Any level of protection less than full wilderness designation will not provide the level of protection needed to ensure these lands will remain forever as they are for our children and grandchildren to enjoy.

I understand the effort to make the Columbine-Hondo WSA into permanent Wilderness has very widespread support, including more than 300 local businesses, acequia associations, village councils, grazing permittees, land grant associations, and Taos Pueblo.

Once a wilderness is lost, it is lost forever. Let's all support the effort to preserve this wonderful area so that we and our children may enjoy its benefits for years to come.

Thank you again, *Taos News*, for the excellent article on the Columbine-Hondo.

*Eric E. Patterson and his wife live in Valdez where they raise chickens and organic fruit and vegetables.*