



Wilderness a Vanishing Resource: An Interview with Gary Sprung

By Laura Anderson

Gary Sprung, local Crested Butte resident, has become increasingly concerned with preserving our nation's wilderness areas. Gary is the Community Coordinator for the Colorado Wilderness Network, a coalition of environmental groups within the state, which from 1978 to 1980 pressured Congress to establish new wilderness areas based on the RARE 2 Survey. This resulted in the 1980 Colorado Wilderness Act which doubled Colorado's designated wilderness areas.

Recently, the network has been reactivated to fight mining in wilderness areas, to protect wild and scenic rivers, make sure that the remaining RARE 2 Wilderness Study Areas (WSAs) become wildernesses, and to study new Bureau of Land Management WSAs.

Gary describes the immediate threats to wilderness areas, one of which is a clause allowing oil and gas mining leases to be considered until December 31, 1983. These leases, which have tremendous negative impacts on wildernesses, are, for the first time, likely to be approved under the business-oriented Reagan and Watt Administration.

Gary explains that a 1981 study shows that only 1.1 percent of America's gas and oil exists in wilderness areas and only 3.4 percent in wilderness study areas. "Clearly, the place corporations should look is on non-wilderness and non-federal land."

Yet, because they are exploring wildernesses, oil and gas corporations could profoundly affect us locally. Immediately surrounding Crested Butte, 52 applications for oil and gas leasing in the West Elks, seven in the Raggeds, and seven in the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness have been received. Thus, of a total of 180 leasing applications in Colorado, 64 are in the three wilderness areas closest to Crested Butte.

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ing have a right to demand that NUPEC use this method in the Collegiate Peaks. With the federal government loosening up its restrictions on big business, this could set a precedent. Everyone should talk to local Forest Service Ranger James Paxon about this before March 9 when comments are due. If approved, it will negatively affect us all—and there's no need for it!"

Looking toward the future of wilderness areas, Gary discusses a Congressional bill that was introduced last December by Philip Burton (D-Cal). This bill could crucially change the direction of wilderness development in the United States by ending the staking of claims and issuing of leases in wilderness areas.

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The bill, H.R. 5282, would revise the clause inserted in the Wilderness Act of 1964, which allows mineral claims to be filed until December of 1983.

The bill reads:

"SECTION 1. This Act may be cited as the "Wilderness Protection Act of 1982".

Section 2. Notwithstanding any other provision of law, and subject to valid existing rights, lands within the national forest system designated by Congress as wilderness or wilderness study areas and lands recommended for wilderness designation or further planning by the Forest Service in the roadless area review and evaluation II, as revised by the President in April 1979, as well as lands identified as wilderness study areas by the Bureau of Land Management consistent with section 603 of the Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976, are hereby withdrawn from all forms of appropriation under the min-

ing and wilderness cannot co-exist. The idea that land is still wild after a mine is ludicrous. It's only a political compromise that was necessary in 1964 to get the Wilderness Act passed. This was a mistake by Congress and many Congressmen now realize this. The only way to truly protect our wilderness areas is to withdraw them completely from all mining. That's exactly what Phil Burton's bill does."

While Burton's bill, if passed, could infinitely benefit the wilderness, and therefore all of us, Representative Lujan, under the prodding of James Watt, is sponsoring another bill coined the "Wilderness Destruction Act of 1982." Watt, who Sprung believes has "read the handwriting on the walls and

realizes that the majority of Americans don't want development in the wilderness," is pretending to support this mandate, and is pushing for a bill which would allow no new mineral leases to be approved until the year 2000.

The bill, which sounds surprisingly preservationist in attitude for Watt, is, according to Sprung, "merely a decoy." "In the long term it would be disastrous," Gary says. Instead of creating a deadline after which wilderness areas could not be mined, the act would set a time after which unlimited mineral development would be opened. Basically, it would jeopardize all of our wildernesses in 20 years.

"Not only that, but the bill itself contains loopholes to increase exploration and drilling in the meantime. For example, it contains a clause allowing the United States President to open wilderness areas for mining at any time simply by Executive Order,

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Yet, because they are exploring wildernesses, oil and gas corporations could profoundly affect us locally. Immediately surrounding Crested Butte, 52 applications for oil and gas leasing in the West Elks, seven in the Raggeds, and seven in the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness have been received. Thus, of a total of 180 leasing applications in Colorado, 64 are in the three wilderness areas closest to Crested Butte.

If approved, extensive drilling will commence in this nearby wilderness. If mining is discovered feasible, the oil and gas corporations will invade with roads, pipelines, pumping stations, houses, and electric power lines, virtually ending any wildness.

Even the preliminary exploration can be destructive. For example, Gary describes the NUPEC exploration in the Collegiate Peaks Wilderness nearby. NUPEC has proposed building a 3500-foot road up a ridge to the head of Tellurium Creek at the top of the Continental Divide. "This will be an extremely visible road, a huge scar," Gary explains. "The traditional means for corporations to explore is by helicopter. We

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Gary stresses that pressuring Congressional members to support this bill is imperative. He urges everyone to attend a Congressional Hearing in Grand Junction this Saturday, March 6, from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., at which Ray Kogovsek will preside. Others attending will include Mark Brown (Colo.) and Pat Williams (Mont.). The hearing will take place in the Liff Auditorium at 12th and Elm. For more information, contact Gary at 349-6244.

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"Not only that, but the bill itself contains loopholes to increase exploration and drilling in the meantime. For example, it contains a clause allowing the United States President to open wilderness areas for mining at any time simply by Executive Order, and any RARE 2 WSAs not approved by 1983 would automatically become eligible for mining development.

Gary denounces Watt's methods of dealing with the wilderness as "rape, ruin and run, or as David Brower of Friends of the Earth says, 'strength through exhaustion of our resources.' The only way to deal with this destructive bill is through constant pressure on those in power."

Gary Sprung emphasizes that while protecting the existing wilderness areas is paramount, the importance of preserving new areas must not be overlooked.

In the Gunnison National Forest, there are three Forest Service WSAs which are be-



THE PILOT PREY



Gary Sprung.

Photo By Paul Gallaher

ing considered right now. These are O-Be-Joyful, Fossil Ridge, and Cannibal Plateau.

There has been lengthy discussion of the O-Be-Joyful dilemma, but Gary emphasizes the Fossil Ridge WSA as his "adopted area" to put his energy into.

Fossil Ridge, which can be seen rising above the Jack's Cabin Cutoff southeast of Almont and northeast of Gunnison, is a high limestone ridge full of fossils, with associated wilderness valleys. "One of these," Gary stresses, "Crystal Creek, which flows north to the Taylor River, is extremely pristine and as wild as you can get."

The limestone geology means that acid rain is buffered and has less effect on the ecology. "If acid rain becomes severe, this will be one of the last places to die," Gary explains. Other benefits of the Fossil Ridge include its use by three hunting outfitters which bring money into Gunnison County and its importance as a summer range for elk and as a habitat for mountain goats.

The Forest Service claims that the area has a high mineral potential and thus far has been reluctant to support it as a wilderness area. Gary Sprung, however, disagrees. "Just as in O-Be-Joyful, the mining potential of Fossil Ridge is completely unconfirmed," he says. "Limestone is too expensive to remove and the uranium market is way down. Besides, uranium would be particularly hard to get out of there. Right now the mineral value of Fossil Ridge is nil! Unquestionably, this area should be designated wilderness." To demonstrate the value of Fossil Ridge as wilderness, Gary will be leading a two-night ski tour into the area this spring. He asks that interested people contact him about it.

Gary is equally insistent about Cannibal Plateau, the scene of Alfred Packer's infamous crimes, which is located northeast of Lake City, and is attached to the Powderhorn Primitive Area. "Only a line on a map separates the two," Gary says. It just happens that the Forest Serv-

ice controls Cannibal Plateau instead of the BLM but it should be thought of and designated as one wilderness. If Cannibal Plateau is allowed to be developed, it will adversely affect the Powderhorn Primitive Area, as well." Gary stresses the need for people to contact Jimmy Wilkins of the Forest Service about these areas both now and after the Draft EIS on them is released March 31st.

Gary Sprung is clearly dedicated to defining new wilderness areas and strictly controlling existing ones. He sums up his ideas and methods for helping all of us: "The only way to deal with preserving the earth is constant grass-roots pressure. It's a never-ending battle and conservationists are always compromising. What we are doing is a series of delaying actions, which require dedication and committed resolve. We can never recreate wilderness. But by preserving it, we put the minerals within it into a trust and maintain our future options."