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### **Eye on the Environment: The Freedom of Wild Places**

By Jessica Lund for the Seeley-Swan Pathfinder

Wild Places; do they still exist? Some may say that there are no truly wild places left in this world. After all, the technological man has traveled to the far ends of the globe, has conquered the highest mountain on earth, and daily turns wild landscapes into suburban housing developments.

I would disagree that there are no truly wild places left however. Just look outside your door, and you will see something wild and untamed. Whether it be a mountain consumed by wildfire, or a simple hummingbird busily searching for the sweet nectar of life; these things remind us of the wild, unpredictable chaos that is "nature".

The Swan Valley is a rich place because it harbors the wild and untamed spirit that our forefathers longed for in their quest for freedom. Freedom comes in many forms; it could be the freedom from city noise and exhaust. It could be the freedom to hike into the wilderness any time you choose. It could be the freedom to build your house and prove yourself, much as our ancestors who settled this valley did not so very long ago.

Edward Abbey once wrote, "It is my fear that if we allow the freedom of the hills and the last of the grizzly bears to be taken away from us, then the very idea of freedom may die with it."

I often ask myself why I choose to live in the Swan Valley. What is it that cements me in this place and prevents me from searching for greener pastures elsewhere? Have you ever asked yourself the same question: Why do *you* choose to live here?

I suspect that many people, like me, choose to live in wild places such as the Swan Valley not only for the recreational opportunities, but also for the spiritual and emotional qualities gained from first hand experiences with nature. After all, who among us does not feel our soul revived after witnessing a majestic sunset, or coming home exhausted from a wilderness hike? Who does not marvel at the sight of a newborn fawn, standing for the first time on shaky legs? Whose heart does not race after an encounter with a grizzly bear, searching just as you are for a prime huckleberry bush?

Professor of Philosophy Holmes Rolston, III accurately portrays our need for wild animals; "Wild lives raise the excitement level; the untrammelled quality of their lives raises the quality of human life. Behind the motion and sentience there is struggle. The

animal freedom brings with it the possibility of success and failure.” These first hand experiences with nature cannot be re-created on the Discovery Channel or even at a city zoo where the surprise and danger of the moment is missing.

Like me, you may realize that wild places provide the opportunity to push yourself to the extreme, to let the adrenaline pulse through your veins. Wildlands provide a place to take risks, to experience the fiery of the weather, to lose and find your way, and ultimately to reminisce over success and failure. Wildlands teach us humility and a sense of proportion...

I believe that the soul of this nation and more specifically the soul of rural areas like the Seeley-Swan Valley revolve around the things that engage our consciousness and curiosity. Ask yourself this; What drove Lewis and Clark over thousands of miles of undiscovered territory to the West coast? Why has the western frontier always been a place of longing for so many people? If your answers to these questions include the need to experience wild places and to challenge the normalcy of everyday living then you may have an inkling of why the preservation of wild places remains essential to the human condition.

Chief Mike Dombeck, USDA Forest Service said during a National Wilderness conference in 2000; “Wilderness is key to our cultural heritage. Other, older peoples have their ancient myths and traditions, their glorious architectures, their classical literatures. We have our wilderness. Wilderness is part of the American spirit, the American character, the American legacy. Its part of who we are as a people.”

Author Wallace Stegner put it this way; “We need wilderness preserves, because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed. The reminder and the reassurance that it is still there is good for our spiritual health even if we never once in 10 years set foot in it.”

Holmes Rolston, III reminds us that wild places have intrinsic virtues that cannot be found in any other aspect of human existence; “Wilderness brings a moment of truth, when we realize how false it is that the only values moral or artistic or political, are human values. Wild nature has a kind of integrity; it is creation itself and contact with it is re-creating because we encounter our sources, beyond our resources.”

As a Swan Valley resident you may have already come face to face with the realization that the very essence of our “freedom” is being challenged. With the potential loss of thousands of acres of wildland to development, you might be asking yourself where the wild places will be in the next twenty years? Where will the wild animals roam, and will we still be able to watch a beautiful sunset without seeing a housing development littering the once vibrant mountainside?

It will do us all some good to remember that; as author Laura Waterman writes, “Nature remains untamed, violently disturbed, turbulent, stormy, unruly, rough, lawless, not

civilized.” “What a sterile, empty world without this wild spirit at large! Is it not worth our best efforts to save?”

World-renowned wildlife and landscape photographer, Ansel Adams sums of the essence of preserving “wild” things; “ We either have wild places or we don’t. We admit the spiritual emotional validity of wild, beautiful places, or we don’t. We have a philosophy of simplicity in these wild places, or we don’t. We admit our almost religious devotion to the clean exposition of the wild natural earth or we don’t...”

Authors Note:

*My heartfelt condolences go out to everyone affected by the Jocko Lakes wildfire... As a former Emergency Fire Fighter with DNRC I know personally the dedication that goes into protecting lives and homes from being lost in a forest fire, and I would like to thank **all** those who respond to the call of duty during these times.*

*I wrote this article before the Jocko Lake Fire started, and I have thought long and hard about whether it is an appropriate time for readers to hear about the wild untamed values of the Seeley-Swan Valley. However, I feel that there might not be a **MORE** appropriate time for us all to reflect on the reasons for living in this majestic place. I know that living in this wild valley is not without its perils, but I also know the quality of the people living here. My hope even at this time is for people to see that living in the Seeley-Swan Valley is worth all the trials and tribulations that go along with forest fires. Houses can be re-built, but you can never re-create the experience of living day in and day out in one of the “Last Best Places”*