

My love of public lands began in earnest while at the University of Wyoming in 1976. On weekends, I'd be in the Snowy Range of Medicine National Forest hiking and backpacking in all seasons, skiing Medicine Bow in winter. My freshman gym class was an outdoor "climbing gym" at Veedauwoo, also in Medicine Bow NF, and the other direction from Laramie. Coming from the Midwest, I was blown away by the very idea that I could just go explore these lands wherever my curiosity took me.

My life as I know it wouldn't be possible without public lands. In other words, I can't live without wild places in my life and in my heart.

Seeds planted climbing Colorado's fourteeners, backpacking to the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon, witnessing grizzly bears roaming free in Denali National Park ultimately led a career as a conservation photographer focused on the American West. I came to learn that the lands around our incredible national parks are just as important as the national park itself, for wildlife and people need freedom to roam.

I could go on at great length about what it's like to witness the miracle of Sage-grouse displaying on a lek on BLM lands, a bison dropping its calf in Yellowstone, the magic that flows through me at every turn while rafting the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon, and the warmth of sunrise while standing on a cold 14,000 foot peak in the Uncompahgre Wilderness. All of these experiences have stoked a sense of wonder for decades that will no doubt continue for the rest of my life.

Sharing these remarkable experiences with others transcends this love of public lands. I'm inspired by outings with my wife when we're too mesmerized to speak, by researchers who study a single species for a lifetime, or ordinary people who stand for a place forever tethered to heart strings, of folks who work tirelessly to bring kids into the wilderness, National Wildlife Refuge, the forest, mountains, plains and the rest.

Just last week, I was with a Big City Mountaineers group taking five teenage boys into the Flattops Wilderness, a weeklong backpacking trip that will no doubt shape their lives in a powerful way. I thought a lot about my grandchildren on that journey, wondering how the Flattops and this remarkable landscape would shape them.

I intentionally left out advocacy for landscape integrity, functioning ecosystems, climate benefits of intact ecosystems, free-flowing rivers, keeping migration corridors open, the idea and value of wilderness to community and the human psyche, the need for us to see the west on a landscape scale etc. I left these things out because this love affair with *our* public lands is a matter of the heart that I hope lasts forever. Protect our public lands.

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