

Hermosa Creek Wilderness: Conservation Designations and Use

Recreation and use of our public lands continues to grow. No where is that more true than in Colorado and here in the San Juan Mountains. Hunting, fishing, bicycle riding, trail running, hiking, skiing, camping, boating, climbing and many more outdoor activities are why many of us live here and why people from around the world come to the San Juan Mountains every year. Southwestern Colorado and the San Juan Mountains are a known destination for outdoor recreation and we continue to promote the region as a world-class destination for these activities.



Weminuche Wilderness, Colorado

Recreation is only one of the activities increasing pressure on our public lands and while it is for the most part considered more benign than many other uses, it must be factored in when examining overall land management. Visitation levels to our public lands are dynamic and ever changing. Understanding these specific dynamics requires an in-depth analysis of the location and size of the relevant public lands area, proximity to a major population center, proximity to other public lands, the socio-economic status of the adjacent population, and more. Generally speaking, there are only a small number of studies that analyze what is called the “designation effect (DE)” in the southwest. DE is defined as the increase in visitation of an area after a conservation designation. DE is difficult to measure because most land management agencies do not systematically collect visitation data prior to designation.

There is no dispute that designation within Hermosa Creek as a “national conservation area” or “special management area” will bring added publicity and attention and in-turn add pressure on the resources. While there is little hard data to support the claim, anecdotal evidence has shown that there is a spike in visitation levels after an area is designated.

However, designation also provides new tools to address any increases in use and also provides clear mechanisms to manage it into the future ensuring the protection of the watershed and enabling us to continue our enjoyment of all recreational opportunities. Without some form designation and the additional management tools that come along with it, resources in the region will inevitably see increased pressure without increased management opportunities.

FINDINGS

While there are many studies that analyze the economics of designation to adjacent communities, the willingness to pay for protected areas, and the like, there have been very few that directly analyze the designation effect. There are two seminal studies on the topic both have differing overall conclusions but reaffirm the difficulty in assessing the effect due to data quality concerns, i.e. the lack of data collected prior to designation. A 1985 study by McCool states that designation does not necessarily lead to increases in overall use levels.

McCool explains that use levels are dynamic and are consistently changing which makes it difficult to determining the causal factors involved due to a large number of variables, unreliable data, etc. (McCool, 1985). The more recent by Loomis (1999) confirms that there has been little statistical analysis on a broad regional scale. However, his analysis shows a net increase in use with additional acreage designated. Importantly, his conclusion states that these results are tentative due to data quality concerns. An important factor in any increase in use resulting from a protective designation may in large part due to publicity. Increases in use have been noted for areas that are featured in prominent outdoor recreation media outlets like Outside Magazine, Bicycling Magazine and the Discovery Chanel.

CONCLUSION

For Hermosa Creek it is not a question of whether or not use will increase based on our efforts to safeguard the values of the area. The use is and will continue to increase strictly because of the large growth projections for our county, the state, and beyond. An important question that our community must consider is whether or not through our efforts we can provide and ensure that the Forest Service has the tools and opportunities to properly manage the area to protect the values we all share.



While not always a certainty, designation of an area can help ensure the region receives additional management resources by increasing its' priority for funding via designation. Designation (depending on type and how written) will also permanently remove some pressures on the region and could include prohibitions on new mining, timber and development in the region. Removing these pressures will allow management resources to be focused on maintaining the character of the watershed and assist in mitigating potential spikes in visitation levels. Discussions with residents in and adjacent to designated protected areas consistently support designation as a beneficial tool for managers with positive effects on the landscape.

The bottom line is that growth and use in the Hermosa Creek watershed will continue either way...Right now, we have the opportunity to ensure there are more resources and management tools available by appropriate protective designations.

References

Loomis, J. 1999. Do Additional Designations of Wilderness Result in Increases in Recreation Use?

McCool, S. 1985. Does Wilderness Designation Lead to Increased Recreational Use?