

# **WILD CONNECTIONS CONSERVATION PLAN**



*For Protecting Biological Diversity and Ecosystem Health  
in the Pike and San Isabel National Forests*



Submitted as an option for the  
Pike and San Isabel National Forests Plan Revision  
June 2006

Authored by:  
The Upper Arkansas and South Platte Project

## iv. Executive Summary



The Wild Connections Conservation Plan was created by the efforts of people who share a deep concern for the well-being of public lands spread across the Upper Arkansas and South Platte headwaters. From hunters and hikers to biologists and volunteer mappers, they worked together to map the boundaries of 100 roadless areas, explore some of central Colorado's wildest lands, and apply the science of conservation biology. Over the past decade, they developed and refined a vision of a network of protected core areas and wildlife linkages. The Wild Connections Conservation Plan describes how this vision can be a reality where it counts – in the everyday policies and management of the Pike-San Isabel National Forest.

The Pike-San Isabel National Forest encompasses 2.2 million acres from the Continental Divide south almost to the New Mexico border and from the Sawatch and Sangre de Cristo Ranges to the foothills at the edge of the eastern plains. The Arkansas and South Platte Rivers shape this extraordinary landscape and provide life to thousands of native plants and animals and the people who live here or visit the region.

As the largest public land steward in these two watersheds, the Pike-San Isabel National Forest is revising its land and resource management plan starting in 2006. The Plan Revision team will involve the public in a collaborative process to gather stakeholder input. The Wild Connections Conservation Plan presents an option for protecting the delicate balance between decreasing wildness with its biodiversity and increasing desired human uses of the Pike-San Isabel. It provides detailed recommendations for the Pike-San Isabel, and includes useful information for the Bureau of Land Management, state and local government agencies, and local conservation and civic groups.

The Wild Connections Conservation Plan has two long range goals: 1) to protect and restore the native biological diversity of the Pike-San Isabel National Forest; and 2) to promote sustainable interactions between the human society and the natural environment of this National Forest.

To move toward these goals, the Conservation Plan recommends that the Forest Service and BLM:

- Preserve large expanses of roadless land containing high-quality habitat, including lower elevation ecosystems and riparian areas, by:
  - ✓ Managing the nine Congressionally designated Wilderness areas of 446,700 acres to meet national standards.
  - ✓ Recommending 53 additions to existing Wilderness or new Wilderness Areas. When added to the National Wilderness System, these will give strongest protection to 648,300 acres of the Pike-San Isabel's largest remaining unprotected roadless areas.
  - ✓ Incorporating another 14 areas totaling 94,500 acres as Core Reserves to provide protection for roadless areas that do not meet the qualifications for Wilderness.
  - ✓ Balancing representation of ecosystems in protected areas by including lower elevation types such as ponderosa pine and pinyon-juniper in Wilderness and core reserves.
- Adopt the concept of a network of protected core areas connected by wildlife linkages as the basis for sustaining native biodiversity by:
  - ✓ Recognizing that Wilderness and core reserve areas are at the heart of a system that taken as a whole is larger than the sum of its parts. Wild roadless places like Burning Bear, Kreutzer-Princeton, Thirty-nine Mile, Highline, Bruff Creek, and Purgatoire provide

lowest human presence that multiplies the functional wildlife security and connectivity to adjacent areas.

- ✓ Providing wildlife linkages among the wild cores. The Conservation Plan recommends approximately 203,500 acres to facilitate wildlife movement, whether from spring birthing areas to winter range or for young animals dispersing to new home ranges.
- Protect and restore the native biodiversity of the National Forest by:
  - ✓ Protecting existing roadless areas and important biological hotspots, which contain most of the rare plants and animals that have been driven into decline by our expanding human activities. These are areas where greenback cutthroat trout can thrive in cold headwaters streams, and where lynx can find dens and snowshoe hares and red squirrels to eat. Yellow lady-slippers, Porter feathergrass, boreal toads, Preble's meadow jumping mice, Mexican spotted owls, Pawnee montane skipper butterflies and a host of other rare plants and animals depend on such secure habitat for their existence.
  - ✓ Adopting a comprehensive list of species of concern and species of interest that will facilitate direct protection and monitoring to determine trends in numbers.
  - ✓ Controlling exotic invasive plants that threaten the existence of native species.
  - ✓ Ensuring that conditions across the forest provide for the needs of large, far ranging animals such as mountain lions and black bears.
- Allow natural processes such as fire, seasonal cycles of winter snow and spring runoff, and interactions among plants and insects to aid renewal of the land by:
  - ✓ Recognizing that in the roadless back country, far from human habitation, the cycles and processes of the natural world can continue without man's intervention.
  - ✓ Designing projects in areas close to human habitation, where intervention may be desirable, to focus on highest risk areas and mimic natural processes.
  - ✓ Adopting wildfire prevention plans for the wild-urban interface as the appropriate location for thinning overly dense trees in order to protect human life and property.
- Promote the benefits of healthy ecosystems and watersheds that sustain robust local economies, ensure high quality water, and provide clean air and other ecosystem services by:
  - ✓ Facilitating ecologically sustainable multiple uses of the Pike-San Isabel National Forest that will foster long-term economic stability for tourism, ranching and local businesses.
  - ✓ Protecting watersheds in the Pike-San Isabel that are the source of snow pack which replenishes the water table for wells and feeds municipal water supplies down stream. Healthy forested lands also sequester carbon produced by burning fossil fuels and help overcome the effects of air born pollutants.
- Provide balance among the multiples uses of forest land by:
  - ✓ Ensuring that all modes of recreation, logging, grazing, mining, energy development and other human-oriented activities are designed to sustain a healthy forest for the indefinite future.
  - ✓ Fostering recreation uses that have the least impact on the natural landscape and wildlife. As recreation is the most wide-spread human use of the Pike-San Isabel National Forest, management of a spectrum of activities in appropriate settings will prevent irreparable damage. Wilderness recreation that depends on individual challenge and self-sufficiency is clearly abundant in the Wild Connections Plan. Twenty Quiet Use Areas totaling 150,500 acres are recommended for hiking, horse packing, mountain biking, cross country skiing, and similar recreation. Vehicle-oriented recreation is widely available on



hundreds of miles of designated roads and trails. Intensive recreation is located at special sites such as the Rampart Range Motorized Recreation Area, Monarch Ski Area and Ski Cooper. Camping is available at campgrounds, with dispersed camping allowed across the forest. Opportunities for canoeing, rafting and fishing can be found on the rivers, lakes and streams. Hunting, pack trips, and guided excursions are activities for all parts of the forest. Wildlife watching, nature photography and enjoying the scenery can be found everywhere.



- ✓ Permitting limited commercial logging, mining and energy development only in suitable areas of the forest. While large commercial logging projects are not appropriate, small fuels thinning projects that reduce wildfire danger in the wild-urban interface are encouraged and provide the basis of a small fuels industry. Grazing will continue on current allotments with emphasis on protecting the rangeland and riparian zones.
- ✓ Establishing forty new Research Natural Areas to protect examples of representative ecosystems, provide scientists with sites for research in how to best sustain our national forests, and preserve a baseline for comparison over the years.
- ✓ Ensuring that all human activities will protect riparian zones, water quality and sensitive wildlife areas such as birthing or nesting areas, migration routes, and winter habitat.
- Enhance the functional capacity of wildlife linkages by:
  - ✓ Including dispersal and migration corridors in protected areas such as core reserves and Wilderness and by applying seasonal travel restrictions.
  - ✓ Reducing road densities in connectivity areas by closing and rehabilitating unused routes.
  - ✓ Working with other agencies to install wildlife passage structures along major roads and to protect adjacent habitat.
- Acknowledge the intrinsic value of wild landscapes that sustain the human spirit and provide for all our co-inhabitants in an interconnected, interrelated whole. While not easily measured, Coloradoans and visitors alike treasure the high mountain peaks, rivers and streams, stunning scenic views, and all those values that provide a quality of life that nourishes our families and communities.

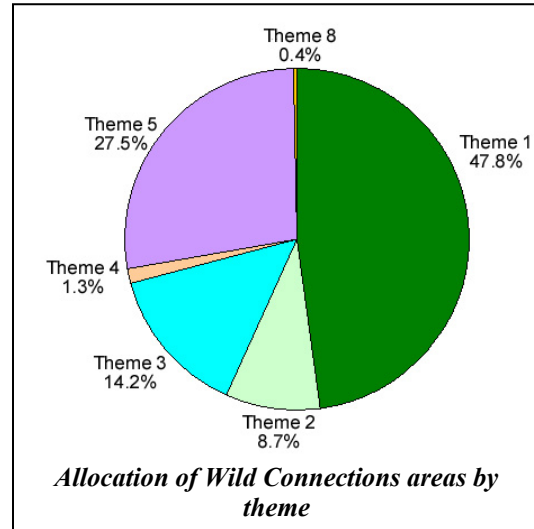
The Wild Connections Conservation Plan brings together 1) citizen field work and community workshop results; 2) conservation science using the three-track approach; and 3) the U. S. Forest Service's thematic framework for land management planning.

The first two aspects produced the larger wildlands vision for the Upper Arkansas and South Platte watersheds. Field work by trained volunteers over the last ten years gathered data on the boundaries, natural characteristics, and wilderness qualities of 100 roadless areas. A series of community workshops and extensive task force meetings brought more input into the conservation plan design process. The three-track approach, developed by conservation biologists, incorporated biological data and GIS modeling. The first track, ecosystem representation, was used to ensure that collectively the protected areas contained proportional amounts of vegetation native to these mountains. The second track, special elements, used the roadless area field work and locations of rare or sensitive species. In the third track, focal species, animals such as black bear, lynx, elk, pronghorn and others were used to identify areas that are important for their life cycle needs.

The resulting vision for the two watersheds was formulated into Themes that address the major components of the Forest planning process. The U. S. Forest Service has new planning regulations,

which only a few National Forests have used. We adapted the Thematic framework found in several other Forest draft plans to organize management recommendations. The themes used in the Wild Connections Conservation Plan are:

- **Theme 1: Natural Processes Dominate** includes existing and proposed Wilderness areas and recommended core reserves.
- **Theme 2: Special Areas** consists of Research Natural Areas, experimental forests, and wild and scenic rivers.
- **Theme 3: Natural Landscapes with Limited Management** includes quiet use areas and wildlife connectivity areas.
- **Theme 4: Recreational Emphasis Areas** is where motorized recreation areas and scenic byways are described.
- **Theme 5: Active Management** includes both active management for wildlife and for human needs such as logging or energy development.
- **Theme 8: Permanently Developed Areas** consists of ski based resorts and permanent developed recreation areas.
- **Theme 9: Significant Non-Forest Lands** is a special category used to describe BLM, state and private conservation areas outside the jurisdiction of the Forest Service that are important for a comprehensive approach to the entire watersheds.



These themes<sup>1</sup> are applied across the Pike-San Isabel National Forest. In order to describe the lands that are recommended for various themes, the Conservation Plan divides the landscape into eleven geographically based complexes: Arkansas Canyons, Mount Evans High Peaks, Mosquito Range, Pikes Peak Massif, Rampart Range, Sangre de Cristo, Sawatch Range, South Park, South Platte Canyons, Spanish Peaks, and the Wet Mountains Complexes. For each complex, the Plan describes natural features of the roadless areas in detail, followed by the management recommendations for each part of the complex, which are shown on a large map. The complex descriptions and management recommendations are the heart of the Wild Connections Conservation Plan as it is applied to the actual landscape.

In addition to this thematic framework, there are recommendations for general management, such as grazing, invasive species management, fire management and others, that apply across the whole National Forest regardless of theme designation. Both the themes and general management sections provide detailed guidance for desired future conditions, objectives and guidelines. Thus a relatively complex expectation of uses and management is laid across the mountains and valleys of the Pike-San Isabel.

In crafting the Wild Connections Conservation Plan, UASPP collaborated with local and regional stakeholder groups, with hundreds of people giving their input and guidance. We look forward to working with the Pike-San Isabel planning team and the many stakeholders to arrive at a management plan that will sustain the Pike-San Isabel for present and future generations of native plants, animals and our own communities.

<sup>1</sup> Theme 6: Grasslands Ecosystems is designed for National Grasslands and Theme 7: Residential Forest Interface was incorporated in general management considerations.