

Opinion

A Landscape Lewis and Clark Would Recognize Is Now Under Threat

Logging, mining and development loom over the Northern Rockies.

By Mike Garrity and Carole King

Mr. Garrity, a fifth-generation Montanan, is the executive director of Alliance for the Wild Rockies. Ms. King is a singer-songwriter and alliance member who has lived in Idaho for more than 40 years.

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Payette National Forest in central Idaho. A court last year stopped a logging plan there. CreditCreditUniversal Images Group, via Getty Images

The Northern Rockies are surely near the top of the list of the world's most spectacular landscapes. Its ranges contain one of the last great expanses of biodiversity left in the continental United States, including most of the species that were there when Lewis and Clark first passed through in 1805 on their journey of discovery.

These attributes alone would be reason enough to protect this region. Instead, the Trump administration has been pushing oil, gas, mining, and logging projects, and removing legal protections from threatened species. To be fair, the Obama administration also pursued some of those actions. But the current administration's zealotry threatens the region's wild landscape and rich biodiversity. It's up to all of us

who care about the environment, science and preserving wild places for our children to resist such efforts.

Legislation recently introduced in the House would protect a vast swath of this region. But until that law is enacted, we'll have to rely on the judiciary. Along with other organizations and Indian tribes in the Northern Rockies, our group, Alliance for the Wild Rockies, has been fighting threats to the region in court. Fortunately, this past year has brought some encouraging news. But the court system alone will not provide the protection this area needs and deserves.

In August, a three-judge panel of the United States Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit voted unanimously [to halt](#) a planned 125-square-mile logging and burning project in the Payette National Forest in western Idaho. The court concluded that parts of the project ran counter to the forest's management plan.

Under that project, so many trees would have been cut that the forest would have no longer provided elk or deer with the cover they need. Forest streams would have been filled with sediment from bulldozers building miles of new logging roads — further damaging the native fisheries for which the Northern Rockies are internationally famous. According to the United States Forest Service's own projections, taxpayers would have spent more than \$12 million to subsidize the logging.

On the same day of the Ninth Circuit ruling against the Payette project, a Federal District Court judge in Montana, Dana Christensen, granted a request by Alliance for the Wild Rockies and two other groups for an [injunction](#) temporarily stopping a logging and road building project along the northwestern border of Yellowstone National Park. Nearly 16 miles of logging roads would have been bulldozed through grizzly bear habitat. The judge concluded that the Forest Service had failed to consider how the project would affect the Canada lynx, which has been listed since 2000 as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. Now the court is weighing whether to permanently block the project.

Then, in September, Judge Christensen ordered the Yellowstone-area grizzly bears [restored to full protection](#) as a threatened species. When the federal government removed the bear's protected status in June 2017, ignoring the concerns of scientists, environmentalists and tribal leaders, the State of Wyoming started gearing up for its first grizzly hunt in more than 40 years. But Judge Christensen ruled that the United States Fish and Wildlife Service had erred in removing the bear's threatened status, siding with us and opponents of the hunt. The Interior Department is appealing this decision.

This was a particularly important ruling because the loss of protected status could have opened the bears' habitat to mining, logging, and development. But the fight to protect the landscape and its species is far from over. With the nation's environmental laws under all-out attack by the Trump administration, victories in the judicial branch can get us only so far.



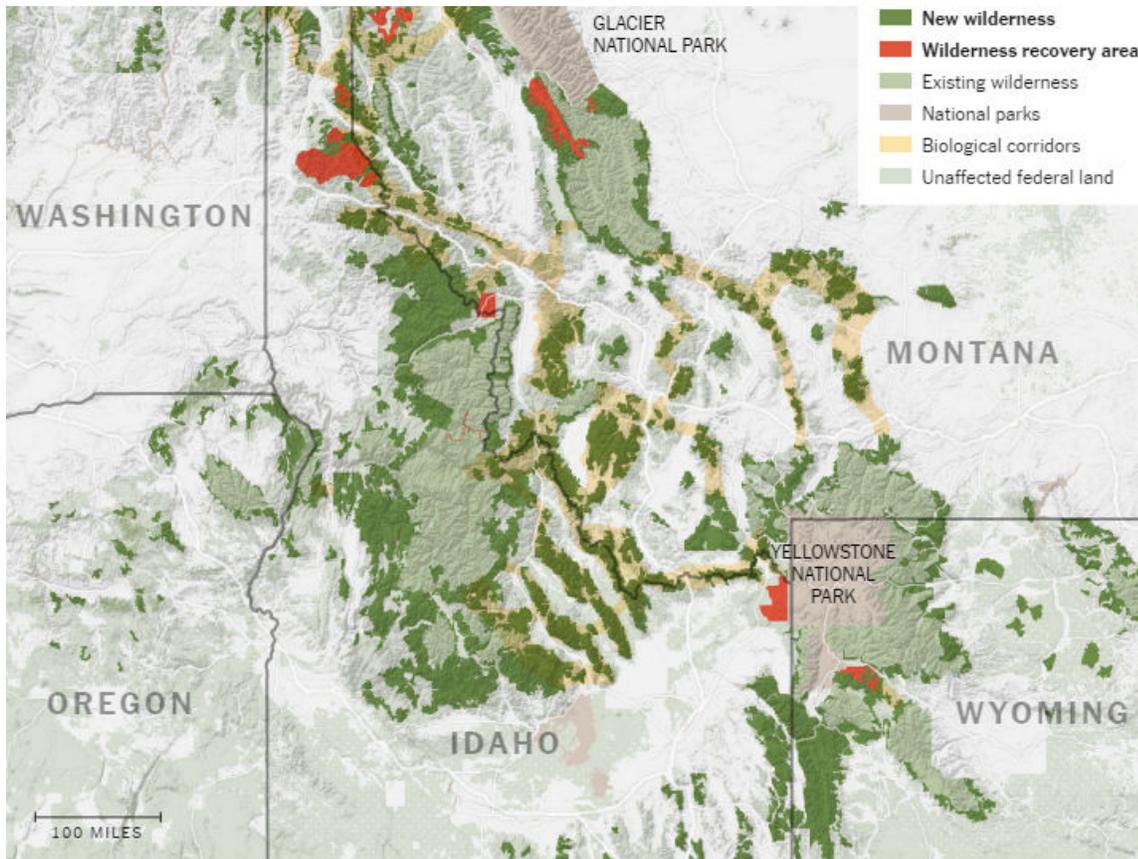
One of the authors, Carole King, at an event to promote a bill to protect land in the Northern Rockies as permanent wilderness. Credit Tom Williams/CQ Roll Call, via Getty Images

That's why Congress must act to protect the Northern Rockies. Legislation introduced recently in the House by Carolyn Maloney, Democrat of New York, and soon to be introduced in the Senate by Sheldon Whitehouse, Democrat of Rhode Island, would designate 23 million acres of roadless public lands in Montana, Idaho, western Wyoming, and eastern Oregon and Washington as wilderness.

The [Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act](#) would also establish a system of vital biological corridors connecting smaller ecosystems within the Northern Rockies to protect native plants and animals. Restoring over one million acres of damaged habitat and watersheds would create jobs, and taxpayers would save millions of dollars that would otherwise be spent on road-building and logging projects in which private corporations cut down our public forests.

Reconnecting Fragmented Wilderness Areas

A proposal recently introduced in Congress seeks to add 23 million acres of wilderness and designate key wildlife corridors.



By Baden Copeland/The New York Times; Source: Save America's Forests

In 1872, when Congress [designated Yellowstone](#) as the world's first national park, America was the world leader in conservation. That reputation is fast eroding. By passing this legislation, Congress can help reverse this trend.

Our group and others have been fighting for more than a quarter of a century to protect the ecosystems of the Northern Rockies that are the rightful heritage of all Americans and generations to come. With the support of an engaged public and insistence by an independent judiciary that this administration adhere to longstanding environmental laws, we will succeed.

On June 12, 1805, Meriwether Lewis climbed a bluff in what is now Chouteau County, Mont. From this vantage, [he was able to see](#) wolves, antelope, mule deer and “immense herds of buffalo.” He added, “From this height we had a most beautiful and picturesque view of the Rocky Mountains, which were perfectly covered with snow.”

They were, Lewis wrote in his journal, “an august spectacle.”

Nearly 214 years later, parts of the Northern Rockies remain as they were when Lewis first saw its peaks. We must protect them so future generations can experience the grandeur that he beheld.

Mike Garrity is the executive director of the Alliance for the Wild Rockies. Carole King is a singer, songwriter, author and environmental advocate.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/13/opinion/northern-rockies-carole-king.html#commentsContainer>