

THE ASPEN TIMES

Saving the High Elk Corridor

By Paul Andersen
Special to The Aspen Times
August 15, 2003

The West Maroon Pass Trail has become a mecca for hikers from around the world. Wending its way through the heart of the Maroon Bells-Snowmass Wilderness, the trail passes beneath the soaring ramparts of Pyramid Peak and the Maroon Bells, and courses through some of the most astounding wildflower meadows in Colorado.

On a typical summer day, dozens of hikers cross 12,500-foot West Maroon Pass. The 11-mile trail connects Maroon Lake to Schofield Park, where taxis with coolers of cold drinks shuttle weary hikers to Crested Butte.

"This is about the most beautiful place on earth," effused a middle-aged woman from Illinois two weeks ago, panting for breath and surveying an emerald green basin spotted with snowfields and wildflowers.

The woman was gazing on Schofield Park, to the west of the pass, which encompasses a swath of land known as the High Elk Corridor. Few hikers who reach the aeriellike pass realize that an urgent land preservation effort is under way to protect the valley below. But saving the High Elk Corridor is becoming a celebrated cause for wilderness enthusiasts.

Land development and land values

The Corridor stretches from the old silver mining town of Gothic, near Crested Butte, to the town of Marble. Between these rural settlements, one in the Gunnison River drainage and the other in the Roaring Fork, lie thousands of acres of Rocky Mountain splendor.

But scenery is only part of the High Elk Corridor's value. Human history is told in Elk Mountain boomtowns such as Gothic, Schofield, Crystal and Aspen. President U.S. Grant toured the High Elk Corridor in 1880 to see for himself what all the excitement was about, and reportedly got drunk during the excursion. During those days, the Corridor's value was judged in tons of silver ore, but since then a new value has come to the land.

The Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory (RMBL), one of the nation's top independent field stations, was founded in Gothic in 1928. Today, after 75 years of ongoing studies, scientists at RMBL (locally known as "rumble") have created a body of science, the integrity of which depends on protecting remote, isolated and undisturbed study sites.

The Corridor holds other ecological significance, containing two state natural areas, important wildlife



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migration corridors and critical watersheds for downvalley communities. Schofield Road, a summer-only four-wheel-drive route, threads through the Corridor as the only motorized link between Gothic and Marble. On either side of the Corridor, high ridges and mountain peaks form a rugged boundary.

The challenge of preserving the High Elk Corridor is compounded by the threat of land development. Two legislative precedents, the Mining Law of 1872 and the Townsite Act, subdivided portions of the High Elk Corridor with mining claims and townsite lots, hundreds of which are in private ownership today.

Schofield Park would be dotted with cabins today if not for severe winter weather. Avalanches close the Corridor from both sides, erecting walls of ice and snow that often block the road through July. Still, the potential for speculative real estate development and summer dream-cabins remains.

Leading the preservation march is an ad hoc association called Friends of the High Elk Corridor. This intermountain consortium of land trusts, local governments, private entities and individuals, representing both sides of the Elk Mountains, is striving to acquire private inholdings that dot the national forest in the area.

The Friends of High Elk envision the Corridor not as a second-home enclave, but as a place for wilderness inspiration, scientific study and historic integrity.

Forming a consensus

What is unusual about this sweeping preservation effort is that few people on either side of the Elks differ with the mission. The project has spawned a broad consensus that includes the biggest real estate developer in Gunnison County, Crested Butte Mountain Resort (CBMR).

"The ski resort and our community really came together to help Crested Butte Land Trust get the ball rolling," explained Edward Callaway of CBMR. "Several key parcels have already been protected. Now it's time to put our efforts into high gear and preserve one of the last untouched, unspoiled alpine valleys in the state."

The effort to save the High Elk Corridor began in 1996, when CBMR joined with the Crested Butte Land Trust and RMBL to save half of the historic Schofield townsite. The deal was struck to buy the 74-acre holding in July 1997 for \$490,000.

During the acquisition, research showed that a nearby 70-acre parcel containing the historic West Maroon Trailhead was also privately owned and ripe for development. The Crested Butte Land Trust hurriedly teamed up with Jon Mulford, then-director of the Wilderness Land Trust in Aspen, who tapped Aspen donors and came up with the asking price.

Uncertain about the status of other Schofield Park parcels, the Land Trust expanded its review to the entire Corridor. To complete a thorough review and enable future purchases, the consortium needed more partners. The issue quietly rippled through communities on both sides of the Elk Range, and the momentum grew.

By 2001, the Friends of High Elk included CBMR, RMBL, the Crested Butte Land Trust, the Aspen Valley Land Trust, the High Country Citizen's Alliance, the International Mountain Biking Association, Gunnison County, Pitkin County and the town of Crested Butte. Critical momentum came in 2002 when the nationwide Trust for Public Land joined the effort.

"The High Elk Corridor represents an incredible land conservation opportunity for anyone who knows and loves Colorado," said Doug Robotham, director of TPL's Colorado office.

Since it was founded in 1972, TPL has helped protect more than 1.4 million acres in 45 states. According to its mission statement, "TPL helps conserve land for recreation and spiritual nourishment and to improve the health and quality of life of American communities."

The High Elk Corridor was a perfect fit.

Science in the Elk Range

The Rocky Mountain Biological Laboratory also has a major investment in the sanctity of the High Elk Corridor, where 75 years of research has produced a continuum of scientific data on climate change, acid rain and species studies.

RMBL is one of the few independent, high-altitude field research stations in the United States. Affiliated with major universities, RMBL hosts more than 60 researchers each summer at the historic townsite of Gothic, which it owns.

One of RMBL's prominent researchers, Dr. John Harte, explained the Corridor's scientific values at a July reception in Aspen. With rapid species extinction and loss of pristine lands, he said, saving remnants of the shattered natural mosaic is critical to the understanding of future trends.

"Our research at RMBL contributes enormously to our understanding of the factors that govern reproduction, growth and death of organisms," stated Harte. "It also has the potential to contribute enormously to our understanding of how many species there are on earth and how fast we are losing them."

Since human activities affect the environment, Harte said, it is up to humans to understand their actions and hopefully alter the harmful ones. By preserving the High Elk Corridor from piecemeal development and accelerated human activity, RMBL's programs can continue providing data to promote sound land management.

Said Harte: "I am pleased to be able to say that the science that is carried out at RMBL, and the efforts of scientists there to convey that information to the public, are a small but important part of the solution to this grand challenge."

\$6.5 million in real estate

The Trust for Public Land's first priority in saving the High Elk Corridor was creating a "Greenprint" of the Corridor with a \$20,000 grant from Great Outdoors Colorado (GOCO). This resulted in an inventory of nearly 1,000 mining claims and homesites totaling 6,000 acres.

Sophisticated digital mapping systems then helped identify the most critical acquisitions. TPL weighed factors such as ecological sensitivity, wildfire hazards, geological stabilization, historic values, vegetation, wildlife habitat, buildability, road access, recreation and scenic beauty.

The Friends of High Elk are now focusing on 2,000 acres, 80 percent of which are owned by 12 landowners. TPL began working immediately to acquire the most critical parcels.

To meet its target of \$6.5 million for land purchases identified by the Greenprint, the group hopes to generate \$3.5 million from private donors and \$3 million through grants and public sources.

Said Reid Haughey, executive director of the Wilderness Land Trust in Aspen: "There are certain special places we need to honor and protect. The High Elk Corridor is one of those extraordinary places. I'm excited about our prospects for leveraging public and private resources to pass this treasure on to future generations."

"Anyone who loves this place should stand up and be counted," urges Sandy Shea of the High Country Citizen's Alliance in Crested Butte. "For so many of us, the High Elk Corridor is a place of spiritual renewal and great adventure. Its loss would be tragic."

Former President Jimmy Carter, a longtime visitor to Crested Butte, added his voice to the cause. "Rosalynn and I have had the privilege of hiking from Crested Butte to Aspen along an extraordinarily beautiful and rigorous trail. We've traveled to over a 150 countries, and the mountains of Colorado remain one of our favorite destinations. We hope that these lands will be protected and preserved in all their glory."

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