

ENVIRONMENT



## Crow leaders seek new protections for the Crazy Mountains in forest plan revision

By Joseph Bullington June 3, 2019

Photo courtesy of Zach Porter

The Crow Nation of Montana wants a say in the future of the Crazy Mountains, a range that shaped the history of the tribe and the West at large.

The Crazies — an island range of sharp peaks, glacier-carved cirques, and forested drainages that juts from the sagebrush prairie of south-central Montana near the confluence of the Shields River and the Yellowstone — were once at the spiritual and geographical heart of Crow country.

As a once-in-a-generation revision of the Custer Gallatin National Forest management plan enters its final stage, the Crow, joined by wilderness groups, [are requesting](#) that the Forest Service consult with the tribe about the spiritual and historical significance of the Crazies in Crow culture and prohibit new roads and development in the mountains.

Though the range is mostly roadless and trail-less, the current forest plan, drafted in 1987, does not protect any part of the Crazy Mountains as recommended wilderness. For the plan revision, the Forest Service is considering alternatives that range from maintaining the status quo to recommending nearly 60,000 acres of wilderness in the

Crazies — a status that would bar development, road building, and motorized and mechanized use in the mountains' interior.

Shane Doyle, an educator and Crow tribal member who is serving as a liaison between tribal leadership and the Forest Service, said the tribe would like parts of the Crazies to be protected either as recommended wilderness or as a backcountry area with prohibitions against road building and development.

According to John Gatchell, a senior conservation advisor at the Montana Wilderness Association, it's hard to overstate the importance of the forest plan.

“From my perspective, the Crazies are the most deserving and least protected area in the state of Montana,” Gatchell said.

The Crazy Mountains came within one presidential signature of Wilderness Study Area protection in 1988 when Congress passed 29 wilderness bills, and President Ronald Reagan signed 28 into law — all but the Montana Wilderness Bill, which Reagan pocket-vetoed.

Because Congress is currently “completely dysfunctional,” Gatchell said, “the forest plan is the only way we have right now of protecting wilderness values, which are the most fragile and easily lost.”

When completed, the new plan will govern management and land use for the next 30 years on the 3-million-acre forest, which comprises much of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, spans east into South Dakota, and includes the Absaroka, Gallatin, and Pryor ranges.

The Forest Service [will accept public comments](#) on the plan revision until midnight on Thursday, June 6.

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For generations before the arrival of white settlers, young Crows journeyed to the high peaks of the Crazies to fast and pray for dreams, which gave strength and guidance not only to the individuals but to the collective life of the tribe.

“For hundreds and hundreds of years people have been fasting up there,” Doyle said. “We were one of the only groups of people who lived by their dreams. These dreams shaped their reality and became their reality because they believed in them.”

As a young boy, Plenty Coups, who would go on to be the last traditional chief of the Crow, had a dream on Crazy Peak that would change the history of the Crow and the West at large. In the dream, as relayed in frontier journalist Frank B. Linderman’s book “Plenty Coups: Chief of the Crows,” Plenty Coups foresaw the disappearance of the bison from the plains, their replacement by cattle, and the toppling of a great forest, interpreted by tribal elders as representing the Indian tribes of the plains, by a storm, interpreted as representing white settlers and armies. In the end, only one tree remained standing, in which the chickadee bird, which tribal elders considered wise because it learns from the mistakes of others, had built his lodge. From that time on, Plenty Coups explains in the book, the tribe kept its lodges “pitched in the safety of peaceful relations with white men, whom we could not stop even though we would.” The Crow went so far as to serve as scouts and fight alongside U.S. soldiers against other tribes.

The U.S. government did not show the same loyalty to the Crow, repeatedly reducing the tribe’s land holdings over the following decades. The Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 reserved for the Crow more than 38 million acres, spanning from the headwaters of the Yellowstone as far east as the Powder River and as far north as the Musselshell. Seventeen years later, the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868 reduced the tribe’s lands by some 30 million acres, including the Crazy Mountains and everything north of the Yellowstone River. Today the tribe controls 2.2 million acres in southeastern Montana.

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Though the world has changed much in the years since their ancestors first built dream beds on Crazy Peak, many young Crows still climb the peak to [sic] fast and ask for dreams, said Doyle, who himself fasted there as a young man.

“It made a big difference for me,” he said. “I think it can continue to make a big difference for a lot of people.”

“Fasting and dreaming is part of Crow identity,” he continued. “Once we stop doing that, we’ve lost a big part of who we are.”



*Shane Doyle in the Crazy Mountains.*

Doyle worries that if the Forest Service doesn't act now to protect the Crazies, future generations could lose that opportunity.

The biggest threat he sees, he said, is that the same moneyed forces gentrifying Bozeman, where he lives, will turn the Crazies into a playground for the rich.

Unlike most Montana mountain ranges, the Crazies are checkerboarded with private inholdings — a legacy of the every-other-section land grants given by the federal government to the Northern Pacific Railroad to subsidize its construction. Even many of the high-altitude, alpine lake sections — including Crazy Peak itself — are privately owned.

Doyle thinks it's only a matter of time before someone buys some of these sections and builds a mansion or a resort with a paved access road.

“If we don't put the language of ‘no new road easements’ into the forest plan, [developers are] going to see a gold mine,” Doyle said. “We need to protect these mountains in a way that money doesn't matter.”

Gatchell has similar fears for the Crazies.

“Trophy homes and orange paint at nine or ten thousand feet, helicopters, roads, weeds — that to me would be a nightmare, but I think it's a real concern in the Crazies,” Gatchell said.

Gatchell said that more roads would destroy what makes the Crazies special: the range's multitude of roadless, trail-less drainages and high-altitude basins, which serve as a refuge for many species of plants and wildlife, including mountain goats and wolverines.

Wolverines are a snow-dependent species, Gatchell said. Keeping intact high-altitude habitat like the Crazies, which will hold snow even as temperatures warm, will give the wolverines a better chance of weathering the impact of climate change.



*The Crazy Mountains, viewed from the Shields River on Thursday, May 30, 2019. Photo by Joseph Bullington.*

Gatchell said the Crazies also serve as an important migration corridor for wildlife, including the potential to connect grizzly bears of Greater Yellowstone with those of the Northern Continental Divide ecosystem.

The Forest Service plans for the Gallatins and Bridgers, to the west of the Crazies, to serve as such a migration corridor. But, Gatchell said, “the animals didn’t read their plan.”

The construction of roads to private inholdings in the Crazies has some precedent. In the late 1970s, Gatchell said, the Forest Service granted an easement and a road was bulldozed up the Cottonwood Creek drainage to reach a private cabin. Before that, a road was bulldozed up Big Timber Canyon to reach a mining claim. Gatchell said that hikers who head up the trail from Half Moon Campground can still see a railroad flatcar that once served as a bridge across Big Timber Creek.

Since those roads were built, the Forest Service adopted the 2001 Roadless Rule, designed to prevent new roads in inventoried roadless areas like the Crazies. According to Gatchell, though, it’s not enough.

“The Roadless Rule is nothing,” he said. “It’s the weakest protection possible. The Forest Service needs to make a clear commitment, so the future ranger, whoever it is, can say, ‘We can’t grant an easement for a new road.’”

The Roadless Rule has exceptions, Gatchell said, for existing rights of access and use, which could include private inholdings. The rule could also be overturned by the Trump administration, he said, whereas if it’s written into the forest plan, the Forest Service itself would have to amend the plan before allowing a road easement in the Crazies.

Though many past and current Crazy Mountain landowners have preserved the wilderness character of the mountains’ interior, Gatchell said, there’s no guarantee that future owners will do the same.

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Stacy Bragg, executive co-chair of the motorized-use advocacy group Citizens for Balanced Use, doesn’t want to see more roads in the Crazies, either. He also doesn’t want to see a designated wilderness area.

Bragg, a fifth-generation Montanan who said his great-great grandfather hit the first major gold strike in the Absarokas’ Emigrant Gulch, and who still owns part of the original family homestead in Paradise Valley, said he fears his heritage of forest use is at risk.

“If it goes wilderness, that closes it down,” Bragg said. “I see it as just another way to close people out.”

Bragg says the Crow’s historical connection to the Crazies doesn’t justify special consideration in how the mountains are managed.

“I could say I had a grandfather who came up through the Crow reservation — does that mean I get to tell them, ‘clean up your garbage’ or ‘fix your houses because it’s starting to look bad’?” he asked. “We all have some kind of spiritual connection to this place.”

“Their comments are probably important and valid, but this is federal land, for the public,” he continued. “This is what it is now — it’s not going backwards.”

Last week, Custer Gallatin National Forest leadership sat down with Crow tribal leadership to hear the tribe's call for recognition of the Crow's historical and spiritual connection to the Crazy Mountains. Mariah Leuschen-Lonergan, public affairs specialist for the Custer Gallatin plan revision, said the Crow expressed their desire to see the Crazy Mountains protected, but that the meeting did not get into specifics.

“What that may become as far as designations [in the forest plan] is yet to be seen,” Leuschen-Lonergan said. “We will continue to have formal consultation.”

Under the formal consultation process, which is ensconced in Forest Service policy for forest plan revisions, tribes are not constrained to the public comment period, she said, and consultation will continue until the Forest Service issues a decision.

The Forest Service expects to present a plan and environmental impact statement next spring, to be followed by an objections process and a final decision in the fall of 2020.