

My thoughts on the Wilderness Proposals for the Cherokee National Forest By Rick Harris

I have had a lot of trouble trying to decide what is the right answer to this situation. There are strong pros and cons to the wilderness proposal. An alternative approach suggested by George Owen and supported by Ken Jones and Clayton Pannell is to have the Upper Bald River Wilderness Study Area designated as a National Scenic Area (NSA) or a National Recreation Area (NRA). They support this proposal primarily to allow us to maintain the trails in this area with chainsaws. The wilderness supporters propose that the boundary for the proposed Upper Bald River Wilderness Area exclude the Stateline Trail (Benton MacKaye Trail from Sandy Gap to Sledrunner Gap), but there is no guarantee that the final boundaries will indeed exclude this stretch of trail. However, the wilderness area would definitely include the Benton MacKaye Trail from Sledrunner Gap down Brookshire Creek, then up the Bald River to the top of Sugar Mountain, a total of 5.7 miles. This section would continue to need to be maintained with crosscut saws. This section currently must be so maintained since it is a Wilderness Study Area. Jeff Hunter, who presented the wilderness proposal at the September CHC meeting, is responsible for maintenance of the BMT from Sledrunner Gap down Brookshire Creek to its junction with the Bald River. I am responsible for the BMT from there on up the Bald River to the top of Sugar Mountain.

An example of a National Scenic Area is the Columbia River Gorge NSA. An example of a National Recreation Area is the Mount Rogers NRA in southern Virginia. In general, NSA and NRA do not allow mining and may not allow logging, but do often allow motorized equipment and roads. Both are designated by Congress. I say "in general", because a NRA or NSA can indeed permit logging if it is written into the bill. For example, the Mount Rogers NRA does allow logging and logging has occurred in this area. But a wilderness bill clearly can never permit logging or mining. Wilderness Areas are roadless, do not allow logging or mining and do not allow any mechanical transport or motorized tools. Wilderness areas are designated by Congress as well.

Here is how I see the pros and the cons for a wilderness designation versus a National Scenic or Recreation Area:

Wilderness Areas:

Pros:

- Protected by an act of Congress, thus very unlikely to ever be reversed
- Prevents logging or mining or any extractive resource activity
- No new roads are permitted and old roads are closed
- No 4-wheelers, no bicycles

- Greatest level of protection

Cons:

- Does not allow use of chainsaws or gas-powered brush cutters to maintain trails
- Even though the Wilderness Act does allow chain saws to clear trails after a fire or other natural catastrophe, this has seldom been allowed.

National Scenic Area or National Recreation Area:

Pros:

- Protected by an act of Congress, thus very unlikely to ever be reversed
- Usually prevents mining and might exclude logging, but this is not always the case (for example, the Mount Rogers NRA does allow logging)
- Roads are permitted
- Chain saws and gas-powered brush cutters are permitted to maintain trails
- High level of protection

Con:

- 4-wheelers might be permitted, if written into the bill
- Bicycles might be permitted, if written into the bill
- Logging or other resource extraction activities might be permitted, if written into the bill, as has been done in the Mount Rogers NRA. Several other examples of logging in NRAs also exist.

So, what could happen is that we might put a NSA or NRA proposal forth which does not allow 4-wheelers, bikes, logging or mining, or rock harvesting or the like, but when it gets to Congress, the advocates of those activities might use their very great lobbying strength to get these activities written into the final bill which gets voted on. Then, if it is passed, we are stuck. We now have the ability to use chainsaws, but we might see 4-wheelers, bikes, logging or rock harvesting occur in the area we intended not to have these activities. This scares me. I know how strong the lobbying groups for these are. And in this time of a strong push for fully using our national “resources” and for “multi-use recreation”, these lobbyists just might succeed.

So in sum, I am all for using chainsaws to maintain trails, but not at the expense of potentially allowing logging, mining, rock harvesting, 4-wheelers or bikes in these areas. So I am willing to maintain my section of the BMT in the Upper Bald River with crosscut saw in order to assure this does not happen. I am also willing to help on other trails in the wilderness as well. I think we should though work hard to assure the BMT between Sandy Gap and Sledrunner Gap remains outside the wilderness area boundaries.

Right now, however, I am not crosscut saw certified. So I have to obtain my crosscut certification (as well as my chain saw certification). This I will do and I will push FOR wilderness designation in the Upper Bald River area.

I strongly propose that the Cherokee Hiking Club support the wilderness proposals as described by Jeff Hunter at our September club meeting, including the designation of the Upper Bald River WSA as wilderness and that we not support any less protective sort of designation for this area.

I would also like to make a few comments about other concerns expressed at the September meeting.

1. **That in wilderness areas, group size is limited to 10.** I have looked into this. Some wilderness management plans allow larger groups and some have no limits. This is something which would be designated in the wilderness management plan for the Upper Bald River after discussion with affected groups. However, I favor some restrictions. Large groups are noisy and difficult to keep together and under control. I know this from my Boy Scout experience of 29 years with Troop 6 in Cincinnati. We always break up into groups of 10-12 or less, just for these reasons. We just take different routes. This actually is a good way to meet the physical needs of the group. One route can be easier than a second route. A person can choose whether he/she wants to take the easier or the harder route.
2. **That the Forest Service is under some obligation to recommend areas for designation as wilderness.** The USFS generally will recommend for consideration roadless areas or areas which could become wilderness if we let them recover from past abuses. But they are not obligated to do so. In fact, some forest service areas are resistant to designating wilderness areas in their region. The Cherokee National Forest of the USFS originally recommended the Upper Bald River be designated as wilderness in 2004, when it was made a Wilderness Study Area. The USFS recommends this area be designated wilderness to this day. The majority of proposals for wilderness are put forth not by the USFS, but by private citizen groups pushing for wilderness areas in their local area. About 70% of Americans are in favor of more wilderness on repeated surveys by the USFS and other survey groups.
3. **That campsites and trails have been closed by the USFS in wilderness areas.** Yes, some campsites have been closed, but not because of some requirement that relates to wilderness designation. These campsite and trail closures occur both in and out of wilderness areas. These campsites were closed due to overuse, to allow the areas to recover vegetation. Or campsites might be closed because they are poorly situated, such as too close to a trail, a road, or a creek. Trails might be closed if they are not maintained and they become dangerous. We need more volunteers to do trail maintenance. We users of the trails should be getting out there more to open up poorly maintained trails in and out of the

wilderness areas. If we use them and don't help maintain them, then we may lose them. I can't tell you how many times there have been only 2 or 3 people on a trail maintenance trip—just Ken, Clayton and myself.

4. **Wilderness designation limits access.** Hikers, backpackers and horseriders as well as hunters and fishermen are allowed access. Bikes, 4-wheelers, and vehicles are not permitted access (yeah!!!). Also, hand-drawn carriages are not permitted. So the deer hunters who like to bring in their supplies for a weekend of deer hunting on the Brookshire Trail to the campsite one mile in from the Bald River Road would have to hand carry in their stuff or carry in their stuff using their horses. I can't get too bummed out over this situation. So, yes, there is some limitation of access, but I feel this is the way it should be.

And remember that the boundary decision process is an ongoing process with input from all groups (USFS, us and other users). Jeff Hunter's group is supporting setting the boundary downslope from the Stateline Trail so this long section of the BMT can be maintained using chain saws. The Benton MacKaye Trail Association supports this plan as well and has unanimously voted to support the wilderness proposals put forth by Jeff, even though they are the one group most affected by the wilderness proposals being put forth. The BMT passes already through an awful lot of already designated wilderness in Georgia, Tennessee and North Carolina. The new proposals will only add to the sections of the trail which will have to be maintained with crosscuts and swingblades. Also, the decision about size of groups permitted in the wilderness is open to discussion. If our club ends up supporting the wilderness proposals, we need to push for locating the BMT between Sandy Gap and Sledrunner Gap OUTSIDE of the wilderness boundary. Also, if we want to suggest a particular group size limit, we should do so.