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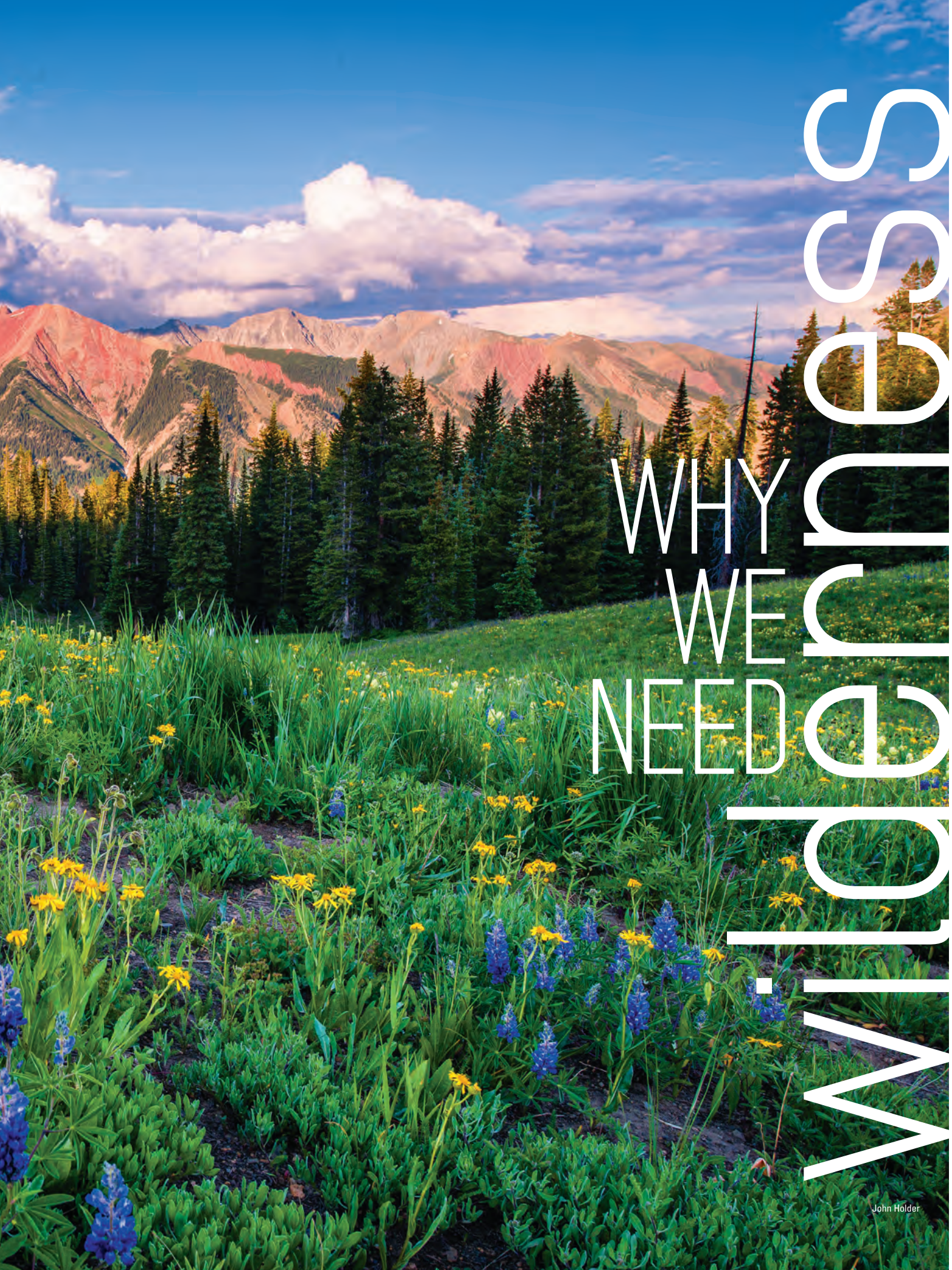
complimentary

Wilderness

WHY WE NEED



John Holder

Raynor Czerwinski

J.C. Leacock

By Molly Murfee

The irony of running a program that preserves open space from indoors behind a glaring computer is not lost on me. Eerie electronic vibrations emanate from the screen, probably disrupting my own force field. The crazy machine whirs at me, as if trying to take flight or project its self-importance. My ass pools like lead in the seat of my chair. Through the skylight above my desk, I see leaves twisting in the light breeze. A robin teases me from the aspen branch, cocking its head back and forth in search of worms below, then flaunts its freedom by zipping off into the blueness of a summer's sky that is leaking onto my computer keys.

I can't take it.

My back hurts. My neck hurts. My heart hurts.

I whip my control back from the pulsing contraption in front of me and press the "off" button with a "take that" cackle and cuss words that would embarrass my mother.

My backpack stays well supplied for just such occasions. I add a couple of energy bars and a peanut butter sandwich, top off my water, leave a note for my honeybun and screech off in my truck as fast as 15 m.p.h. will allow.

"What have we done?" I mutter, rolling down my windows so the wind may have its way with me. I breathe down into my toes, blowing out all the crap of modern life, its materialistic obsessions and unreasonably fast pace. Of the more more more and bigger bigger bigger. Of the buildings with their isolating walls and stuffy air polluted with coughs and farts and yesterday's anxieties about tax returns and health insurance. Of the refrigerator's hum and the garbage truck's beeping. Of cars and pavement and the ridiculousness of street sweepers in a place this close to the dust of the wild. Of hammers and backhoes and the infernal racket that signals "progress." Excel spreadsheets, endless emails, community-bludgeoning Facebook posts, soul-sucking meetings, short-sighted politics and bureaucratic paperwork trail behind me in a turbulent wake. So much toxic flotsam and jetsam, expelled like sewage from a cruise ship too long at sea.

On the dirt road to my salvation, much of the swill is jarred out of me by cavernous potholes. At the trailhead, I swing on my backpack and slam the truck door behind

me, marching away from the last chunk of modern industrialization I'm going to see for a while.

At first I practically run, just to make sure nothing and no one has followed me. But after a couple of turns up the trail, with a glance over my shoulder, I finally slow down.

Stop.

I inhale a breath that now goes beyond my toes, sending tendrils into the cool earth, exhale a softer air that laces out from my lips like a plea. I breathe in the sunshine, chin tilted to the sky, pulling those golden rays into my lungs. I breathe in silence. Stillness. Solitude. I breathe in the wing beats of bees as they busy from sunflower to sunflower. I touch the fringy stamens, dusting my fingertips with pollen, rolling it between pointer and thumb until the topography of my own prints is full of it, touch it to my tongue to taste what the bees taste. The crystalline creek to my right burbles as the water spills over boulders and spirals in eddies. A white-crowned sparrow flits through the high alpine meadow, its whistling song winding through the pristine air like a silver ribbon. I smell the green musky pungency of the willow shading the creek, the fullness radiating from the Engelmann spruce bark, its scent released by the caress of warmth. I evaporate into the essence of cleanness. Of greenness. Of openness. Of a "less" that is pregnant with connection, realness and right importance.

For the first time in days, my eyes gaze beyond a space two feet in front of me. They linger over the folds and creases in the hillsides, take in the moving variance that is life unencumbered by man-made contraptions, soak in the multitudinous color palette. Effervescent emerald. Drenched fuschia. Ethereal periwinkle. Luxuriant purple. All set against an implausible blue.

This sensory explosion and heart-plumping response is part of human's evolutionary history, for 99% of our existence we lived as hunter-gatherers. As we look out onto the verdant hills, alive with bees and flowering and pollination, as we drink in an environment that is diverse, healthy, ripe with food and water and shelter potential, our modern interpretation of this as an "aesthetic" experience is actually our genetic history telling us – yes. This is a place where

life thrives. Each sight, sound, taste, feel and smell is a clue that leads us to both medicine and meal.

Harvard entomologist and two-time Pulitzer Prize winner Edward O. Wilson purports that this genetic-cultural encoding from our hunter-gatherer history remains in our genes, despite generations of city habitation. It creates what he calls "biophilia," or the innate affiliation human beings have to other living organisms and processes – in other words, to nature in all of its glorious diversity.

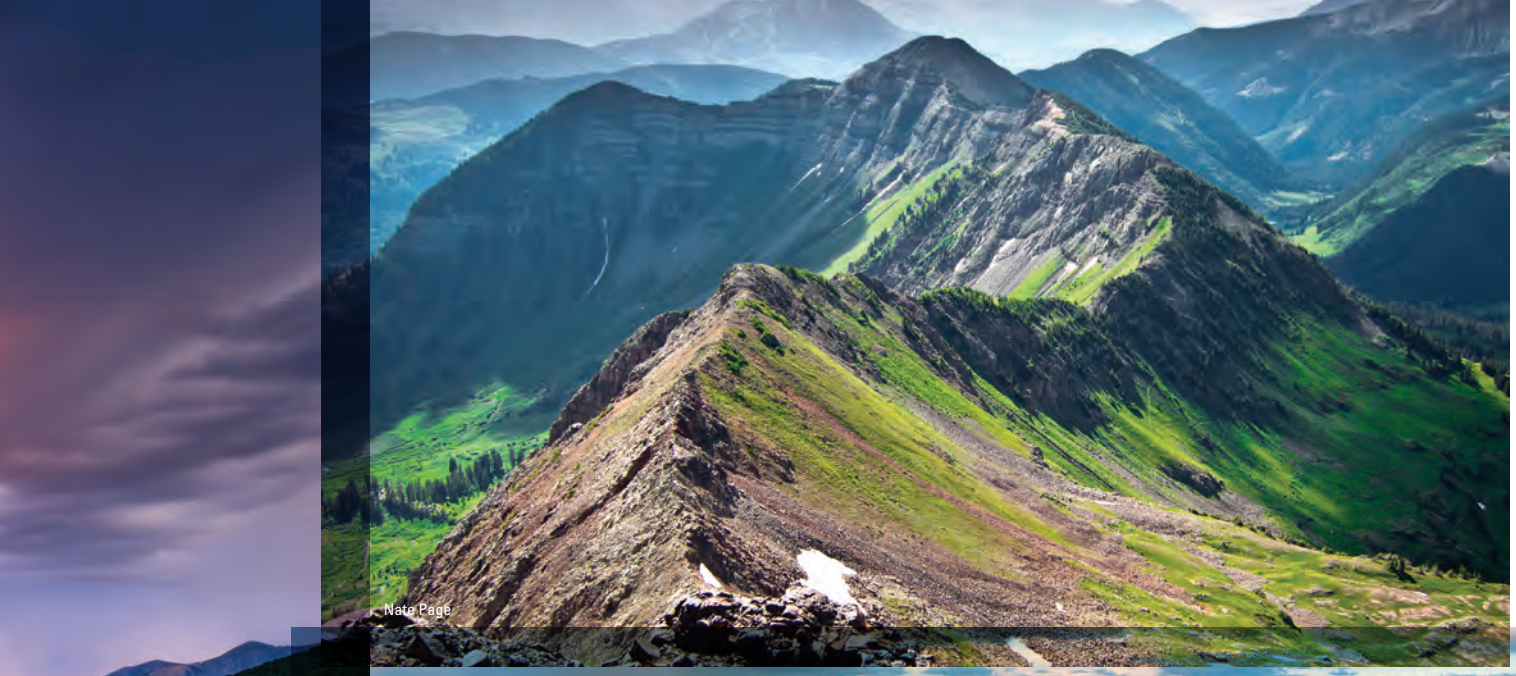
Stephen Kellert, professor at the Yale University School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, dissects our biophilia response even more. He has found that this sense of awe and fascination, with the resulting tension release, relaxation and peace of mind, is derived from an intimate experience of nature's diversity and complexity arising from eons of natural selection.

As hunter-gatherers our observational skills were paramount to survival. Even today if we spend the time noticing species interconnectedness, we discover kinships and affiliations and find our place as a part of the whole. Knowing of life's complexities fosters reverence and loyalty. Our loyalty to maintain that which sustains us leads to cooperation and altruism. A sense of spiritual significance awakes. With all our human needs met – from physical to social to spiritual – we gain psychological well-being, identity and confidence produced by the conviction of an ultimate order and meaning in life.

And that's when we begin to care. The importance of conservation arises when we realize not only the physical, but also the emotional, cognitive and spiritual needs nature fulfills within us.

If we are to save anything – a species, ecosystem, chunk of land, the planet or even ourselves – we must first love that thing. Create a heartstring to it. Only then will we fight for it. I don't know how to realize this relationship, and its importance, except through actual physical connection.

The numbers make it difficult, however. We have already exceeded the ability of our planet to provide with more than seven billion humans living on its surface. Colorado's population alone will increase up to five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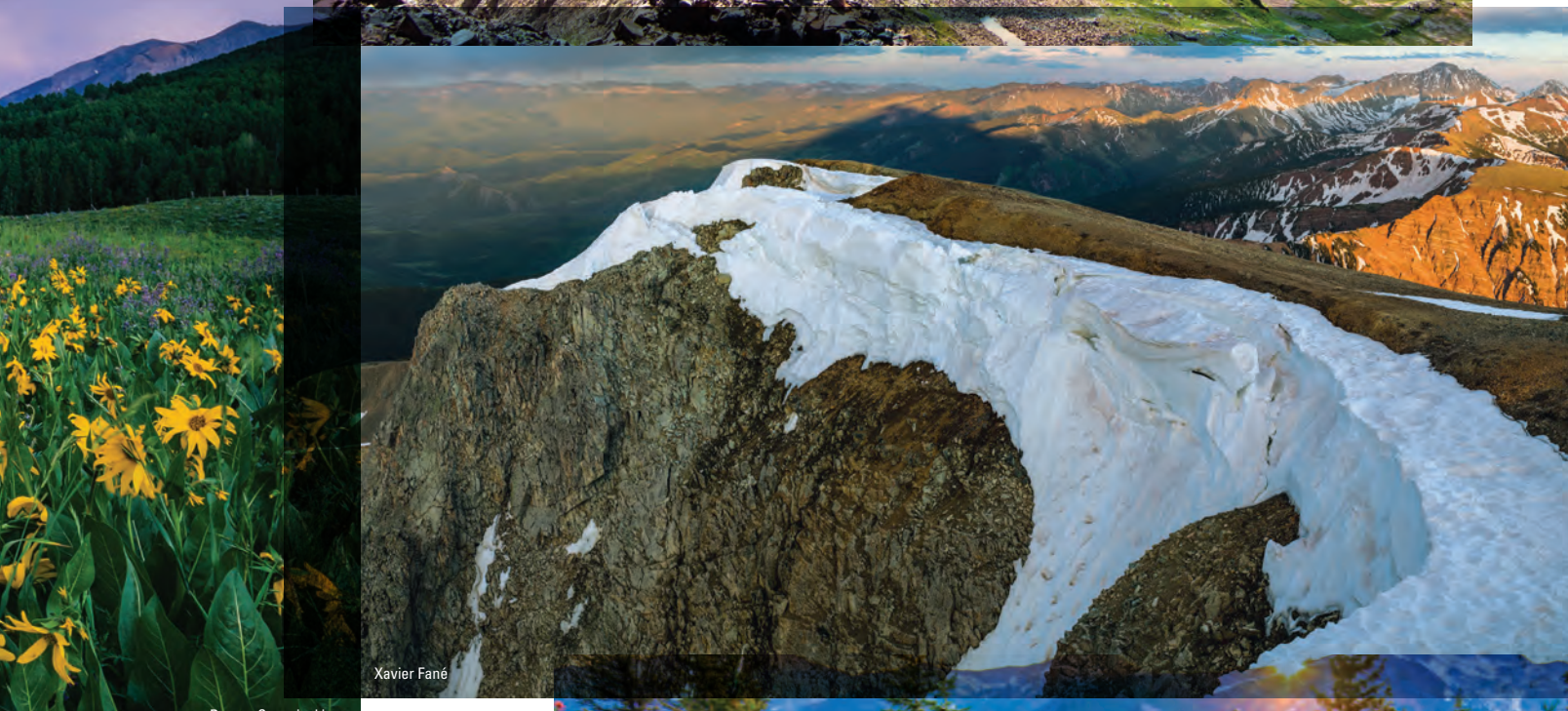
Xavier Fané

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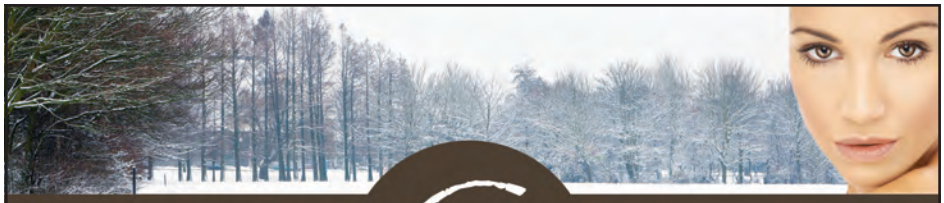
million in the next three decades. The United States is seeing more than 1.6 billion visits to the outdoors per year. The National Forest that surrounds us here in Gunnison County experiences 3.4 million visitors annually.

We are crawling over each other to get a piece of the outdoors. And we're having an impact.

Outdoor adventure has become fashionable, with magazines, blogs, websites and social media proclaiming the "Top 10 Secret Hot Spots," the carrying capacity of those hot spots be damned. Gear brands tout the latest and greatest products that will protect us from getting lost, or getting bunions, or getting hypothermia in a hailstorm.

So we load ourselves up with more,



bigger, better and latest and "does this backpack make my ass look fat?" and "is this color in style?" We head into the woods, reading our GPS manual along the way, checklist of hot spots in hand, searching for that wilderness experience with a million of our closest friends. And hurry. We've only got two days.

Our clamoring has us hiking and biking on each other's heel and pedal, panting down each other's necks on the trail. Our backcountry is becoming littered with toilet paper and goo wrappers. Tire tracks mar the delicate high-alpine tundra, fire rings scar our mountain meadows, campsite areas are as populated as subdivided neighborhoods. Soon there will be little untrammeled land to enjoy. Through its commodification, it will be burned, occupied and eradicated.

Somewhere along the way, we've forgotten the point. We've lost the ability to sense or be aware of that innate attraction to nature that probably pushed us to read the blog about hot spots in the first place. Biophilia.

What we really need, more than bragging rights or looking cool or being in the hippest new place, is to Just. Stop. Moving. Be silent. Be still. Be alone. Be vulnerable. And then just listen. Watch. There is so much to hear without the noise of a civilization on hyperdrive grinding in our eardrums. So much to see when our noses aren't pasted into our hand-held devices.

Extraordinary beauty slams us into the present moment. It empties our minds until our only focal point is that one thing. We're immersed in the blue iridescence of a full-moon bath, the blush of the sun on a vermilion peak. Our eyes are wide open to our surroundings, that which gives us food, air, spirit. We become in that instant a part of our world because we are so fully engaged in a deep gaze with it.

We need wilderness for more than "just" the preservation of species, ecosystems, wildlife corridors, recreational opportunities or medicinal possibilities. We need it for more than "just" the preservation of clean air, water and soil. Our societal ills of excess are not only causing the destruction of our land and pollution of our air and water, they are also making us depressed, sad, anxious and stressed as we struggle to keep up. And so, we also need wilderness for what author Wallace Stegner describes as a spiritual resource, for the "incomparable sanity it can bring… into our insane lives."

We need to be in wilderness for that primal reconnection – the biophilia that still glimmers in the genetic memory of our cells.

We need to feel the real rhythm of a place – of sun and moon, blooming and dying – instead of a day choked with the demands of iPhone dayplanners. We need to learn that we don't need so many gadgets, and that screens don't really connect us.

But too often we slam through the wilderness like a carnival ride, then toss aside what it has to teach us like a half-eaten cone of cotton candy. We bring our inconsiderate tendencies with us, and destroy the very thing that supports our truest and deepest needs.

To develop a wildland ethic, we acknowledge the gifts nature gives us – from physical sustenance to spiritual reconnection – to help us curb our hedonism and exercise restraint. We consider the health of the ecosystems we're traveling through and living on, we note our impacts, and we're respectful – focused on sustainability rather than selfish exploitation.

We kindle our sense of awe to give us the perseverance and passion to preserve wild places. We carry in our packs only what we need, and that simplicity can inform our material decisions back in civilization. We tread lightly in the backcountry, which prepares us for exerting a smaller footprint in the front country. We remember the mountain stream that teased us with its laughter and are prudent in our use of its resources. The mutual relationship of the ant and the aspen sunflower reminds us of our interconnectedness with all things, and to maintain right relations with all.

In the introduction of *The Biophilia Hypothesis*, Kellert writes, "The modern onslaught upon the natural world is driven in part by a degree of alienation from nature." The biophilia revolution promises we humans may yet rediscover our love of the natural world and renew our relationship with it. From solitude and silence, from activating our senses in the natural world, we can find answers. Clarity and right values will arise. We can recover reverence, cooperation and a sense of spiritual significance. We can recognize the natural world's role in our very happiness and move toward its preservation. In the process, we just might regain our own sense of sanity. cb

Freelance writer Molly Murfee is also the executive director of 1% for Open Space, a local non-profit that collects voluntary donations from customers of 100-plus participating businesses. These funds are used to permanently protect open space lands in Gunnison County.