



Recreationists along the South Boulder Creek Trail, Boulder Open Space. SCOT RODGERS

# The Battle of Boulder

*In which good intentions combine  
with contrary expectations to produce  
a troubling irony*

By Dyan Zaslowsky

**T**he South Boulder Creek Trail's Bob-o-Link segment is the pastoral route between subdivisions blanketing the tan prairie of the southeast side of Boulder, Colorado, and the city's grandest community center. The flat trail, situated by the creek and on the edge of a pasture, meanders through a narrow corridor of tall cottonwoods that in summer shelter visitors from the intense sun. Apart from serving as a convenient path between the two destinations, the trail's placid beauty—same enough for supervised toddlers to explore—has made it a favorite destination for urban hikers, horseback riders, joggers, dog walkers, picnickers, and mountain bikers. I last hiked the South Boulder Creek Trail on a cold day, accompanied by my daughters and our Scottish terriers

Victoria and Albert were leashed. Hilary and Ariel roamed freely, bounding ahead and back again to generate warmth and excitement. Through the bare cottonwood branches and the air coated in an icy film I could still make out the Flatirons on the west side of town: three red-rock planes aslant like giant appliances left to cool.

The Flatirons lend immediate drama to Boulder's skyline, but these formations are only a suggestion of the wild majesty that lies farther west, straddling the Continental Divide: Rocky Mountain National Park, the contiguous Indian Peaks Wilderness Area, and the proposed James Peak Wilderness Area are all within 40 miles of the city. Such vast opportunities to enjoy nature have made Boulder's wilderness-loving residents the staunchest of advocates for the protection of these lands.

But even with so much protected wild land less than an hour away, Boulderites were not satisfied, and in 1967 Boulder became the first city in the country to purchase urban open spaces using the proceeds from a local sales tax. Since then, residents have enthusiastically supported the acquisition of a variety of landscapes both within the city and on its outskirts—tucked into central neighbor-



hood pockets of surprising beauty and naturalness and reaching beyond the city's boundaries in mottled patterns of black-green ponderosa pine forests and golden sweep of grass. The Open Space fund takes in about \$13 million a year to cover the cost of land acquisitions and management and supports a system that has grown to 25,000 acres. It will ultimately total about 33,000 acres.

As long as the Open Space Department concentrated its efforts on adding property to the Boulder system just about everybody considered the sales-tax-funded program the best idea the city ever had. Open Space staff members were regarded as local heroes in their quest for wild lands they could rescue from the sort of destinies real-estate developers, water rights' commissions, and gravel quarry owners might have planned for them. In matters of nature pres-

ervation, few communities in Colorado or elsewhere were as visionary as Boulder.

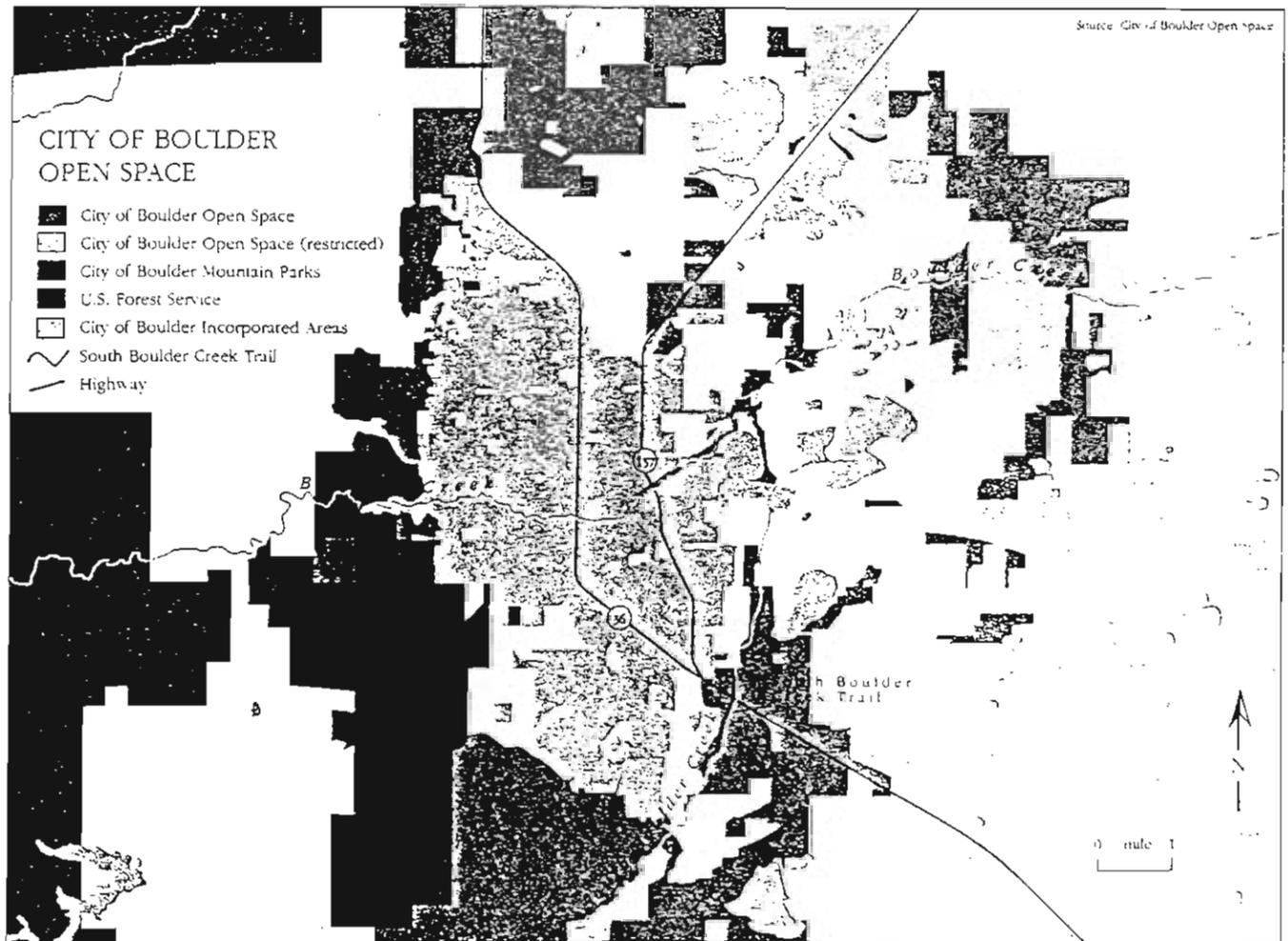
But the popularity of the Open Space Department and system tumbled sharply last year, as the staff shifted its focus from land acquisition to land management. When veteran Open Space director Jim Crain and his staff started to talk about recreational activities that were incompatible with natural area preservation, they unwittingly sparked one of Boulder's bitterest environmental confrontations in years. All last summer, at Boulder city council meetings, Open Space forums, and in the local press, devout, dues-paying environmentalists faced off against devout, dues-paying environmentalists, exposing, as one knowledgeable commentator later put it, "the soft underbelly of the entire environmental movement."

*Boulder's two faces of wildness: on the opposite page, Indian paintbrush blossoms below Elk Tooth in the Indian Peaks Wilderness Area; below, a rock-climber reaches his goal, the city spreading out in the distance behind him.*

OPPOSITE PAGE: GLENN RANDALL, BELOW: DAVE SCHIEFELBEIN

The Boulder controversy and its flawed resolution demonstrate a troubling irony: the traditional industrial exploiters of western ecology and landscape have taken on a new and unlikely partner—recreation-seeking environmentalists. So asserts Gary Holthaus, head of the Boulder-based Center for the American West, at any rate. Environmentalists, says Holthaus, are just as likely as anybody to operate according to what he crankily calls a "Shell Oil mindset": a tendency to define land's value in terms of what it can be used for.

Contrarily, in Boulder and other booming, nature-loving towns where drillers and diggers and loggers and ranchers have virtually disappeared from the scene, many, if not most, of the recreating hordes insist that they understand what it means to love the land while doing it no harm. So say the baby-packing hikers, bikers, power-walkers, picnickers, horseback riders, Walkman-rigged joggers, and moms who love scrolling beside shade-dappled creeks with kids and dogs. So say people just like me. And, perhaps, just like you, too.



MAP BY BRIDGET SNYDER

*In Chautauqua Park, an owner walks two of the many, many dogs that take their recreation in Boulder's Open Space units. In the background are the Flatirons, another view of which appears on the opposite page.*

BELOW: SCOT ROIXGERS OPPOSITE PAGE: GLENN RANDALL



I want my children to appreciate nature up close and personal," Suzanne Webel told me over the phone soon after my last visit to South Boulder Creek. "If children enjoy nature, then when they grow up and become taxpayers, they'll continue to support programs for open space." Webel, a geologist who has lived in Boulder for twenty years, belongs to several national environmental organizations and a few local ones. Articulate and environmentally aware, Webel heads the Friends of the South Boulder Creek Trail, a group formed to protect the trail's heavily traveled Bob-o-Link segment a few minutes from her house. The group vigorously defended the trail against attempts to turn it into a high-speed concrete bikeway and often volunteered to help Open Space staff fill in the ruts and widening mud sinks that ruin the trail's well-used pedestrian and equestrian parts.

But then Webel learned that the Open Space Department did not want her group's help. In truth, Open Space director Jim Crain did not even want the trail, which had begun as an undesignated, or "social," trail years ago and had grown into a nagging headache. The department worried about how much South Boulder Creek's wetlands, one of the few to be found in the city, had been degraded by heavy hiking, bicycle, and dog traffic and decided to move the trail from beneath the cottonwood canopy by the creek into a sunny meadow 20 yards away. The decision seemed a routine one and reflected the department's commitment not only to South Boulder Creek but to its new

"Long-Range Management Policies," which asserted that henceforth "preservation of natural ecosystems will take priority in decision-making." The draft also stated that "In conflicts between trail locations, trail users and the protection of the natural environment, the natural environment shall be given greater weight. When environmental impacts are unacceptable, trails may be closed and removed or relocated."

Webel told me she "saw red" when she stumbled across these words in the department's long-range policies draft. "We the taxpayers bought these lands, and suddenly we were hearing this very strong message that they could be closed off if their use was too high." The Open Space staff was acting "like the worst kind of environmental elitists," she said. "They want to go into a place to manage it, but they won't allow anybody else in to enjoy it."

Webel continued: "Did Open Space have any data to prove they needed to move the trail? No. I was told that 'common sense' dictated their action. Look, I am all in favor of helping wildlife as much as is practical, but I am not in favor of degrading the quality of peoples' recreation when there is no good reason to. Open Space is trying to manage this like a wilderness area. This is not a wilderness area, and it hasn't been a wilderness for 150 years."

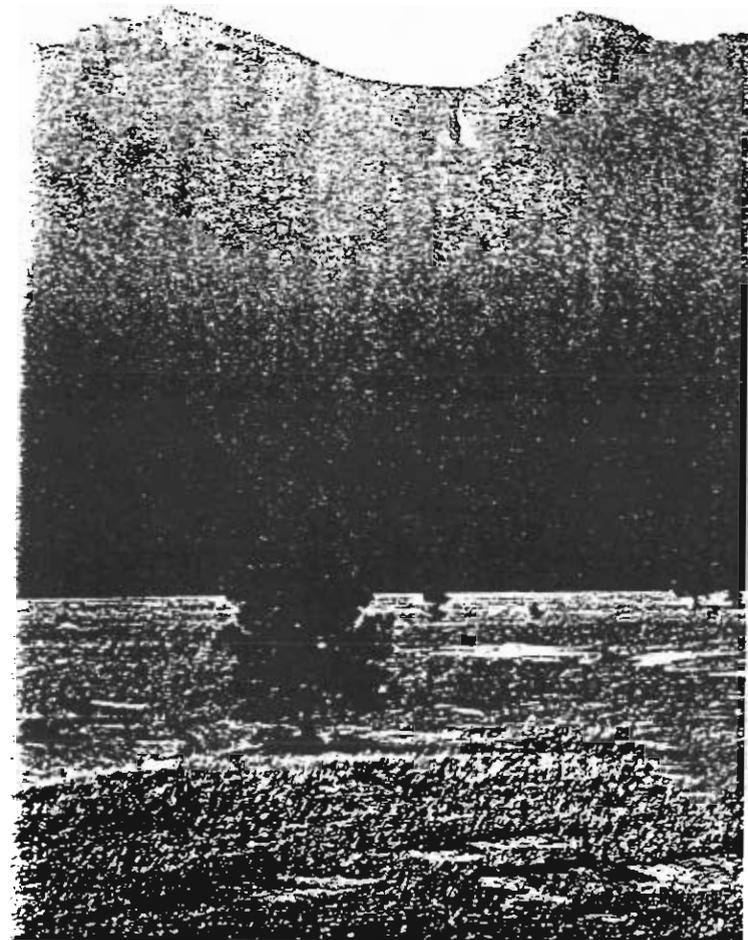
Given the management priorities outlined in the Open Space's long range plan, Webel viewed South Boulder Creek Trail as a precedent-setting case. "If Open Space was successful in shutting off this trail," she said, "than the rest would fall like dominoes."

Guy Burgess, a specialist in conflict resolution, also saw danger lurking in the Open Space's new policy. "This is a conflict between social ecologists and deep ecologists," said Burgess. "The deep ecologists are the sort of people who lecture us that human society is a cancer on the planet. We social ecologists see ourselves as a part of the natural environment and believe that the footprints of humans have as much right to be on a trail as the footprints of deer and elk."

To Burgess, the Open Space Department was guilty of "overreaching" in its attempts to restore South Boulder Creek's riparian habitat by removing people. "The political implications of shutting people out will be devastating," he warned. "The whole key to expanding and enlarging the wilderness constituency is to make parks enjoyable to people. You can't put up a bunch of signs saying this place is closed. If you do, there will come a point when support for these parks will drop off or disappear."

Many Boulderites shared Webel's and Burgess's fear that the Open Space staff cared more about nature than it did about people. The Boulder *Camera's* editorials weighed in with the opinion that the Open Space Department had gone too far in trying to make nature preservation its goal





*Left: El Dorado Mountain from Dowdy Draw, Boulder Open Space. "I am very worried that we haven't gotten the preservation part of our job right yet," says Open Space director Jim Crain. "We can't just continue allowing all the impacts."*

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moaned the installation of a split-rail fence along the creek, which increased the area's artificiality (although it did at least discourage people and dogs from cooing up to the creek).

While the Friends of South Boulder Creek generally applaud such improvements, Jim Knopf, a landscape architect, was so annoyed with the Open Space Department that he resigned as head of its Board of Trustees. "There is," he grumbled, "an anger or a spitefulness in that trail."

**T**o see in a trail's pitch and symmetry the ill-will of its builders suggests that relations between the Open Space Department's supporters and its critics—call them deep ecologists versus social ecologists—are not yet smoothed out. The department's allies still affirm that preservation of native habitat within an urban setting is a necessary and possible pursuit, requiring modest sacrifices. It is also what the Open Space system was originally intended to do, according to Ricky Weiser, a Shakespearean actress and scholar who has lived in Boulder for forty years and helped write the Open Space charter amendment. While she conceded that "passive recreation" was one of the eight purposes originally cited in the Open Space charter, she claimed that recreation was never meant to be on an equal footing with preservation of landscape and natural habitat. At the height of the South Boulder Creek controversy Weiser took that position against Weibel in a radio debate.

"We believed that passive recreation was only acceptable as long as it was not destructive to an area that deserved preservation or restoration," Weiser later told me. "The needs and joys of people who hike by streams need to be tempered with the needs of riparian wildlife."

"I'd like to think that lots of people in this community would be willing to forego some of their personal pleasures for the benefit of nature," said Tim Hogan, assistant curator of the University of Colorado Herbarium and head of the Boulder County Nature Association. "But Boulder's lycra-clad, aerobic yuppies want access to their playgrounds, above all. Everything seems to rest on the idea that the individual has a right to free access."

Another Boulderite who favored moving the South Boulder Creek Trail away from the wetland is environmental attorney Joni Teter. She said she has been amazed at the difference in the condition of natural areas where people have been allowed to hike and places where they have been kept out altogether. A perfect example is the Rocky Mountain Arsenal, a former weapons manufacturing site east of Denver that was closed to the public for about fifty years. Although it is believed to be one of the most toxic waste sites in the country, the arsenal has remained otherwise pristine without the stream of human traffic.

in an urban setting. "Open Space for People" declared one headline.

"Hikers, horseback riders, dog owners, bird watchers—the people most likely to value and understand nature—are cast as the enemy, branded as selfish and irresponsible," complained one columnist. Open Space management should include an "emphasis on passive recreational use of the land," concluded the city's Parks and Recreation Advisory Board. Even the Boulder chapter of the Sierra Club opposed the direction set forth in the Open Space's long-range management plan. "We believe the purpose of the Open Space system is less to foster a kind of urban wilderness than to provide a balance of recreation and protection," asserted a Sierra Club resolution.

The issue of preservation versus recreation on Boulder's Open Space grew so divisive that the fate of the Bob-o-Link segment was taken out of the hands of the Open Space staff and given to the Boulder City Council. In a vote of nine to one, the council elected to reverse the Open Space Department's decision. The trail was to be left where it was. The council also adopted recommendations by Weibel and her supporters that demanded intense maintenance of the existing trail. The Open Space staff, which had planned to reduce the human impact, was instead directed to expand the Bob-o-Link parking lot, widen the trail, and harden its surface so that it could better accommodate recreationists. The staff did succeed in having bicyclists excluded from the improved trail, but privately they be-

It is so rich in bird life that it has been made a wildlife refuge, open only for carefully managed bird and wildlife observation. Said Teeter of this kind of phenomenon: "I have noticed that in large numbers, people are no better than the grazing cattle that many of us have always objected to."

The numbers of people are large indeed. A comprehensive visitation study conducted for the first time in 1994 estimated that Boulder's 25,000 acres of city Open Space received almost 1.5 million visitors that year, with more than 260,000 visits to the Bob-o-Link segment of the South Boulder Creek trail alone. The estimates alarmed Jim Crain, particularly after he compared them with the three million visitors logged at nearby Rocky Mountain National Park—an area more than ten times the size of Boulder's Open Space system.

Crain was convinced that a reaffirmation of first principles for the system was

needed. "We've been successful in building public support and in acquiring land and in providing recreation," he said. "But when we confront numbers like those in the visitation study, I am very worried that we haven't gotten the preservation part of our job right yet. To do that we have to figure out what the human carrying capacity of these lands is. We can't just continue allowing all the impacts that go on until we figure this out. We have to decide what we want these lands to look like in the future because we're making all the decisions for our children right now."

The visitation study confirmed that jogging, hiking, dog walking, and biking account for about 75 percent of the activities on Open Space. Crain questioned whether these forms of passive recreation were compatible with Open Space's primary effort to preserve native habitat and species. How different were these pastimes from those anticipated by

Open Space's initial supporters? Weiser claimed that she and other founders had thought the Open Space system would primarily foster more sedentary forms of nature study and wildlife observation. Yet today "nature studies" are ranked lowest on the list of activities people engage in on Boulder's Open Space lands. Nature is often treated as a pleasant sideline, rather than as the main event.

And public education is given short shrift. "The Open Space Department should be asking itself, 'How much environmental education can we inspire?'" former Open Space trustee Jim Knopf told me. The need for education certainly is clear, for the signs of ignorance are too easily seen everywhere: trails that have been blazed for personal convenience—even at the risk of fragmenting a delicate ecosystem—and that outnumber official trails; official trails that have been widened to the breadth of a car's lane on a highway; naked, degraded stream banks;

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Between two arms  
of outcropping mudstone  
in a small gully that trails out  
into baked clay flats of  
hardy shadscale and snakeweed.

The mudstone rocks are black  
with a sheen bent into them  
by this solstice sun.  
Hot air ripples, burns eyes,  
bends my gaze down to a point.

To a point!

The blade is perfect,  
flake scars delicate  
and precise with patience,  
knapped from a creamy gray chert.

And what of our traces left here  
for future eyes in a thousand years?  
Broken plastic knives,  
brown beer bottle glass,

a tarnished coin that fell  
amongst black rocks.

—JONATHAN TILL

## Webs

A spider drops from the leaf  
his plumb-line and the strand reflects  
a blue apple, a scarlet sky,  
anything emerald like a child's  
crayoning of the wind.

That's the eye's way to know more  
than the plain green leaf,  
the force in the fruit's fall  
and the earth, tangled in space,  
dangling from the arm of the spider.

—E.G. BURROWS

# Wildsong

## Canyonlands

Long-living earth bones, old beyond caring  
for soft skirts of grass or the comforts of soil,  
bare you are beautiful,  
pared to your essence,  
sculpted by rivers, sanded in winter wind,  
burnished with rain.

Canyon wrens sing with you, long-living earth bones,  
fluted rib songs arcing over the heart,  
needle songs gracing the sky.

Shyly we come to you, long-living earth bones,  
hungry for sunlight and thirsty for stars.  
As with our grandmothers,  
we small creatures hide in your shade  
when the light is too brilliant;  
as to our grandmothers, we small creatures  
offer our pictures of gods.

Serene your worship, long-living earth bones,  
certain and slow and sublime:  
Hum stillness.  
Hold light in matter.  
Teach the true measure of time.

—LINDA BESANT

## Echolocation

All day long you flutter through artificial night;  
hover, sway, wrap furred bodies in leathery shawls  
after aborted flight, cling to false stalactites.  
Do you know when the moon outside is full,  
do you miss the veering, all-out beats  
of easy strength across the lunar face,  
every stroke of wingspan a simple masterpiece?

## Salvation

They are going to  
daylight a river here —  
That's what they call it, noun to verb.  
A stream turned out  
years ago from its channel  
to run in cement tunnels, dank and airless  
till it joined a sewer,  
will be released—to sun, rain, pebbles, mud,  
yellow iris, the sky above it  
and trees leaning over to be reflected!

At night, stars or at least streetlamps  
will gleam in it,  
fish and waterbugs swim again in its ripples;  
and though its course,  
more or less the old one it followed before its  
years of humiliation,  
will pass near shops and the parking lot's  
glittering metallic desert, yet  
this unhoped—for pardon will once more permit  
the stream to offer itself at last  
to the lake, the lake will accept it, take it  
into itself,  
the stream restored will become pure lake.

—D. LEVERTOV

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dog feces left behind by too many of the estimated 500,000 visiting dogs; wildlife, startled or driven out by the canine scent and disturbance; scarred and exposed tree roots; plucked wildflowers; prairie grasses invaded by pines on one side because of years of dedicated fire suppression and choked off by subdivisions on the other. (When, not if, wildfires ignite these drought-stricken, fuel-laden sections, the price of ignorance may be dearer than suspected.)

Still, raw information on the effects of recreational use is hard to come by. Last summer, Suzanne Webel wrote to Boulder's mayor and city council, asserting that "No data are available—in the South Boulder Creek area, or in any other area of the Front Range, or Colorado, or the Rocky Mountains—to indicate wildlife are even inconvenienced by trail use." With regard to South Boulder Creek, at least, she was certainly correct about the

*Right: Indian Peaks Wilderness Area in Roosevelt National Forest, Colorado. "I think we must take care of a native ecosystem where it occurs," says Open Space's David Kuntz.*

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lack of enough data to come to a conclusion one way or the other about impacts. It was in the absence of such information that the Open Space Department had decided to follow conservative management regimes. Meanwhile, the department launched \$34,000 worth of studies that will assess something called "trail effect."

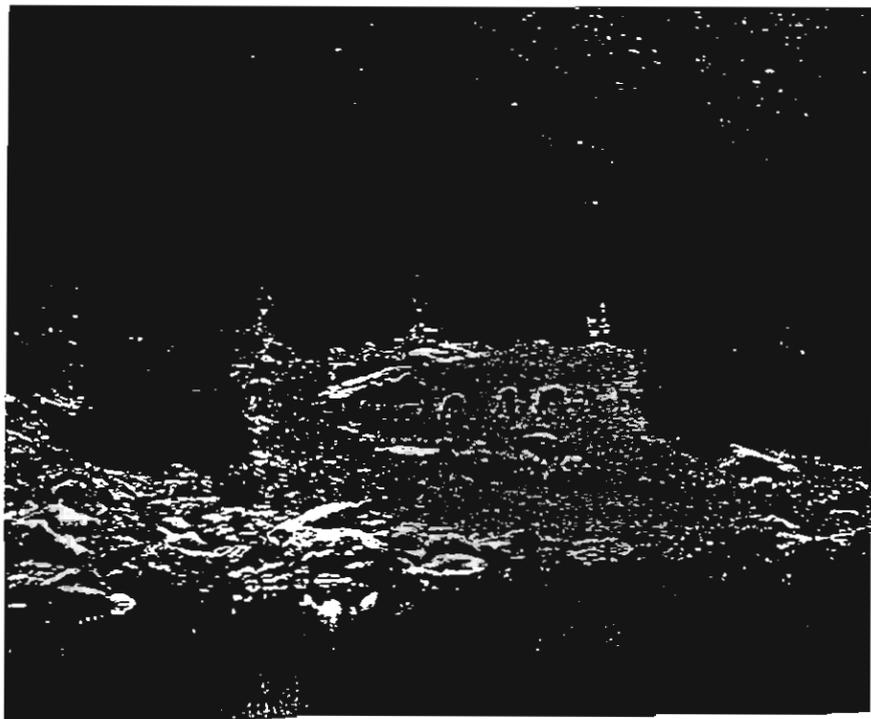
"We have always focused on the detrimental impacts of ranching, grazing, logging, and mining," observed Rick Knight, a Colorado State University wildlife biologist Open Space hired to conduct part of the study. "We've assumed that what urban recreationists did was benign. But since our species has a singular ability to overdo whatever it does, it is nearsighted to assume that environmentalists do no harm." Knight noted that the only studies available on trail effect have been done in Europe and indicated that "simplification"—the "pauperization of wildlife and plants near trails"—could have some significant effect on some species and that the loss of more adaptive, generalist species populations in an area could indicate severe habitat degradation. That is why last spring's accidental discovery by some University of Colorado graduate students could be worrisome. According to Professor Carl Bock, his biology students found that in the vicinity of South Boulder Creek, "One hundred percent of the robins' nests failed to fledge young."

**A**nd still the recreational demands grow: more parking, more fencing, more picnic tables, trash bins, mudless trails, and talk of using Open Space trails as convenient transportation corridors for bicycles. It

is not a problem unique to Boulder, of course; in urban wildland areas all over the country the tension between use and preservation is growing. It is typical of public land users to resist altering their behavior until "the science gets good enough," observed Luther Propst, a nationally known community land-use consultant who heads the Sonoran Institute in Tucson, Arizona. "We ask ranchers, loggers, and miners to do something different on our land or get off it, but when the same issues come up for recreationists, isn't it funny how they react the same way all the other resource users do? You can change the names in these land-use conflicts, but the arguments are always the same."

"People tell me it's impossible to try to put nature first in an urban setting," David Kuntz, City of Boulder Open Space planner, told me during a scouting expedition southwest toward Eldorado Mountain, a more recent Open Space acquisition that he is now studying how to manage. Here lies another potential recreationist wonderland—and another potential fight, for this is a transition zone between montane woodlands and prairie grasslands that Kuntz believes is as diverse in its vegetation and wildlife as any in the nation. "I think we must take care of a native ecosystem where it occurs," he said, "and not leave that job entirely to the national forests and the national parks."

"And yet it's strange, because many people in Boulder will talk and talk about how important it is to save the Amazon rainforest. They forget about their own backyard. It's easy to talk about protecting biological diversity that is far away, but when we tell them there are equally strong reasons to restore or preserve our



own biological diversity, we are told we are unreasonable to try to treat an urban area like a wilderness. Who is supposed to do it in our communities if we don't?"

Some, operating according to their own instincts, are willing to try by rotating themselves off fragile lands. "I'm enough of an environmentalist not to walk on my own property when birds are nesting on those parts of it," said Ricky Weiser. "So to my way of thinking, when an area is overused, you should leave it alone to give it time to rest and be repaired." And Tim Hogan said he no longer hiked in certain heavily visited places around Boulder. "I removed myself from the picture," he said.

Such examples of voluntary absence may be the beginning of what environmental attorney Joni Teter refers to as "a constituency for nonaccess" that could be promoted in the Open Space Department's environmental education efforts. "Nonaccess" in the name of nature preservation is already practiced on thousands of private land trusts, wildlife refuges, and other places with a mandate to protect or restore the area's natural condition. Even some urban Open Space programs have successfully resorted to the promotion of nonaccess; in Seattle, the King County Open Space's Waterways 2000 program took a year to explain to taxpayers that \$15 million of their money would be used to buy land and streams that were critical salmon habitat and would be closed to recreational use. So far, the education seems to have paid off in public support.

And a few miles from where I live, our hometown Mountain Area Land Trust convinced the residents of Evergreen to donate \$200,000 from their own pockets toward the purchase of more than 400 acres of a meadow. We understood at the time we wrote our checks that we would be able to hike on less than half the acreage we had bought, because the meadow was to be preserved as an elk calving range. I have heard some people grumble about this limitation on property rights, but I imagine that most of us still believe we spent our money wisely, despite the constraint on our ownership.

It's a small price to pay, after all, to give the elk their own open space.

DYAN ZASLOWSKY, who has been reporting from the Rocky Mountain region for fourteen years for *The New York Times* and many other publications, is the coauthor of *These American Lands: Parks, Wilderness, and the Public Lands*, recently reissued in a revised and expanded edition by The Wilderness Society and Island Press.

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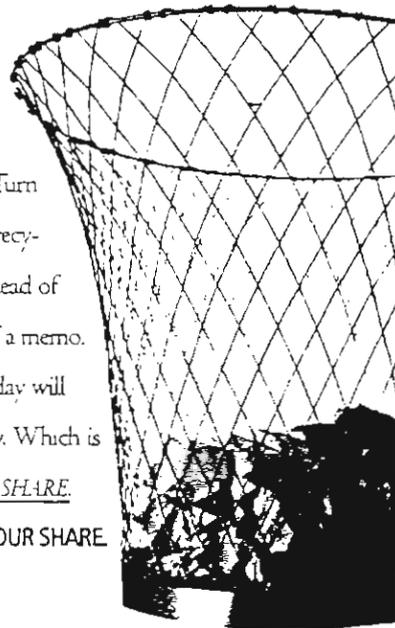
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