

Wild Connections

Celebrating 30 years of
protecting wild lands



Stories and accomplishments over 30 years and in 2024

VOLUNTEERS STEP UP

by Jean Smth, Wild Connections Founder

The January 1995 slide show at the American Mountaineering Center was the first public event that highlighted the need to identify and protect the millions of wild acres located on public lands in the South Platte and Arkansas basins.

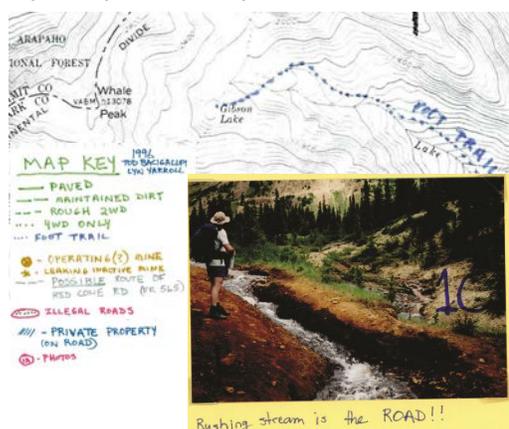
Volunteers stepped up, a steering committee was formed, and we joined the state-wide roadless area inventory coalition to focus on the Pike-San Isabel National Forest.

Now in our 30th year, I want to share how people have shaped Wild Connections.

Mappers

The Steering Committee, with solid support from Enos Mills Sierra Club, Art Smith on finances, and me as chair recruited and trained mappers, conservation experts, regional coordinators and interns.

Of the more than 300 mapping trips, the Tod Bacigalupi - Lyn Yarrol team stands out in my memory. Miles in their truck and on foot in Jefferson, Hall Valley, Big Union, Marmot Peak, and Boreas Pass resulted in some of the best documentation. This was in the days of dead reckoning with compass and paper topo maps, colored pens, and film cameras!



Lyn drew the exquisitely detailed maps. The photo shows toxic runoff from a mine running down the road in Handcart Gulch. Vickie Smith is digitizing the roadless inventory paper files.

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EVOLVING CONNECTIONS

by Lee Patton, Wild Connections volunteer and former Board member

Five years ago, for Wild Connections 25th Anniversary of Landscapes, I summarized my involvement with Wild Connections from its very beginning, when I volunteered for the earliest roadless mapping efforts in the Pike-San Isabel. Neither an activist, naturalist, nor scientist, but a mere teacher, I satirized myself as "Average Citizen Goes Wild," and summarized my involvement with Wild Connections as a board member, ad-hoc mapper, and editor.

Since I left the board and temporarily gave up restoration projects on uneven terrain while I recovered from brain surgery, my involvement with Wild Connections has evolved in a new direction. As I regained my stability on trails, I began to join informational hikes for new perspectives on wilderness characteristics and climate impacts. These now impress me as a critical to Wild Connections' mission.

One late summer day John Sztukowski and Claude Neumann led a monitoring hike in the upper reaches of Tarryall Creek where Wild Connections volunteers had helped close an illegal ATV trail a few seasons before. As I tagged along, I learned the impact of all those volunteers' hard work. John and Claude's familiarity with the past conditions helped me understand the progress achieved — no sign of vehicle intrusion over miles of once eroded, abused roadway already vanishing under tall grasses. In what had been rutted and denuded ATV trail, conifer saplings were already lodging themselves.



Tarryall Creek: Wet men - Claude and Lee and a conifer sapling

I joined an autumn hike led by Misi Ballard into Wildcat Canyon, where the wild South Platte River narrows between rock walls eventually widening as it flows into Cheesman Lake. While the rolling lands above the canyon rim had barely recovered from the devastating inferno of 2002 Hayman Fire, the riparian zone within the canyon remained green and pristine. Our



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Mappers Step Up continued from page 1

Restoration workers

In 2009, we started getting our hands dirty in the “restore” part of our mission. Work day volunteers raked, seeded, built water bars, and placed slash for all eleven projects.

Sheep Creek was challenging! A strenuous hike with heavy packs took volunteers over Breakneck Pass to the site where they seeded and mulched the closed route. Peace and quiet was restored for wildlife in the headwaters of Sheep Creek and the Weston Peak Roadless Area.



John packing a mulch bale up to the site. A family of moose were in the valley wetlands.

Hikers

Since 2005, about 1,000 hikers have explored roadless areas on guided hikes. They are ambassadors for wild lands because they have seen and felt their value.



Heading into Browns Canyon National Monument.

Board members

It would take this whole page to describe how the Steering Committee/Board of Directors have been a moving force in Wild Connections’ growth. You’ve met them on line, at a work day, on a hike, getting a donation receipt, testifying at a hearing, tabling at a community event, viewing a map, giving a slide show for a conservation group. All that in addition to the quarterly Board meetings and monthly committee meetings!

With my gratitude to volunteers, past, present and future.

Photos Misi Ballard, Wendall Day

Evolving Connections, continued from page 1

actual mission was to determine the need for barriers on a much used but illegal river crossing. Four-wheelers and ATVs forded the river on roads the Forest Service closed after the Hayman Fire. Even as we lunched on a bank above the illegal crossing, we witnessed several vehicles slopping through the river, agitating the waters and battering the banks. With input from Wild Connections and other conservationists, the Forest Service is planning a multi-year project to close this crossing with post and cable barriers.



Wildcat Canyon Illegal motorized use

Another well-attended monitoring hike was led by Karl Ford, writer, climate change expert, and former board member, on a ridge near the junction of the North Fork with the main South Platte. We explored a south-facing wooded plateau above the river, where Karl indicated characteristics of climate resilience and potential refugia around us, and we inspected monitoring equipment placed at intervals along the trail. These data loggers recorded subtle changes in temperature and humidity, giving potential warnings for the future of this verdant roadless segment, only a few miles from where wildfire had devastated lands east of Reynolds Ranch Open Space during one drought-stricken March.



Karl describing climate resilience along the S. Platte River

Jim Lockhart led a hike just this past October in Aiken Canyon, a Nature Conservancy preserve just south of Colorado Springs, where we explored the confluence of prairie, piñon scrub land, and montane zones sprawling under the subalpine forests on the ridges above.



Aiken Canyon hikers

With Wild Connections’ guidance, new Colorado vistas opened for me with greater depth than I could gain on my own, renewing my appreciation for the preservation of our wild lands.



Photos John Sztukowski, Jim Lockhart

WINS FOR WILD LANDS

30 YEARS

1995 to 2001 Mapped the boundaries of more than 100 roadless areas encompassing 1.2 million acres, and engaged more than 150 volunteers. As a result, 107,400 acres were added to the Forest Service's inventory for the Colorado Roadless Rule.

2006 Published and distributed the Wild Connections Conservation Plan, a science-based management scenario for our region after six years of regional meetings, research, and review.

2009 to 2024

Completed 11 habitat restoration projects with 520 volunteers at Beaver Creek Fairplay, Farnum Peak, Geneva Basin, Green Mountain, La Salle Pass, Puma Hills, Selkirk Gulch-North Tarryall, Sheep Creek, Trout-Eagle Creek, and Wildcat Canyon.



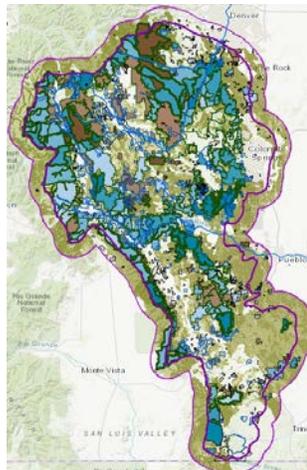
Seasonal ponds in the meadow.

2015 to 2024 Focused on BLM Royal Gorge Field Office's management plan revision for 668,000 acres of public land east of the Continental Divide.

2015 Identified nearly 250,000 acres of Bureau of Land Management Lands with Wilderness Characteristics in 24 areas in central Colorado.

2017 to 2024 Chaired the coalition that wrote expert comments and organized public input for the BLM's management plan revision.

2018 to 2024 Identified climate corridors and refugia in our region to help prioritize advocacy, restoration projects and move toward protecting 30% of the land by 2030 as the region is impacted by climate warming



Refugia modeling map

2019 to 2024 Organized citizen input for the Pike San-Isabel Travel Management Plan for their more than 2,000 miles of roads and 500 miles of motorized trails.

Ongoing Collaborated with more than 50 local, regional, and national conservation partners in advocacy and projects.

Photo Jim Lockhart

2024 HIGHLIGHTS

BLM Approved the Eastern Colorado Resource Management Plan after nearly a decade of community input. It includes 114,700 acres as *Lands with Wilderness Characteristics*, 101,400 acres as *Areas of Critical Environmental Concern*, and 87,400 acres as *Backcountry Conservation Areas*. Five river and stream segments, totaling 60 BLM river miles, were found suitable for inclusion in the *National Wild and Scenic Rivers System*.

The Pike San Isabel Travel Management Plan, published in 2022, depicts authorized routes for motorized travel across 2,200 miles of routes. Most Forest Service travel projects are currently paused. Meanwhile we continue to protect roadless areas, primitive recreation locations, special wildlife habitats, and rare species by coordinating public comments on project proposals and meeting with USFS staff.

Visited Farnum Peak habitat restoration project areas and found no motorized trespass beyond closures or in reseeded areas.

Puma Hills

restoration project was initiated to decrease motorized access and increase connectivity for pronghorn, deer and elk. USFS ripped 2.5 miles of illegal routes and re-wired fences. Ten volunteers seeded and covered routes with slash.



Logs stop motorized travel.

The Central Colorado Climate Resilience Project, a collaboration with Rocky Mountain Wild, shared project modeling in six scientific advisor meetings and three conferences and submitted data for BLM's High Mesa Grassland Wilderness Study area. We hosted a climate change webinar and 22 citizens retrieved climate data loggers in Browns Canyon National Monument and Beaver Creek Wilderness Study Area.

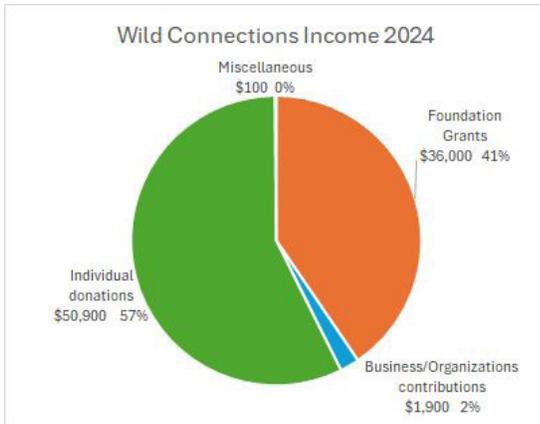
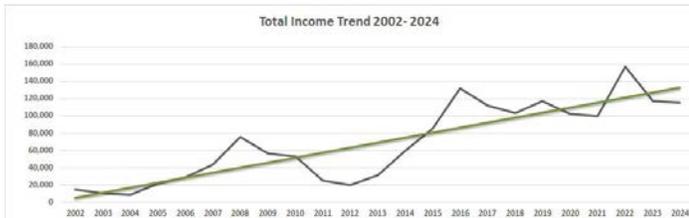
Vigorous outreach included guiding nine backcountry hikes for 67 participants and hosting two webinars with 162 participants. Bi-monthly Wild News and two issues of Landscapes reached 900 households, and we increased our social media presence.

Our new administrative model of a shared leadership team includes Co-Executive Directors for Conservation and Fundraising, supported by Board members and volunteers.

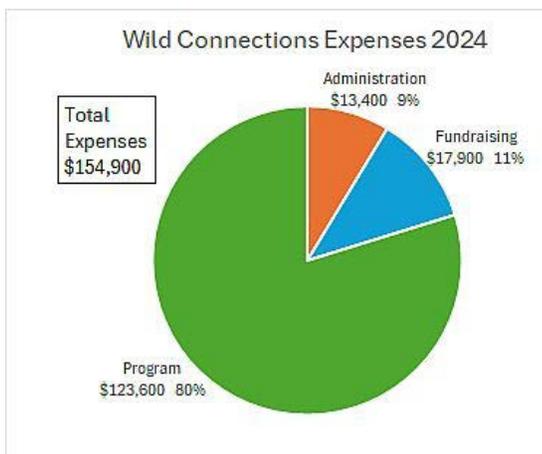
Photo Shane Rosenthal

FINANCIAL TRANSPARENCY

For most nonprofits income has its ups and downs, although expenses tend to remain steady. The Wild Connections trend chart shows a steady rise from 2002 to 2024 as we increased programs and hired staff.



Of the total income of \$ 88,900, individual donations account for 57% and foundation grants totaled 41%. The rest was from small businesses and conservation groups.



Expenses of \$154,900 were high this year, but 80% went to Program. Volunteers help keep fundraising at 11% and administration at 9%.

How you can help

Your donations now of any size will keep Wild Connections strong and proactive in 2025.

We do not receive any federal government funding, but many of our programs depend on collaboration with the Forest Service and BLM. With the current downsizing of staff and reduced budgets, Wild Connections needs to increase our share of expenses for joint programs.

Go to www.wildconnections.org/donate

LOOKING AHEAD IN 2025

Environmental threats will increase over the next few years. The raft of Executive Orders and other actions have targeted Forest Service, BLM, US Fish and National Parks staff, programs and funding. We know it is critical that Wild Connections provide our knowledge, experience and volunteer labor for environmental protection and habitat restoration work. We are doing that in 2025!

BLM and US Forest Service

- Represent conservation interests on BLM's Rocky Mountain Resource Advisory Council and advocate for ACECs, WSAs, and special designations
- Ensure Pike-San Isabel's travel management protects roadless areas, sensible recreation, wildlife habitats, and rare species with on-the-ground inventories
- Represent conservation interests in coalitions like Outside 285, Pikes Peak Outdoor Recreation Alliance, Bighorn Roundtable, Spanish Peaks Outdoor Coalition, and Wet Mountain Valley Outdoors
- Form a coalition to identify and assess streams and rivers for Outstanding Waters designation in the Arkansas Basin

Habitat Restoration Projects

- **Puma Hills Roadless Area:** Continue the second year of restoration and fence repair in collaboration with South Park Ranger District
- **Thirtynine Mile Mountain Roadless Area:** Reclaim a 2-mile-long decommissioned road by seeding and mulching to expand the roadless area by 1,300 acres in collaboration with South Park Ranger District. Installing post and cable and wire fence barricades will prevent illegal motorized use

BLM Fence Removal:

Partner with BLM Royal Gorge Field Office and Colorado Parks and Wildlife on a multiyear fence removal project to improve connectivity to winter range, migration corridors, production areas, and vital water sources for elk, mule deer, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, and moose



Pronghorn trying to get on the other side of the fence.

Climate Resilience

- Share findings with agencies, organizations, and public
- Continue climate education events, hosting outings at climate refugia
- Organize Pika monitoring training and a Pika hike

Outreach and Education

- Sponsor monthly-guided hikes to conservation areas
- Host bi-monthly education webinars or virtual events
- Publish monthly Wild News, two issues of Landscapes newsletter, and weekly social media posts