

Opinion: Beartooth Travel Management DEIS

by Don Heinze

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The Custer National Forest's current draft environmental impact statement, which concerns the Pryor Mountains and the Beartooth Plateau, hardly addresses vegetation. It completely ignores sensitive plant species. I am appalled at this omission. I worked as a botanist on adjacent BLM administered land in the Pryor Mountains for five years and as a Wild Horse and Burro Specialist in that same area for eleven years. I have also worked for the BLM as a Botanist/Watershed Specialist/Range Conservationist/Wild Horse and Burro Specialist in other parts of Montana and in California. In all, I spent 28 years in these positions. I can say, without fear of valid contradiction, that the Pryor Mountains are a botanical gem that is threatened by off-highway motor vehicles (OHMV's).

When I started the botanist position, no fewer than 35 plant species considered sensitive by the Natural Heritage Program had been observed in the Pryor Mountains. These included: Big Horn fleabane (*Erigeron allocotus*), bird's foot sagebrush (*Artemisia pedatifida*), bud sagebrush (*Artemisia spinescens*), ground milkvetch (*Astragalus chamaeleuce*), dwarf ipomopsis (*Ipomopsis pumila*), Geyer's larkspur (*Delphinium geyeri*), Gray's milkvetch (*Astragalus grayi*), Great Basin gilia (*Gilia leptomeria*), hoary townsendia (*Townsendia incana*), sticky scorpion-weed (*Phacelia ivesiana*), larch-leaved beardtongue (*Penstemon laricifolius*), matted nama (*Nama densum*), naked stemmed evening primrose (*Camissonia scapoidea*), narrow-leaved Indian paintbrush (*Castilleja angustifolia*), obscure evening primrose (*Camissonia andina*), pale yellow cryptantha (*Cryptantha flavoculata*), platyschkuhria (*Platyschkuhria integrifolia*), rocky tansy (*Sphaeromeria capitata*), rough mule's ears (*Wyethia scabra*), shy gilia (*Gilia inconspicua*), small blazing star (*Mentzelia pumila*), small-flowered evening primrose (*Camissonia minor*), smooth woody aster (*Xylorhiza*

glabriuscula), southern twinpod (*Physaria acutifolia*), spiny hopsage (*Grayia spinosa*), summer milkvetch (*Astragalus hyalinus*), sword townsendia (*Townsendia spathulata*), beaked streptanthella (*Streptanthella longirostris*), Torrey's bitterweed (*Hymenoxys torreyana*), Torrey's desert dandelion (*Malacothrix torreyi*), tufted prickly phlox (*Leptodactylon caespitosum*), Wind River milkvetch (*Astragalus oregonus*), woolly prince's plume (*Stanleya tomentosa*), and yellow bee plant (*Cleome lutea*).

Apparently however, the BLM wanted to sweep rare plants under the rug. I tried to initiate several intensive studies of these plants, but BLM higher-ups strenuously opposed me every step of the way. It is very possible that the BLM wanted a botanist for cosmetic purposes only; they did not want me to do anything. This is how the BLM often operates behind closed doors. After a great deal of effort and tenacity however, I finally prevailed. The studies were conducted.

These studies indicated that most of the subject plants may have been rare elsewhere in Montana, but they were not rare in the Pryors. This alone makes the Pryors a botanical gem. Five additional rare species were found, however. In the end, nine Pryor plant species were considered BLM Sensitive. These include: desert cryptantha (*Cryptantha scoparia*), Geyer's milkvetch (*Astragalus geyeri*), matted nama (*Nama densum*), obscure evening primrose (*Camissonia andina*), Pryor Mountain milkvetch (*Lesquerella lesicii*), shoshonea (*Shoshonea pulvinata*), small evening primrose (*Camissonia parvula*), smooth buckwheat (*Eriogonum salsuginosum*), and Torrey's desert dandelion (*Malacothrix torreyi*).

All studies were conducted on BLM administered land. To my knowledge, the Custer National Forest never did any studies for rare plants on their lands. It is probable that all 40 of these plants species were also on Forest Service administered land. I suspect that the Forest Service also wants to sweep rare plants under the rug. They have closed the Beartooth Plateau to OHMVs, so it is

possible they have decided to give their land in the Pryors to the OHMVs. In other words, the Forest Service wants to make their land in the Pryors a sacrifice area to OHMVs. If so, this is outrageous.

The official comment period has ended but your opinion can still be heard. Write: Mr. Doug Epperly, Project Leader, Custer National Forest, 1310 Main St., Billings, MT, 59105.

If you are interested in helping to protect the unique plant life of the Pryor Mountains, contact MNPS members: Mark Taylor (mark@learningclinic.com), Dick Walton (dwalton@imt.net), Clayton McCracken (chmc9@bresnan.net), or Don Heinze (donald_heinze@yahoo.com).