



**Scenic wildlands near Vail.**

# **VAIL HOMEOWNERS ASSOCIATION**

## **VHA Background Report**

### **Sustaining Vail’s Regional Environmental Resources**

**October 28, 2022**

The impact of historic events on the Vail community indicates that future environmental and cultural decisions point toward further urbanization of Vail and Eagle County and directing attention to the continued restoration and enhancement of the surrounding wildland habitats; a delicate balance. Understanding events influencing conservation of wildlife, cultural and natural resources is vital to the future of Vail.

Vail’s founders believed runaway tourism and recreational development would damage natural resources necessary to the Vail resort and the community. Today, acceptance of responsibility for preservation and activism motivates members of the Vail Homeowners Association (VHA) and guides its agenda.

The evolution toward increased focus on restoring and preserving wildland habitats has raised local concerns about continued containment of adverse effects from tourism-related development within Vail, Eagle County and the USFS Holy Cross – Eagle Ranger District.

Water shortage could cause Colorado’s urban development over the long term to shift from Front Range cities to the Western Slope putting pressure on authorities to retain water in the Colorado River Basin. Emphasis on conservation and preservation will ensure Vail’s global leadership position by sustaining environmental assets that are the foundation of success as a community and resort.



**1905 postcard view of Holy Cross Mountain.**

The former National Park Service [Holy Cross National Monument established in 1933 and decommissioned in 1950](#) is near the newly created Camp Hale National Historic Site – Continental Divide National Monument. Holy Cross Mountain became a Christian pilgrimage site during the western exploration and settlement era in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Evidence shows that areas near the mountain have been occupied by waves of human inhabitants.

The Holy Cross Monument was within the Holy Cross – Eagle District of the White River National Forest, which was established in 1891 and included land formerly inhabited by indigenous people. In the United States settlement of Colorado, Indigenous people were relocated to reservations in neighboring states or territories.

The Holy Cross Monument was an impediment to the water development interests of Colorado’s burgeoning Front Range communities. National Park Service protection of the Holy Cross Monument constrained water development projects more than if the area had remained part of the White River National Forest managed by the United States Forest Service (USFS).

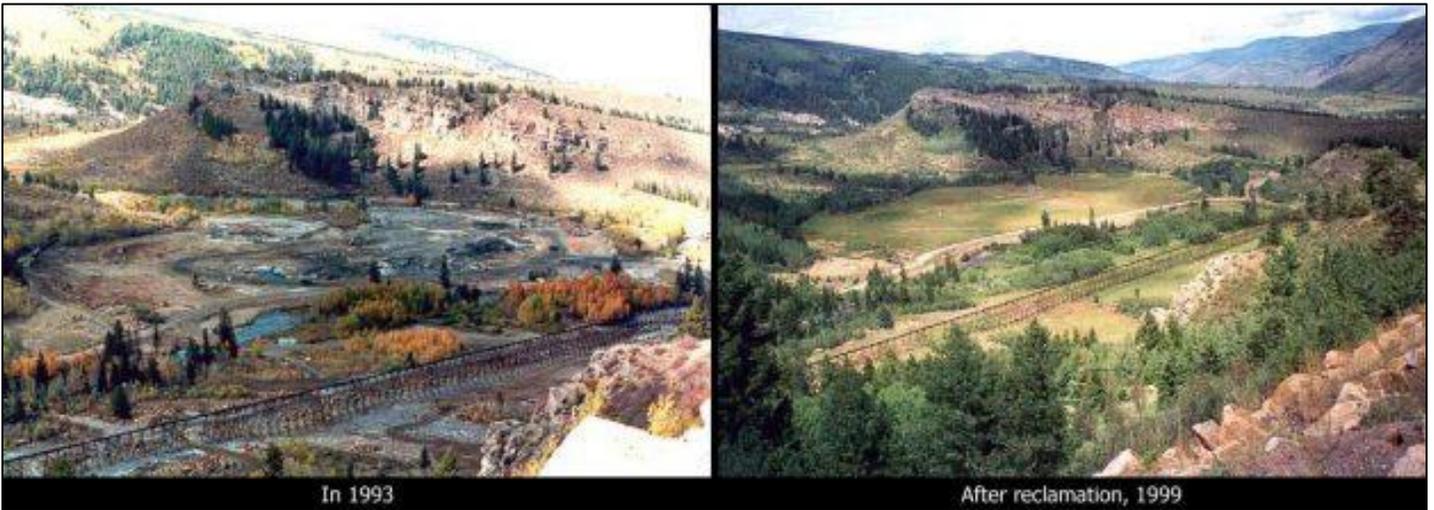
Because of the Holy Cross Monument’s perceived ties to Christianity, the advent of the national “secularism” movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, with its debate over separation of church and state gave Front Range interests an opportunity to lobby successfully for abolition of its Monument status in 1950.

Located on the western slope in the upper reaches of the continental divide in the Rocky Mountains, the former monument was in one of the highest precipitation regions in the Colorado River Basin. The dissolution removed the final barrier and allowed the construction of the Homestake Transmountain Diversion Project to proceed. The project was conceived as a means of delivering high quality mountain water to Colorado’s eastern slope to sustain the growth of Front Range cities.



**The Homestake Dam**

The Homestake Dam, in the Homestake Valley near Camp Hale, with a system of pipelines and tunnels, was constructed in the early 1950s. Heavy handed construction practices caused the destruction of primeval wildland forest and wetlands. This insensitivity ran afoul of the 1960s environmental preservation movement. At that time the State of Colorado and the neophyte Vail community were embracing growth management practices to rein in unplanned or environmentally destructive development.



Gilman zinc mine tailing ponds under restoration.  
[Site of proposed Bolts Lake water supply reservoir.](#)

Near Vail, on the southwestern boundary of its ski area, is the century old Gilman underground zinc mine, a remnant of the area's late 19<sup>th</sup> century mining era. When the Gilman mine closed in the late 1970's, Vail and Eagle County environmental activists took advantage of new federal pollution clean-up regulations, causing the clean-up of the mine's waste storage ponds that had been contaminating the Eagle River for decades. Pollution

from the mine's tunneling turned public attitude against furthering tunneling and proposed mineral extraction activities, including oil and gas fracking.

Expansion of the [Bolts Lake Reservoir](#) is planned to supply new development at Maloit Park on Eagle County school district land and former Gilman Mine land. This will respond to the demand of water districts to serve growing communities in the Vail area, which may include snow making. If the development area includes claimed indigenous sacred lands, government investigation will be required. The reservoir proposal could also impact growing political pressure to hold West Slope water in the drought prone Colorado River Basin.

A sense of urgency arose when dysfunctions were uncovered in planning the moribund 1976 Colorado Winter Olympics event slated to take place in Vail. The overwhelming effects of tourism in connection with the Olympics led Vail's corporate and community leaders to constrict tourism and vacation home development in Vail and Eagle County. Land use zoning and master planning restrictions imposed in the 1960s continued through the 1970's.

They included conferring National Park or National Monument status from USFS lands around Vail and the Beaver Creek ski area (to be developed). Both were rejected. They required transferring federal administrative authority from the resource development view of the USFS to the preservation philosophy of the National Park Service (NPS). USFS, it was decided, was less likely to deter the development of ski areas. Opportunities remained open for water development.

It was thought at the time that the NPS might favor claims of Indigenous people since its Mission was protection of cultural historical and environmental assets. Social equity advocates lobbied to interpret American Indian Treaties which led to the assessment of reparations. This was seen as an effort to hinder access to and interfere with resource development of federal lands.

Vail's leadership chose to take USFS advice supporting restrictive land use to create the Holy Cross and Big Piney Wilderness areas in 1980. This preserves scenic wildland landscape by limiting access and occupancy.

The Winter Olympics experience caused the State, urged by the Town of Vail, to give cities and counties authority to require environmental assessments of development projects. Environmental Impact Statements (EIS) evaluate cultural (archaeological) resources and ecological factors affecting in-stream (water quality and flow volume in rivers and streams). Monitoring in-stream flows allows ski operators to respond to weather changes by manufacturing snow. This also supports a State requirement that local government provides a water supply sufficient to serve the need of the Vail community. The Town of Vail is required to consider the availability of water rights and water supply in its administration of land use and occupancy density. Gore Creek water quality in the 2010s complicated TOV's administration of in-stream flows and water quality standards causing a sense of urgency to protect allocation of Colorado water rights for the area.

Front Range cities applied to Eagle County to expand development of Homestake's diversion system in the late 1980's. Eagle County required an EIS, which necessitated scientific investigation of archeological (cultural) and ecological issues raised by the public.

Eagle County Commissioners authorized an archaeologist to inspect the area of the Homestake expansion project. The report was included in the public record of the Commissioner's review proceedings, verifying evidence that an ancient culture occupied the project area.

This and other scientific investigations provided evidence that resulted in Eagle County denying the cities expansion proposal in 2000. The scope of the County's decision had historic implications for local government authorities to make land use management decisions on federally controlled USFS lands.

Vail's response in the 1970s to restrict development in areas subject to natural hazards, preserve historic buildings from the valley's ranching era, improve sewage treatment and suppress air pollution from wood

burning fireplaces was the community's early effort to uphold its environmental preservation ethic. The community created land use controls to check the occupancy densities of residential housing for tourist and residents, planned for compact pedestrian commercial tourism centers, established cultural institutions, set community wide landscaping standards and set aside wildland and agricultural meadowland open spaces to contain wildfire, serve as wildlife preserves and reduce the appearance of urban sprawl.

In the 1990s Vail caused the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT) to remediate Interstate 70 road sand siltation of Gore Creek, followed in the 2010s by moving to stem the Creek's water quality impairment from toxic urban runoff. The condemnation in the 2020s to preserve the wildlife habitat of a native herd of bighorn sheep and install wildlife fencing along I-70 perpetuated efforts begun in the 1970s to advocate for restoration of native wildlife populations and migration routes inhibited by the construction of the highway. The conservation effort for wildlife sparked a debate that is solidifying efforts by the community and TOV government for resort interests to provide for the presence of permanent and part-time resident populations through heightened levels of social equity housing, health and care-giving services for workers and an aging population.



**Camp Hale National Historic Site – Continental Divide National Monument.**



**Proposed restoration of Camp Hale Eagle River wetland.**

The [creation of the Camp Hale National Historic Site – Continental Divide National Monument](#) illustrates the evolution of environmental preservation leadership that occurred resulting from the development of the Vail community.

[The management of the Camp Hale Historic Site will remain with USFS.](#) The Camp Hale Historic designation includes consideration of an important symbolic step to [restore the Eagle River wetlands destroyed in the construction of Camp Hale in the 1940’s.](#) Drought conditions in the Colorado River Basin are restructuring the design of projects being advocated by Colorado’s east and west slope water development interests. Restoring wetlands retains opportunities to recreate pre-existing lake and wetland habitats that enabled ancient cultures to subsist and contemporary in-stream flows to be maintained. Wetland restoration at Camp Hale will influence continuing pressure for water development on Homestake Creek. If pursued, the design suggests additional reservoirs on Homestake Creek and includes a proposed adjustment of the Holy Cross wilderness boundary. The proposal could be subject to the preservation of cultural and ecological assets identified in Eagle County’s Homestake II investigation.

The [response of the Ute Indian Tribal Council](#) to the administrative procedure used to designate the Camp Hale Historic Monument is an indication that administration of

treaty rights remains an issue with respect to tribal representation in federal review proceedings for the Camp Hale National Historic site and, by extension, the USFS administration of Holy Cross-Eagle District of the White River National Forest. Subjects raised by the Tribal Council call for the respect of spiritual lands. Respect for the land and its habitants is at the heart of the environmental conservation and preservation movements which have inspired the Vail community through decades of environmental activism.

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VHA provides clear and concise discussions of matters affecting the Vail community in the belief that an informed citizenry will be an engaged citizenry. We intend to promote more citizen involvement and community discussions of issues facing the Town. If these are issues that concern you, please make your views known to [town officials](#). Public discussion of current issues by concerned citizens creates an environment to further community initiatives. We heartily encourage your input in shaping the road ahead.

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To receive VHA letters and reports as a Paid-Subscriber or Member.

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