

A Message From Wilderness Watch Founders

— By Bobbie Cross Guns & Bill Worf

As you read this, Wilderness Watch is beginning its 20th year, and the authors thought you would appreciate learning how and why Wilderness Watch was born. At the time, in early 1989, both of us, with a number of other local citizens and conservation organizations, were working with the Forest Service to develop a new management plan for Idaho's Frank Church - River of No Return Wilderness and the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness that straddles the Montana-Idaho border.

Our major concern was the way commercial outfitters maintained permanent campsites and equipment caches within the Wilderness. The Forest Service presented plans that called for removing these caches and the piped water systems, buildings, and fixtures offensive to the Wilderness Act. We supported the Forest Service's position. However, the Idaho Outfitters and Guides Association filed an administrative appeal to Forest Service Chief Max Peterson, who granted an oral hearing. We participated in support of the Forest Service. Peterson ruled against the Association, and we cheered! Unfortunately, Peterson was to retire shortly after that.

Not wanting to succumb to this ruling (the heck with the law), these outfitters and guides traveled to Washington to meet with the newly confirmed chief F. Dale Robertson. Robertson agreed with them, that it didn't make sense to pack out equipment in the fall if it would be used next year (the heck with the law!). But, because the administrative process had ended, Robertson suggested they take the matter to federal court. Once the judicial process was started, he planned to settle the case out of court, approving their caches and other offensive structures and fixtures.

Needless to say, federal court presented a pretty daunting prospect for us mere mortals. We approached the Sierra Club, Wilderness Society, and other big national organizations. They told us that the outfitters and guides were strong proponents of the creation of new Wilderness. A few "unobtrusive caches" didn't bother them. They wouldn't get involved. Right then we realized no organization was fighting to protect these precious lands. No one was working to ensure that the agencies were following the law.

The authors joined with fellow wilderness lover, Jim Dayton, and over lunch one day we bemoaned this sad state of affairs. But Bobbie Cross Guns had just appealed the reopening of an airstrip in the Selway-Bitterroot and had received over \$300 in unsolicited donations. "There are others who want to protect this system and are looking for an organization to support," she said.

Wilderness Watch was born at that small café in Missoula, Montana, with Bill Worf's contribution of \$20! We soon got pro bono help from a wonderful Minnesota law firm, Faegre &



Bass Creek Crags, Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, MT.

Benson, and fought this assault on Wilderness by the so-called Wilderness supporters (Idaho outfitters and guides).

With Bill's knowledge of the Wilderness Act and Forest Service management – he was a retired forest supervisor and agency administrator for wilderness in Washington – Jim's tireless and tedious work reading documents, writing letters and talking on the phone at all hours, and Bobbie's enthusiastic fund-raising and professional organizing skills – not to mention the fire in our bellies – we won a ruling that caches and other permanent structures for commercial outfitters are illegal.

And, as they say, "the rest is history."

How effective has Wilderness Watch been?

We think the organization's record has been stellar, but, then again, we're pretty biased. The organization's positions haven't relied on personal philosophies, but, rather, rely on the law. When an agency's proposals or performance runs counter to the legal mandate of the Wilderness Act, we get involved. We have prevailed in the majority of the cases we've taken on. We sometimes lose in the administrative process, the internal process when the agencies are proposing a new policy or initiative. Afterwards, we will determine the precedent-setting nature of the action. If the precedent is significant and negative, we will find a competent attorney or law firm to take the case to federal court. Fortunately, when we've prevailed, the attorney's costs are paid under the Equal Access to Justice Act. Through good solid background work by our staff and hard work by these very competent attorneys, our win/loss record is outstanding. Our biggest challenge is that there are still many bad things occurring in the National Wilderness Preservation System that we don't learn about in time to take action. This is an important role for our members!

What you can do to help steward this wonderful System for future generations:

1. We need you to monitor what is taking place and advocate for those wilderness areas you love. What happens to one unit affects the entire System! Report any concerns to Wilderness Watch and we'll work with you to address those concerns.
2. We need more Watchers! Spread the word! Encourage everyone who loves wilderness to become involved. Ask them to join Wilderness Watch. And always let agency managers know you care!

It has been a WILD ride and we are very proud of our baby born of humble means! Thanks to all of you for helping raise Wilderness Watch and helping protect these Wilderness lands we all love! 🐾

A Wilderness Primer

For those readers who may be learning of Wilderness Watch for the first time, and for the rest of us who can use a refresher about Wilderness we offer the following:

What is Wilderness Watch?

Wilderness Watch is an organization of citizens dedicated to providing citizen oversight of those federal agencies charged by Congress to maintain the wilderness character of the National Wilderness Preservation System. We seek to keep these lands unimpaired for present and future generations of Americans. Wilderness Watch doesn't spend organizational energy working for new additions though we recognize that many acres of undesignated land should be added. We defer to other organizations to lead those efforts.

What is the National Wilderness Preservation System?

Many Americans have a favorite wilderness area where they hike, backpack, ride horses, or camp. Some people just like the idea that these lands remain wild and unchanged. All of these individual Wildernesses taken together make up the National Wilderness Preservation System (NWPS).

Congress established the NWPS when it enacted the 1964 Wilderness Act "[i]n order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition." Congress had debated the Wilderness Act for more than eight years passed it with only one dissenting vote in the House and 12 dissenting votes in the Senate!

The nucleus of the new System was 54 national forest areas totaling some 9.1 million acres. Subsequently, Congress has invested nearly 100 million additional acres into the



System. Four agencies now manage these lands: the Forest Service, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Bureau of Land Management. The NWPS has grown to more than 107 million acres in 702 individual units scattered east and west, north and south throughout the nation.

Congress gave specific direction to these agencies, saying. "[E]ach agency administering any area designated as wilderness shall be responsible for preserving the wilderness character of the area and shall so administer such area for such other purposes for which it may have been established as also to preserve its wilderness character." This means that the evidence of man's works must not be allowed to become any more visible than it was at the time the land was designated as Wilderness and added to the System.

Wilderness is a uniquely American phenomenon for which we can all be extremely proud. No other nation in the world has created a Wilderness System that can come close to the size and importance of our NWPS. Our job now is to ensure its safety and protection.