

25 years of the BWCAW Act: What a long, strange trip it's been

On Oct. 21, 1978, as a result of a long and intense effort to provide meaningful protection to an area of outstanding ecological and recreational significance, President Jimmy Carter signed the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness Act into law banning logging and mining, phasing out snowmobiling, and restricting motorboats to 26 percent of the water surface in the Boundary Waters wilderness.

Having moved to Northeastern Minnesota a few years before, I found the intense conflict and open hostility that were common during the debate regarding the Boundary Waters to be an eye-opening and troubling initiation into the complex character of community life, and of human relationships with the land.

My support for the act was challenged and scrutinized in many new and uncomfortable ways, and was weighted with a daily and personal meaning unlikely to be felt living elsewhere, or more anonymously than life in a small community typically allows. Learning, reflection and self-examination demanded by each experience then, and by many local and regional land use issues during the 25 years since, have not diminished my support for the act, the Boundary Waters and other designated wilderness.

Northeastern Minnesota has experienced many changes since the divisive debate that preceded the act. Some natural resource-dependent industries, and communities reliant on them, struggle in a changing and increasingly global economy. In contrast, besides the irre-

CHEL ANDERSON

POINT OF VIEW

placeable ecological services they provide, the natural features of the wilderness remain a stable economic asset: a place of refuge from lights, noise and roads; and of discovery and enjoyment of natural treasures drawing 200,000 visitors annually and bringing tens of millions of dollars to local communities.

The popularity of the wilderness is accompanied by many management challenges, ranging from exotic species introductions to resisting pressure to increase use in the face of a growing population, or to get greater economic bang from this one wilderness "buck."

Supported by the large public land base in and outside the wilderness, the natural landscape of Northeastern Minnesota also drives intense development as private land near the wilderness — on inland lakes, rivers and Lake Superior or embedded in state and federal forest lands — have become the focus of residential, resort and recreational development.

While bringing some benefits to our communities, this growth also is costly, as illustrated by the recently published results from a monitoring study of North Shore streams; degraded water quality in inland lakes and Lake Superior's near-shore waters; the spread of harmful aquatic and terrestrial exotic species; habitat

loss; increasing conflicts among recreational users; and numerous challenges in managing land uses and meeting service demands of all kinds.

Managing natural resources, present and future land use, and the growth some of our communities are experiencing are among our most difficult dilemmas, even when there is agreement on the desired outcomes.

Unlike many communities facing these challenges elsewhere, additional wilderness designation is still possible in Northeastern Minnesota. A citizen effort has identified 90,000 acres of publicly owned land that merits wilderness status. This is one proven strategy available to us in creating ways to live in and use this landscape that sustain the natural systems and features that sustain us and our communities.

The changes over the past 25 years have deepened my appreciation and sense of gratitude for our wilderness and all wild lands, for all who worked for passage of the 1978 Act, and for the act of collective restraint that designated wilderness represents and continues to ask from us.

I believe wilderness designation and other forms of individual and collective restraint need to be among the thoughtful strategies we use to ensure that 25 years from now, our choices and actions will have sustained the natural assets that support us before they are gone.

CHEL ANDERSON is an ecologist, conservationist and wilderness advocate who has lived in Cook Court since 1974.

Fighting over BWCAW will continue

In response to Chel Anderson's Oct. 22 Point of View on the 25th anniversary of the passage of the 1978 BWCA Wilderness Act: There have been several views on how this law came about and how well communities are doing. It's interesting to see how this milestone has been covered.

One of the main items these articles include is the act of civil disobedience, with the hanging in effigy of two supporters of the bill. This was at a time of very high emotions in northern Minnesota as a result of the lies and deceit.

Many articles paint bright, rosy pictures of Ely and other Boundary Waters communities — how the economy is thriving with tens of millions of tourist dollars coming in. They fail to say that this is mainly in the summer months, May through September, with several businesses closing for the winter months. Nor do they mention these are not livable-wage jobs.

A big indicator of how well our communities are doing is shown by the decrease in school enrollment. In the 1970s, graduating classes topped 150. Today, we have kindergarten enrollment at 35.

Any mention of good-paying jobs with benefits coming to the area is met with resistance from preservationists that it's too close to the Boundary Waters.

Rarely do reporters include how the 1978 legislation came about in the first place. It was because U.S. Rep. Jim Oberstar was doing what the 1964 Wilderness Act mandated: "report to president. (c) Within ten years after the ef-

NANCY McREADY POINT OF VIEW

fective date of this Act the Secretary of the Interior shall review every roadless area of five thousand contiguous acres or more in the national parks, monuments, and other units of the national park system . . . and shall report to the President his recommendation as to the suitability or nonsuitability of each such area or island for preservation as wilderness."

The Boundary Waters didn't fit because of all of the established motor uses. Oberstar proposed that the central part of the Boundary Waters be made a National Recreation Area, and the rest be designated as wilderness.

The people of Ely and Northeastern Minnesota were deceived and lied to with the passage of the 1978 act, but you don't hear about this.

You don't hear about how the "present rights and property rights" that Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey said would be "protected and honored" were one by one attacked.

They don't tell about the 10,000 signatures opposing the Burton-Vento bill gathered in one day. Or how then-Sen. Wendell Anderson said: "I am going to see to it that no bill gets through the Senate that the people of Northeastern Minnesota can't live with." They don't report how California Rep. Burton (close friend of the Sierra Club), would indicate his decision by outlining with his socked right big toe which boundaries were acceptable. Then

someone would then trace the path of the toe onto the master copy of the map. This is how the "no motor" line around U.S. Point was drawn.

It isn't mentioned how the Friends of the Boundary Waters' attorney Chuck Dayton included language in the law that could be contested in court, such as the word "feasible." Or how the motor restrictions on Lac La Croix have led to ongoing quarrels with the Canadian First Nation.

All of the above can be found in former leader of the Friends of the Boundary Waters, Kevin Preoscholdt's, brag book, "Troubled Waters."

The bottom line: We have accepted the restrictions of the 1978 act. Ely has bounced back. But the Friends of the Boundary Waters challenge the law every 10 years with something different, and each time we lose a bit of our bounce.

First it was the lawsuit to remove the trucks from the three truck portages, going to court to have the word "feasible" redefined. Then it was back to the courts to have the phrase "that particular lake" redefined. Now it's back to the courts challenging the Chain of Lakes permit quotas.

The fights will continue, and northern Minnesota will continue to persevere. And yes, Conservationists With Common Sense will continue to stay on top of the issues, and prevent another devastating blow to the area like the 1978 act.

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