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In Our View / Wild Sky Wilderness

A lasting legacy

The most enduring legacy in politics is the conservation of wild places for future generations. But those yet-unborn Westerners who will trek low-elevation, ancient forests in 2100 aren't voting in the next election or the election after that. The cynical calculus makes finagling wilderness and national parks politically thorny. As Gov. Booth Gardner said, "Conservationists make great ancestors."

The Herald's Bill Sheets reported Wednesday that supporters of the 106,000-acre Wild Sky Wilderness celebrated the fifth anniversary of the bipartisan legislation signed into law by President George W. Bush with a hike and a get-together in Index. It was a justified victory lap. Wild Sky was art-of-the-possible lawmaking at its finest.

The wilderness designation, a profile in collaborative leadership, accommodates user groups from snowmobilers to backcountry horsemen (and women). Today, gateway communities see the economic benefits first-hand.

Index offers an illustrative backdrop. Bill Corson, owner of the Outdoor Adventures Center that provides guided outdoor activities and river rafting, told The Herald that visitors regularly ask about Wild Sky.

"We direct people up there every week," he said.

The Outdoor Adventures Center transformed an aging tavern into a gathering and chow spot for weary rafters and hikers. Corson's son, Blair, is rehabbing the old Bush house downtown to become an eat-and-stay-over hangout. Wild Sky has had a catalytic effect on growth and interest in outdoor recreation, locals say. When the Index-Galena Road is at last repaired, hikers and nearby communities will have even more reason to celebrate.

For more than a decade, Sen. Patty Murray and Rep. Rick Larsen shepherded the Wild Sky legislation through a maze of obstacles, a recalcitrant House, and retro, cut-it-down user groups. The great-ancestor sensibility won.

"Hundreds of years from now people will walk through there and see what we see today," Sen. Patty Murray said.

Murray and Larsen stayed the course. So, too, the grassroots activists who galvanized local support, including Mike Town, Bill and Sue Cross, Tom Uniack, and former Index Mayor Kem Hunter.

Wilderness. An area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man. The phrase "untrammelled by man" in the 1964 National Wilderness Act was conceived by a woman, Seattle's Polly Dyer. Dyer, now 93, was one of hundreds of local and regional leaders who pushed for Wild Sky. Dyer and those who emulate her legacy breathe life into Edward Abbey's notion that the idea of wilderness doesn't need to be defended. It only needs more defenders.