Looking Back at Our First 45 Years

The Power of Grassroots Activism

CONSERVATION VOICES: Former WA Department of Ecology Director Jay Manning

First WA Outstanding Resource Waters Designated
December 18, 2023
On a rainy Seattle day in September 1979, a group of friends gathered at the College Inn Pub where Karen Fant first proposed the concept of the Washington Wilderness Coalition (WWC). After a few more drinks and passing around a hat yielding $7 for the organization’s treasury, Karen and Ken Gersten officially became the first two volunteer staff for the WWC and set to work.

After 45 years and a name change, Washington Wild is still here, working to educate, empower, and mobilize our communities to protect our wild lands and waters. In looking back on our history, who better to share what that means than our co-founder, Karen Fant. The following is an excerpt from an editorial she wrote to celebrate the organization’s 5th anniversary in 1984:

In the 20 years since the Wilderness Act passed in 1964, the Wilderness movement has come of age, nationwide and in Washington State. This year’s passage of the Washington Wilderness Act, which resulted from a tremendous outpouring of citizen sentiment, exemplifies what can be done by organized grassroots advocates. The fact that bills have passed or are pending for more than twenty other states also points to the ability of Wilderness supporters to take their cause to Congress for resolution. … The WWC was formed in direct response to the knowledge that specific organizing in areas adjacent to the major blocks of unprotected roadless land would prove critical when the time came for a Wilderness Bill for Washington to be developed. … In the five years since its inception, the WWC has grown impressively. … And, in five years, we have seen the passage of the Washington Wilderness Act, knowing that our efforts, through our 1,000 members and 25 groups we work with, have made a significant difference in the outcome of this legislation. In truth, the legislation was not everything we wanted—far from it. The new Act protects one million acres; the Conservationists’ Wilderness Proposal was 2.5 million acres… Yet, we can look at the million acres we have had a hand in protecting with a certain sense of satisfaction. And as we look ahead, we also need to reflect on and celebrate the long tradition of Wilderness advocacy, knowing that we are part of an ever-expanding movement.”

From where we stand today, we must admire Karen’s foresight. Today, there are 31 Wilderness areas in Washington, covering approximately 4.3 million acres. Of those, Washington Wild has had a hand in protecting nearly 3 million acres—from the 1.7 million acres as part of the Washington State Parks Wilderness Act of 1988 to the 106,000 acres in the Wild Sky Wilderness in 2008—and more. As we look ahead to the next 45 years of keeping Washington Wild, we can once again draw on the valuable wisdom and inspiration from Karen who signed off her 1984 editorial stating, “keep the faith, and thank you, every one of you, for your contributions to the strength of [Washington Wild] and the cause of Wilderness.”
up, Saul redoubled efforts to build a grassroots coalition. “We needed all the help Washington Wild, and others could muster statewide to generate the support needed to protect this incredible place.”

In 1981, this coalition submitted a new proposal to protect 216,000 acres, which was met with strong opposition. By the spring of 1982, there were three separate bills in play in Congress, each differing in their acreage and boundaries. Championed by Representative Don Bonker (WA-01), ultimately a bill for a 110,000-acre monument was passed by both the House and Senate.

Washington Wild and the coalition threw their support behind the bill, generating strong local support, including an appeal to President Ronald Reagan from Washington Governor John Spellman. This effort ultimately propelled the proposal to the President’s desk, and on August 26, 1982, President Reagan signed the Mount St. Helens and the surrounding area into a National Volcanic Monument.

“We as mountain bikers have been working with Washington Wild for nearly two decades to develop a rare partnership based on trust and transparency around efforts to protect wild places while preserving access for mountain biking,” explains Yvonne Kraus, Executive Director of the Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance.

For the two years prior, Washington Wild helped lead a coalition that had worked alongside the members of Congress to carefully craft the proposed Wilderness boundaries to protect more than 100,000 acres of old-growth and mature forests, and to build local support.

SPEAKING FOR THE TREES

Surrounded by the towering peaks of the North Cascades, folks have long escaped to Index to trade in the din of urbanism for the gentle rustle of trees and running water of the North Fork Skykomish River. But on a rainy summer night in 2001, Index’s town hall was buzzing with energy. Despite the weather, the one-room building was packed with over 100 people, more spilling out the back door. The event was one of several public meetings organized by Senator Patty Murray (D-WA) and Representative Rick Larsen (WA-02) to share information and gather feedback about their proposal to designate portions of the surrounding Mt. Baker Snoqualmie National Forest as the Wild Sky Wilderness.

For the two years prior, Washington Wild helped lead a coalition that had worked alongside the members of Congress to carefully craft the proposed Wilderness boundaries to protect more than 100,000 acres of old-growth and mature forests, and to build local support.

Kem Hunter, the Mayor of Index, was key to unlocking that local buy-in. “When I was approached by Washington Wild to support the Wild Sky Wilderness proposal, I knew it would be a big ask,” recalled Hunter. “But I also knew that protecting the surrounding forest and rivers was the right thing to do for the Town of Index and those of us that call this place home.”

After a pause, a voice rang out from the back. It was Index resident, Bob Hubbard, who spoke against the prevailing sentiment by stating he thought the Wild Sky Wilderness proposal wasn’t big enough—the boundaries had left out a grove of ancient cedars, some 700 years old. While most of the concerns raised at the town hall that evening had already been addressed by the proposal, Bob Hubbard’s insight resulted in a change to the boundaries. When the Wild Sky Wilderness Act was signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2008, it included what is affectionately known as “Hubbard’s Grove.”

PEDAL DRIVEN CONSERVATION

When Joe Breeze built the first frame designed specifically for mountain biking, he was probably thinking of all the new unpaved trails he was going to explore, not that he just set off a decades-long, highly contentious debate. Passed more than a decade earlier, our nation’s strongest form of protection for federal lands, the Wilderness Act of 1964, prohibited “mechanized travel.” And as thrill-seeking early adopters of mountain biking quickly learned in the 1980s, that meant them.

Since then, common ground between Wilderness organizations and mountain bikers across the country has proved elusive. Court battles, administrative technicalities, proposed legislation, and “trail poaching” have inflamed tempers on both sides of the issue. But here in Washington State, Wilderness supporters led by Washington Wild, and some 30,000 mountain bike advocates led by Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance, have developed a working relationship. Rooted in a shared passion for responsible recreation, environmental stewardship, and recognition of the importance of outdoor recreation to our local economy and quality of life, there is an understanding that both interests can not only thrive but complement each other’s efforts.

“We as mountain bikers have been working with Washington Wild for nearly two decades to develop a rare partnership based on trust and transparency around efforts to protect wild places while preserving access for mountain biking,” explains Yvonne Kraus, Executive Director of the Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance since 2016. “Together we have found ways to support efforts like the Wild Olympics legislation through carefully drawn Wilderness boundaries resulting in the best solution for both mountain bikers and natural resource protections.”

One such example of this partnership in action is the pending Wild Olympics Wilderness and Scenic Rivers Act. As the Wilderness boundaries were being drafted around 2011, Washington Wild worked with Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance and local mountain bikers to carefully analyze 110 miles of trails throughout the Olympic National Forest. That years-long collaborative effort led to the proposed Wilderness boundaries that exclude popular mountain biking trails, while a few less-used, shorter trails in unprotected groves of old-growth were included.

These efforts resulted in the endorsement of the Wild Olympics legislation by the Evergreen Mountain Bike Alliance, the International Mountain Bike Alliance, and more than 15 local mountain bike stores and outfitters.
A component of the federal Clean Water Act (1972), Outstanding Resource Water (ORW) designation allows states to identify pristine waterways that constitute an outstanding state resource due to their exceptional water quality, statewide ecological importance, and/or unique recreational value. Once a waterway is designated as such, it protects that waterbody from any future activities or development that would harm water quality.

**OPPORTUNITY**
2019 | WA Wild, as a member of the Protect Washington Waters Coalition, identifies ORW designation as a not-yet-utilized conservation tool to provide lasting protections to Washington’s wildest rivers.

**RESEARCH**
2020 | Using data from 22 rivers statewide, the Coalition identifies the three strongest candidates for ORW designation: the Napeequa (Chelan County), Green (Lewis/Skamania Counties), and Cascade (Skagit County).

**NOMINATION**
June 2021 | The Coalition formally submits nominations for ORW designation for consideration by the WA Department of Ecology. In August, Ecology confirms all three rivers’ eligibility and the public process to designate them begins.

**INITIAL TRIBAL OUTREACH**
Winter 2021 | The Coalition reaches out to key Tribes, including the Upper Skagit, Swinomish, Sauk-Suiattle, Samish, Cowlitz, and Yakama, to share the intention to pursue a nomination and receive feedback.

**RESEARCH**
2020 | Using data from 22 rivers statewide, the Coalition identifies the three strongest candidates for ORW designation: the Napeequa (Chelan County), Green (Lewis/Skamania Counties), and Cascade (Skagit County).

**PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD**
July 18, 2023 | Ecology opens a 70-day public-comment period, including Tribal consultation.

**STAKEHOLDER INPUT**
November 2022 | Based on concern from local counties and timber interests, the Green River ORW nomination is modified and resubmitted.

**ORGANIZE**
2022 - 2023 | The Coalition works to build diverse grassroots support from 38 initial supporters to more than 240 elected officials, Tribes, hunting and fishing outfitters, outdoor recreation groups, local businesses, Brewshed® partners, conservation organizations, and faith leaders, and submit a series of public comment letters demonstrating that support to Ecology.

**PUBLIC OUTREACH**
July - September 2023 | Events hosted across the state by the Coalition encourage folks to participate fully in the process by attending local town halls and/or submitting comments to Ecology in support of the designations:
- [Lux] Pot Shop works with WA Wild to include ORW into their Ganja Gone Wild campaign, hosting events and postcard boxes at all three Seattle locations.
- Brewshed® member, Icicle Brewing, releases the Napeequa Pilsner and hosts a release party at their taproom in Leavenworth.
- WA Wild is invited to table before Coldplay’s concert at Lumen Field and collects signatures from concert-goers.

**HARNESS MEDIA ATTENTION**
July 2023 | The Coalition works to secure earned media coverage in outlets such as the Skagit Valley Herald and The Seattle Times.

**VICTORY**
December 18, 2023 | Ecology officially announces its decision to designate all three rivers—the Cascade, Green, and Napeequa—as Washington’s first-ever Outstanding Resource Waters!
Washington’s rivers are vital. In the years since I served as Director of the Washington Department of Ecology from 2005 to 2009, the urgency for protecting our rivers has only grown. As Governor Christine Gregoire’s Chief of Staff and Director of the Washington Department of Ecology, it is to engage the government effectively to protect Washingtonians’ values.

Now a consultant with Cascadia Policy Solutions, I recently had the good fortune to work alongside Washington Wild and several other river and salmon conservation advocacy groups to seek a new form of protection for three beautiful rivers—Outstanding Resource Waters (ORW) designation. Reserved for waterbodies that exceed the level of health required by Washington’s Water Quality Standards, we are fortunate to have many rivers that qualify. And yet, while Washington State has this conservation tool available to it since the early 1970s, it has never used it.

Recognizing this opportunity, a little over two years ago Washington Wild joined American Rivers, Trout Unlimited, Cascade Forest Conservancy, the Wild Salmon Center, American Whitewater and PEW Charitable Trust to form the Protect Washington’s Waters Coalition to explore the viability of an ORW nomination. The first step was to identify appropriate nominees, which led to many “high spirited” conversations exploring the pros and cons of several highly qualified rivers and streams. After sifting through loads of information regarding water quality, habitat values, recreational opportunities, and importance to salmon recovery, we ultimately selected the Cascade, a tributary to the Skagit River, the Napeequa, and Green Rivers as Washington’s first Outstanding Resource Waters.

As ORWs, these rivers will enjoy the highest level of protection provided by state law. At the core of this protection is the concept of “no diminishment”. No diminishment of water quality, habitat values, or recreational uses, which will effectively prevent adverse impacts from potentially harmful activities such as logging, agriculture, and development.

From day one, Washington Wild was a critically important member of the Protect Washington’s Waters Coalition. While playing a lead role on the Cascade River nomination, Washington Wild was always willing to step up and do the hard work, including gathering nomination information, building support from key constituencies—most importantly Tribes and local elected officials—and providing high quality strategic advice on how to succeed with this difficult project.

Washington Wild was instrumental in establishing this highest level of protection for these three deserving rivers. They are smart, strategic and hard workers. It has been my pleasure to work with them and I hope I have additional opportunities to do so in the future.

As the 2024 Washington State Legislative session ended, Washington Wild and a coalition of state forest advocates celebrated the protection of more than 2,200 acres in nine different counties through the Trust Land Transfer (TLT) Program. TLT works by transferring state trust land that is ecologically valuable but economically underperforming to entities that can manage it more effectively for conservation and recreation. This initiative contributes significantly to efforts by the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) to increase revenue for trust beneficiaries, including schools and local government services, as it provides DNR with the funds and opportunity to purchase replacement lands.

Last year, Washington Wild coordinated a public comment letter signed by 55 diverse stakeholders to advocate for the Trust Land Transfer Revitalization Bill which aimed to increase transparency and flexibility to maximize benefits of the program. Signed into law by Governor Inslee in May 2023, these improvements ushered in a new era for TLT.

Building upon that momentum, Washington Wild and the Trust Land Transfer Coalition once again brought TLT to the forefront. This time, organizing a comment letter signed by 110 elected officials, local businesses, and conservation, recreation, and wildlife organizations, we urged legislators to allocate $8 million in the supplemental capital budget to fund six TLT projects. On March 6th, through a unanimous bi-partisan vote, the Washington State Legislature exceeded our hopes by approving $10.8 million in funding for nine TLT projects!

“The opportunity to protect additional state forest lands through the Trust Land Transfer Program this year is a great sign of growing support for this conservation tool,” said Mary Jean Ryan, Board Chair for Center for Responsible Forestry and member of the Trust Land Transfer Coalition. “It has been great to work with Washington Wild which has used its grassroots experience to significantly increase local support of the Trust Land Transfer program statewide to nearly 160 organizations.”

Next, the budget will go to Governor Jay Inslee’s desk, who we expect will sign his signature after signaling strong support for TLT at the start of the session. Then, pending the results of a ballot initiative to repeal the Climate Commitment Act (by which many of these projects have been funded) implementation can begin in January 2025.

It has been great to work with Washington Wild which has used its grassroots experience to significantly increase local support of the Trust Land Transfer program statewide to nearly 160 organizations.

Mary Jean Ryan, Board Chair for Center for Responsible Forestry
Bob Brenlin

In the week leading up to Earth Day, you might spot something strange—a group of people hand trucking, chair wheeling, skateboarding, hiking, or even dog sledding legs from their breweries throughout Seattle to Greenlake's Latona Pub. It's all part of an annual fundraiser to support Washington Wild’s Brewshed® Alliance. Each April, brewers are tasked with getting their legs from the brewery to the Latona Pub without the use of motorized transportation if they want to be on tap at the pub’s Earth Day celebration event.

Bob Brenlin, owner of the Latona Pub, explains, “It’s a way to promote the idea of environmental sustainability and a reminder to breweries and pub patrons that we should not take the environment for granted.” He adds with a chuckle that, “Delivering legs through non-motorized means is a spectacle, but it creates awareness in a fun way.”

Brenlin, owner of some of Seattle’s most historic and iconic beer pubs—Fidler’s Inn and Hopvine Pub in addition to Latona Pub—is something of a Seattle craft beer icon. His first bar, the Latona Pub, has been open for 35 years and was the first bar to pour Georgetown Brewing’s Manny’s Pale Ale.

A firm believer that pubs are a great place to create a dialogue as our society’s gathering places, Brenlin has been using his status as an industry institution and a reminder to breweries and pub patrons that we should not take the environment for granted. He has added with a chuckle that, “Delivering legs through non-motorized means is a spectacle, but it creates awareness in a fun way.”

Since his days as a college student, Roger Mellem has been an advocate for saving wilderness. And when the nation celebrated its first Earth Day in 1970, Mellem was at the helm, organizing the University of Oregon’s inaugural event to celebrate this marvelous blue-green planet we all call home. Seeing the impact his event had on his peers, Mellem took his passion to the next level, creating an “Introduction to Wilderness” course 420 eager students took for academic credit. As his involvement in the outdoor and community conservation continued, he eventually became good friends with one of our co-founders, Karen Fant.

“When I was in college, I spent considerable time working for the Sierra Club in Seattle. Washington Wild’s founder, Karen Fant, was one of my Sierra Club colleagues. Several years later Karen decided to create the Washington Wilderness Coalition, now Washington Wild, with Ken Gersten, and naturally, I joined immediately.”

Since our organization’s inception in 1979, Mellem has remained an avid supporter—donating countless hours, his professional skills, and significant financial donations to our conservation work. In 2009 Mellem was asked to join the Washington Wild Board of Directors, which he happily accepted. After years of showing his commitment and passion to grow the organization, Mellem was voted by his peers to serve as Board President.

Washington Wild’s approach to conservation success is not about taking short cuts. It’s seeing our work through to the very end, even if it takes years or even decades, to achieve permanent protection for our beloved wild places. Without supporters like Mellem, and the countless others who have been by our side for decades, we wouldn’t be where we are today, celebrating our 45th anniversary and our legacy of achieving new and impactful conservation wins for all of us. Thank you, Roger, for all the years of believing in our work and helping to make Washington one of the most unique and beautiful places to live and play.

Conservation Updates

KEY SENATE COMMITTEE APPROVES WILD OLYMPICS BILL FOR FIRST TIME

On December 14, 2023, the Wild Olympics Coalition cheered a major milestone for the Wild Olympics Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers Act sponsored by Senator Patty Murray (WA) and Representative Derek Kilmer (WA-06) as it was voted out of the full Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee for the first time in the bill’s history. With a strong foundation of broad local support and the steadfast efforts of the two Congressional leaders, the bill has made steady progress each successive Congress. Last year the bill passed the House with bipartisan support and advanced farther than ever before in the Senate. December’s committee vote completes a key step in the Congressional process towards it becoming law.

CONSERVATIONISTS AND CLUMBERS RAISE CONCERN ABOUT PROPOSED WILDERNESS CLIMBING REGULATIONS

In November 2023, the National Park Service (NPS) and U.S. Forest Service (USFS) released draft recreation management directives to classify fixed anchors—the bolts, pitons, and slings climbers have used to safely scale technical rock faces since before Congress passed the Wilderness Act—as prohibited “installations” in Wilderness areas. Washington Wild recognizes rock climbing as an appropriate use of Wilderness and we do not want to see this responsible access denied. In response, Washington Wild joined 12 other Wilderness advocates and climbing organizations to submit a joint comment letter emphasizing the shared stance that the proposed guidance is problematic. The climbing community has long been a valuable partner in our efforts to protect our wild places, and the letter expresses the shared concern that “the implementation of this guidance would create profound problems for the climbing community and a strong backlash against Wilderness conservation.”

CELEBRATING THE ALPINE LAKES WILDERNESS WITH A COMMEMORATIVE BEER

Cans of a WA Brewshed® Alliance beer to mark the 10th Anniversary of the Alpine Lakes Wilderness Additions are coming to a cooler near you early this summer! We have teamed up with No Boat Brewing to brew a very special beer to celebrate the 10th anniversary of getting federal protection to 22,000 acres of pristine low-elevation Wilderness and designated nearly 40 miles of the Middle Fork Snoqualmie and Pratt Rivers as Wild & Scenic. The effort to protect this area, which took several years and four separate Congressional attempts, is a testament to Washington Wild’s dogged commitment to conservation and our ability to build diverse coalitions that ultimately lead to success. Keep your eyes on your inbox and our social media channels for details once we set the date for our release party sometime in June. Located in Snoqualmie—“gateway to the Alpine Lakes Wilderness”—No Boat’s beautiful taproom is the perfect stop to stock up for a weekend of camping or quench your thirst after a long hike.

Roger Mellem

Since his days as a college student, Roger Mellem has been an advocate for saving wilderness. And when the nation celebrated its first Earth Day in 1970, Mellem was at the helm, organizing the University of Oregon's inaugural event to celebrate this marvelous blue-green planet we all call home. Seeing the impact his event had on his peers, Mellem took his passion to the next level, creating an “Introduction to Wilderness” course 420 eager students took for academic credit. As his involvement in the outdoor and community conservation continued, he eventually became good friends with one of our co-founders, Karen Fant.

“When I was in college, I spent considerable time working for the Sierra Club in Seattle. Washington Wild's founder, Karen Fant, was one of my Sierra Club colleagues. Several years later Karen decided to create the Washington Wilderness Coalition, now Washington Wild, with Ken Gersten, and naturally, I joined immediately.”

Since our organization's inception in 1979, Mellem has remained an avid supporter—donating countless hours, his professional skills, and significant financial donations to our conservation work. In 2009 Mellem was asked to join the Washington Wild Board of Directors, which he happily accepted. After years of showing his commitment and passion to grow the organization, Mellem was voted by his peers to serve as Board President.

Washington Wild's approach to conservation success is not about taking short cuts. It's seeing our work through to the very end, even if it takes years or even decades, to achieve permanent protection for our beloved wild places. Without supporters like Mellem, and the countless others who have been by our side for decades, we wouldn’t be where we are today, celebrating our 45th anniversary and our legacy of achieving new and impactful conservation wins for all of us. Thank you, Roger, for all the years of believing in our work and helping to make Washington one of the most unique and beautiful places to live and play.
Support Washington Wild's spring fundraising campaign!

Help us reach our goal of $35,000 and keep Washington wild and green for all of us.

Donate now at wawild.org/donate

Photo courtesy of Christina Hickman