

***Idaho Wilderness Considered:* Idaho Humanities Council Nomination for the 2016 Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize**

The Idaho Humanities Council is pleased to nominate a council-conducted project entitled *Idaho Wilderness Considered* for the 2016 Helen and Martin Schwartz Prize. This project that spanned from 2014 through 2016 was developed in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the 1964 Wilderness Act and the establishment by Congress of new wilderness areas in Idaho in August of 2015. Given that Idaho is home to the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness, which, adjacent to the Gospel Hump Wilderness, constitutes the largest contiguous wilderness area in



Castle Peak, Boulder-White Clouds Wilderness, south-central Idaho.

the lower 48 states (3.3 million acres), the Idaho Humanities Council board felt that Idaho's wilderness history, ethic, and presence was worth exploring through a special initiative of public humanities programs. The two-year-long initiative included:

- (1) development of a five-meeting, scholar-led, reading and discussion series hosted in seven Idaho cities (two series in Boise due to broad interest) in 2014 and 2015, featuring works by noteworthy naturalists, political figures, activists, poets, and other writers from the 19th century to the present;
- (2) support for a conference at Boise State University in September of 2014, for which the Idaho Humanities Council and BSU's Frank Church Institute partnered to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act and brought prolific conservation historian and Rice University Professor Douglas Brinkley to lecture as a prelude to two days of lectures and panels; and
- (3) compilation and publication in 2016 by the IHC of *Idaho Wilderness Considered*, an anthology of essays by 25 Idaho writers—conservation activists, political figures, journalists, academic scholars, and other writers--on the meaning of wilderness to the imagination, to the state's conservation legacy, and to an Idahoan's personal sense of identity. Readership of the *Idaho Wilderness Considered* anthology will reach an audience much wider than the audiences that attended the discussion series, sustaining the conversation about Wilderness throughout Idaho and the Pacific Northwest for years to come.

IHC's initiative in 2014-2015 was not only an opportunity for philosophical reflection about the meaning of wilderness, but, fortuitously, the program could not be more timely, as Idaho Republican Congressman Mike Simpson, a member of the House Interior Appropriations Committee, revived a bill in Congress he had worked unsuccessfully for a dozen years to

preserve and secure new wilderness designation for a pristine mountainous area in south central Idaho, known as the Boulder-White Clouds—a bill which, stunningly, eventually would receive *unanimous* approval in Congress in July of 2015, and was signed into law by President Obama a month later.

Background

The 1964 Wilderness Act was part of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society that established sweeping new laws regarding clean air and water, health and education, public housing, improvement of National Parks, a war on poverty, Civil Rights, and a plethora of public works programs for the betterment of America and the quality of life of the American people. Idaho Senator Frank Church, an avid outdoorsman, was the floor manager of the Wilderness Act bill, the language of which proclaimed the good of setting aside vast areas of wild land that would be "untrammelled by man," and off limits to mechanized transport.

When Congress overwhelmingly approved the Wilderness Act in 1964 (73-12 in favor the Senate and 373-1 in the House) the Act originally designated and preserved 9.1 million acres of land as Wilderness across the United States, and also created a mechanism whereby Congress could approve additional wilderness areas "where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

Over the past half-century, America's wild lands have increased to over 100 million acres—seen as a victory in the eyes of contemporary conservationists, but as a terrible waste of resources in the view of contemporary loggers, ranchers, and outdoor enthusiasts who wish to explore remote landscapes by means of motorized or "mechanized" transport. Thus, Congressional designation of official wilderness lands in recent times has been contentious and slow in coming.

The Idaho Humanities Council saw the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act as an opportunity to engage the public in reflective discussions about the meaning of wilderness, while at the same time offering a forum for civic dialogue for those in favor of and those opposed to new wilderness areas in Idaho.

Idaho Wilderness Considered Reading and Discussion Series

In preparation for the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, two IHC academic board members, an environmental historian and an American literature scholar, compiled a photocopied anthology of essays by such naturalists as Henry David Thoreau, Aldo Leopold, John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt, Howard Zahniser, Wallace Stegner, and many other poets, political figures, conservationists, and other writers. IHC made the anthology as the primary text available in hardcopy and online to participants in month-long reading and discussion series—eight series in seven cities (forty programs total). Each session of the five-meeting series involved a different scholar, scholars specialized in environmental history, American literature, law, political science, and anthropology.

Scholars from five Idaho colleges and universities were involved in the series, lecturing and moderating discussion of the readings in each city. Between 40 and 60 readers attended each

of the discussion programs in Boise (two series), Ketchum, Idaho Falls, Twin Falls, Moscow, Lewiston, and Coeur d'Alene.

The programs were well attended in part because the whole project took place over a divisive political year between 2014 and 2015 in which Idaho was embroiled in near-daily media flurry, pro and con, about whether Congress should approve additional Idaho wilderness areas in a state that already held the largest contiguous wilderness in the lower 48. Many Idaho conservatives lobbied hard against approving the Boulder-White Clouds area as new wilderness, as they saw it limiting mechanized access and limiting possible economic opportunity. Conservationists on the other hand wanted new pristine areas officially protected and preserved.

Discussions in IHC's reading series were lively in part because of the diverse opinions about the Boulder-White Clouds legislation. While presentations by scholars were more generally focused on the texts read for the evening rather than the political issue in the news, there were plenty of opinions aired among participants for scholars to moderate discussion. The programs were fueled and enhanced and well-attended because of this timely political debate in 2014 and 2015 that swirled around the possibility of new wilderness for Idaho.

IHC saw new audiences for these reading programs—outdoors people, hikers, bikers, hunters, university students, employees of the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Fish and Wildlife, employees of Idaho Fish and Game, independent outfitters and guides.

Wilderness Act 50th Anniversary Conference

In the fall of 2014, in part because of IHC's reading/discussion series, the IHC and Boise State University's Frank Church Institute collaborated in planning a two-day conference at Boise State University on the Wilderness Act. IHC helped to bring conservation historian, Rice University Professor, and CNN political commentator Douglas Brinkley to Boise to keynote the conference. Having published books on Theodore Roosevelt's conservation legacy, and on the history of the Alaska Lands Act (with a book on Franklin Roosevelt's conservation legacy forthcoming in 2015), Brinkley brought historical context to the contentious contemporary story of wilderness legislation. Sitting in the front row of an audience of about 400 sat Congressman Mike Simpson, whom Brinkley referred to as "Idaho's Wilderness Warrior." The next day, Simpson delivered an impassioned and very heart-felt speech on why the Boulder-White Clouds should be designated by Congress as wilderness. After it was clear that President Obama was considering invoking the Antiquities Act to declare Idaho's Boulder White-clouds a National Monument, Congressman Simpson asked the President for six months to try to get his wilderness legislation through Congress, arguing that designated wilderness status provided greater protection under the law than Monument status.

The wilderness conference offered the general public an opportunity to hear from veteran conservationists, political leaders, legal experts, recreationists, and opponents of any more wilderness in Idaho. Several speeches and panels are available through podcasts. Congressman Simpson's speech is available on YouTube. At the time of the conference, few believed Simpson's wilderness bill would pass.

Idaho Wilderness Considered Anthology

With the reading/discussion series brought to a close in 2015, members of the IHC board proposed compiling an anthology of new essays about Idaho wilderness as a culminating and lasting piece of the Council's wilderness initiative, with IHC board members Murray Feldman, a Boise environmental attorney, Jennifer Emery Davidson, and American Literature scholar, and IHC Director Rick Ardinger serving as the editors.

We asked a number of scholars who participated in the reading series as lecturers and discussion leaders to contribute essays. These included scholars from the disciplines of literature, history, political science, anthropology, and other humanities fields. To this mix, we asked some veteran conservationists to offer some perspectives on environmental battles of the past and what they learned from them, other than the imperative willingness to compromise. We included an interview with former Idaho Governor Cecil Andrus, who was the U.S. Secretary of the Interior under President Jimmy Carter. And we asked several contributors--journalists, poets, and other writers to reflect upon their memorable times of being in the wilds. A Native American writer reflects upon his memorable childhood summers spent with his grandparents fishing along the Yankee Fork of the Salmon River. One scholar reflects on how wilderness is portrayed in some classic works of Idaho literature. It was an eclectic mix of reflections on wilderness from many perspectives.

We had asked contributors to avoid taking stances on whether the Boulder-White Clouds should be Wilderness or National Monument, so as not to date the anthology in the years ahead.

Then, in the summer of 2015, a surprise. While Congressman Mike Simpson's various Boulder-White Clouds Wilderness bills received little support in Congress in the previous 12 years, the news that President Obama was considering declaring Boulder-White Clouds as a much larger National Monument, finally mustered support from very conservative members of Congress to eventually support Congressman Simpson's Boulder-White Wilderness bill, thus avoiding the President invoking the Antiquities Act and simply proclaiming that a much larger area in Idaho suddenly has National Monument status. After a dozen years, Simpson's Boulder-White Clouds Wilderness bill was unanimously approved in Congress.

With IHC's anthology nearly complete, we added a major essay by Congressman Mike Simpson about why he worked so hard to protect the Boulder-White Clouds, and we added a well of photos of Idaho's new wilderness areas. At the beginning of the project, we did not anticipate the passage of new wilderness legislation; however, it was a most fitting way to wrap up the initiative.

From the beginning of the project, we used an image of Castle Peak, an 11,800-ft peak in the heart of Idaho's White Cloud Mountains, as the image to promote IHC's *Idaho Wilderness Considered* initiative. We used the image of Castle Peak, taken from the air, as the iconic image of wilderness on our reading series promotional posters, in our electronic advertising for the initiative, and on the cover of our anthology. Threatened at one time by a mining company's plan to dig an open pit molybdenum mine at its base, Castle Peak is now in the safe heart of new Wilderness designated by Congress.

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