

Author to Discuss Montana Wilderness Visionaries

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Backcountry hunters, horse packers, outfitters and anglers were the leading force behind wilderness designations in Idaho and Montana in the years following World War II, according to a new history of wildland controversies released in April by the University of Utah Press. Frederick Swanson, author of *Where Roads Will Never Reach: Wilderness and its Visionaries in the Northern Rockies*, says that sportsmen and other conservationists saw wilderness as a means to protect habitat for native fish and wildlife. “Their efforts were the real beginning of the preservation movement in both states,” he says. He will profile leaders of wilderness battles in the Northern Rockies region in a talk sponsored in by the Swan View Coalition, Wednesday, May 13 at the Swan River Community Hall, 7-9 p.m (across Hwy 83 from Swan River School).

Clashes over forested wildlands in the region began in the 1940s with efforts to halt dams on the upper Flathead and Sun Rivers, which would have flooded big game wintering areas and encroached upon Glacier National Park and the Bob Marshall Wilderness. “Many of the activists in those battles went on to oppose road-building and timber harvesting projects in areas such as Jewel Basin, Bunker Creek, the Lincoln Back Country and the Middle Fork of the Flathead,” he says. Only the latter two areas have been protected as wilderness, yet all are components of the greater Bob Marshall ecosystem and provide important wildlife habitat and backcountry travel opportunities.

A former Montana resident who now lives in Salt Lake City, Swanson recalled meeting many of these activists as a “green college kid” in Missoula in the 1970s. “Conservationists such as Doris Milner, Loren Kreck, Clif Merritt and Dale Burk inspired me back then with their love of Montana’s wild places,” he says. “I’ve always felt that their work needs to be remembered, especially as we face equally difficult decisions over protecting and managing wilderness today.”

Other conservation leaders profiled in his book include include Ovando outfitter “Hobnail” Tom Edwards, Lincoln hardware dealer Cecil Garland and Bozeman sportspeople Ken and Florence Baldwin. “These were ordinary citizens who grew alarmed at the steady encroachment of roads, dams, and clearcuts into the habitat of native trout, salmon, elk and grizzly bears,” Swanson says. Assessing the long-running political battles over wilderness, Swanson argues that the heartfelt message that grassroots preservation activists presented on behalf of wild creatures and the places they live helped to boost the American wilderness movement to its current prominence.

The author’s previous book, a study of Montana conservationist G. M. Brandborg, won the Western Writers of America’s Spur Award in 2012. His talk is free and open to the public, and will include historical photographs of wildland areas in the region.