

Another Call for Civility

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I always thought that the best way to generate a lot of controversy is to write about issues like religion, politics or drawing school boundaries. So I was caught off guard with the hostility that was generated by a recent column I wrote on – of all things – civility.

I called on the need to restore civility to public land debates and used some examples of death threats and intimidation by some ORV users of examples of where changed was needed. The responses have been, in some cases, less than civil.

Reflecting on this, I think all of us are sometimes guilty of lumping everyone together. It is wrong to lump all ORV users as all being cut from the same cloth, or claim all conservation groups are the same, or that all timber mills and loggers have the same approach to forest management. In our work at The Wilderness Society we know all of these groups are equally diverse.

Some locally owned timber mills have a much stronger stewardship ethic than larger, multinational companies. Some ORV groups are families that are enjoying public lands with courtesy for others, while others are far less than courteous. On the conservation side of things, The Wilderness Society often finds itself at odds with other conservation groups.

All of these groups also have radical people who would die on their swords rather than compromise. Some have people so radical they break the law. Anyone who breaks the law, damages property or harms other people should be prosecuted. That's true no matter who they might identify themselves with.

Despite the radicals on all sides, there are many efforts at collaboration in Montana that I'm proud The Wilderness Society is participating in. In fact, we are much more likely to work to solutions than file a lawsuit.

In my 10 years as Northern Rockies regional director, TWS has filed a total of one lawsuit on a timber project in Montana. I'm not sure where people who label us as litigious get their facts. There are groups that challenge a lot of timber projects, and we sometimes find ourselves at odds with them. For example, last year the Alliance for the Wild Rockies and Ecology Center filed suit on a fuels reduction project in the Boulder Canyon south of Big Timber – a project we openly supported.

We do file public comments on dozens of Forest Service projects, and often work with the agency to improve projects. This effort to reach out is an important part of our work. While we collaborate and try to

find solutions, we also remember our mission to protect wilderness and help inspire others to care for our wild places.

During the past several years we have participated in collaborative efforts throughout Montana. I co-chair the steering committee of the Montana Restoration Working Group – a broad collection of more than 30 people from the timber industry, recreation groups, conservation and state and federal agencies collaborating to identify successful forest restoration projects on Forest Service lands. The group has agreed upon 13 restoration principles and is at work today to apply those principles on the ground.

TWS also has been a full participant in the Blackfoot-Clearwater Stewardship cooperative, a collaboration between timber, conservation, motorized users, and ranchers in the Blackfoot watershed that calls for forest restoration projects that will include commercial timber harvest, wilderness designation, identifies snowmobile areas and a biomass plant at the Pyramid Mountain lumber mill in Seeley Lake.

Collaboration efforts between conservation and timber interests are also active on the Lolo, Bitterroot, Beaverhead-Deerlodge, Kootenai and Helena national forests in Montana. Some of these include ORV interests, and in other cases ORV interests have refused to participate.

Forest management activities and wilderness efforts have been stalled in Montana for nearly two decades. Right now, timber and conservationists are working together better than ever. The reason is that both timber and conservation interest have realized that only the most radical interests have benefited from the controversy that has led to paralysis on our public lands. For example, some lands that were included in the 1988 Wilderness bill are now overrun with ORVs. The bill passed Congress but was vetoed by Ronald Reagan.

More recently, on the Lolo and Helena national forests, ORV interests have negotiated agreements on where ORV use is appropriate and where wilderness is appropriate – a compromise that resolves issues.

Closer to home, some ORV groups oppose any negotiation, any compromise, any more wilderness. The local group Citizens for Balanced Use maintains a Web site has strict advice: “never negotiate with environmentalists.” They have opposed any new wilderness whether on the Gallatin or Beaverhead-Deerlodge national forests.

My personal hope is that the efforts around collaboration and resolution of the public land debates that provide so much hope in other parts of the state will eventually spread to this region and the Gallatin and Beaverhead-Deerlodge national forests. Maybe someday, we can all sit down, have a civil discussion, and resolve these issues together.

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