



NORTHERN ROCKIES
CONSERVATION
COOPERATIVE

2024 YEAR IN REVIEW

Conservation for the Common Good

– Since 1987 –

D Casey

DEAR FRIENDS,



This annual Year in Review newsletter is our opportunity to reflect, share, and gather together as we turn the page to a new year. The past year has been one of growth and transformation at NRCC as we’ve continued our decades-long commitment of stitching together communities around shared interests and innovating across complex conservation challenges. We’re proud of what we’ve accomplished with all those in our network who are working to build a better future for the common good.

We’re thrilled to announce new leadership at NRCC. Katie Christiansen has been appointed our new Executive Director. Many know Katie through her work as one of our esteemed Experts-in-Residence. Her knowledge of and commitment to NRCC’s mission has deepened over her ten years of affiliation with our organization. Her experience in leadership positions with NGOs throughout the region, paired with her practical use of integrated problem-solving techniques, make her the perfect fit to lead us into the future. On page 3 you can read more about Katie and her vision for NRCC.

We thank Ben Williamson for his five years of leadership. Ben helped us grow our network, expand projects, and create new ways of working with communities. He has taken an exciting job at Montana State University as Project Manager of the Mountains and Plains Thriving Communities Collaborative. We know he’ll continue to accomplish great things in his work towards a sustainable future and we wish him the best. We’re pleased that Ben will continue to be connected with NRCC as a Research Associate.

Featured throughout this issue are original artworks by NRCC co-founder Denise Casey. The centerfold includes her artist statement and reflections on how art can encourage appreciation of the natural beauty around us, remind us of the specialness of this place, and capture and stimulate value discussions, curiosity, and new perspectives. We hope you enjoy this very special feature.

NRCC centers our work on human relationships with place, wildlife, and one another. Exemplifying this effort, we highlight Research Associate Aaron Bott’s work helping humans and wolves coexist; Fellow Ana Lambert’s examination of climate change policy in the Amazon; and a new book by Susan Clark, Evan Andrews, and Ana linking human dignity to healthy environments. We also feature NRCC’s two new Research Associates, three new Project Partners, and the three AmeriCorps interns we hosted this year.

We mourn the recent passing of Grizzly Bear 399. In a published *JH News & Guide* letter to the editor, Susan connects the death of 399 to the central question of NRCC’s work: *What can we collectively do to ensure a healthy and sustainable future for wildlife and all of us?* Susan wrote, “Her most important legacy is as a spark, a prod, an opportunity to fully and meaningfully engage with each other around the basic question, just what responsibility do we have for all the wildlife in this special place?”

We believe this is a time of new relationships and opportunities for better conservation outcomes, for people and wildlife alike. We are honored by the commitment so many of you have made to work with us to create a more hopeful, secure, and sustainable future. We’re happy to hear from you anytime, and we look forward to a fruitful new year.

Susan *Peyton* *Katie*

Susan Gail Clark Peyton Curlee Griffin Katie Shepherd Christiansen

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BY THE NUMBERS

56 Research Associates	25 Average Number of Employees on Payroll Last Five Years
85 Interns/Student Researchers (cumulative)	43 Active Projects
67 Partnering Organizations	53 Total Number of Workshops and Conferences
Locations of Projects In Last Five Years	
12 States	14 Countries
95% Percent Spent Annually on Program	33 Years of Longest Current Running Project

\$650,543
Average Annual Income In Last Five Years

NRCC Welcomes New Research Associates, Project Partners, and Interns

NRCC is pleased to welcome Michele Banowetz and Ashelee Rasmussen as new Research Associates and Charlotte Cadow, Ben LaFrance, and Anna Reside as new Project Partners. NRCC also hosted three AmeriCorps Interns this year: Tucker Grinnan, Abby Main, and Lillian Mitchell.



MICHELLE BANOWETZ
Research Associate

Michelle joins NRCC as a science communicator and editor partnering with the National Park Service for the Natural Resource Condition Assessment program. Michelle retired from the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) where she served in a variety of management and public affairs roles, including as Deputy Director, Supervisory Biologist, Branch Chief, and Information Program Manager of the Fort Collins Science Center in Colorado. Prior to working with the USGS, Michelle was a biologist and education specialist for the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Michelle is committed to improving communication practices to increase public understanding of natural resources. She earned a BS and MS in Fishery and Wildlife Biology and a Teacher Certification from Colorado State University.



ASHELEE RASMUSSEN
Research Associate

Ashelee joins NRCC as a science communicator, educator, illustrator, artist and exhibit designer. She has led education programming at the Idaho Museum of Natural History and teaches such courses as botany and illustration at Idaho State University. Ashelee engages students, educators, and researchers in using illustration as a learning tool to observe, record, and communicate science and nature. She integrates science and art in her research, teaching, and projects. Ashelee has partnered with NRCC RAs and PPs Chuck Peterson and Andrew Ray to produce a series of images of GYE amphibians to educate about their unique beauty, life histories, and vulnerabilities. She earned a BS in Ecology and a MS and DA in Biology from Idaho State University.



CHARLOTTE CADOW
Project Partner

Charlotte is a Community Science Specialist with The Nature Conservancy and has worked with NRCC RA Trevor Bloom on such projects as Wildflower Watch and research including a project focused on determining how best to keep cheatgrass from becoming established after fires or other disturbance. Before joining TNC full time, Charlotte was a native plant technician for a joint NRCC/TNC project. She earned her BA in Environmental Science at Colorado College and her MS in Plant Biology and the Field Naturalist Program at University of Vermont.



BEN LAFRANCE
Project Partner

Ben works for the National Park Service's (NPS) Greater Yellowstone Network leading the amphibian, wetland, and water quality protocols for Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Parks and Bighorn Canyon National Recreation Area. He was an amphibian and wetland project coordinator for NRCC before joining NPS. Ben collaborates with NRCC RAs and PPs Chuck Peterson, Deb Patla, and Andrew Ray. Ben earned a PhD in Molecular and Cell Biology from UC Berkeley and a BS in Biochemistry from Montana State University.



ANNA RESIDE
Project Partner

Anna is an aquatic ecologist and Masters student at Idaho State University. She has worked on national-scale biological monitoring assessments for fish communities and water quality status in states across the West. Anna's research focuses on how changes to landscape scale processes like wildfire, avalanches, and debris flows shape aquatic communities. Anna earned her BSc in Ecology and Evolutionary Biology from Yale University. These days, her work is centered on tributaries of the Middle Fork Salmon River in central Idaho.



TUCKER GRINNAN
AmeriCorps Intern

Tucker was NRCC's spring AmeriCorps service member through the Teton Science Schools. He worked on a research and writing project focused on wilderness management that grew out of his experience working as a backcountry ranger for the US Forest Service in Washington state and Wyoming. Tucker earned a BA in History and Chinese from Whitman College. He was born in the US but lived in Hong Kong with his family from ages 2-18. Tucker is an avid runner and enjoys crosswords and culinary videos.



ABBY MAIN
AmeriCorps Intern

Abby volunteered with NRCC this summer while serving as an AmeriCorps member with the Teton Science Schools. She worked on a community engagement project that united her experience in social science, journalism, and education. Abby has a BA in Anthropology with a minor in Creative Writing from Whitman College. While at Whitman, she worked as an Oral History assistant, a Writing Fellow, a news writer, and a preschool teacher. She also led Freshman student backpacking trips. Abby grew up in Kirland, WA.



LILLIAN MITCHELL
AmeriCorps Intern

Lillian was NRCC's fall AmeriCorps service member through the Teton Science Schools. She helped manage NRCC's social media platforms and worked on a writing project about how environmental education contributes to a sense of place and stewardship values. Lillian earned a BS in Environmental Science from UCLA, where she conducted research on blue carbon and the mountain yellow-legged frog. She grew up in Boulder, CO and enjoys hiking, downhill skiing, and pickleball.

A Letter from NRCC's New Executive Director, Katie Christiansen



Katie Christiansen,
NRCC's new
Executive Director,
and her family.

For 37 years, the Northern Rockies Conservation Cooperative has served a high purpose: to secure the benefits of nature for the long term. NRCC has established its legacy as both a preeminent place of learning and community, and as a transformative and inspirational idea. NRCC is a place I'm humbled to lead and an idea I'm honored to carry forth as the new Executive Director.

My affiliation with NRCC spans a decade, and I have served in leadership roles for several Greater Yellowstone non-profits for 15 years. Some of my most significant work was incubated at NRCC, including my book, *The Artist's Field Guide to Greater Yellowstone*, my interpretive environmental art installations, and the partnerships that grew out of these efforts. Beyond NRCC, I've served in roles conducting and overseeing scientific studies, partnering with independent researchers, managing networks, and developing educational resources.

I was first introduced to NRCC during my graduate studies at Yale School of the Environment. I quickly met Susan Clark, not knowing how this meeting would change my life. Susan was my academic advisor, and very soon friend, mentor, co-teacher, and colleague. I was awarded the Wyss Conservation Scholarship, through which Susan invited me to Jackson to join NRCC as an intern. Following my Masters, I was offered a Research Associate position, and soon the role of Expert-in-Residence.

Through these ever-deepening roles, I have experienced the transformative power of NRCC. I've come to know and embody the organization's long standing legacy of scholarship and leadership. I've come to hold in high esteem its people and the integrity with which it conducts its work. In short, I've come to understand what sets it apart from other organizations, and what sets NRCC apart is that which gives me hope for the future.

NRCC is a place providing a professional and personal home for independent researchers, students, and conservation professionals in Greater Yellowstone and far beyond. It is an incubator for innovative approaches that transcend traditional conservation. A place where scientific study contributes to our

growing knowledge of the world, and where we work to expand *how* and *what* we know. A place of familiar faces, enduring partnerships, and collaboration. NRCC is an open and welcoming classroom for all.

NRCC as an idea exemplifies the possibilities created when people build community around shared hopes for a better world. It is a symbol of leadership and scholarship. A beacon of hope in these times of great challenge. NRCC promotes the great ideas of humanity—ideas including democracy, justice, dignity, and the common good. NRCC was uniquely established to support us in our movement towards coexistence, lest we lose these wild places and beings that support and inspire our very existence. There may be no time more critical than now to elevate the place and ideas that are NRCC.

Serving as Executive Director, I will advance NRCC's legacy of conservation leadership, a pursuit only possible but for the shoulders of giants before and around me upon which I stand. Here I must thank my good friend and colleague, Ben Williamson, for furthering our mission during his tenure. I must also thank the community of Research Associates, Project Partners, Board Members, and the entire NRCC body, past and present, who have co-created this network of integrity, leadership, and innovation that I will carry forth. I look forward to serving you all with more opportunities and capacities that empower each of you in your work to realize your greatest potential.

NRCC is a world-class center of research, education, and conservation, and I believe it is the best-positioned organization for providing high-level conservation education and leadership, anywhere. I want to grow NRCC's influence so more people have opportunities to engage with the transformative ideas, skill sets, and values we promote. Across my efforts, I will be working to ensure that NRCC can continue the earnest pursuit of its mission long into the future, changing the lives of people like me, and guiding how people interact with nature and one another for generations to come.

It is an honor to be passed the torch of leadership at NRCC. And yet NRCC has never been an organization of one, rather a community of people and ideas. I look forward to pursuing this mission of conservation for the common good together with you. Please reach out to me at any time at katie@nrcccooperative.org.

Onward,

Katie

Katie Shepherd Christiansen

Coexisting with Wolves: Recovery Beyond the Wilderness

By Aaron Bott, Wolf Biologist and NRCC Research Associate,
PhD Candidate at Utah State University



NRCC RA Aaron Bott collaring a gray wolf.

Wolf recovery across the American West is shaped by the relationships between wolves, the landscapes they inhabit, and the people who share those spaces. Though wolves are highly adaptable and can survive in many environments, true recovery requires more than just survival—it depends on large, biodiverse habitats and an array of human interests and choices. Where wolves have returned after eradication, we face the challenge of finding ways for them to coexist in a world dominated by human activity. A successful path forward requires that we navigate modern life’s complex social, economic, and ecological pressures in relation to wolves, wilderness, and landscapes.

Today, as a wolf biologist, I find myself working at the intersection of this complex, dynamic matrix. My job is not just to track wolves and study their behavior, but to foster trust and relationships with the people with whom they share the land. Unlike the protected environment of Yellowstone, the western landscapes where wolves are now returning are vast mosaics of working lands and rapidly growing suburban centers. Wolves, livestock, and people all exist within this shifting patchwork. My challenge is to manage interactions successfully.

Wolves are remarkable creatures. Their resilience and adaptability allow them to survive in diverse habitats across the globe, from the Arctic to deserts. Yet, wolves remain deeply polarizing in our culture. I saw these tensions firsthand while growing up near Yellowstone. My family and friends held a complex view of wolves, shaped by generations of living on the land—first eradicating them as predators and later becoming reluctant co-residents with them after their reintroduction. I became fascinated with how people’s experiences, values, and stories shape their perceptions of these animals, often overshadowing the biological realities.



Fladry being installed to deter wolves.

Aaron working with a sheep rancher to avoid depredation.

One of the most valuable lessons I’ve learned is that ideal coexistence does not mean the absence of conflict. Rather it means the ability to manage conflict with the right attitude. Conflicts with wolves are inevitable due to their meat-eating nature, which evokes strong emotions. However, most people’s interactions with wolves are limited, and their perceptions are shaped by stories and imagination rather than direct experience.

This makes managing wolf populations challenging, as personal values and cultural beliefs interact and heavily influence decision-making. To address this, it’s crucial to understand the moral and spiritual values that underpin belief systems. Whereas beliefs may not always align with observable facts, recognizing and comprehending both is crucial for developing effective coexistence strategies. Such an approach involves acknowledging real challenges and diverse perspectives towards wolves, ecology, and conservation so we can more effectively navigate these intricate dynamics.

In my discussions about coexistence methods and tools, a common phrase I hear is, “There’s no one silver bullet that will solve everything.” A rancher once challenged this notion by stating, “Yes, there is. It’s our attitude.” I agree that it’s not the biology of wolves that presents the greatest challenge, but how humans perceive and relate to them—our attitudes and actions.

As biologists, we recognize that the return of wolves can lead to positive ecological changes. Yet wolves don’t operate in isolation. The landscapes they move through are shaped by humans—roads, fences, and development create barriers that affect not only wolves

but also their prey. Habitat fragmentation, human recreation, and urban sprawl complicate wolf recovery, often pushing animals into suboptimal habitats where conflict with humans is more likely.

We have altered too much of their former habitat to expect a complete recovery. The landscapes are very different today compared to a century ago. Today, wolf distribution and abundance vary geographically across local cultures, values/ politics, and conservation policies. Nevertheless, some regions do support wolves, and there are others that might support them. This is where the real challenge of coexistence lies—not in the wilds of the Northern Rockies, but in the everyday interactions between modern people and wildlife in a variety of landscapes managed for a spectrum of human desires. Wolf recovery is now being decided far beyond National Parks. It represents a test of our willingness to tolerate the needs of far-ranging carnivores that require connected landscapes and sometimes forces us to consider alternative livestock management practices to avoid conflict.

The return of wolves to these landscapes can teach us about personal, cultural, and ecological resilience—both theirs and ours. Coexistence should be about finding common ground, creating space for wolves to thrive while respecting the people who live alongside them. This requires compromise, creativity, and, perhaps most importantly, a willingness to listen to each other, nature, and wolves. After all, the future of wolf recovery lies not just in the wilderness but in the places where humans and wolves meet.

Art of the GYE

ART AS A LENS ON THE GYE AND OURSELVES

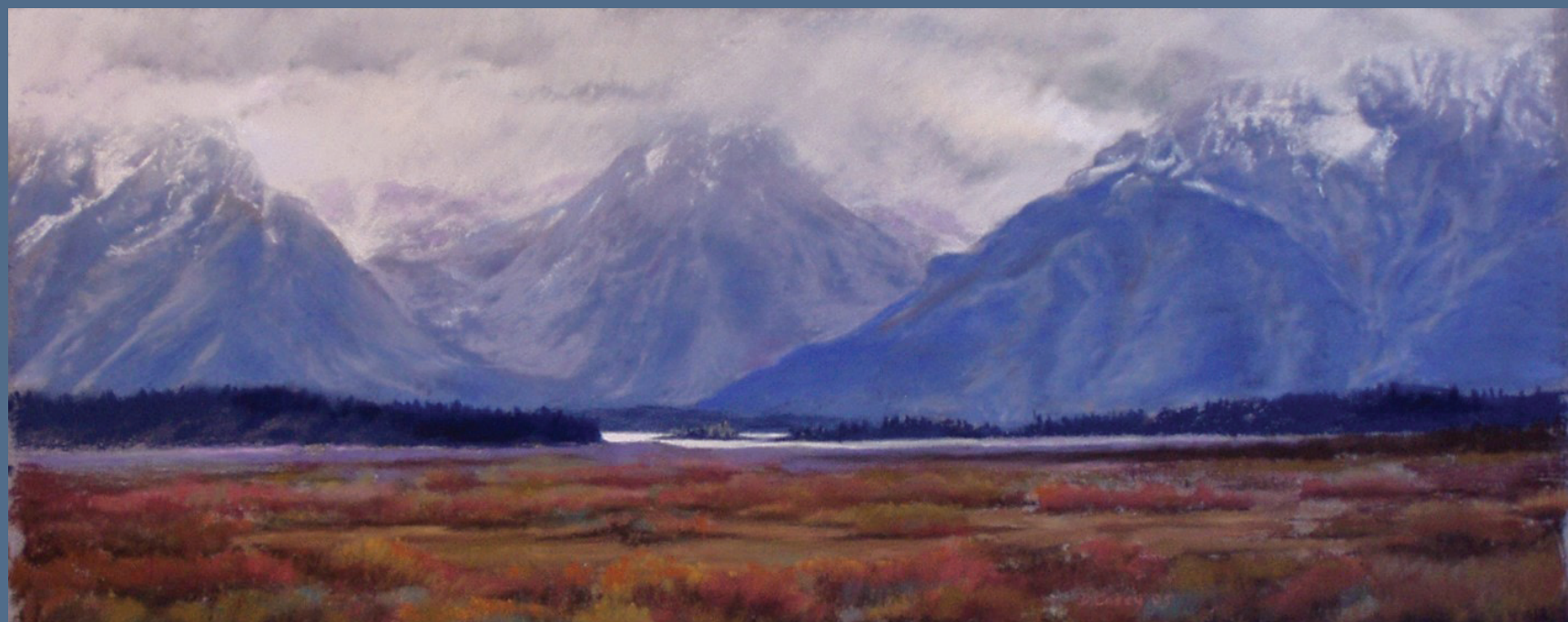
Denise Casey has lived in Jackson since 1975. She co-founded NRCC 37 years ago, and today serves as an emeritus board member. Denise is also an accomplished artist. We invited her to share some of her art in this *Year in Review* to celebrate her extraordinary skill and vision. Denise makes iconic scenes like the Tetons and the Miller Homestead new to us and somehow grander. We are invited into the landscape through the composition and framing of subjects like Fall Creek Road. Her paintings illuminate the beauty of the GYE and serve to strengthen our relationship with this special place. We hope you take a moment to contemplate her work as it appears throughout this issue, and that you come away renewed and refreshed.



Miller Homestead by Denise Casey



Fall Creek by Denise Casey



Tetons by Denise Casey



ARTIST'S STATEMENT BY DENISE CASEY

I've long been interested in natural history, and I mostly concentrate on painting landscape. Trees are one of my favorite subjects; I like how they define and create space with their varied forms and the mass and growth of their trunks and limbs. I've worked in lots of different mediums—pastels, oils, oil pastels, acrylic, collage, mixed media, clay. What has interested me across them all, though, is composition, that is, the architecture or visual structure of a work. I'm drawn to strong graphic or sculptural designs. My goal, no matter the subject, is to keep exploring the expressive qualities and limitations of each medium and the range of compositional devices. I'm always willing to try new mediums and new ways of working, and my work keeps evolving.



Action Opportunities for Huge Gains in the GYE

By Susan G. Clark, NRCC Co-Founder and Board Emeritus

Let me speak plainly. We are in trouble. Big trouble. It is easy to see, if you take an encompassing view of the growing momentum of our living, working, and playing [our visitation, recreation and physical development/ infrastructure growth] in the GYE. The expansion of the human footprint on GYE's nature, ecology and wildlife is immense. The GYE's future, and our own, are intimately connected.

Fortunately, we have actionable opportunities before us. At NRCC we engage key issues and speak to a wide audience. Our field work, workshops, educational initiatives, and multiple publications are focused on how to work effectively. NRCC has beavered away on daunting challenges for 37 years now. We have sought cooperative projects and offered practical advice. We have created endangered species plans and teams that have brought species back from the brink. We have trained conservationists who are taking on regional, national, and global roles in conservation and sustainability.

WHAT IS GOING ON?

I am pragmatically hopeful about surmounting our current problems and achieving a healthy relationship with wildlife, the ecosystem, and each other. As Yvette Converse, Grand Teton National Park's Head of Science and Resources said, "We don't understand the connection we have to the ecology we live in." And, "once we lose that [ecological] functionality... it's going to affect us as humans, being able to live and thrive."

Take these headlines: "The number one threat to a wild GYE: Sprawl" (Todd Wilkinson, *Yellowstonian.org*). "[The] GYE and Tetons region are at great risk of succumbing to larger economic forces and, however unintentionally, fundamentally compromising the region's ecosystem" (Jonathan Schechter, *CoThrive*). "Feds signal deference to Wyoming, dilution of protections, on [wildlife] migration routes." "Jackson Town Council meets to discuss a moratorium on big buildings." "Wyoming's legal embrace of killing wildlife with snowmobiles triggers federal bill." "Hot, dry weather spurs fast-growing fires around Wyoming." Hundreds of articles speak to our growing footprint in the GYE. One article asks if it is perhaps past time to rethink how we live and play in the GYE. Are our institutions and leaders equipped to tackle these real problems?

How do you see these concerns?



Grizzly bear by Kate Ochsman

CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Having lived and worked in the GYE for nearly 60 years, I have some thoughts on our opportunities. The good news is that as problems mount and become more visible to more people, so do opportunities for meaningful engagement, networking, sharing stories, and taking individual and collective action that truly addresses our problems.

The paradox we face, simply put, is the stark contrast between our conservation history—the many good things we have done over decades, for the common good—and our current mushrooming harmful impacts, the human footprint problem. How can we turn our experiences, hopes, and ideas into visionary actions that will result in a healthy future for all?

In the GYE, the opportunity to enjoy and experience an extraordinary place on the planet is unparalleled! What are the virtues of this place? How did we come to inherit such a place? What are the opportunities to improve our efforts? I'll speak to these at the individual, networking, and strategy levels.

Individual Opportunities

There are many highly effective individuals working in the GYE. People like Doug Smith, who dedicated his career to Yellowstone working within government, and Ann Harvey, who has been an intelligent, strong voice for GYE conservation working with many NGOs. Alongside these iconic leaders, a growing number are doing their best to tackle specific, often local problems. Fighting invasive weeds in a specific valley. Removing fences obstructing elk migrations. Erecting overpasses to protect wildlife and people on highways. Hands-on opportunities for individuals include Audubon bird counts, restoration field work, writing op-eds, attending meetings, voting, and information sharing to help government programs and environmental NGOs. These actions are conservation critical and many solid organizations are working on these. Yet, the issues across the GYE overwhelm the singular reach of individuals and organizations. How can we ensure such efforts are multiplicative? Perhaps through training and education for leaders, change agents, and citizens who are keen to build consensus, execute joint projects, and create enduring common ground outcomes?

Networking Opportunities

Networks can make it possible for people to share experiences, chat, co-learn, build cooperative efforts, and even create movements. If all the ecologists and physical scientists and managers in the GYE were seamlessly networked, what would be their aggregate assessment of the health of the ecosystem? What would they say about managing our future? How about the NGO's, elected officials, or academics?

There are already many networks in place in the GYE. Building upon and sustaining the good works of the diversity of people and organizations that we have now will open the door for even greater accomplishments. Any new network should also involve intellectuals, academics, and philosophers—those who ask hard questions, provide sound answers, and seek to address system-wide problems.

Strategy Opportunities

If we had better networks of effective individuals, what would our strategy be for conserving the GYE? Do we have a shared, forward-looking strategy? Towns, counties, states, government departments, businesses, ranchers, and others have some notion of what they are working toward—their mandates or specific interests. Some entities have solid plans, others only vague notions, and others simply follow tradition. Teton County, Wyoming has a sound plan; however, implementing it is proving difficult. A plan is not a strategy, they are often confused.

We urgently need a well-thought-out strategy, a *grand* strategy. This is a high order task. Strategies are about our goals, aspirations and hopes, founded in reality. Strategies are about how we will manage our resources to achieve our goals. Plans are details about the actions, or work steps, needed to realize the strategy on the ground.

A grand strategy for the GYE should be about how we can quickly learn to inhabit and share the GYE in sustainable ways. It should minimize conflict and maximize common interests. As Yufang Gao, Ana Lambert, and I have written, "Achieving coexistence [would mean] creating conditions where [human-human and human-wildlife] conflicts can be managed in socially, ecologically, and economically acceptable ways, enabling both people and wildlife to thrive."

Thinking strategically relies on asking big questions, such as: What is our intergenerational responsibility? And can we learn to live, sustain, and protect the GYE and our planet within livable boundaries? Together we will either succeed strategically and practically, as a human species, or we will perish together.

People have employed grand strategy at moments of great peril, such as during world wars. Grand strategy is increasingly being applied to issues like public health, climate change, and marine fisheries management. If we acknowledge the stakes are just as important in the GYE, we can use grand strategy methods to mobilize our resources and preserve the birthplace of the first national park—a unique place where we hope to hang on to a rich diversity of wildlife and their migratory movements.

CONCLUSION

We at NRCC believe there are many opportunities to get ahead of the harmful changes caused by our human footprint. The opportunity lies in our ability to adjust society, management, and policy, by capitalizing on our substantial collective experience, and translating that into actionable steps. We *can* create better networks of individuals and organizations. And we *can* create a grand strategy that moves us toward a future in which we understand the ecological limits of our environment, while preserving this treasured landscape for all of us and our nonhuman neighbors.

How can we preserve Wildness in the face of an Outdoor Recreation boom?

By Tucker Grinnan, NRCC Intern



Okanogan Wenatchee
National Forest trail sign,
Mason Schuur, USFS

Immersed. That’s how I felt, leaning against a rocky outcropping and staring across the border into Canada, twenty-two miles into the Pasayten Wilderness in North Central Washington. I had spent the last five days hiking, posting signage about a nearby wildfire at trail junctions, and surveying backcountry campsites. I thought, “This is what true wilderness looks like and feels like. Desolate, relatively untouched, remote.”

Fast forward a little over a year. I’m stepping out of a helicopter onto the shores of Colchuck Lake in the Washington Cascades. The mission is to attach vault toilets, each filled with 40 gallons of human waste, to the bottom of a helicopter so they can be transported to Leavenworth. These toilets are but a few of the many that are scattered throughout the Enchantments Permit Area.

Human impacts from recreation are acute everywhere in the Enchantments. A big part of my job was to attempt to mitigate those impacts; picking up trash, educating folks on best practices, enforcing permit regulations, and maintaining toilets. Needless to say, my summer in Leavenworth was quite different from my time in North Central Washington. The feeling of immersion I felt in the Pasayten was nowhere to be found in the Enchantments. Yet, I was working in the Washington Cascades again, I had the exact same job title and description, and I spent most of my time in federally designated Wilderness Areas.

Periodically, I would think back to the way I felt staring across the US-Canada border the year before. Where I had been so confident about what Wilderness was, I was now profoundly confused. I wondered, what does it mean for a place to be wild? Why do wild places matter? How can we be good stewards of these places? What role does outdoor recreation play in all of this?

Bear with me as we fast forward one more time to the present day...

I had the pleasure of working for NRCC as an AmeriCorps Intern, where I had the opportunity to talk with folks invested in conservation efforts across the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE). I chatted with writers, wildlife biologists, artists, advocates, and land managers. In each conversation, I brought up some of the same questions I started asking myself during my summer in Leavenworth. It became clearer to me with each interview that outdoor recreation access is a pressing issue. I came to understand it’s not only a contentious topic in Leavenworth and the Pacific Northwest, but a hot button issue around the GYE and across the Mountain West.

When I first mentioned the topic of outdoor recreation to Ben and Peyton, my contacts at NRCC, they told me to get in touch with Linda Merigliano. Merigliano started working for the Bridger-Teton National Forest as a Wilderness Ranger in the 1980s and now heads the recreation department. Over the course of our conversation, I was able to get a short rundown of how the major challenges facing Federally Designated Wilderness Areas, and their land managers, have changed over her more than forty-year career. “Wilderness debates have radically shifted. All of the debates through the 80s were ‘we want to protect this land from

oil and gas, or timber harvest, these commodity uses.’ That is no longer the debate. Now, it’s about recreation access,” she said. Merigliano went on to describe a series of community meetings the Forest Service had hosted to discuss the management of several Wilderness Study Areas surrounding Jackson, Wyoming.

Clear disagreement arose between mountain bikers and the Forest Service. The mountain bikers wanted full access to what they saw as their public lands. However, from the Forest Service’s perspective, conservation and wilderness principles clashed with the impact unlimited use would inevitably have on the landscape. Similar conflicts have arisen around backcountry skiers dipping into crucial winter habitat in the Tetons and climbers bolting in Wilderness Areas in the Wind River Range.

For Merigliano, it was emblematic of a much bigger shift in attitudes when it comes to folks invested in the protection of wild places. “It was relatively easy for conservation and recreation folks to come out on the same side when it came to opposing commodity uses. However, that conservation-recreation alliance isn’t there anymore,” she said. In the past, folks invested in protecting public lands have been able to unify around “clear threats” (i.e. oil, gas, coal) to wild places, which has helped fend off those interests since the 80s. However, newer threats to wild places, like the impact of recreation, are coming into focus, and the alliances that were there before are no longer present.

I am an avid outdoor recreator. Trail running, hiking, and backpacking are all passions of mine. I’m also a firm believer that outdoor recreation can positively impact people and inspire love for wild places. However, I came to realize that I can’t continue to gloss over the potential negative impacts of recreation. I decided to take a closer look into what the negative impacts might be on the wild places of the GYE and I came upon an article written by NRCC Writer-In-Residence Todd Wilkinson.

After reading some of what Wilkinson had to say, I knew I needed to talk to him. One 45-minute phone call later, my long-standing belief that outdoor recreation’s potential positive impacts on the environment outweigh its negative ones had been strongly challenged. He made one thing clear to me: protecting wildlife, and the places they inhabit, needs to be front and center in any effort to preserve the few truly wild places we have left.

As he puts it in his article, *Gobbledygook? Are Feel-Good Words Failing The Cause Of Wildlife Conservation?*...“Wildness is defined here as a place where wild animals can persist. And what is a wild land if it cannot maintain—sustain or conserve—its wild life?” Wilkinson explained to me how the wildlife that inhabit Greater Yellowstone are a key part of what makes the area truly wild. The relative absence of a “human footprint” is what allows wildlife to thrive in the GYE. As our footprint expands, it fragments intact ecosystems, extirpating wildlife, and eliminating wild places. These are dire consequences and they are rapidly changing places like the GYE as we know it.

He went on to explain how outdoor recreation is a growing threat. “These days, we have industrial strength outdoor recreation” Wilkinson explained. “When I arrived in the Mountain West in the 1980s, recreation was considered benign. Now the science is clear, it’s irrefutable, when you put a lot of

people doing lots of different things into landscapes, first you displace wildlife, then you ‘islandize’ their use of terrain, and then ultimately those species have a higher rate of extirpation.”

I knew I was seeing serious recreation-related issues in Leavenworth, but I couldn’t put a finger on what exactly was happening. I began to realize that outdoor recreation has the ability to be a force of de-wilding. Increasingly concentrated and diverse methods of recreating (Wilkinson’s “industrial strength recreation”) are literally changing places like Leavenworth in front of our eyes. Even the heavily managed and protected wild areas that surround Jackson are not immune to similar recreation caused de-wilding. The desire to access, and unfortunately jeopardize, the public lands that contain our nation’s wildest areas keeps growing. How pressure to increase recreation access is handled over the coming years will play a key role in determining the fate of our nation’s remaining wild places.

For me, all of this begs the question... is it possible to balance increased recreation access with the needs of ecosystems in a way that preserves wildness? Some of the folks I talked to seemed to think so, others weren’t so certain. Merigliano was optimistic. For her, a big part of mitigating outdoor recreation’s potential negative impacts comes down to influencing the behavior of the user (i.e. encouraging them to give wildlife space and recreate in less ecologically fragile areas) and cultivating a culture of care in communities that border wild places. She explained how the Bridger-Teton has been very intentional about focusing on both elements in their work. Merigliano said, “That’s what we’re really focused on...creating a community norm around responsibility. Right now, I’m very encouraged. I think it’s happening.”

Other folks echoed a similar sentiment about forming positive cultural norms and getting folks informed. However, changing cultural norms is a big undertaking and a long-term endeavor. Where do we start? Do we have the luxury of time on our side? Can our nation’s increasingly finite and fragile wild ecosystems hold on while we figure out how to truly be good stewards? There was a lack of consensus among the folks I talked to when it came to these questions.

The idea of limiting use via permit systems, and enacting seasonal closures, also came up across a couple of the interviews I conducted. These methods have merits. However, schemes to limit recreation use have not always worked as intended. For example, the Enchantments Permit Area, where I worked in Washington, has a strict limit on the number of overnight backpacking permits. Overnight use impacts noticeably declined as a result, which is fantastic. However, the system has had the unintended negative consequence of encouraging large-scale, unsustainable day use.

There is no simple solution. Addressing recreation-related de-wilding will take time, flexibility, and investment in social and decision processes across the board, but these few remaining wild places are worth it. The questions I’ve posed are just starting points that have guided my personal attempt to figure out how I can help preserve the wild places that I love. Having the opportunity at NRCC to delve into how our society is valuing wildness in the GYE has convinced me that I won’t stop searching for better ways to elevate wilderness values.



SCIENCE AND POLICY IN THE AMAZON BASIN

By Ana Elisa Lambert, NRCC Resident Fellow

Over the past year, I have continued my research on how organizations operating at the intersection of policy and science influence knowledge production and policymaking in the Amazon Basin. My work examines how NGOs, universities, and governments manage competing interests and represent diverse perspectives on the social dimensions of environmental change. I am currently completing my PhD at the University of Manchester (UK).

Looking ahead, I hope to continue contributing to practical solutions that bridge the gap between knowledge, policy, and human dignity—whether through academia or the NGO sector.

Living Lives of Human Dignity in Healthy Environments

Book preview by Ana Elisa Lambert, Co-author and NRCC Resident Fellow

As NRCC’s Resident Fellow, I have collaborated with Susan Clark and Evan Andrews on the forthcoming book *Policy Sciences and the Human Dignity Gap*. This work goes beyond theory; it is a call to action, addressing urgent environmental and social governance challenges that are intensifying amid global crises.

In today’s polarized, ‘post-truth’ world, where trust and goodwill often seem scarce, we must ask: what does it mean to be a good citizen and a capable leader? What kind of world do we want to create? In our book, we aim to engage a broad audience in exploring these questions, encouraging reflection and action that promote dignity and sustainability. The book offers practical solutions for both citizens and leaders to move beyond short-term, fragmented approaches and more effectively tackle complex issues.

In day-to-day interactions, we face deep disagreements on critical issues: how we should treat one another, how to manage natural resources, and what it means to live a responsible life. The GYE serves as a test case where these dynamics unfold daily through competing interests in conservation, tourism, recreation, Indigenous rights, and agriculture. Our book underscores the importance of shared values as the foundation of a well-functioning democracy.

The book makes three core claims:

First, human dignity and sustainable practices are inseparable. Dignity—how we are treated—is fundamentally linked to our ability to thrive in healthy environments. The two are intertwined; the fate of one directly impacts the other. Societal struggles—whether in media debates, environmental conflicts, or resource management—are fundamentally about how we

see ourselves, relate to society and nature, and whose perspectives are valued.

Second, we argue that the aspiration to live a dignified life in a healthy environment full of opportunities is a shared hope. Achieving this requires informed, active citizens who are engaged in developing the ethics and skills of responsible citizenship, recognizing that we are our greatest resource.

Third, the book provides a pragmatic framework with exercises designed to help readers grasp the connection between human dignity and sustainable environments. These exercises focus on critical thinking, evaluating values, understanding standpoints, and influencing social processes and decision-making.

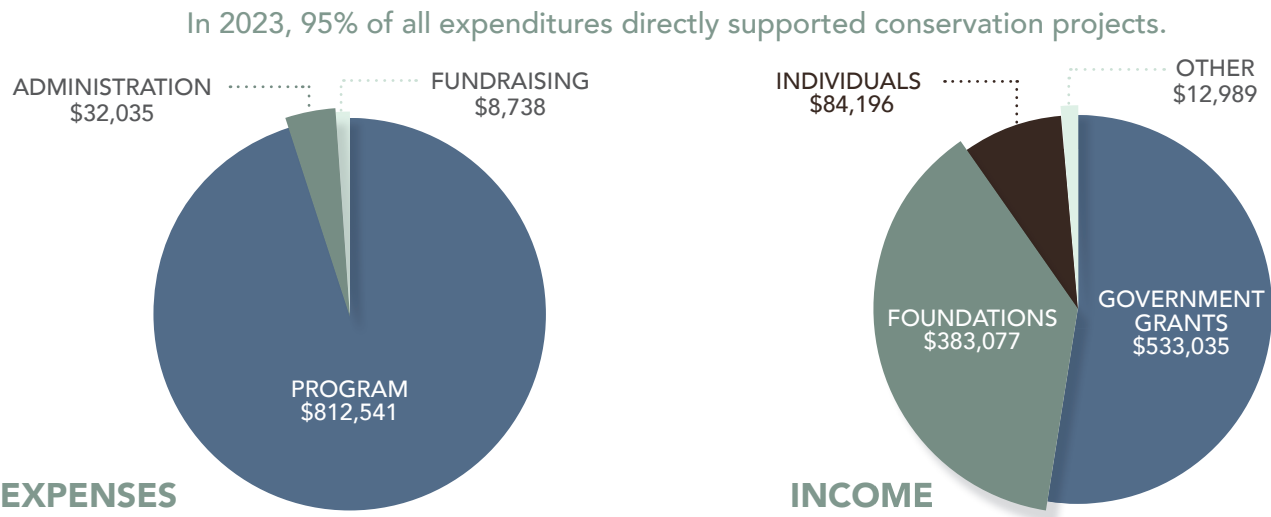
Many of us have experienced divisions within our communities or organizations that seem insurmountable. This book offers practical strategies to bridge these divides, such as pilot projects and roundtable processes facilitated by neutral parties. Case studies from around the world illustrate how starting small—building trust, effective communication, and clarifying values among key stakeholders—can generate momentum for larger, coordinated efforts.

This book, a product of collaboration since 2004, reflects the contributions of many people, both in the GYE and globally. Our shared goal is to advance knowledge and practice in the service of human dignity and healthy environments.



2023 FINANCIAL REPORT

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