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**Exploring Common Ground for Wilderness:
Back Country Horsemen and The Wilderness Society Commit to Working Together**

When representatives of The Wilderness Society (TWS) joined the National Directors of the Back Country Horsemen of America (BCHA) at their annual board meeting in April 2009, it marked a significant step towards exploring the real possibilities of working together to protect and enjoy one of this country's finest features – wilderness lands. Both organizations pledged their mutual intent to insure that traditional and historical pack and saddle stock use is recognized, protected, supported, and sustained in America's wilderness.

BCHA approached TWS to request their help preserving opportunities to enjoy wilderness riding and packing and interpreting the history and significance of pack and saddle stock for managers and other wilderness advocates. Likewise The Wilderness Society felt that BCHA would be a natural partner because of the common heritage of protecting yesterday's, today's, and tomorrow's public wild places and the opportunities to experience them.

When the Wilderness Act was enacted in 1964, pack and saddle horse and mule use was a dominant means of travel in many western wildernesses. In the 45 years since the Act was passed, our country has changed. We have become a nation of city dwellers – horses and mules are not an integral part of urban culture. BCHA has a real concern that land management agencies have been restricting recreational riding and stock use due to a conflict in "values" between horsemen and some other wilderness advocates, more so than an actual change in wilderness condition or an increase in recreational stock use. In some places, a small and vocal minority of wilderness users has challenged that the historic use of horses and mules belongs in the wilderness any more.

The three Wilderness Society staff - Cynthia Wilkerson, Washington State Program Manager; Scott Brennan, Northern Rockies Forest Program Director; and Bart Koehler, Senior Wilderness

Campaigns Director - expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to make a presentation before BCHA's National Board of Directors. Koehler led off by noting the historical roles of Aldo Leopold, Howard Zahniser, and Mardy Murie as founders and leaders of TWS and the critical role those trips by horse and mule played in their work with TWS. Aldo Leopold is not only a hero to TWS, but has long standing respect and admiration by BCHA members. "I believe that you will hear echoes of your history in our history," said Koehler during his presentation. Founded in 1935, the Wilderness Society's mission is to protect wilderness and inspire Americans to care for our wild places. "Our historic TWS leaders would not have gotten where they needed to go without horses, mules, and pack trains. This is true for both their wild destinations and for striving towards the landmark legislation we know as The Wilderness Act."

"From the get-go, many of our TWS visionary leaders saw their greatest moments of clarity, insight, and inspiration while riding a horse deep into the wild country of America. These moments gave them a bedrock solid sense of direction and helped them lead the way to securing protections for special wild places thanks to the Wilderness Act," continued Koehler.

"It was certainly our pleasure to welcome The Wilderness Society's speakers to our annual meeting," stated then Chairman Mike Reedy. From its formative years in the Flathead Valley of Montana, Back Country Horsemen proclaimed that "we are environmentalists as well as horsemen ... Our desire to reduce adverse impacts while continuing maximum enjoyment leaves no room for either apathy or indifference." (Back Country Horsemen's Guidebook, 1st edition) To accomplish its goal, the BCHA's founders pledged to be a service group assisting our public agencies in the stewardship of our wildlands in addition to advocating for our continued access.

"When the Wilderness Act was being debated in Congress, horsemen were among the advocates who testified for its passage. None of us imagined that later generations might question our privilege to enjoy that resource. But that's the situation we find ourselves in more and more often. The Wilderness Act passed because of broad citizen support," said Reedy, "it is our hope that horsemen will be welcomed by the wilderness advocacy as partners in the continued support and enjoyment of wilderness."

Koehler noted that many a wild day on horseback in the wild country forever shaped Leopold's thinking and then quoted Leopold's beliefs about the place of horses in America's wilderness: "Public wilderness areas are, first of all, a means of perpetuating the primitive skills in pioneering travel. Two of these skills are as American as a hickory tree: One of these is canoe travel and the other is travel by pack train. Wildernesses are – first of all – a series of sanctuaries for the primitive arts of wilderness travel, especially canoeing and packing by horse and mule."

In concluding his presentation, he said "It is my hope that we here today can saddle up and work together to protect more wild places as wilderness. And together we can help the American people understand and truly recognize that horseback riding in the wilderness is a time-honored all-American tradition."

Scott Brennan followed with the context of how TWS today has developed a more focused recreation program, beginning with a revised mission statement, which is "to protect wilderness

and inspire Americans to care for our wild places.” Brennan noted, “Direct personal experience is what inspires people to care for wild places, and recreation, including pack and saddle stock use, is by far the most important source of such inspiration. This is why we seek to make common cause with the Back Country Horsemen of America. The Wilderness Society believes that pack and saddle is an historic, appropriate, and accepted use of wilderness.”

Cynthia Wilkerson shared the concerns that TWS heard in an earlier listening session with the BCHA leadership and their heartfelt concern about the loss of recreational opportunities and sense of persecution that has resulted from recent agency decisions. “We share a deep connection and respect for wild places, and when you no longer can access places that you have spent time in with your friends, family, and animals, this is a real loss,” she stated.

At this point, the BCHA National Director’s and TWS worked together to identify potential solutions and positive steps that they can take together to improve the situation. The TWS team and BCHA leadership met the next day and came up with a condensed list of possible next steps. Wilkerson commented “We (TWS) are grateful for the opportunity to engage in this constructive dialogue about protecting our wild lands and critical experiences on those lands with the BCHA National Directors. We have been very welcome here and have been treated graciously and with respect.”

We were originally a little uncertain about initiating this effort, said Dennis Dailey, Executive Director of Issues and Policy, because of some of the resentment over management practices in parts of the country, but the unanimous vote of support from the BCHA Board of Directors for continuing the cooperative effort was very encouraging. Since the meeting in April, the internal team with TWS has also committed to moving forward with these discussions.

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If you want to know more about Back Country Horsemen of America or become a member, visit their website: www.backcountryhorse.com, call 888-893-5161, or write PO Box 1367, Graham, WA 98338-1367. The future of horse use on public lands is in our hands! Find out more about The Wilderness Society at www.wilderness.org.