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Back Country Horsemen of America Celebrates 40 Years
By Sarah Wynne Jackson

From the vision and insight of four mountain men was born Back Country Horsemen of America, the nation's leading organization in our fight to preserve our right to ride horses on public lands. In 40 years, a handful of folks has increased to over 13,000 members from over 185 chapters and affiliates in 26 states.

Humble Beginnings

The seeds of BCHA were planted in the late 60s and early 70s. As hiking, mountain biking, and other trail uses rapidly grew, the general sentiment toward horses on public lands soured. Pack and saddle stock were quickly restricted to a few particular trails or prohibited altogether.

Four friends from Montana — Roland Cheek, Ken Ausk, Dennis Swift, and Dulane Fulton – could see the future on the horizon. They knew they needed an organization of horsemen to represent the interests of back country horse users on matters regarding public lands.

Gathered around the fire at Roland's hunting camp in the Bob Marshall Wilderness of western Montana, they brainstormed and developed a vision for a new organization and a course of action for it to follow. They also arrived at three basic principles which have guided BCHA since its inception: 1) become involved in public land management issues that affect recreational stock use; 2) participate in volunteer programs on public lands that enhance riding opportunities; 3) educate horsemen in low impact methods of using stock on public lands.

The founding members presented their ideas to local officials of the Flathead National Forest (Montana), who endorsed the concept and encouraged them to proceed. The founding members gathered community support and at a public meeting on January 17, 1973, officially formed the first Back Country Horsemen organization. True to the principles of the new group, they immediately became involved in wilderness issues and volunteer programs related to equestrian use.

The idea of a united voice speaking for the interests of stock users spread throughout Montana and Idaho during the 1970s. Around the same time, the Washington State Horsemen and the High Sierra Stock Users Association of California, both with similar goals and objectives as the new Back Country Horsemen organizations in Montana and Idaho, became interested in affiliation. In 1986, a constitution was adopted by representatives of all four states and the organization officially became Back Country Horsemen of America.

Making a Difference

In the years since then, BCHA had addressed a variety of issues at the local, state, and national levels, including forest management, wilderness use, the US Forest Service's Limits of Acceptable Change process, invasive species, stock restrictions, user fees, trail closures, outsourcing, sale of public lands, endangered species, agency funding, and more. BCHA takes an active role on these issues and helps shape outcomes that will benefit recreational stock use as well as other trail users.

The path hasn't always been a smooth one. Despite their reasonable expectation of fairness and cooperation, BCHA's efforts were at times rebuffed. A prime example is the US Forest Service's poorly conceived trails classification plan that failed to consider horse use almost completely. After many unsuccessful efforts at communicating this problem, Back Country Horsemen of America finally filed a lawsuit in 2005. A federal judge ruled in favor of BCHA to give horsemen across the country a say in how pack and saddle stock trails are managed.

From the very start, Back Country Horsemen of America have been folks who believe in giving back. They find ways to volunteer their time, manpower, horsepower, and money towards projects that benefit the community and keep public lands open for recreational stock use. The quality and scope of this work is truly outstanding and includes cleaning trails after storms; blazing new trails; hauling in materials for the construction of bridges and camps; preserving historic trail structures; public education about enjoying and protecting America's wilderness lands; picking up litter (including a junk car and a World War II bomb); food drives for local food banks; stocking fish; rescuing ill and injured hikers; and so much more. Many of these projects, although performed by horsemen, benefit all trail users and the wilderness in general.

Often, BCHA does these projects in cooperation with other organizations, such as the US Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, state divisions of natural resources, Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society, Colorado Plateau Mountain Bike Association, Wyoming Wilderness Association, Washington Trails Association, Pacific Crest Trail Association, Montana Conservation Corps, Capon Valley 50K Run (West Virginia), Continental Divide Trail Alliance, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, Trout Unlimited, and Southern Appalachian Wilderness Stewards.

It is doubtful that any other organization in the country donates as much to our public lands as BCHA. The numbers alone are staggering. In 2011, Back Country Horsemen across the country donated 326,347 hours to volunteer activities. The total value of the "grunt labor," vehicle mileage, stock hauling, pack and stock used, and equipment and supplies used during those hours was nearly \$11 million. During the past 17 years BCHA has contributed \$74 million of service and 2,970,000 hours of time. Is your favorite trail well-maintained? If so, you can probably thank a Back Country Horseman.

Celebration

Back Country Horsemen of America is celebrating their 40th anniversary throughout 2013 with events and activities at all levels of the organization; chapter, state, and national. Some special activities are scheduled during their annual national board meeting in April in Rapid City, South Dakota. Fitting for the occasion, the festivities include educational clinics (one will be given by a US Forest Service Lead Packer), meet and greet gatherings, and recognition of the folks who have helped make BCHA the amazing organization it is today.

About Back Country Horsemen of America

BCHA is a non-profit corporation made up of state organizations, affiliates, and at-large members. Their efforts have brought about positive changes in regards to the use of horses and stock in wilderness and public lands.

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!

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