Rumble hovering over central Idaho's Boulder-White Clouds

Eric V. Segalstad

The University of Montana

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THE RUMBLE
HOVERING OVER CENTRAL IDAHO'S
BOULDER-WHITE CLOUDS

by
Eric V. Segalstad
B.B.A. Pacific Lutheran University, 1996
presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts
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2-21-06
Date
The rumble hovering over central Idaho’s Boulder-White Clouds

Chairman: Dr. Clem Work

This series of articles explore various facets of the debate surrounding the proposed wilderness in the Boulder and White Cloud Mountains of central Idaho.

It’s been more than a quarter of a century since new wilderness was designated in Idaho, but Republican Congressman Mike Simpson from Idaho’s second district has spent the last five years preparing an omnibus wilderness bill.

The Central Idaho Economic Development and Recreation Act (CIEDRA) aims to please Simpson’s four main constituencies in and adjacent to the proposed wilderness in the Boulder and White Cloud Mountains—ranchers, local politicians, motorized recreationists and environmentalists.

Wilderness designation is the strongest form of federal lands protection. Only traditional uses such as hiking, grazing and horseback riding are generally allowed; snowmobiling, timber harvesting and construction are not. Consequently, successful wilderness designation requires a display of shrewd political tiptoeing.

Simpson’s recent years of shuttle diplomacy between the aforementioned constituents has created a tolerable consensus between those consulted.

Local politicians govern a county larger than three states, but with 4,300 residents and less than 4 percent private land, raising taxes to pay for municipal services is a challenge. CIEDRA will transfer nearly 6,000 acres of federal land to the county and four of its towns and communities, which in turn will be auctioned to developers.

Ranchers who hold grazing rights in the proposed wilderness have agreed to a voluntary buy-out scheme to release those rights.

Motorized recreation is one of the fastest growing activities in the country, and the growth of participants in Idaho mirrors this trend. Wilderness designation will close areas currently open to ATVers, mountain bikers and snowmobilers, so Simpson has worked closely with alternatives. A popular motorized corridor will remain open after designation, bisecting the wilderness. In addition, CIEDRA will set aside funds for a new trail outside the wilderness.

The environmental movement is sharply divided over the wilderness proposal. The Idaho Conservation League, led by Rick Johnson, has worked closely with Simpson and generally agrees with the Act in its current form, while the Sierra Club has opposed the idea of an omnibus wilderness bill on grounds that it compromises wilderness.
Preface

The first time I passed the Boulder Mountains and drove across Galena Pass it was 2 a.m. and a chaotic mess of black and white: womb-like darkness interrupted by dense snow darting 45-degrees and illuminated by the low beams of my truck.

The fuel gauge hugged the red mark and I hoped the vehicle could snail from the pass to Stanley without being halted by weather or lack of fuel. I had shot a Keller Williams show in Ketchum on assignment from *Relix* magazine and raced for an interview in Great Falls for the same publication the following day.

After passing the White Cloud Mountains, I refueled in Stanley, drove another thirty miles and decided to pull to the side of the road to avoid plunging into the Salmon River.

Before I turned off the light of my headlamp I read a piece in the *Idaho Mountain Express* about possible wilderness protection of the Boulder and White Cloud Mountains.

The area is the largest roadless, unprotected piece of federal land left in the contiguous states and as I kept up with coverage over the next year or so, it baffled me that with the exception of a few articles in the *Idaho Statesman* and two pieces in *High Country News*, the discussion of the future of these magnificent public lands mainly took place in the *Challis Messenger* (a weekly with 1,900 in circulation) and the *Mountain Express* (a semiweekly with 15,000 in circulation).

When it was time to decide on a master’s project, the proposed wilderness appeared like an interesting topic for several reasons.
Casting the net widely I discovered the issue touched on environmentalism (and its schism), *old west* versus *new west*, philosophy (the crux of man and nature), history, economics and politics (local, state and national).

I drove down the east fork of the Salmon in July packed with enough gear, food, books and article printouts to last me a fortnight. Since then I’ve taken more than a dozen trips, each lasting four to fourteen days, exploring large tracts of the proposed wilderness by foot, car and on skis.

I doubt I could’ve found another project that would’ve taken me from shaving in creeks of snowmelt with a dull razor and no shaving cream, to wearing a pinstriped suit at a subcommittee hearing in D.C. and meeting with Congressman Mike Simpson in his congressional office.

The hearing sparked a wag of interest from the national press because pop singer, environmentalist and long-time Custer County resident Carole King happened to testify.

“Is she the Carole King,” a veteran Capitol Hill reporter asked me after he glanced the agenda laid out on the press table in front of us. But he and other reporters asked to drop by caught on quickly. The collective angle in next day’s papers was King against the bill.

King, who finds CIEDRA a threat to The Rockies Prosperity Act (previously known as NREPA—The Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act), a five-state wilderness package devoid of compromises that she’s busy lobbying for, has hardly been involved in the CIEDRA debate, but was invited by Simpson to testify. Never mind that
The Rockies Prosperity Act is a fantasy bill that is unlikely to pass unscathed. That angle wasn’t explored so I felt compelled to write a piece that was published by New West later that afternoon [see appendix].

It’s January and feverish behind-the-scenes tweaking, deals and squeals are made to keep moving the bill by Simpson’s office and the most powerful interest groups.

I’m optimistic that Richard Pombo and the House Resources Committee give CIEDRA an acceptable mark-up within the next few months [see commentary]. Assuming I’m right, the bill will first move to the House of Representatives and then to the Senate. The bill can be tossed or turned in either, and only if identical bills come out of them, can the President sign the act into law.

Regardless of whether it passes or not, I hope others will be able to visit the Boulder-White Clouds and see mountain goats hasten up scree, throw a line in the creek, scramble up Castle Peak on a frosty October morning, soak in one of the area’s many hot springs and carve deep powder from Galena Summit on down to the Stanley Basin. It’s been a fun ride and I’ll see it through.

BjS
January 15, 2006
Idaho
by Adan Aijala
of
Yonder Mountain String Band

From Stanley up to Sunbeam
From Clayton on to Challis
Headin’ down the Salmon River
To a rangeland palace
Sagebrush all around
Where the deer and elk do roam
This place I may call home
Where the flatlands stretch for miles
And the mountains touch the sky
And the sun always shines
In Idaho, ohhhhhhhh
In Idaho, ohhhhhhh
In Idaho, ohhhhhhhh
In Idaho

My mind is filled with images
Of sawtoothed ridges
Where the snowmelt forms
Cold mountain creeks
Flowing through the valley down below
I was standin’ ‘neath the pine trees
On a bed of wild grass
This place has captured me
Wildflowers I can see
There ain’t no place I’d rather be
Than Idaho, ohhhhhhhh
In Idaho, ohhhhhhh
In Idaho, ohhhhhhhh
In Idaho

In Idaho
Thanks

I’d like to thank my parents, Siri and Tom, for unconditional love and support throughout my life; my committee members, Professor Clem Work, Associate Professor Keith Graham and Dr. Martin Nie, as well as Dean Jerry Brown for their time, interest, discussions and suggestions; Josh Hunter for a never-waning and encouraging interest in my work; Owen Dodd for being a reliable compadre-in-excess; Jaime Bohle for letting me stay and work out of his bunker hide-out in Vancouver, Washington, when the going went rough; Brandon Shimizu for ditto in Bellevue, Washington; the staff at Tully’s Coffee in Ketchum, Idaho, for serving drip-coffee and providing cover, vista and WiFi while slipping out from the wilderness; visiting professor Michael Downs for saying out loud what I had on my mind; the Joe Durso fund for covering $500 worth of expenses; the interviewees who devoted their time to this project and the signers of the Wilderness Act who facilitated the National Wilderness Preservation System.
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The Rumble Hovering Over Idaho’s Boulder-White Clouds

"It is imperative to maintain portions of the wilderness untouched so that a tree will rot where it falls, a waterfall will pour its curve without generating electricity, a trumpeter swan may float on uncontaminated water—and moderns may at least see what their ancestors knew in their nerves and blood."


Pulitzer Prize winning writer
and historian of the
American West.
From the air, Idaho’s great Snake River plain looks like a smile, as if someone scooped through the southern part of the state from west to east, creating an unbroken stretch of semi-arid farmland. But the plain is the flat exception to the gem state’s vast intermingling mountains that rise like steep creases on a ruffled bedspread.

Drainages and gushing rivers such as the Payette, Clearwater, Lochsa, Selway and Salmon cut through massive slabs of lava, granite, basalt and batholith, providing productive farmland, plenty of fish and game and spectacular scenery: views of the cragged Grand Teton National Park to the east, the Seven Devils of the north and the colorful Owyhees sprawling south across the Oregon and Nevada borders. Although better known, those stand like outliers in a centrifuge compared to Idaho’s cluttered centre. Here, Lewis and Clark crossed the Pioneers, were turned back by the deep and twisting Salmon River and struggled their way through the rugged and coniferous Bitterroots—twice—before they reached the Pacific. But the explorers never saw what locals regard as the hidden heart of Idaho: the big Lost River Mountains, the Pioneers, the Boulders, Castle Peak and the rest of the White Clouds. In this vast, sparsely populated and mainly roadless area, the mountains face one another like pieces on a chessboard.

Idaho is the wildest of the 48 contiguous states. The 53 million-acre state’s roadless holdings are the size of Massachusetts and Vermont combined: 13 million acres primarily managed by the Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service (of which 4.4 million acres are designated wilderness) and are habitats for species such as elk, big horn sheep, mountain goat, trout, salmon and bald eagle. The wildlands serve as
rangeland and attractive playgrounds for hunters, anglers and recreationists as well as caches of ore and to a lesser extent, wood.

“Buy land. They’ve stopped making it,” Mark Twain advised two centuries ago—today he might say, “Protect land. They’ve stopped making it.”

The U.S. carved its existence out of wilderness and the American character is sculpted and hardened by it. By the time the once mighty frontier became a memory relived in books, and a few years later on the movie screen, people like John Muir and Aldo Leopold were alarmed.

What was America without wilderness? The answer seeded the idea of protecting patches of wildland. These pioneers of protection were forerunners to the long process that culminated in 1964 with the passing of the Wilderness Act.

Today, the wilderness preservation system protects 680 areas in 44 states, numbers 106,619,199 acres—4.7 percent of America’s total landmass and 2.4 percent of the contiguous states. New bills aimed at protecting wilderness surface every year, but like any other legislation, the process from proposal to law is usually long, tedious and marked by compromises between an increasing number of competing constituencies.

Nevertheless, the National Wilderness Preservation System keeps growing. Last year netted a scant 21,183 acres, divided between Puerto Rico’s El Toro Wilderness and New Mexico’s Ojito Wilderness. The most recently designated wilderness is the 100,000-acre Cedar Mountain Wilderness Area in Utah, which was designated January 6, 2006.
A recent proposal emanates from the headwaters of the Salmon. The Central Idaho Economic Development and Recreation Act (CIEDRA), which is under review by the House Resources Committee, could designate more than 300,000 acres of wilderness in the Boulder and White Cloud mountain ranges—snow-capped peaks, alpine lakes, forested moraines and fragrant sagebrush valleys—in the largest unprotected swath of land left in the Lower 48. It’s a picturesque area true to the Forest Service’s motto: a land of many uses. The problem, as some see it, is that the greater area will continue to be so after designation.

In the Boulder-White Clouds backcountry Congressman Mike Simpson has tried to make sure all users—ranchers, local politicians, backpackers, ORVers, hunters, anglers and environmentalists—get some of what they want out of CIEDRA (pronounced ceedra).

Roughly speaking, the area comprises the quadrant from Ketchum (Sun Valley), east to Mackay, north to Challis and west to Stanley—nearly 550,000 acres of predominantly roadless Forest Service and BLM lands.
Ranching is still an important activity in Custer County. Black Angus graze next to the Salmon River in the Stanley Basin.
Each season has its unique attributes, but early June is a magnificent time to visit the White Clouds. Perennials are blooming, the peaks are still covered in snow, the landscape brims with color, wafts of pungent aromas and the sound of crickets, ravens, bees and gushing creeks offer recreationists a delightful break from the incessant sound of cell phones, cars, elevators and keyboard clicks.

In June 1999 Simpson, a freshly elected Republican congressman from Idaho with a then-zero rating from the League of Conservation Voters (his score was 9 percent after second session of the 108th Congress), was invited to speak at Idaho Conservation League’s annual conference in the Stanley Basin.

Executive Director Rick Johnson brought the Congressman on a flyby over the nearby Boulder and White Cloud Mountains. Always the opportunist, Johnson gave his conservative Congressman a history lesson in Idaho conservation efforts. Gliding across Castle Peak, he talked about the humongous open-pit mine that threatened its base in the late 1960s. He talked about the conservation efforts of former Governor Andrus, who later became a revered Secretary of the Interior, and the late Frank Church, a Republican like Simpson, who helped designate the River of No Return Wilderness 19 years earlier. The Congressman seemed to enjoy the lesson and kept his face glued to the window, soaking up the vistas.

Exiting the small aircraft Simpson stepped into questions from journalists. One pitched Simpson a soft ball: what do you think of the Boulder-White Clouds?

“Oh, I love the Boulder-White Clouds,” the Congressman replied.
Not missing a beat Johnson found an opportune moment for interjection. “If it was politically advantageous for you, would you consider protecting the Boulder-White Clouds as wilderness?” he said.

“If it is politically advantageous,” Simpson replied. “And it’s not.”

He must’ve given it some thought—four years later Simpson announced he was working on a wilderness bill. A year later, in 2003, he offered a framework of the bill. Greg Warden’s (R-OR) subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health heard CIEDRA in late October 2005. A mark-up from the House Resources Committee is expected by March.

CIEDRA seeks to designate three wilderness areas: the Jerry Peak Wilderness (131,700 acres), the Ernest Hemingway-Boulder Wilderness (96,700 acres) and the White Clouds Wilderness (73,100 acres). The three areas are contiguous, but the bill proposes to divide them by leaving a motorized corridor open after designation.

The popular west side of the White Clouds, which is currently designated as a Wilderness Study Area with restricted use, will be part of a new management area allowing for continued freewheeling on established trails—much to the chagrin of conservationists.

In addition, the bill includes an economic development package for Custer County, contentious federal land transfers, a 960-acre motorized recreation park near Boise, a $500,000 bike and snowmobile trail between Stanley and Redfish Lake and various other carrots.
CIEDRA is basically a pie with four slices baked for specific constituents: ranchers, local politicians, motorized recreationists and environmentalists.

Ranchers across the west are allowed to run cattle on public lands through federal grazing programs. The Wilderness Act doesn’t prohibit cattle grazing, but both environmentalists and many federal managers have long dreaded the practice in wilderness for ecological reasons.

Ranching is still prominent across the proposed wilderness area, primarily in Custer County, so simply taking away grazing rights, which Congress is free to do if it wishes, would alienate one of Simpson’s core constituencies. To avoid a potential political hara-kiri, Simpson added a voluntary buy-out program that’s endorsed by local ranchers but denounced by the Idaho Cattle Association. Under CIEDRA, ranchers who hold grazing rights in the wilderness may exchange that right for monetary compensation—$7 million is allocated for this purpose.

Simpson is also keen to please local politicians—county commissioners, mayors and state representatives. Most of the proposed wilderness is located in the relatively poor county of Custer. A mere 4 percent within the county line is privately owned—the rest is federal and state land primarily managed by the Forest Service and the BLM. The county, which is almost the size of Connecticut, is home to a scant 4,300 residents and it’s thirsty for additional tax dollars.

In the first version of CIEDRA, the county was slated for a 16,000-unspecified-acre transfer from the federal government. The lofty gift outraged the environmental
community and when the county remembered it was responsible for community services in its new holdings, it too realized the number had to come down. In the latest version, transfers are down to 5,848 acres (422 acres in Blaine county). Although many are opposed to federal land transfers in principle, 162 acres in and adjacent to the City of Stanley, by the foot of the rugged Sawtooths, have caused a stir, rippling throughout the greater environmental community.

Janine Blaeloch of the Western Lands Project in Seattle spends her time monitoring the use of federal land holdings. She sees CIEDRA as the latest example of omnibus approaches in wilderness legislations, a trend that started with the Steens Mountains Wilderness in Oregon seven years ago.
Blaeloeh and other conservationists note that land trades and motorized corridors granting ATVs and burly trucks access to deep wilderness, set new and detrimental standards for future designations.

Nevada’s Clark and Lincoln County bills, from 2002 and 2004 respectively, include many of the same conveyances found in the earlier Steens bill and have helped pave way for Simpson’s central Idaho bill.

In addition to wilderness designations, the Nevada bills grant rights-of-way for water pipelines and power lines, the sale of federal parcels and hard releases wilderness study areas. A Wilderness Study Area, or a WSA, is set aside, and often managed as wilderness, because it inherits wilderness qualities that merits de facto wilderness.

During the legislative process, WSAs not recommended for wilderness by an agency are often released in two different ways. A hard release is permanent, while a soft release means the area can gain wilderness protection at some point in the future.

The Central Idaho Economic Development and Recreation Act include hard release language, which is unpopular with most environmentalists, but an attractive bargaining chip for non-wilderness supporters.

“Land is being used to smooth over political differences. It’s a disturbing trend that needs to be nipped in the bud right now,” Blaeloeh said at the Wild Rockies Rendezvous in Idaho’s Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness in September 2005.

The third constituency Simpson coddles is motorized recreationists. Off-Highway vehicle use is the fastest growing recreational activity in the U.S. according to a report
released this summer by the U.S. Forest Service [see Trail Use Tribulations]. The report found that every third Idahoan older than 16 partakes and more than 91,000 Off-Highway Vehicles (ATVs and dirt bikes, excluding snowmobiles and SUVs) are registered in Idaho.

The increasingly powerful Blue Ribbon Coalition, which is based out of Pocatello, Idaho, represents OHV users in negotiations with Simpson and his staff. BRC was founded as a national interest group in 1987 and it has grown exponentially with the activity since then, establishing a significant political force in national wilderness and recreation politics.

The fourth component is wilderness. Without the other three on the team, Simpson would argue, wilderness designation in the Boulder-White Clouds is moot. But Simpson is genuinely interested in wilderness protection. Simpson slings a backpack in the White Clouds every August and he keeps a photo album in the front office of his congressional quarters on Capitol Hill stocked with snaps from his overnight trips.

Many environmentalists claim today’s wilderness bills are far removed from the intent of the Wilderness Act of 1964. They are no longer mere acts to protect wilderness, but stitched together as legislative Frankensteins, they say, aimed to please the entire shooting gallery of interest groups.

Those assertions are at best inaccurate, according to wilderness historian and long-time activist Doug Scott. Scott began following what became the Wilderness Act as
a graduate student while Congress was still debating it in the early 1960s. For the last forty or so years he has been directly and indirectly involved in dozens of wilderness laws across the country. Last year he published a chronicle of the Act’s first forty years titled “The Enduring Wilderness.”

Increasingly, environmentalists find themselves head to head with motorized recreationists, ranchers and representatives from local government, each fighting for their own. The results are hydra-headed wilderness bills that include a smorgasbord of components. “We didn’t have a single face-to-face meeting with everybody,” admits Lindsay Slater, Simpson’s chief of staff. “It was more like shuttle diplomacy.”

The title of Simpson’s wilderness bill says it all—it’s an economic development and recreation act—not simply a wilderness bill.

Scott divides wilderness bills into two historical epochs. The first, called the mandate era, lasted ten years from enactment, but its history went back three decades before that.

Early federal conservationism designated primitive areas starting in 1929. Although these areas never enjoyed the same protection from logging, road building and stringent use-restrictions as areas under the Wilderness Act, they were an important first step.

When President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Wilderness Act into effect, it protected 9.1 million acres of primitive areas as wilderness. With more than five million acres of leftover primitive areas, the Forest Service was given 10 years to determine
which areas deserved reclassification as wilderness. Similarly, the National Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Service were each to review roadless lands within their holdings. Agency findings would form the basis for Presidential recommendations of potential wilderness areas to Congress.

These initial bills were what some environmentalists today call clean. The old primitive areas had few mineral and logging claims, so legislation during the mandate period didn’t have to accommodate special interests to the same degree as later bills.

The designation of the Scapegoat Wilderness in Montana in 1972 started a gradual change in wilderness designation. Up until that point, all proposals had come from an agency or the President—the Scapegoat originated with local citizens eager to preserve nearby wildlands for posterity.

During the early 1970s, the conservation movement solidified, became more professional, shrewd and efficient at localizing efforts. From then on, Scott explains, citizens began pestering congressional members to designate threatened areas as wilderness—areas where the extracting industries often had substantial claims or interests.

Politics is the art of balancing competing constituencies, a fact reflected in most wilderness legislation ever since the mandate era. In the early days, compromises were often manifested in bills passed on or around the same time. A wilderness bill on one side of the scale equaled, say, the rights to drill, mine or harvest timber in a nearby area.
Merely looking at the wilderness legislation won’t reveal these invisible compromises, Scott points out.

Starting in 1980 with Idaho’s River of No Return Wilderness (later renamed Frank Church-River of No Return in honor of the late Senator who was instrumental in passing the bill), bills became *legislative Frankensteins*, forging compromises into one comprehensive bill—CIEDRA being just the latest example.

It’s been 26 years since Idaho’s last wilderness bill so it’s hardly surprising that environmentalists like the Idaho Conservation League see the need to compromise to get one passed.

“There is no way Simpson could get a clean bill through this Congress,” Scott says. Or any other Congress for that matter. The reality on the ground is simple yet complex: the plethora of user and interest groups all want their rock strategically placed on the legislative cairn.

In the confusing climate of politics, even the most savvy is hard pressed to pass anything without broad support from a cross section of constituents. Simpson is savvy. He’s in his fourth term and he knows that to protect these mountains he must listen and herd various interest groups into supporting his 58-page compromise.

George Nickas, executive director of the non-profit Wilderness Watch, says national politics is currently unfavorable to wilderness designation. “To get one [wilderness] passed, you gotta make a lot of deals,” he says.
Although the lines are somewhat blurred, today’s conservationists seem to fall in two camps—realists and visionaries. For interest groups, politics is a difficult game of compromises where the challenge is to give something away and still come out ahead. Conservation realists realized it decades ago and without them we’d be hard-pressed to have many acres of protected wilderness. Idaho Conservation League’s Rick Johnson is a good example of a realist. “I think like a politician,” he says unabashed. He commands ICL toward incremental goals, using the tactics, shrewdness and charm of a veteran politician, but his willingness to compromise has caused many environmentalists consternation in the other camp.

Visionaries, on the other hand, are driven by a strong conviction for what some opponents might label utopian. They are driven by an all-or-nothing philosophy where clean and uncompromised wilderness bills are the only acceptable solution.

Nickas explains his philosophy using an analogy: “I don’t think environmentalists should get on board unless the conductor is willing to listen.”

In today’s political climate, willingness to compromise translates to no play so visionaries like Nickas often find themselves yelling off field, reminding the rest of us what a grand, unspoiled wilderness could—or perhaps should—be.

“I think the Boulder-White Clouds would be better off without CIEDRA,” he says. “We have the opportunity to set aside the largest, wildest, unprotected land in the Lower 48, but CIEDRA offers a very diminished vision of what the place could be.”
Environmentalists and others who care about wildlands operate in an unprecedented climate of confusion with regards to politics and policies. The Bush administration has muddied the future of forest management, forest planning and roadless area management to the extent of unpredictability, which explains why some wish to secure wilderness now, while others want to wait.

Gov. Dirk Kempthorne’s roadless petition for Idaho, which he expects to turn over to the Forest Service by mid-June 2007, could have future ramifications for the Boulder-White Clouds if CIEDRA ends up in the wastebasket. The petition is not likely to directly threaten the area with logging or additional roads, but opponents fear vague language will leave the roadless Boulder-White Clouds in limbo for a second time.

Castle Peak is the tallest and most famous of the numerous white-capped summits in the White Cloud range, many of which are still unnamed. Solid rock divided by fans of alluvial talus drape the crown-shaped 11,815-foot mountain.

In 1968 rumors circulated that corporate interests intended to mine molybdenite, an alloy used in stainless steel, in the basin by the foothills of Castle Peak. Since the ore was located below the basin, operations required a gargantuan pit: 7,000-feet long, 300 to 400-feet deep and up to 700-feet wide. American Smelting and Refining Company estimated it would process about 40 million pounds of ore per day. The ore was expected to hold 0.2 percent molybdenum content, which is about average for these deposits, rendering 99.8 percent of the mined rock waste. The company proposed constructing a
tailings pond to deal with the waste—a 400-foot high dam on Little Boulder Creek. Over the course of 20 years of operations, ASARCO estimated it would dump 145 million tons there.

“We’ll be removing tons of ore and rock,” said the supervisor for ASARCO’s Northwest Exploration division back then, “but it’s our intention to do it with a minimum of disruption. …[W]e can…re-establish the ecological system in the area to as high a value as it is now. We’re sure we can do that. The landscape won’t look the same as it does now. Maybe it might even be a little better.” And the mammoth wound by the base of the crown? ASARCO planned to fill it with water and touted it as a recreational lake, perfect for water skiing, swimming, fishing and camping.

The problem with open-pit mining apart from the obvious esthetic aspect is the unavoidable damage to soil, flowers, trees, shrubs and wildlife. It can take hundreds of years for nature to recuperate and biodiversity to reestablish itself.

When the people of Idaho realized the imminent threat to one of their great wild lands, they created such a ruckus that Forest Service Chief Ed Cliff decided to hold a public hearing on the matter. Idaho Governor Don Samuelson, an ardent supporter of the mining industry, publicly chastised Cliff to his face at the Western Governor’s Conference in Seattle, accusing him of stirring up the public. “If you had just gone ahead and issued the permit, there would have been no controversy,” the governor said.
Hiker approaching Castle Peak in the heart of the White Cloud Mountains.
Concerned citizens quickly saw the need to organize in order to fight the powerful mining behemoth and its political cohorts. The Greater Sawtooth Preservation Council and the Idaho Environmental Council were perhaps the two hardest fighting of the many interest groups hatched to protect serenity in the heart of the gem state.

The gubernatorial race in 1970 divided the state along environmental lines. Democrat Cecil Andrus received political endorsements from the environmentalists, while the incumbent Samuelson sided with the extracting industry. Andrus eventually won on the preservation ticket, ending a 25-year long Republican grip on the state.

Although environmental efforts thwarted ASARCO’s grand plans, the Boulder-White Clouds fell in a legislative limbo that continues to this day. Large-scale mining wasn’t permitted, but due to the “political climate,” Andrus said the Boulder-White Clouds had to be omitted from the 1972 Sawtooth National Recreation Area bill, which protected 217,000 acres nearby as the Sawtooth Wilderness Area.

Thanks to conservationists, Governor Andrus and Senator Frank Church, Idaho kept adding chunks of wilderness throughout the 1970s: Hell’s Canyon in 1975, Gospel-Hump in 1978 and River of No Return in 1980.

A 26-year lull has followed with several unsuccessful attempts at statewide wilderness bills. McClure tried it in 1984, Mike Crapo put out the feelers for an east-central bill in the early 1990s. The best attempt was when the state’s leading Democrat and Republican sat down together in 1987-88. It seemed like a perfect moment to pass a 1.4 million-acre statewide bill that included a chunk of the Boulder and White Cloud
Mountains. Unfortunately, the effort plummeted when it became clear that Andrus and Symms refused to solicit input from interest groups.

After 26 years and a few failed statewide efforts, Simpson’s four-pronged bill sounds reasonable to most residents, politicians, ranchers and environmentalists who live near the proposed wilderness. Statewide, Idahoans seem to agree.

In an ICL-commissioned poll from September by Republican pollster Bob Moore, Idaho voters supporting CIEDRA outnumbered those who didn’t by two-to-one. Even though not all components of the bill were favored by those polled, the data suggest Idaho residents are willing to compromise for additional wilderness.

It’s early September 2005, in the White Clouds and a few inches of fresh snow dust Castle Peak. Further down, fire fighters are welcoming a day and a half of incessant rains. They hope the downpour will help quell a 40,000-acre wildfire that’s been raging for the past five days. But the fate of the Boulder-White Clouds isn’t at the mercy of the blazing flames—they will eventually perish and the trees grow back.

Idaho Conservation League’s Rick Johnson, although fearful of what lies ahead, is bullish. Since Republicans control both the House and the Senate, he thinks a Republican-sponsored wilderness bill is more likely to pass than a Democratic one.

In an October 1, 2005, interview at the Society of Environmental Journalists’ annual conference in Austin, Texas, House Resources Committee Chairman Richard Pombo told reporters “it is possible” that CIEDRA is the right bill at the right time.
Aldo Leopold once wrote an essay titled ‘Thinking Like a Mountain.’ He argued nature has a deeper meaning known only to the mountain itself, and urged us all to think like one.

Slater, Simpson’s chief of staff hopes the bill will get its mark-up from the House Resources Committee in March, after which it should move to the House floor. There, it can either be tossed or sent to the Senate, where it can also be tossed, or sent to the President before becoming law.

Although CIEDRA’s future is uncertain, we’re left hoping our elected officials in the House and Senate collectively know how to think like a mountain and vote what’s best for the Boulder White Clouds.

View of the snow-draped Boulders in mid-October from near Castle Divide.
Trail Use Tribulations

A motorized corridor bisecting Congressman Mike Simpson’s (R-ID) wilderness proposal in the Boulder and White Cloud Mountains in central Idaho has environmentalists fuming. Engine roars from the Germania Creek corridor, critics assert, will disturb wildlife and diminish the wilderness experience for recreationists even deep inside the boundaries.

“The reason we designate wilderness is because it’s the strongest protection there is for primitive areas,” says Linn Kincannon of Idaho Conservation League. “We don’t want motorized users everywhere. And I think even motorized users like quietness when they turn off their engines.”

She’s probably right, but trail closures, even in the name of wilderness, are a tough piece of meat for motorized users.

“If you’re a hiker you don’t know what it’s like to lose trails,” says Brian Hawthorne of the Blue Ribbon Coalition, a special interest group representing motorized recreationists and mountain bikers. “We never know if a place we love, and have been going to for years, will close [or not].” He says the Forest Service fails to warn users about trail closures and that motorized users are continuously shoved to other spots as a consequence. But with Idaho’s 9,000 miles of single-track trails and 34,000 miles in the state’s national forests open to motorized users—combined more than 8.5 times the length of Idaho’s highways—environmentalists find it difficult to sympathize.
Sign by trailhead to Crater Lake in the White Cloud Mountains.
A study published by the U.S. Forest Service last summer found dirt biking and four-wheeling with All-Terrain Vehicles one of the fastest growing recreational activities in the country.

From 1993 to 2003, the number of ATVs and dirt bikes tearing it up on the loose network of trails across the country grew by 174 percent. More than one million new ATVs and dirt bikes were sold in 2003 alone.

The Idaho Conservation League, the Wilderness Society, Sierra Club, Boulder-White Clouds Council and others, realize that the landscape is changing, both literally and metaphorically.

It is well documented that often-used trails cause erosion and that a limited number of irresponsible riders blaze new trails that may take years to heal, but the sheer number of motorized recreationists has rendered the group as an increasingly powerful voice in public land-use issues.

“Over the years, motorized users have increased exponentially and groups have expanded their clout,” says Kincannon, ICL’s director for central Idaho.

The most powerful of these groups is the Blue Ribbon Coalition, which has organized motorized recreationists across the country from its headquarters in Pocatello, Idaho.

Brian Hawthorne, BRC’s public lands director, says compromise between various interest groups are necessary to successfully designate wilderness. “We really do like the
way Simpson has addressed inputs from various recreation groups. I’ve never seen wilderness done this way before,” he says.

And just that is why groups like the Sierra Club are against CIEDRA.

“The impact zone for ORV [Off-Road Vehicle] use is broader than just the few feet the trail covers,” says Duane Reynolds, chair of Sierra Club’s Sawtooth chapter. “There are wildlife impacts. Winter is a critical time for wildlife and snowmos [snowmobiles] can go places they couldn’t in the past.” In addition he is concerned about the precedent CIEDRA could set on future legislations.

Hawthorne admits that Simpson’s wilderness bill is not too bad for ATVers and dirt bikers—only a couple of existing trails will be closed. The real losers are mountain bikers and snowmobilers who are used to cruising up the area’s many drainages to the mountains. “Poor mountain bikers—talk about getting gunked,” Hawthorne says. “Their trails are expert-only and not many people use them because they’re still un-discovered.”

Fifteen years before the emergence of mountain bikes, the fathers of the wilderness act disallowed both motorized use and self-propelling, mechanical modes of transportation within wilderness boundaries. Translated from legalese, mountain bikes fall under the latter category (so did wheelchairs until Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 allowed the use of certain wheelchairs in wilderness areas. CIEDRA is the first act that includes the construction of a wheelchair-accessible natural trail within wilderness boundaries).
Mountain biker Chris Cook is ardently against the proposed wilderness area. He lives in Boise and visits the area at least a dozen times per year. Nearby Sawtooth National Recreation Area and Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness up the road is enough protection he says. He prefers the status quo.

“A lot of the trails in the area can only be ridden by elite motorcyclists and mountain bikers who respect the trail and don’t do random hill climbing,” Cook says.

“When we attend meetings with ICL, the Wilderness Society and others, they talk about conflicts on the trail [among different user groups], but when I’m in the
backcountry, everybody gets along—mountain bikers, hikers, horse packers and dirt bikers.”

Speculating on the reason why the meetings are so much different than the realities on the trail, Cook thinks, “They don’t spend a lot of time out there, frankly. They’re kind of blinded by what I would call, wilderness religion. They see things with blinders on.”

Both environmentalists and engine enthusiasts can be accused of clinging to an institutionalized set of beliefs filtered through blinders. But Simpson’s efforts mitigating those to a near-consensus might give the Central Idaho Economic Development and Recreation Act better odds at becoming law.
When True West Meets New West

“In the long term, the economy and the environment are the same thing. If it’s unenvironmental it is uneconomical. That is the rule of nature.”

—Mollie Beatty,
Director, US Fish and Wildlife Service, 1993-96

Summers are already glitzy and chaotic in Sun Valley, but the scene seems unusually bling when New York investment firm Allen & Co. hosts its annual media retreat. Private and corporate jets clutter the local airport and the likes of Bill Gates, Paul Allen, Washington Post Chairman Don Graham, legendary investor Warren Buffett, Google CEO Eric Schmidt, CEO Dan Glickman of the Motion Picture Association of America and a few dozen other top executives meet for informal BBQ lunches and presentations.

Their families bask in the sun playing golf, ride horses or shop in Ketchum’s exquisite boutiques. Most of the resort is cordoned off for the duration of the exclusive get-together and curious visitors and inquisitive journalists are briskly told to stay away by suit-clad security guys sporting earpieces and dark sunglasses.

North from Sun Valley, Highway 75 runs along the broad-shouldered Boulder Mountains and leaves Blaine County behind, meandering up to Galena Pass.
The pass offers stupendous views of the rangeland in Stanley Basin framed by the sharp dorsal fins of the Sawtooth Mountains. After half a dozen hairpins the two-lane road straightens and Stanley is reachable in fifteen minutes. The small mountain hamlet by the base of the Sawtooths boasts an impressive 1.7 million visitors every year—the majority visits during the summer time. Cars, roaring Harleys, river shuttles and luxury RVs, with plates from as far away as Georgia, are constantly arriving or departing. Boaters, anglers, RVers, hikers and bikers stock up on groceries and supplies in Jerry’s Country Store. Only 100-some residents live in Stanley year-round, but 269 cabins and motel rooms are available for short-term stay.

From Stanley the highway follows the convoluting Salmon River east through a myriad of canyons to the faded county seat of Challis. The wooden sign at the bottom of Main Street greets visitors to the “Wilderness Gateway.” The humongous Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness is nearby, but a stroll past run-down cottages and ill-maintained brick buildings offer a clue to Custer County’s economic status relative to neighboring Blaine.

The two counties are good examples of what is happening across the Rocky Mountain West. Some counties successfully attract retirees, entrepreneurs and young professionals, while others struggle with unemployment due to stifled growth in traditional industries such as timber, mining and ranching.

Over the past decade economists and geographers using advanced GIS mapping techniques have theorized what causes some counties to boom, while others lag.
In 2001, the *Economic Review* published an insightful article by Karl Stauber, executive director of the Northwest Area Foundation. In the past, rural America’s competitive advantages were timber harvesting, mining and low-cost production of food. Stauber argues that public investments in infrastructure, subsidies to ranchers and railroad, mining and lumber operations on public lands facilitated rural America’s modest prosperity.

Today’s global marketplace, however, is a vastly different creature. Wages are still low compared to urban America, but the Rocky Mountain West finds itself unable to compete with most foreign resource extractors (natural gas drilling in Wyoming is a rare exception). Crops are raised less expensively in Brazil and oil pumped more efficiently in Saudi Arabia.

Consequently, sectors in the region that depend on traditional resources have failed to grow, leaving rural and tradition-bound counties like Custer unable to compete with the rest of the world.

Studies by the Sonoran Institute, a non-profit specializing in economic analysis and landscape preservation strategies for the *new west*, echo Stauber’s findings.

Prosperous counties share a number attributes, according to Sonoran’s economists. They have an economic base in manufacturing, act as regional centers of commerce and are either close to a metropolitan area or an airport with daily flights to major hubs. Further, they have invested in social and education institutions and are close to ski areas and protected land.
Custer (and to a lesser extent, Blaine) is in the middle of a rare opportunity. Congressman Mike Simpson’s omnibus wilderness bill, titled Central Idaho Economic Development Act, includes a controversial land transfer to the county with Uncle Sam as benefactor.

At the heart of the bill, Simpson attempts to protect 301,500 acres of the magnificent Boulder, Pioneer and White Cloud Mountains: cragged peaks, rangeland, deep blue alpine lakes and drainages to the famous Salmon River.

A hundred years ago both counties were dependent on mining gold, led and silver; sheep herding; raising cattle and harvesting timber. After a decade of boom, the ores dried up like the arteries of a heroin addict and most miners, loan sharks, prostitutes, proprietors and gamblers left in search for quick fortunes elsewhere, leaving the stickers—ranchers, shepherders and loggers—to fend for themselves.

Then, 70 years ago, the financial fortune of the two neighboring counties forked. Chairman Averill Harriman of the Union Pacific Railroad hired Austrian Count Felix Schaffgotsch to survey the Rocky Mountains for the ideal spot for America’s first grand ski resort.

The count traveled widely, combing the mountains of the West and was about to give up when he heard locals talk about a mining town named Ketchum. If Ketchum was really the perfect spot, as resort historians assert, or if the count was sick of searching, is beside the point. His telegraph to Harriman captivated the chairman with excitement.
“This combines more delightful features than any place I have ever seen in Switzerland, Austria or the U.S. for a winter resort,” the count wrote. Harriman wasted little time and traveled west to investigate.

The rest is history, as the old adage goes. Harriman purchased 4,300 acres and after seven months of feverish construction, North America’s first grand winter resort, christened Sun Valley for marketing reasons, opened the world’s first chair lifts in 1936.

“When you get to Sun Valley, your eyes should pop open,” Harriman said. “There isn’t a single thing that I could wish for that hasn’t been provided.”

The amenities included the now compulsory Swiss-style lodge, a glass-encased swimming pool, nightly performances by the house orchestra, world-class service, gourmet meals in the restaurant and stiff martinis at the bar.

Errol Flynn, Clark Gable, Bing Crosby and Gary Cooper were among the first regulars of the lodge and Sun Valley cemented its position as an instant hit among European nobility, Hollywood movie stars and wealthy East Coasters. Ernest Hemingway fell in love with it, bought a house and lived there until he killed himself with his shotgun.

The T-shirt-driven economy of a typical resort town doesn’t necessary pave the way for a thriving community. Winter Park, Colo., is a good example. Most service jobs there consist of low-paid maids, store clerks, lifties, waiters, groomers, bartenders and concierges. But unlike Winter Park, Blaine has developed beyond a T-shirt economy to a
remarkably urban economy with jobs in high-paying professions such as bankers, realtors, lawyers, entrepreneurs and engineers. The growth is attributed to the influx of highly educated urban refugees who wish to live amidst natural beauty—an economic phenomenon economists call amenity-driven.

A 2003 letter from 130 Idaho businesses to the Congressman voiced support for preserving the Boulder-White Clouds as wilderness. But sporting goods stores, dude ranchers and fishing guides, who will directly profit from visitors, weren’t the only ones to sign. The region’s business leaders realized long ago that designated wilderness fuel growth from new residents and investments.

From 1970 to 2000 Blaine’s population increased by 228 percent and real wages grew by more than a fifth.
The county already offers skiing, golf, world-class fly fishing, hunting, mountain biking, rafting, hiking, trails for off-road vehicles, excellent restaurants and bars, a vibrant art scene, a hospital, assisted living services and four nearby mountain ranges administered as National Forest or BLM land.

The *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* are available the date of publication, a rarity in small towns in the Northern Rockies. Coffee shops offer wireless Internet and using major cell phone networks is hassle-free across the valley.

The Friedman Memorial Airport in Hailey, 12 miles south of Ketchum and Sun Valley, lands on average seven commercial flights per day from Oakland, Seattle and Salt Lake City as well as 205 private aircraft. To stimulate further growth the county is planning a new and expanded airport to serve the booming valley.

Ketchum is in a unique position compared to the rest of rural Idaho. The 2000 census lists median income as more than $45,000 and median house values an incredible $503,300. Demand from professionals across the country help drive up the property values in a county where private land is scarce and beautiful mountain scenery is both plenty and publicly owned.

A quick drive through the neighborhoods is telling: 15,000 square feet vacation homes—adobe palaces, western style lodges and stone mansions made from imported Italian marble—are the norm.
Less than 100 miles away, in Challis (a two square-mile community with 900 residents), homes are substantially different, often thirsting for a layer of paint or three-pane windows.

In Challis and Mackay (pop. 566), Custer’s two largest communities, the income bracket with the largest number of households makes less than $10,000 per year (Ketchum’s largest bracket is $75,000-$99,000) and median house value is only $73,500.

A newer development on the outskirts of town was built in anticipation of a mine that never opened.
Most of Custer County is largely undeveloped: a vast and remote area of sawtoothed ridges, rolling hills of sagebrush, gushing streams, verdant moraines and scree pouring down arid declivities. But Custer lacks Blaine’s conveniences.

“Opportunities for economic development [in Custer] is more limited than in Ketchum,” says Ray Rasker, executive director for the Sonoran Institute. “Decades of mining has actually left the county impoverished, but that’s the nature of mining in the west.” Region wide, county commissioners failed to ask mining companies to invest in the community—in schools, hospitals, airports and other infrastructure.

“On thing Custer does have,” he adds, “is spectacular scenery, affordable housing and the potential for a high quality of life.”

But until the county can offer services found elsewhere, potential residents shy away. Major cellular networks are unavailable and Internet cafés nonexistent. The closest airport is at Friedman—two hours away from Challis, and driving to Boise takes at least three and a half hours on the beautiful, but winding Highway 21 (parts of which is closed during the snowy months).

Custer is home to only one golf course, the nine-hole River Park next to the Big Lost River, but its communities are gateways to the 2,366,757-acre Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness (the second largest in the Lower 48), the 217,088-acre Sawtooth National Recreation Area and the little used Lost River, Pioneer, White Knob, Boulder and White Cloud mountain ranges.
Although Stanley and the rest of Custer County boasts an incredible visitor-to-resident ratio, it has until recently failed to invest in the future. It usually takes money to make money and counties typically make money from property taxes, fines and fees. But taxes are hard to raise in a county nearly the size of Connecticut with only 4,300 residents and less than 4 percent private land. Consequently, 60 percent of Custer’s revenues are state and federal support monies. In an effort to aid counties with holdings of nontaxable federal land, the Department of the Interior sends Payment In Lieu of Taxes. PILT is a federal ointment for local governments with a high proportion of nontaxable federal lands within county lines.

In fiscal 2005 Custer received $395,327 in PILT grants—slightly more than 10 percent of its revenues—for the county’s nearly 3 million acres of federal land. Curiously, the formula for payouts penalizes sparsely populated counties, earning geographically smaller and wealthier Blaine a million dollar check.

While the research indicates wilderness and prosperity often go hand in hand, Custer’s lack of airport access may be a good explanation for why prosperity has so far evaded the large county. But there are other factors.

Gundars Rudzitis, a geography professor at the University of Idaho, suggests a remedy for counties like Custer in his book, “Wilderness and the Changing American West.”

Instead of focusing on how to beef up successful industries of the past (which he calls it old west), rural communities must look at what might work in the future.
The transition can be painful, especially for ranchers, miners and loggers who may find reeducation difficult, but progressive counties like Blaine have actively invested in adaptation.

“The [Custer] area doesn’t seem to direct itself from old west to new west,” Rudzitis says in a phone interview. “I think a lot people there are entrenched and aren’t interested in turning Custer into an amenity county.”

And why should they? Many people who grew up in now-prosperous new west communities, such as Ketchum, find themselves unable to pay property taxes and are forced to commute from bedroom communities.

Clayton sits on the banks of the Salmon River and is home to 23 people. It’s the kind of community that would elicit a “Why would anybody want to live here?” comment from transiting urbanites. But the people who call it home do so for good reasons: they love the nearby wildlands, the tight-knit community, the low-stress and relative peace and quiet.

In 1957 Clayton Hurless moved from the Magic Valley, about 200 miles south, and purchased a sawmill in Clayton from his in-laws that he operated with his wife Deanie. When the mill was no longer financially viable, the couple converted the sawmill into a combined gas station, cafeteria and mini-grocer and called it the Old Sawmill Station. Miles away from competitors, the business is a convenient place for neighbors to chat, tank up, buy French toast and coffee and pick up, say, milk, bacon and newspapers.
With the exception of four years in Alaska on a fishing boat, Hurless hasn’t seen the need to relocate.

When asked about the proposed wilderness, Hurless says, “I’m ambivalent to the whole thing. It’s good for the community ‘cause of the land and development package, but I’m not a big wilderness buff, so I don’t really care either way.” His sentiment is representative of many Custer residents.

When rancher and county commissioner Cliff Hansen testified before the House Forest Health Subcommittee in late October he said he has seen bands of sheep and herds of cattle diminish during the 63 years he’s lived in the Stanley area. Logging too.

He emphasized the county didn’t support additional wilderness on its own merit, but 5,848 acres of land transfers from federal holdings to the county makes the bill palatable. The land will be sold to developers for the benefit of county coffers and the appropriated funds invested. Accrued interest, Hansen testified, will be disbursed for economic development and maintaining county services.

Exactly how much the land sale will raise hasn’t been estimated yet, Hansen said from his ranch five weeks after the hearing. “But we have some kind of idea,” he added.

About the hearing he said, “I think we finally got our problem across.” The county has lost nearly 6,000 acres of private land to conservation easements (in Idaho conservation easements receive conditional tax credits), leaving Hansen and the two other commissioners anxious to bring county holdings back to its pre-SNRA status.
Rasker of the Sonoran Institute isn’t convinced that additional land will ease the county’s woes. “There’s a difference between gross and net tax receipts,” he says. Gross tax receipts are tax dollars received, while net subtracts the cost of county services. “I think the fiscal result for the county [after the land transfers] will be a net loss, which is a pity.”

Instead of additional land, he thinks Custer would benefit more from a $20 million check and a solid economic development plan.

“What they really need is infrastructure,” he says. But Rasker knows that requires a significant investment of tax dollars—above and beyond what the county has. “Instead of land they should’ve asked for money,” he says.

One of his suggestions is founding either a two or three-year college or a research institution for students and faculty at the University of Idaho. Hansen says they have no plans for the former and are thinking more along the lines of “some kind of biomass plan to get rid of dead timber, clean land fills and such.” In other words, protecting what they already have.

The county recently found an interesting angle, turning its remoteness into an asset without inviting the world to relocate. Challis applied for NASA’s Swift program—part of an international study of gamma-ray bursts, which are the most powerful explosions in the universe. A short burst occurs almost every day and is believed to create black holes, but scientists still don’t know what causes them.
Central Idaho is one of the largest dark spots on NASA’s night map of the U.S. and Challis’ arid climate, low cloud cover, negligible amounts of both ambient light and air pollution and moderate elevation (5,000 feet) makes it an attractive spot for an observatory.

The Challis Rapid Reaction Observatory was erected in late 2005 on a hill overlooking Challis. The observatory houses a 16-inch telescope set up to observe and digitally capture the bursts’ optical afterglows. Not only is the observatory a great facility for the physics department at Boise State University, but also for students and teachers across the county who can download and study images of bursts the next day.

Gynii Gilliam, north Custer and Lemhi counties’ economic development director, was instrumental in facilitating the project on behalf of Custer and she hopes the observatory will provide scientific and technology jobs to the community.

“The future is in the electronical [sic] world,” Hansen believes. “Chances for any new mines are pretty slim because of the number of assumed endangered species in the area.”

Meanwhile community leaders in Salmon, a town facing similar challenges an hour’s drive north of Challis and across to Lemhi County, are talking about expanding its airport with the hope of attracting daily commercial flights. “What if Custer and Lemhi shared an airport?” Rasker theorizes. It would definitely bring new residents to central Idaho. But he warns that making pristine areas accessible to the rest of the world require preparations. “The strategy to open up the community to the outside world works so well
that growth will come faster than the community can handle it,” he says. Just that might
be the reason why Hansen and the other commissioners choose not to listen too closely to
what the *new west* advocates have to say.
A Chronicle of Oxymoronic Reality: Development Paves the Way for Wilderness

“Since 1972, approximately 65 million taxpayer dollars ($7.5 million in 2005 alone) have been wisely spent to purchase land or acquire scenic easements on private land parcels within the SNRA to prevent subdivisions and commercial developments. … Privatization of prime SNRA lands is a totally inappropriate means to an end to achieve wilderness designation,”

—Scott Phillips on behalf of more than a dozen retired Forest Service employees in an op-ed in the Idaho Statesman, June 25, 2005 on threats to the Sawtooth National Recreation Area.

Trotting up the steep ridge, each step takes me farther away from parking tickets, computer crashes, annoying ring tones and the after-work crowd at the grocery store. I’m scouring the mountaintops, hoping to get a glimpse of Jerry Peak. All I see are rolling knolls covered with mountain brome grass, sagebrush and the occasional patch of old growth whitebark pine. Established trails are nonexistent in this magnificent sanctuary and the least taxing route is only obvious to those able to read the contours and vegetation.
This breathtaking country, not far from Ketchum, Idaho, could be close to federal protection as a 301,500-acre wilderness area known as the Boulder-White Cloud Mountains. After six years on the drafting table, Congressman Mike Simpson’s (R-ID), Central Idaho Economic Development and Recreation Act (CIEDRA) is written, fine-tuned and ready to meet the scrutinizing eyes of Richard Pombo (R-CA), leader of the House Resources Committee. The Committee heard CIEDRA October 27. but the bill must pass through both the House and the Senate before the President can make it law—
time the bill’s opponents, who find the cost of designation excessive, intends to spend
well.

From the inception of the Wilderness Act in 1964 until 1980, Congress passed
Idaho wilderness and scenic river bills every four years or so. In the 26 years since,
wilderness bills in Idaho haven’t come very far.

Nationally, recent additions to the wilderness preservation system are scant
compared to the past: 2.5 million acres included since 1995, increasing the 106 million-
acre system by 2.4 percent. The last major addition was California’s 7.9 million-acre
statewide wilderness bill that established 70 new areas in 1994.

Given this meager legislative activity, CIEDRA is a major opportunity for many
wilderness advocates, especially in Idaho. Despite the possible establishments of new
wilderness, far from all wilderness advocates support it. The bill sports several contested
components such as motorized corridors and an economic development package for the
surrounding areas. Perhaps the most contentious component of CIEDRA concerns federal
land transfers to Custer County and its four sparsely populated communities: Stanley,
Clayton, Challis and Mackay. The 4,925-acre county is slightly smaller than Connecticut,
and the 2000 census counted only 4,342 residents.

It’s a beautiful country: rolling hills of windswept sagebrush broken by pastures,
framed by verdant moraines that lead up to glacial lakes and glittering peaks. This palace
of unspoiled beauty is the largest swatch of unprotected federal land left in the Lower 48.
The Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service manage 93 percent of the county. Large-scale exploitation of natural resources is quickly becoming a memory of the past and local government is struggling to maintain the necessary tax base to pay for basic municipal services.

Simpson hopes CIEDRA will alleviate some of the pressure and he consciously plays land transfers as attractive bargaining chips for wilderness. If CIEDRA passes, Custer County and its incorporated cities plan on auctioning off plots to developers. Therein lies the controversy. What the bill call transfers, a substantial group of agitated residents and various non-profits label giveaways. Three plots totaling 162 acres in and adjacent to Stanley have stirred up the most furor.

Local government, hungry for a cash influx and an expanded tax base, is in favor of the transfer, while opposing organizations and residents fall back on two arguments.

One line claims developing the plots will threaten crucial elk habitat and prevent migrating steelhead trout that come 900 miles away from the Pacific from spawning in the Salmon.

The other asserts that giving away plots, some bought and protected under the Sawtooth National Recreation Area, and therefore owned by all Americans, is indisputably wrong. Ironically, factions involved in negotiations say the battle is over, while those not willing to budge an acre, like Janine Blaeloch of Western Lands Project, flatly states “Oh, it hasn’t even begun.”
Cloud formation above a Boulder foothill.

But Blaeloch and others already have their hands full battling Pombo’s recent initiatives. The chairman of the House Resources Committee proposed last Fall to close and sell 15 National Parks—approximately 23 percent of the total park system acreage—to drillers and private developers. Another initiative from his desk, an energy bill, could open production of 10.4 billion barrels of oil in the northern coastal plain of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. The money raised from disposing federal land, he suggests, is for relief work and costs of rebuilding in wake of natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina.
The land transfers in CIEDRA, although microscopic in comparison, are meant to nurture the economic well being of Custer County. Unlike Blaine County, its wealthy neighbor to the south and home to Sun Valley, Custer’s economy is a stew of ranching, retirement, government jobs and tourism. The old pillars of resource extraction continue to lose significance, according to a 2003 study by the Sonoran Institute. But there are hopes for a brighter future. Research indicates that communities surrounded by areas of immense natural beauty can gain from them. Blaine County was much like Custer until 1936 when Sun Valley fired up its lifts and became the country’s first all-inclusive ski resort.

Stanley and Challis have benefited somewhat from being gateways to Sawtooth National Recreation Area (established in 1972) and the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness (created 1980). But even with 1.7 million visitors per year and a 2.5 percent citywide sales tax, Stanley finds itself without the means to have its own high school.

Visitors bring with them a substantial influx of cash to the area, but it’s not enough to pay for adequate municipal services in a large and sparsely populated county.

Gynii Gilliam, the economic development director for north Custer and Lemhi counties, is excited about the transfers, but she also has reservations. The problem, as she sees it, is the lag time between enactment, when land is transferred and visitors presumably come in larger numbers, and sale. “We’re fighting for direct appropriations upfront, because emergency needs will grow.” Her logic is simple: as more visitors come...
to the wilderness, demand for public services such as police, upkeep of roads, fire crews and emergency care will increase rapidly—services the community is responsible to fund.

The appropriations are commonly known as PILT, an acronym for Payment In Lieu of Taxes—the federal ointment preferred by groups who oppose the giveaways on principle. PILT is handed out to help local governments offset lack of property taxes due to nontaxable federal lands within county lines. In fiscal 2005, Custer County received $390,504 according to data from the U.S. Department of the Interior.

View south from Jerry Peak on a frosty September morning towards the Pioneer Mountains. The haze is from a 40,000-acre forest fire raging 35 miles to the west.
“This is a way to buy local support for wilderness,” says Janine Blaeloch, director of Western Lands Project, a Seattle-based non-profit that monitors federal land use.

A recent paper titled “Quid Pro Quo Wilderness,” co-authored by Blaeloch and Katie Fite of the Western Watersheds Project, argues that we’re witnessing a new and dangerous trend of trading or giving away public lands for a pittance in return for wilderness legislation.

Oregon’s Steens Mountains bill from 1999 was perhaps the first of these deals. Ranchers traded 18,000 acres for inclusion in the wilderness in exchange for 104,000 acres of public lands. In addition, the bill guaranteed them $5 million in cash and made the BLM financially responsible for all fencing and water development projects the ranchers deemed necessary on their new ranges.

One of the key players in the Steens Mountain legislation was Lindsay Slater, legislative director for Rep. Greg Walden, (R-Ore.). Slater is today Simpson’s chief of staff.

In Clark County, Nev., a 450,000-acre wilderness bill included auctioning 22,000 acres of federal land near Las Vegas to real estate developers. The 2002 bill also included a controversial land exchange, granting the construction of a new road to cut travel time for commuters.

George Nickas, executive director for the non-profit Wilderness Watch, is saddened by that fact that environmentalists help make these bills reality through negotiations with other interest groups. “These are diminished visions of what these
places could be,” he says. Wilderness Watch is a national organization based out of Missoula, Mont., that focuses on the preservation and stewardship of areas within the wilderness and scenic river systems.

Nickas characterizes negotiations surrounding the bills as “backdoor political games” focused on “what can I [as a user group] get out of it?”

Two years ago Slater told the *Salt Lake Tribune* “stand alone wilderness is done. The trend seems to be towards legislation based on compromise among various interests.”

The Boulder-White Clouds bill is the latest quid pro quo wilderness according to Blaeloch, but she suggests an alternative to handing out free federal land.

“I’d rather see the government give them money,” she says. “The very Congress that’s screaming about the economic slump these communities are in is not giving them [enough] PILT.”

Payment In Lieu of Taxes, or PILT, is a time-tested lifeline for cash-strapped communities with a meager tax base.

“Congress is responsible for this train wreck by not following through with PILT, yet it complains about the [state of] local economies. Then Simpson turns around and says ‘What the Hell can we do here? Let’s give ‘em land!’”

Gilliam sees it differently. “Stanley needs employee housing. We’re like Jackson [Wyoming] and Ketchum—surrounded by so much federal land that the people who work here can’t afford to live here. The land exchange will hopefully change that, but I
have some concerns about it too. Conservationists buy up land for conservation easements, which I think is great, but as an economic development advisor, I see it reducing our tax base even further.”

Idaho offers conditional tax credits to land owners who enter into conservation agreements or donate conservation easements to non-profit organizations. Income tax credits are awarded in exchange for improving habitat for wildlife and endangered plants. Half of eligible expenditures, such as removing barriers to fish passage or construction of ponds for waterfowl, are reimbursed. The limit is currently $2,000 per landowner for the tax year, although a case review can net the owner additional credits.

In 1999, the Forest Service paid $2.3 million for a 160-acre conservation easement from WOMAC Land and Cattle Company in the Sawtooth National Recreation Area. The easement reduced a 20-unit subdivision to three units, but without a plan for wildlife improvement, this particular easement wasn’t awarded tax credits.

The deal was one of the first brokered by the Sawtooth Society, a non-profit created in 1997 to oversee policies in the Sawtooth National Recreational Area.

“Our aim and mission is to protect the SNRA and particularly open space,” says Bob Hayes, the organization’s executive director. On the phone he has the weathered voice of an old rancher. Hayes has spent his entire life living in the Stanley Basin and trudging around the towering Sawtooths. He understands the complexities of the issue: SNRA must remain more or less intact, Stanley lacks affordable housing and wilderness protection of the Boulder-White Clouds is on the agenda.
In the first draft of CIEDRA—Simpson called it a framework—land transfers numbered some 16,000 acres, an undisclosed amount of which came from the SNRA. It seemed Simpson’s office spelled out the number without considering from where the acres came. The high acreage was unacceptable to most except city and county officials who dreamed of a healthy tax base supported by an avalanche of new residents. “Simpson tested the public mindset with the framework,” Hayes says. The Sawtooth Society and others told Simpson they couldn’t give him their support for CIEDRA, and the acreages evaporated in the subsequent drafts like morning dew on the basin’s alfalfa. “It’s been a give-and-take process and Congressman Simpson has responded accordingly,” Hayes says.

A majority of the Society’s members now accept the 162 acres slated for transfers. “The impacts on the SNRA are minimal. Our view is give them what they [City of Stanley and Custer County] need, but with deed restrictions,” Hayes says. “We are very sympathetic to the people who get heartburn over this, and at one point we did too, but given the political realities, we believe this is the best way to save the SNRA.” Far from everyone concurs.

“These guys are smoking some funny stuff,” says Scott Phillips, facilitator for a group of 13 SNRA retirees who like himself are ardently opposed to any transfers. “Simpson, ICL [Idaho Conservation League], Hayes and a few others have been sitting in backdoor meetings and invented their own little reality world. Taxpayers have already spent nearly 60 million dollars over a 35 year-period by purchasing tracts to protect
additional SNRA land. Amazing progress has been made. CIEDRA intends to do the
diametrically opposite [by transferring three tracts for development] and ignores public
law 92-400 [the law that established the SNRA in 1972]. It’s arrogance on the part of
Simpson to even propose such a thing [land transfers].”

The group Phillips represents has so far published two op-eds in five local and
statewide newspapers, and plans to publish a third.

“The Forest Service has spent nearly $58 million [figure from 2004] since the
SNRA was established to protect the valley floors—and scenic vistas considered to be
among the most beautiful in the mountain West,” read the group’s op-ed from August.
“CIEDRA would reverse one of the very purposes for creating the Sawtooth NRA—
protecting the Sawtooth Valley and Stanley Basin from development.”

Negotiations among Stanley, Custer, the Forest Service and the Sawtooth Society
resulted in a solution acceptable to those involved. The current, and presumably final,
version of CIEDRA places deed restrictions on the plots. “They’re modeled after the
Forest Service restrictions set forth in the SNRA. They are very tight, very strict,
prescriptive and designed to make sure the use of that land is consistent with the use in
the area,” Hayes says. The restrictions control height, setbacks, maximum square-
footage, types of houses and more. In addition, a special committee made up of three
Stanley-area residents and a representative each from Stanley and Custer, must agree on
proposed developments before bulldozers can start gnawing the sagebrush and alfalfa.
It’s a convoluted conflict, but a closer look at the individual plots in question removes some of the haze.

The first parcel is 8.3 acres and sits second-to-last on Benner Street in Stanley, a small town made up of log cabins and western ranch-style houses. During the 1970s the owner envisioned a sprawling trailer park on the green alfalfa, but SNRA management wasn’t thrilled with the prospect of a trailer park with an unobstructed view of the magnificent Sawtooths. Consequently, the SNRA bought the plot with taxpayer money and preserved it as open space.

“We intend to sell the land for residential development,” says retiring mayor Paul Frantellizzi. CIEDRA allows four single-story homes no larger than 3,000 square-feet on the parcel. The mayor thinks the city can sell the plots for $200,000-$250,000 each. Assuming he is right, the in-town plot could raise $1 million—five times Stanley’s annual budget. “I suggested we take all or a significant portion of that and create an endowment for the community to use as a rainy-day fund or use the interest for the arts, educations or other causes,” Frantellizzi says.

The second plot is Valley Creek (also known as Old Sewer Ponds from the creek’s past use), a 68-acre chunk that’s currently open space, but contiguous to the city. Frantellizzi says the city requested Valley Creek to be deeded for municipal purposes. Suggested uses include municipal housing for fire fighters, emergency personnel and teachers, develop the natural hot springs on the property for the benefit of the community, or a tent city for summer employees. The warm months are especially busy for the
community and a large contingent of mostly young people work nearby at the popular Red Fish Lake, or down in the valley as guides, cooks or ranch hands. Stanley is too small for a rental market and land too scarce for affordable housing. But Frantellizzi affirms that the city will maintain a view corridor and push developments up toward the hill—restrictions carefully laid out in CIEDRA.

The third parcel is on a bench overlooking Stanley Basin, 80-some acres deeded to the county. CIEDRA allows for up to ten parcels with single-story houses no larger than 3,500 square-feet. The deed restrictions require that the houses are western style and not visible from the nearby highways. Given the estimated value of the land, there’s a good chance most of the lots will be mostly-empty second homes. “I’d rather see families move in and their kids go to our schools, but it’s market-driven,” Frantellizzi says.

Idaho Conservation League’s central Idaho director Linn Kincannon says the group can accept the SNRA land transfers because they are a necessary part of the political effort to designate wilderness in Idaho. ICL is the leading conservation group in Idaho, a position it enjoys due to political savvy, strong leadership, healthy funding and a willingness to meet halfway, according to a Blue Ribbon Coalition staffer. “We can’t throw everything we don’t like out of the wilderness bill,” Kincannon says. “It just won’t happen, because without compromise there will be no wilderness.”

David Kimpton, a retired SNRA ranger, hunter and angler, is concerned about the loss of what he calls irreplaceable wildlife habitat. That elk enjoy Valley Creek in the
winter is undisputed. However, some dispute labeling the wintering grounds crucial for elk habitat.

“It’s certainly true that it’s elk habitat,” Hayes says. “But they [Kimpton and others] haven’t made a credible case that they are crucial. The reality is that at that elevation [6,400-7,000 feet] elk are all over. They do use the Valley Creek area, and I suspect that they like them because of the hot springs.”

Frantellizzi says he opposes the use of the word critical since it’s subjective. “Do elk walk all over the city? Sure,” he says. “Did I have 15 elk in my yard all winter? Yes, I did.” He pauses. “It’s true that elk have kept coming back to Valley Creek for the past 5 to 10 years, but they go where the food, sun and warmth are. To term it critical is a fallacy. We live in hundreds of thousands of acres of wilderness so that those [few] acres are critical is a little skewed. Are we going to be considerate and think about the elk? Sure, but how much damage does a house on one-eighth of an acre pressed up against the hill do?”

Not much, according to Tracey Trent, chief of the natural resource policy bureau with Idaho Fish and Game. “It’s true elk winter there,” he says echoing Frantellizzi. “That doesn’t make them winter range.” Recent mild winters and locals feeding the elk have encouraged the large mammals to stick around the area. The area’s average winters of sub-zero temperatures and five feet of snow, elk seek refuge in mild drainages such as the middle fork of the Salmon and the north fork of the Payette, Trent says.
In a debate shaped by a mélange of interests, elk wintering grounds are seemingly one of few issues where it’s possible to identify an objective truth. Net losses of public lands from land transfers are new additions to wilderness legislation, yet one of the veterans of wilderness protection is surprisingly calm.

Wilderness historian Doug Scott, who has tracked the Wilderness Act since its inception and has worked on numerous bills, puts the issue of land transfers in perspective: “What’s new about that? We’ve been doing them since 1782. My personal reaction, and I worked on the Sawtooth legislation, I wish we didn’t have to do them.”

With so many user groups demanding continued, exclusive or expanded access to public lands, heated debates and direct conflicts are an unavoidable part of the legislative process. At this point in CIEDRA’s legislative process, user groups who have been consulted by Simpson’s staff support the bill (with a couple of for-the-record reservations), while those not consulted are against.

Perceptions change depending on the perspective. From the top of Jerry Peak one can see for miles in every direction: great rocky slabs that make up the Pioneers and the Boulders to the south and the spiny White Clouds to the west. Giant fields of talus roll perpendicular to drainages and elusive springs dotted on mountain meadows reflect the sky. Herd Creek appears navy blue five miles away and a few thousand feet below, but the perspective deceives—up close the little lake is muddy with silt.
The Bottom Line—A Profile of an Atypical, A-type Environmentalist

“First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.”

Mahatma Gandhi quoted on the flipside of a faded business card on Rick Johnson’s desk

It’s a wet September Saturday along the Lochsa River on the outskirts of the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness in Idaho. Patches of yellow aspen light up ranks of pine trees while fog shrouds sections of the rising hillsides. A constant drizzle of dense, but soft rain pokes at the roof of a large shelter next to the river. Food, spices, pots and pans clutter foldable tables under the south end of the pavilion—a chaos broken up by orderly rows of long picnic tables.

At the other end, a group of 50-or-so people—activists representing two-dozen conservation groups from Montana, Wyoming, Washington, Oregon and Idaho—commingles on the cold concrete floor, seeking warmth from the stone fireplace. They’ve gathered to learn from each other and discuss issues surrounding roadless lands, native forests, watershed restoration and wilderness politics.

In reality only the four in the panel, whose chairs are closest to the crackling logs, has any hope of staying warm, but the crowd listens attentively nonetheless.
Janine Blaeloch of Western Lands Project speaks about the evil of omnibus wilderness bills using phrases such as *lopsided land exchanges* and *quid pro quo wilderness*. She stands up, emerging from the sleeping bag draped across her lap.

“Land is being used to smooth over political differences... and giving away public land to ranchers and local politicians is a disturbing trend that needs to be nipped in the bud right now,” she says.

Next to her sits Rick Johnson, the charismatic leader of Idaho Conservation League—the most influential—and sometimes controversial—environmental organization in a blood red state.
In the 2004 election Republican votes outnumbered Democratic in Idaho by seven-to-three, leaving only Utah and Wyoming more pro-Bush than Idaho. Politics in the fourth fastest growing state are often both backwards and messy. Leading Democrats are against any new wilderness—even the kind without compromises—while a few Republicans are ardently for it.

By some accounts, the Idaho Conservation League, founded in 1973 to influence the legislature, exerts more power in the state’s environmental politics than the Democratic minority. Johnson is far from Republican, but he prefers to wheel and deal directly with the party and people in charge rather than lobby the minority.

Johnson jots something down in his notebook and looks up. His face doesn’t appear to have aged since his late twenties, but the gray, short-trimmed beard puts him in an older bracket.

The 47-year-old environmentalist possesses shrewd political abilities—a rare treat in his profession—and he runs the non-profit ICL like a bonus-hungry CEO. His hands-on approach, multi-disciplinary skills and fortitude are reminiscent of Gifford Pinchot, the founder of the Forest Service.

He just arrived at the rendezvous after driving six hours from Boise for an opportunity to explain ICL’s position on a controversial wilderness bill in the Boulder and White Cloud Mountains—the kind of omnibus bill Blaeloch lashes out against.

It’s Johnson’s turn to speak and he stands up. He expects his audience is overwhelmingly opposed to the bill.
He’s wearing a jean shirt, green sweater and a black Marmot fleece vest with a pointed collar and appears neater than anybody else under the shelter. Then again, he didn’t camp out in the rain last night (although he did the following night).

“We’re standing here in the largest protected ecosystem in the temperate world. Take a look out there,” he says and points his finger at the soaked, foggy hills.

He’s of average height, but his voice and demeanor demands attention. He makes you want to listen to him even if you disagree.

“It’s good that Idahoans are once again talking about wilderness seriously, but legislation requires a process of compromises. It’s hard work, difficult work, and we need to take incremental steps to get there.”

Johnson tallied Idaho bills chronologically, “1964, the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness; ’68, The Wild and Scenic Rivers Bill; ’72, the Sawtooth National Recreation Area; ’75, Hell’s Canyon; ’78, Gospel Hump [which was a severely compromised bill involving timber sales]; ’80, River of No Return.

It’s been 25 years since then—time to get back on that train.”

A few half-hearted attempts at establishing additional wilderness areas in Idaho followed. Senator McClure tried in 1984, Governor Cecil Andrus and Senator Symms drafted a 1.4 million-acre statewide bill in 1988, but their take-it-or-leave-it mentality eventually harpooned the effort. Then Senator Mike Crapo tried to do something for the eastern part of the state in the early 1990s, but didn’t get very far.
Under Johnson’s leadership, ICL intentionally focused on wilderness designation for a single area, rather than a statewide effort. “It’s easier to protect a place, than a concept,” Johnson told me in his Boise office on a sunny Friday last October. A particular area is tangible. People can identify with specific mountains, lakes and trails, whereas the statewide proposals were more about the number of acres than specific boundaries.

The Boulder-White Clouds in central Idaho was chosen for several reasons. After a long fight that sunk a proposed, gargantuan open-pit mine in the heart of the White Clouds, the area had been left out of the Sawtooth National Recreation Area in 1972.

Governor Andrus was elected largely because of his pro-environment stance and his victory ended a 25-year Republican grip on the state, but he explained then there were “political reasons” for exclusion—namely other mining claims in the area. The imminent threat was thwarted, but the mountains remained in limbo.

Johnson, who lived in nearby Sun Valley during the early 1980s, once spent two weeks crossing the Boulder-White Clouds on telemark skis with a couple of buddies. Today, he laments that others can’t experience the same serenity he did. Snowmobiles carve the drainages and glittering peaks as soon as the snow settles, but Johnson knows wilderness protection will put an end to motorized recreation within the boundaries.
A few people milled around Johnson after the Wild Rockies Rendezvous panel was dismissed. Cameron Naficy, a staffer for the Montana-based Native Forest Network, talked to Johnson for almost an hour.

“I felt he was well spoken,” he recalled a few weeks later. “But when he was pressed, he didn’t have good responses. His mind was already made up and nothing that anybody said could change that.”

Naficy said he wanted to learn more about CIEDRA (pronounced cee-dra) from Johnson so he could understand where he was coming from. “What I knew was from people who disagree with him.”

He added that Johnson had “obviously done an amazing job” with his potent brew of environmentalism, politics and business-inspired professionalism. “He has a much more, I might call it sophisticated way, [than others] of pulling techniques from other professions—that may be one of his successes.”

“I also found him generally open.”

Lindsay Slater, Simpson’s chief of staff, has negotiated extensively with Johnson over the past four years, and he says Johnson is always willing to listen to the concerns of others while resolutely protecting his bottom-line interests.

Johnson might be willing to listen to everybody, but long-winded answers make him impatient. “Alright, I get it,” he’ll say with a crooked smile, idling. When he comments on opinions or solutions he finds outrageous he has an affinity for saying, “he must be on drugs.”
His outspokenness and willingness to compromise has undeniably caused many environmentalists toxic levels of consternation. Although he usually enjoys driving wedges into the camps of his opponents—he split ATVers and snowmobilers over use in the Boulder-White Clouds—he makes a point of explaining his actions. While preparing for the hearing in D.C. he shot off an opinion piece for *High Country News*:

“Many of my environmental colleagues are deeply concerned about the trade-offs Rep. Simpson has judged necessary to get local support for wilderness. I, too, have concerns about this legislation, such as the gift of some parcels of public land to Custer County, and the permanent protection to motors of certain trails outside the wilderness. But my dislike for these provisions is outweighed by my concern about our failure to pass a wilderness bill for Idaho in over 25 years, and the growing divide between conservationists and people in our rural communities. Each year that we fail to act to preserve the land, the damage from motorized intrusions increases.”

Wilderness Watch’s Executive Director Nickas has met Johnson a few times over the past decade and he finds Johnson both educated and committed to his goals. “I respect him, but I disagree with the direction he’s going with this legislation.”

The Idaho Conservation League’s wilderness campaign in central Idaho began subtly during the height of the Clinton administration. It was a slow process. Pictures of the Boulder-White Clouds popped up in ICL’s publications and laid the first bricks of brand identity. “We wanted something positive and pro-active, something we could use to brand ourselves,” Johnson says, “but we never thought it would get this far.”
Results make donors happy, so unlike most environmental organizations, ICL has the funding to approach campaigns the same way a business would market a new product.
Hired public relations professionals taught ICL staff how to identify the target, reach it, measure the effect and adjust as necessary. Like a business, ICL focuses on positive messaging. “Public perception is that it’s a downer to go for a hike with environmentalists,” Johnson says. “They view the world as a bleeding entity:

*Look at the clear-cut over there!*

*This area was full of wildlife a few years ago... Look at it now.*

*The river isn’t as healthy as it used to...*

We’re trying to change that.”

Instead of images of destruction, ICL’s publications show people recreating on gorgeous backdrops of mountains, lakes and streams. The approach brings new and committed volunteers, generous donors and attracts a loud media buzz.

A media audit from 2004, authored by Resource Media’s Ben Long, found that ICL made news weekly across 20 topics. It named ICL as the *go to* authority for environmental news in Idaho and found its image split between *vigorous defender* and *bridge builder*.

In 1999, Johnson invited Congressman Mike Simpson—a Republican—to speak at ICL’s annual conference in the Stanley Basin. On a flyby over the nearby White Clouds, former House Resources Committee Chairman Congressman George Miller, (D-Calif.), kept nudging Johnson, saying, “Tell him about Castle Peak, tell him about Cecil Andrus.” Johnson happily obliged.
Reporters on the landing strip asked Simpson what he thought about the Boulder-White Clouds. “I love the Boulder-White Clouds,” Simpson said. Without missing the opportunity Johnson asked, “If it was politically advantageous for you, would you consider protecting the Boulder-White Clouds as wilderness?”

“If it is politically advantageous,” Simpson replied. “But it’s not.”

“Privately I took that as a challenge,” Johnson told me. “I didn’t want to force him [Simpson] into it. The [environmental] movement push[es] people into a corner, but you get nothing accomplished that way. Instead you develop a relationship, so we started having Simpson as our target.”

By the end of the month four newspaper editorials in Simpson’s district encouraged the Congressman’s support for wilderness.

Over the next few years, ICL sent postcards, pictures and newsletters to Simpson’s office and Johnson met with him as often as he could. On the ground, ICL made presentations to local Rotary Club chapters all over Idaho, manned booths at county fairs and made it a point to make their goal and presence known all over the predominantly Republican state.

ICL’s behind-the-scenes work appeared to pay off when Simpson hired Lindsay Slater as his chief of staff. Slater was the principal architect behind the omnibus Steens wilderness bill in Oregon. With Slater in charge of his congressional staff, Simpson sent a strong message to those listening: I’m serious about wilderness. Slater is the only staffer in the Idaho delegation who has helped pass a wilderness bill.

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When Johnson moved to Ketchum in 1979 it was already a booming community, yet quite Unlike today. The field where longhaired ski bums camped out next to the Wood River is covered with pavement and concrete. But the boom propelled Johnson into the wilderness movement. When his dry wall and tile company was “reasonably successful,” he could afford to keep a crew going while volunteering for the Sierra Club and, later, ICL.

In 1984 he went to Washington D.C. to testify against McClure’s statewide bill in the hearing room on third floor of the Longworth building.

He accepted a full-time position with the Sierra Club in 1987 as conservation assistant where he worked on forest planning for Idaho, Oregon and Washington out of the organization’s Seattle office. While he was in Seattle he began a relationship with Roberta Crockett, an ICL board member, who he married in 1990.

Johnson was promoted twice and his professional life centered on protecting ancient forests and the spotted owl. Lobbying brought him to D.C. for up to 100 days per year and the blend of wilderness idealism and national politics prepared him for the next step.

Ten years ago he came back to Idaho Conservation League, accepting the position as executive director. Since then ICL has successfully co-lobbied for preserving the Boise foothills as open space, won lawsuits against agencies and corporations, fought air and
water polluters and much more. Last year the organization worked on more than 100 different projects across the state.

Under Johnson’s reign, ICL’s budget has nearly doubled to $1.2 million, employees have risen from nine to fifteen and the organization just opened a northern satellite office in Sandpoint.

A few years ago ICL bought a building two blocks away from the state Capitol. “We want legislators to know we’re here,” Johnson says.

The Capitol dome is visible from Johnson’s second floor corner office. His walls are plastered with photographs of Idaho scenery, an old Sierra Club ad from The New York Times, various newspaper clips, a faded Idaho state flag and a plaque from the Wilderness Society commemorating Johnson’s 2003 environmental award.

A bundle of rolled-up maps sit on top the filing cabinet in the corner. Four chairs surround a small table crowded with stacks of reports, a dictionary and a notepad from the Tabard Inn—his preferred hotel in D.C., a small, funky hotel close to Capitol Hill frequented by liberals, democrats and journalists.

Executive directors has little time for casework, so Johnson deals mostly with fundraising, reporters, ICL’s board of directors and donors. His direct involvement in the Boulder-White Clouds campaign is the exception.

Over the last two weeks, Johnson’s hectic travel schedule has brought him from the Wild Rockies Rendezvous to Seattle and Bozeman, and he visits with senators and congressional members in Washington at least once a month.
Last time he was there he visited Senator Larry Craig (R-ID). Johnson brought with him the results from a $27,000 poll commissioned by ICL. Among other findings, the poll showed 69 percent of Idahoans support wilderness designation in the Boulder-White Clouds, while 24 percent are against.

Craig leaned over his desk and said, “Bob Moore did that poll?” Moore Information is the favored pollster among Republicans and Johnson knew a poll from Moore would carry more weight among Idaho’s Republican legislators than one from any other pollster.

I met up with Johnson two weeks later in D.C. at the offices of Center for America’s Wilderness, where he is a board member. The offices were a few blocks west of the Capitol and Johnson had temporarily occupied a spacious, albeit cluttered, office where he was preparing for next day’s testimony on his 12-inch Powerbook. “I want what we [ICL] don’t like about the bill on record and explain why we’re on board,” he said.

We talked politics over dinner. “Tomorrow’s a little bit of theatre,” Johnson said, “but it’s a necessary act. You need to do certain things to get to a mark-up and a vote on the floor and Simpson wants it on the floor this year,” he said, “but this late he might not [at the end of January, CIEDRA was still waiting for a mark-up]. He’s a unique player: young, ambitious and smart. He was a speaker in the [Idaho] State House and here on the hill he’s one of five gavel guys in the House and the only majority representative from the entire Northwest.”
The next day Johnson wore a navy blazer, a light yellow shirt with tie, ash-green slacks and brown leather shoes. He sat attentively on first row until his panel was called to the witness table in the same room he had testified in 1984.

Other witnesses included Carole King, the singer, wilderness advocate (she opposes CIEDRA) and Custer County resident; Dan Hammerbeck, president of the Idaho State Snowmobile Association; Custer County Commissioner Cliff Hansen; Fred Carl Pence, a retired Forest Service employee representing himself; and Mike Webster, president-elect of the Idaho Cattle Association.

The room was unusually crowded for a subcommittee hearing, observed a veteran Capitol Hill reporter at the press table. I counted 70 people, and staffers worked frantically, rounding up chairs and assembling additional press packs.

Johnson testified with a calm and clear voice, although he sounded a little more reserved and humbled than at the Wild Rockies Rendezvous five weeks earlier. He talked about the explosive growth in motorized recreation in Idaho, illustrated by a chart on an easel. He summed up the debate and noted how two neighboring counties with very different economies both support the bill and, referring to the Moore poll, that proponents outnumber opponents by two-to-one. As promised, he stated ICL doesn’t support the release of 162 acres in and around Stanley for real estate development, nor motorized trails bisecting the wilderness.
At the Wild Rockies Rendezvous in September Johnson was challenged to reveal his bottom line.

“I don’t really have a bottom line,” he said. “In politics you can’t have a bottom line. It changes depending on political realities.”

The shivering crowd disapproved with murmurs. “But Rick you’re not a legislator, you’re an environmentalist, I’d hope you have a bottom line,” Blealoch said.

“My bottom line is looking back in 20 years and asking ‘Did we do it right?’ My bottom line changes, but I will not compromise my values.”

Johnson is a realist. He knows legislative processes are messy. “There are two things you shouldn’t watch being made,” he told me in Boise, “laws and sausage.

I know what 20 years feel like. We should’ve taken the McClure bill [in 1984].”
Commentary (January 23, 2006)

Congressman Mike Simpson’s 301,500-acre wilderness and economic development bill, duly titled Central Idaho Economic Development and Recreation Act, is still in limbo awaiting mark-up and vote from a full House Resources Committee chaired by the notorious anti-wilderness Congressman Richard Pombo. Even given Pombo’s track record I’m bullish CIEDRA will prevail, because Pombo desperately needs a feather and the central Idaho bill is the most palatable wilderness bill that has crossed his desk.

The bill is wholly Republican and emanates from a blood red state, which sets it apart from Democratic Senator Patty Murray’s Wild Sky Wilderness in Washington state that Pombo has already blocked three times (Wild Sky is backed by the rest of the Washington delegation, while Simpson’s colleagues from Idaho say they’ll make up their minds once they see it on the floor). The chairman’s staff members are ideologically skilled and their boss certainly likes to assert power over scheduling more than his predecessors.

Three years of shrewd shuttle diplomacy has created a sort of on-the-ground consensus between Simpson’s various constituents—local politicians thirsting for taxable land in the vast, largely federally managed and sparsely populated Custer County; ranchers offered a voluntary grazing buy-out program from wilderness pastures; motorized recreationists granted a corridor through the wilderness and the demands from
discussion-minded environmentalists. The equilibrium was recently challenged, but adding crumbs to the county’s pie plate proved impossible.

Ironically, the situation arose after Pombo’s widely covered rewrite of the Mining Act of 1872 was tossed from the Senate floor in December. Tucked away in a budget reconciliation bill, Pombo’s rewrite could have put vast tracts of federal land, predominantly in the west, on sale to mining companies for pennies compared to potential profits blasted from mining and skimmed from post-mining development.

L&W Stone, Custer County’s second largest employer, currently leases land from BLM where the company operates a quarry that sits near the confluence of the east fork of the Salmon and one of its major drainages.

If Pombo’s rewrite had passed, L&W Stone’s directors could’ve picked up the 520-acre site for $519,700. A transfer of ownership from BLM to the company would’ve voided a court-ordered Environmental Impact Statement and an annoying lawsuit from an environmental organization concerned with pollution from the quarry entering the watershed.

For the county, the sale would’ve ensured continued operations and $200,000 of the total sales price into its leaking county coffers.

After the Senate indirectly put a stopper to the sale, L&W Stone and county commissioners presumably asked Simpson to include the sale in CIEDRA, which he then announced as a potential addendum.
But the late-coming idea was met with objections from the environmental community.

“The constructive feedback I have received over the past three weeks has made it apparent to me that including the quarry would tip the balance for many of those who have been working toward the overall goals of CIEDRA,” Simpson said in a statement released January 12.

“CIEDRA is a finely tuned bill that is based on many compromises and considerations,” he added.

The Republican bill from one of the most conservative counties in the third reddest state is surprisingly balanced, which I think gives it better odds at passing the Republican-controlled Houses. But first Pombo must give CIEDRA an unobtrusive mark-up that won’t disrupt its fine-tuned on-the-ground equilibrium. I think he will.

Pombo is up for reelection in Tracy, California, in November. Since last election his constituency has been redrawn and its demographics changed.

A district filled with conservative ranchers like Pombo is now diluted with an influx of moderate professionals who’ve moved east of San Francisco for a better quality of life in the suburbs. This effect was demonstrated in the last election when Democrat Jerry McNerney received 39 percent of the votes against Pombo, even though the latter outspent him by 7-to-1. The Democratic apparatus only provided limited support to McNerney back then, but given Pombo’s controversial profile in national politics as of late, the Democrats are likely to change their approach in Tracy this year.
If Pombo wants to keep his seat in 2007 the take-home point is simple: appear more moderate to voters. Voting for Mike Simpson’s Central Idaho Economic Development and Recreation Act will do just that without voting for a wilderness bill propagated by *the other side*. 
Appendix: Controversial Idaho Wilderness Bill Finally Heard By Subcommittee

The following article was published as the main story on New West <http://www.newwest.net/> Oct. 28, 2005.

WASHINGTON—Amidst a highflying week in D.C. with possible indictments of White House aides, mismanaged hurricane relief efforts and Miers’ withdrawal from Supreme Court nomination, Rep. Mike Simpson’s, R-ID, wilderness bill in the Boulder and White Cloud mountains in central Idaho was heard yesterday by a House Resources subcommittee. It’s been 25 years since wilderness was designated in Idaho and Simpson’s bill is the most serious effort in that state since the River of No Return designation in 1980.

The Central Idaho Economic Development and Recreation Act (CIEDRA), which may designate 300,011 acres of wilderness, is widely known as a controversial, or quid pro quo, wilderness bill due to its compromising nature. But politics is a game of balancing constituents, and Simpson’s six year-long efforts to reach acceptable consensus among the region’s ranchers, county commissioners, environmentalists and off road vehicle users is undeniably a display of the Congressman’s political shrewdness. The cost?
Federal land give-aways to cash-strapped Custer County, soft-release of Wilderness Study Areas, a motorized corridor through the wilderness and a voluntary buy-out program of grazing rights from local ranchers.

Before the hearing, lobbyists, witnesses, Idaho residents and wilderness advocates commingled in the Longworth House’s polished hallway on Capitol Hill anxiously waiting for a seat.

The ranking Democrat on the Resources Committee, Rep. Nick Rahall from West Virginia, stopped by to express his concerns and left immediately thereafter:

“I have spent more than half my life as a member of the Resources Committee. In that time I have supported numerous wilderness designations. In fact, I cannot recall ever opposing a wilderness bill. Yet, today, I find myself in a different situation. While I am normally excited, in fact, enthused whenever a Republican introduces a wilderness bill, H.R. 3603 falls far short of what I see as an acceptable standard for such an exceptional area,” Rahall read from a prepared statement.

Udall stated that Simpson was clearly “diligent with everybody in trying to find compromises that work, and they don’t please everybody.” He moved on giving a “strong recommendation” for the bill and considered it a “work in progress” that the committee should consider “very seriously.”

Miller characterized Simpson’s effort as “real, genuine and serious” and that it deserved to be “paid attention to no matter what side of the issue you’re on.” Miller also acknowledged that wilderness discussions are more convoluted today than in the past due to the rise of new interest groups such as motorized recreationists.

"I'd just like to congratulate Mike Simpson. I believe he is following in a fine tradition in Idaho," he said, alluding to the wilderness legacies of Andrus, McClure and Church.

During recess Craig J. Gehrke of The Wilderness Society said, “we have to have Miller’s support for this to make some headway.”

Deputy Chief of the National Forest System, Joel Holtrop, and Assistant Director of Renewable Resources and Planning for the Bureau of Land Management, Ed Shepard, testified that both agencies supported the bill with reservations. Land transfers without compensation to tax payers was the single most problematic aspect of the bill for both, but that they “would like to work with the committee and bill sponsor.”
The testimonies offered no surprises for those who have been following the bill.

Dan Hammerbeck, President of the Salmon River Snowmobile Club, was against on the grounds that wilderness designation would reduce snowmobile access to parts of the high country and further stifle the economy of Custer County.

Rancher and County Commissioner Cliff Hansen said his district can “only provide minimal services” since 95 percent of the county is federal land, leaving only 5 percent as a taxable. Custer is larger than three states, yet home to little more than 4,000 people according to the 2000 census. “This bill is the best thing for Custer County,” he said.

Mike Webster, president-elect of the Idaho Cattle Association, testified against the bill, as did F. Carl Pence, a retired Forest Service ranger in the Sawtooth National Recreation Area and a registered Republican.

Rick Johnson, executive director of the Idaho Conservation League, emphasized that the majority of Idahoans support Simpson’s bill and now is the best chance in 25 years to designate wilderness in Idaho. In addition, he used a chart on an easel to show the explosive growth in off-road vehicles and ATVs in Idaho.
Simpson, always relaxed and well spoken, ended by thanking the witnesses and stated that protection would allow future generations to decide what to do because once wilderness is gone it’s gone. “We will be dead and gone before the impacts [of wilderness designation] will be measured by future generations.”

It’s interesting to note that Rahall ended his statement by quoting from a song by Custer County resident and singer Carole King—an outspoken opponent and witness at the hearing.

King is a long-time wilderness activist, but she has remained on the sidelines for most of this bill’s negotiating process—perhaps because of her unwillingness to compromise. Nevertheless, Simpson, who counts her as a friend, invited her.

Last week, after she was named a witness, AP picked up the Boulder-White Clouds story for the first time and papers as far away as the *Sacramento Bee* ran it.

King’s testimony was marked by rhetoric and a plead to support The Rockies Prosperity Act, which she has ardently advocated for the past 15 years. The Act aims to protect 1,102,535 acres in Washington, Wyoming, Idaho and Montana. She likes to point out that it has 185 cosponsors, while CIEDRA only has one: Rep. Simpson.
The Rockies Prosperity Act would be a dream-come-true for environmentalists because of its sheer size and lack of compromises, but with a 25-year history of failed efforts to pass *statewide* wilderness bills, how likely is it to pass a *regional* one? An insider who spoke on the condition of anonymity speculated that many Congressmen have put their name on the list because “it’s difficult to say no to a rock star when she comes knocking on your door.” Co-sponsorship doesn’t necessary translate to a vote on the floor.

King’s testimony demonstrated her all-or-nothing philosophy, which might make Simpson’s bill look moderate to the largely anti-wilderness House Resources Chairman Richard Pombo (R-CA).

“If you’re waiting for the perfect bill it will not come because it doesn’t exist,” Simpson warned the panel of witnesses and the unusually crowded hearing room.

The subcommittee is likely to mark-up the bill within the next few weeks and the outcome will determine if CIEDRA can move to the House floor.
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