

Maureen and Mike

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**Oral History Number: 362-002**

**Interviewee: Pat Williams**

**Interviewer: Bill Cunningham**

**Date of Interview: May 15, 1997**

**Project: Pat Williams Wilderness Oral History Project**

Bill Cunningham: This is an oral history interview with Pat Williams by Bill Cunningham on May 15, 1997.

Pat, from your perspective could you discuss the evolution of public understanding of, and support for, wilderness as reflected by the improvements made in the seventeen various wilderness bills for Montana that you played a role in?

Pat Williams: Well, the wilderness bills certainly changed, depending upon one's perspective, progressively better or progressively worse. From the perspective of some within the extractive industry it got worse because it added, each time a bill was passed, added increasingly more wilderness, starting with about 8- or 900,000 acres and the final bill that was introduced had 1.7 million acres of wilderness. And of course many, many hundreds of thousands of acres of other protected categories as well. It seems to me that there are several reasons for the changes in the wilderness bill as we went along, in the various wilderness bills, that is. And those changes I think primarily had to do with the learning process, over 20 years things actually do change and learning takes place as well. There were matters about the land or our understanding of the land that changed. The Forest Service itself for example would change its recommendations, not entirely officially, because they had one RARE II [Roadless Area Review and Evaluation] recommendation, but nonetheless as the years went by they would say, Look, under our planning cycle we found out additional things about this land and so we now suggest the delegation change its boundaries with regard to wilderness designation here. So the delegation, even following the wishes of the agency, would change the boundaries of the bills as each bill was introduced.

Another thing that happened, I think critically important, was that the public went through an entire learning curve over those nearly 20 years that I served in the House of Representatives. One understands wilderness best in Montana, and perhaps everywhere, if you recognize that it is essentially an issue about people's backyards. That is to say this, one looks out one's living room or kitchen in Montana and certainly in western Montana almost without exception, one can see an area that has been considered for wildlands protection, wilderness protection. When I first came to the Congress, Montanans in the majority perceived the designation of wilderness as a change in the land. They thought it was some federal imprimatur that was going to be placed on the land and change it from its current condition.

Later Montanans began to fully understand that what was outside their window pane: K. Ross Toole, beloved historian in Montana once wrote, "Out here wilderness is never far from the window pane." As Montanans began to understand that to keep that land that they wanted

protected the same, to leave it unchanged, given the advent of "progress" in these Rockies, a federal law would have to be passed to mandate that those areas not be changed. That is that they not be roaded, not be developed, not be harvested, not be blasted for oil and gas, so it took a federal law laid over these federal lands to mandate that they would remain the same, that is the only way we can assure their continuance as we and our children and Lewis and Clark knew them because we're at that point now where productivity and people have come over the brow of America's final hill and the previously undeveloped wild and roaded lands in Montana are now of course under the threat, a great many of them, of being changed dramatically. And so to prevent that, wilderness is required. Once Montanans came to that understanding, then they began to support the doing of that and that is the federal legislation requiring that these lands stay the same. And of course once the public began to perceive that, then that in turn gave the delegation, its Congressional delegation, political license to go ahead and change these wilderness bills to add ever-increasing amounts of land to be protected.

BC: Pat, could you discuss very briefly the relative influence of various pressure groups on the legislative process of the wilderness in Montana, maybe talking in a lump sum sort of way relative to the extractive interests and the conservation interests and also it might be useful for you to reflect a little bit on the so-called wise use movement and to what extent that may have played a role, may have had an influence?

PW: Let me begin with the wise use movement. When I first was elected by the people of Montana to the House of Representatives from western Montana, and later of course represented all of Montana for two terms, there was a movement in the west, highly covered by the media because the movement had pizzazz, it had journalists take pizzazz to it. It was called the sagebrush rebellion. The sagebrush rebellion petered out like a wet fuse on a stick of dynamite. It never went anywhere. The reason was because there were no dues-paying members in the sagebrush rebellion. There were some believers, but there was no organization to it. That is, they didn't go out and recruit members, it's just that if you believed in some cause somehow you were thought to be part of this so-called rebellion. That didn't go anywhere.

A decade or so later, having learned a lesson, the extractive corporations begin to have dues-paying members in a similar movement. This one went by a different name, and a much more acceptable name it seemed to me to people, and that is the wise use movement. We all understand the importance of words in trying to promote a cause and the nicer the words the softer apparently the cause. So the wise use movement actually did have adherents, it did have dues-paying members. By the way the vast bulk of the dues that fueled the wise use movement were paid by extractive corporations, not individuals on the land. And that is an important point that historians, particularly political and environmental historians, should not miss. Indeed the wise use movement had members and they paid dues, in effect. But the vast bulk of those dues—I'm going to hazard what I think is a knowledgeable estimate, a knowledgeable guess—85 percent or more of the money that fueled the wise use movement was paid for by the large extractive corporations.

But that movement was powerful nonetheless because in part it was well financed. It remains powerful yet today. And it has, I think, moved politics in the west from the center to the right with regard to conservation issues. That's not to say that politics are only on the right with regard to conservation issues, but the trend toward a more extractive use of the land has been promoted successfully by the wise use movement. With regard to the lobbying, or the influence of groups on the wilderness process, I would say perhaps overly quickly, and painting with too broad a brush maybe, that because of time constraints here, just with this interview—perhaps we can come back to it another time—that generally I was disappointed in the lobbying activity of the industry on the wilderness process. I found that the industry did not do a very professional job of lobbying. They did not have mastery of the facts. Perhaps it is the history, perhaps they relied too much on the history of corporations in Montana and probably elsewhere. And that is you can get your way by simply bludgeoning elected officials. You can support or withhold them financially, their campaigns, that is. You can threaten to provide no money in their campaigns, in fact provide none. You can even worse, you can use your workers, your workforce, to lobby elected representatives by telling your workforce that if the industry doesn't get its way on this particular bill, whether this bill is a taxation bill or a wilderness bill or whatever, if the industry doesn't get its way, you the worker are going to be out on the street. And your little girl who needs the operation on her legs before she reaches the age of 6, is not going to be able to have that operation because the medical insurance will be gone along with your job. Workers are terribly frightened by that. Workers are not easily cowed of course, but particularly the unorganized workforce, the workforce that doesn't form into groups to find out their own facts, those groups are usually known as organized labor. Particularly that unorganized work force, it seems to me, is naked to the wishes of the bosses. And in Montana the bosses push those workers out on the political card table like chips, like pawns, and use them.

Growing up in Butte I recognize the technique and that was not particularly effective for me frankly even though I've tried to always be a friend to—and believe I have been a friend to—the workforce in Montana. But I thought that was a misuse of an old tried and failed lobbying technique. Now that's not to say, by the way, that some corporations and some groups and associations didn't have the facts right and didn't come and present their case in a fairly good way on the extractive side. But generally I thought that they did a poor job.

On the other hand, the conservationist side of it surprised me. I came to Congress believing that environmental lobbying effort was primarily based on emotion. For example, I have sat through hundreds of hours of wilderness testimony, and if I never hear about another wonderful sunset over the Rocky Mountain Front it will be enough for me because I have heard about 200 of them now. And I thought that was the lobbying technique that environmentalists use. And indeed they do to some degree, but primarily they rely upon the data and the facts they get based on good science. To me that was extraordinarily powerful. In fact as I have said prior in speeches and I think in an earlier oral interview similar to this one today, I did not come to Congress as a conservationist, but I left it as one. I left as one simply because of the weight of good science. So overall I think the environmental side did a much better job of lobbying the

delegation, at least lobbying this member of the delegation, in presenting data to them than the extractive side.

BC: Pat, did the science of conservation biology that you refer to have a direct effect on the language and the lines contained within your various bills?

PW: Oh absolutely. Information about watershed, vegetation necessity, elk calving grounds, winter grounds, migration corridors, necessity of protecting certain soils, denning activities, the necessity of land for the protection of endangered species, all of those and more, I think, had a significant effect and influence on the fact that each bill would change based on much of that data. And each bill at least from the conservation side would become better as the years evolved and the bills were introduced.

BC: Getting back to the conservation influence here, there was I believe a sort of schism or split within the conservation community over legislation and approach relative to wilderness in the northern Rockies and Montana specifically. Could you discuss that, whether you believe that there was some type of a split within the conservation community, why that might have been the case, and if so what influence it had on the legislation that you were involved in?

PW: Well, you know, a split in any community, be it the conservation community, extractive community, education community or what not does not seem all that important and sort of seems to many people as though it's simply a rift within some local group or statewide group. But for the Congress it's very important. It's important for this reason: When the Congress is brought a proposal by a community of interests from back home, the Congress or that particular delegation—and the Congress—wants to know whether or not that proposal be it a wilderness proposal or highway proposal or a proposal for a new dam or to tear down an old dam or whatever it is, has been properly considered in the community from which it has sprung. Speaking of wilderness, it has always been critical to every delegation that any group, on the extractive side or the conservation side that would bring in a proposal, bring the Congress a proposal for resolving the wilderness dilemma, it was very important for the Congress and for that delegation to know that that proposal had been worked, considered, looked at, reviewed by the various interests back home. Not every environmental group has done that with the proposals that they have brought to the Congress. When I first arrived in the Congress, any proposal that would be brought to us from either the environmental side or the extractive side had been worked. The extractive people would work it with their community of interest, the environmental side would do the same and we would at least know that if that bill was introduced, and by the way, I never introduced a bill brought to me by either side. I would always look at it myself, put my own stamp on it, make the changes I want, talk to the delegation about it, and then introduce a bill. Not one single time did I pick up a bill handed to me by the conservationists or the industry and simply put my name on it and introduce it. In fact, this is public knowledge so I feel perfectly free to say it here, in all the time I was in Congress that had been done only once. And it was done admittedly, publicly admittedly by Senator Burns who took a wilderness bill brought to him by the industry and introduced it as his

own bill and said this bill wasn't written by me, it was written primarily by the timber industry. So that has been done once over the past 20 years and maybe only once in the lifetime of the history of the Montana delegation in the Congress of the United States. One group, the Alliance for the Wild Rockies, has a bill which has gained a lot of national notoriety. It is the only bill that had been brought us in the 18 years I served in the Congress that had not been fully worked within the various interests of the community back home. That's not to say that the bill was a total surprise to Montanans because it wasn't, but it had not gone through that churning and consideration and reconsideration process that had always sort of predetermined the eventual bill that was brought to us, whether it was by the Montana Wilderness Association or the Wilderness Society, Audubon, Sierra Club, whoever.

BC: Now Pat, this is the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act.

PW: NREPA, the NREPA bill. One would note for example, that although the NREPA bill is brought to Congress, and brought to Congress several times, and introduced, not one time has it been introduced by either sponsorship or co-sponsorship of a single member of any of the five states affected by the NREPA bill. And that's because Congress is a representative body, Congress for the most part does not lead and is not intended to lead. Congress represents. That means Congress follows. It isn't presidents that Congress follows, it's people. And when the people back home are not relatively united, at least within their own community of interests about an important piece of legislation that has been brought to the Congress or any given state delegation, it is extremely unlikely that members of that state delegation will put their name on and sponsor that bill or even one remotely like it.

Now, I have always thought that the Alliance for the Wild Rockies are in fact not really trying to pass their bill, they're trying to make a case, they're trying to get the Congress and particularly the delegations in the northern Rockies to reconsider the way we consider wilderness and the way we write wilderness legislation. And I do think that to some degree the NREPA bill and the Alliance for the Wild Rockies adherents have achieved that, they certainly did in my case. They got me thinking about the fact, maybe it isn't the artificial boundary that delineates Montana from Idaho that is so important in the writing of the wilderness bill, maybe it's the way the land lies, the way the rivers flow, the directions in which the animals migrate and the wind blows. That's what's important in the writing of a wilderness bill. So the NREPA bill and the Alliance did have that effect on me.

I do want to say, however, that in the end, in the short run, we need to pass a wilderness bill. And the NREPA process is a very long run process. Because of that it has been, their process has been a bit destructive to trying to find a "today solution" for the Montana wilderness process. So there's both bad and good in the NREPA process. I think overall their effect on trying to resolve the Montana wilderness problem, however, has not been positive, but rather been destructive.

BC: It's been destructive from the standpoint of preventing the passage of a statewide bill?

PW: Yes, making it much more difficult and so dividing groups, the conservation groups within Montana and nationally, that they have been less able to present a united front in favor of one bill. And I think in the end the NREPA people have not done short term, and maybe they don't want to, but they haven't done short term good for the wilderness process or for protecting the land under the ultimate designation of wilderness.

BC: It gets into this question to some extent between the local interests and the national interests with respect to wilderness and that's a very fine line and a very difficult balancing act. How do you see that relative to somehow or other protecting nationally significant lands with a national constituency and at the same time being sensitive to the local people and the local concerns? Is there a comment you would like to make about this balancing act, local and national?

PW Well, of course, as people know the federal lands in any state belong equally to each citizen in America. That is, the federal lands that exist within Montana belong every bit as much to an individual Montanan as they do to a citizen of New York living in midtown Manhattan. To some that's kind of a troubling notion, but it is the law and it has great strength in the ultimate protection of the land. So the question comes, well, do the people who live near the land because they have a better understanding of the land in that they walk on it and they see it and they know it and they've studied it, should they have an increased authority in the determination of it? The way the Congress has resolved that issue is on the side of yes, they should have a somewhat increased authority and the way we will do that is that we will follow to a degree the wishes of the people who represent in the Congress of the United States the people who live near that land.

We will with regard to a Montana wilderness bill follow within reason the wishes of the Montana delegation, therefore giving greater authority to their folks back home. However, any member of Congress reserves the right to vote on the bill, to delay it, to attempt to amend it and a person from Ohio had as great a vote in the Congress with the same authority as I had. And so in the end these lands have to be decided by the entire Congress. However, they do tend to follow fairly closely the wishes of the local, in this instance the Montana delegation. I do want to say almost parenthetically here that there is an issue coming that will have an effect on this process and that's this issue which currently goes by the name of devolution, and that is the bringing of authority from Washington back home, letting local people have greater decision than it is now perceived they have when decisions are made by the Congress sitting in Washington, D.C. As devolution comes full circle to whatever degree it will, we will have to consider this question—both this generation and succeeding generations, will have to consider this question about—shouldn't the administration of the public land be decided by all Americans or would devolution mean that no, local people are going to decide the fate of the land near them even though it is federal land and belongs to all the people. That's going to be an interesting question for the future.

BC: So, devolution, they've reinforced the existing unwritten policy of deference to the local member, that local member over control the federal lands or the allocation of federal lands within his or her district?

PW: Yes, and an even greater question is, will these decisions be left only to the Congress or are we increasingly going to turn them over to state legislators or governors? That, too, is part of the question. Because devolution is to empower governors, to empower state legislatures, and city council and county commissions at the expense of the power for the Congress. Now you see that kind of playing out because every governor all the way back to Tom Judge has created a citizens' commission to make recommendations to the Congress about how this land ought to be resolved. And by the way, every one of those commissions, including the recent [Gov. Marc] Racicot Commission has failed. When the Racicot Commission failed there was no news about it. It's an interesting thing about the failure of something that my friend Marc Racicot has a hand in. The failures are never talked about. Marc's success, and it's well earned, has in part been built on the fact that his failures are not talked about often, maybe he only has very few of them. But the successes are promoted greatly; the Racicot administration has done a great job of achieving that.

BC: I think, Pat, in our next session we are going to want to dig into this issue of the influence of state government in a little more depth. And I also think it would be interesting next time to talk about the feasibility of a statewide wilderness approach given the neighborhood, back yard aspect of it. Traditionally wilderness bills have been focused on individual areas and then because of RARE II, we've all of a sudden adopted this statewide approach, which has worked in most other places except for Montana and Idaho. I think it would interesting at our next session to really get into some depth about, why hasn't it worked here, at least up to this point, and is it even possible to do wilderness on a comprehensive statewide basis or are we going to need to go back to individual areas like we did with the Rattlesnake and the Lee Metcalf?

PW: It's interesting and the delegation has wondered about it from time to time as well. Groups within Montana, we can talk more about it when we continue this, but groups in Montana, on both the environmental and extractive side, are themselves torn about the answer to that question.

BC: Thank you, Pat.

[End of Interview]