

Oral History Number: 443-004

Interviewee: Bob Ream

Interviewer: Clark Grant

Date of Interview: Fall 2013

Project: College of Forestry and Conservation Alumni Oral History Collection

Bob Ream: I'm Bob Ream and I started on the faculty here in the fall of 1969, so it's been 44 years of the 100 years of the centennial celebration that I've been associated with the school and the university. I am Professor Emeritus, so I still have connections. I'm on the Forestry School Advisory Board with the dean and the Advisory Council for the university as well.

Clark Grant: Do you no longer teach then?

BR: I no longer teach. I retired 14 years ago and I moved to Helena, Montana, where I spent time, while I was on the faculty, serving on the legislature as well. That's what I've been doing since I retired. Most recently, I was Chair of the Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Commission for the last four years.

CG: Are you able to enjoy retirement?

BR: I am, yes. I got in 55 days of skiing last winter. (laughs) And then I had my shoulder operated on this summer, so I'll be ready for next ski season.

CG: Well, can we talk about your schooling initially?

BR: Yes, my background—I grew up on a small farm in Wisconsin. I went to the University of Wisconsin—did my undergrad work there—and then went to Utah and got a Master's Degree. Then back to Wisconsin where I got my Ph.D. I worked for the Forest Service and for the University of Denver before I came to the University of Montana in '69.

CG: What did you do for the Forest Service?

BR: I was in Forest Service Research—in Wilderness Research, actually—up in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area up in Minnesota. That really piqued my interest in wilderness and wildlife. I worked on wolves with Dave Mech there in Minnesota. Not long after I came here, I developed an interest in finding out if there were wolves in Montana. That evolved into Wolf Ecology Project, which went on for a number of years along with the help of Professor Dan Pletscher. We did all the work on wolves up on the North Fork of the Flathead, with the naturally recovering wolf population.

CG: What did that entail, that work?

BR: We captured, radio-collared, and followed wolves. We watched what happened to the population as it grew—dispersal of wolves from that area out into other areas around Northwest Montana. Now, in the last four years, I was still dealing with wolves on the Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Commission, so it kind of came full circle. But I was there from the very first wolf that was radio-collared in Montana.

CG: Have any insights arisen from that work that you didn't expect?

BR: Yes, I think we learned a lot about, particularly about, dispersal. How wolves have a very high reproductive rate, so we saw the population really explode, if you will, and move around to many other parts of the state through dispersal of sub-adults. When they reach sexual maturity, they take off just like our teenagers do. They go off to college (laughs) and seek greener pastures. That's been fascinating to see how that happened.

CG: When did you start teaching here, you said?

BR: I started in '69 in the Wildlife Biology Program. I also, because of interest in wilderness, I started the Wilderness Institute in 1975 and the Wilderness and Civilization Program, which is an interdisciplinary program that is still going today on campus here. That was a great experience working with students because we emphasized—the interdisciplinary program had faculty from other departments, so the students were a mixture of students. Not just forestry students, but art students, business students, students from all over campus that signed up for it. We started out each year with an eleven-day backpack trip, usually along the Rocky Mountain Front. I have many fond memories of those experiences. I did that for 25 years—doing those fall program hikes. Then we came back to campus and it was more or less like a regular class situation—they were taking four or five classes in the program. Since all of the twenty-five or so students knew each other, it was a much different learning experience. They knew the faculty well from having been out in the field with them, so that was a unique experience and a neat thing to be involved with.

CG: Now, what's the mission of the Wilderness Institute?

BR: The mission of the Wilderness Institute is to foster education about wilderness, research wilderness use and users and the resource itself, and then it's part of the educational program—the Wilderness and Civilization—was part of it, but we also did education outside the university as well. We worked with the Salish-Kootenai tribe back in the early days of the institute, developing the tribal wilderness—the Mission Mountain Tribal Wilderness—which was the first in the nation, a wilderness created by a tribal entity. That was pretty neat.

CG: What's it like to have started these various programs that continue to this day?

BR: Well, I feel pretty proud of what I did and I think that is kind of neat. That's part of my legacy, I guess, having started that and the wolf project. My first start came—we started the Montana Cooperative Elk Logging Study. I was one of the founders of that as well. One of the other things that I think is unique about me—I think I'm the first forestry faculty member to serve in the Montana Legislature. I did that starting in 1983. Since the legislature meets every other year, every other year I would take a leave of absence from the University for the three months or so that the legislature was in session and then come back to campus. I did that for eight sessions, so sixteen years. It was a valuable experience—learning experience for me, but I was also able to bring what I learned serving in the legislature back to the classroom. So, I think it worked both ways. I also, from that position in the legislature, was able to stand up for the university and for the Forestry School. One of the things I did there was to help establish the Tourism and Recreation Research Institute here in the College of Forestry. Norma Nickerson has been

heading that effort up now. That is the result of we put an amendment—I did—in the legislature to set aside 2.5 percent of the tax collected on the bed tax—would go to the university for the tourism research. Since it's our number two industry, I felt that was important to initiate some research on what is going on with tourism and the impacts of that on the resource itself.

CG: What if anything is most memorable for you in all those years in the legislature?

BR: (Unintelligible).

CG: I'm sure there are many things.

BR: I was chief sponsor of Montana's Stream Access Law in 1985, which was controversial at the time, but it guaranteed the right of citizens to have access to all waters of the state up to the high-water mark. That has held up despite three or four challenges over the years, in court, that our citizens of Montana can utilize rivers for recreation, for fishing, or just simply floating and landowners cannot stop them from doing that. It's unique in the West and in the country, in fact. It's because of Montana's 1972 constitution that held up the waters of the state belonging to the people. That's why the law that we passed—the Stream Access Law—has stood the test of time up to this day.

CG: What is it that motivated to want to be a public servant? Can you cite one particular thing?

BR: Oh, there were several things. Coming to Montana, I realized after a while that Montana is pretty unique in the sense that it's a big state, but it's a small community of people. I realized through other acquaintances that our legislature is truly a citizen legislature. There are people from all walks of life—carpenters and teachers and doctors and lawyers, all serve in the legislature. It is a citizen legislature because it's not full time. It meets every other year for just ninety days and you can't afford to be a legislator as a profession. So, that's why it's the unique mix and unlike almost any other state, I think. I got interested in it, I think, through environmental issues, but also realized that with my natural resource background, I could make a contribution in fish and wildlife as well as other natural resources. So, you know, I had a niche there that I filled and it was good for me, it was good for the university, it was good for the school as well.

CG: And it continues. Your public service on the FWP [Fish, Wildlife and Parks] Commission?

BR: Yes, I served until April this year. The new governor re-appointed me, but I was not confirmed by the senate, so I had to step down. But I still stay involved in the issues and in fact, in three weeks, I'll be chairing a session at the International Wolf Symposium in Duluth, Minnesota. I keep my finger in the pot and keep active doing things.

CG: We simply must record more of your words at some date, some future date.

BR: I'd like to do that. Yes, talk a little more.

CG: We should do that.

BR: More depth, yes.

CG: We've reached the 15 minutes, but like everybody else, I feel like we could go all day. Do you have any parting thoughts maybe for current students here?

BR: You know, it's been almost fifteen years since I retired, I think, and I'm just amazed at the quality of the faculty in the college. The new people that have come in come in with just tremendous credentials. The wildlife program has increased tremendously and all sorts of other programs in the school. You know, it's one of the best schools in the country undoubtedly. The wildlife program stands out and is certainly the top, if not close to the top of all the wildlife programs in the country. What better place to do that than Montana?

CG: Thank you, sir.

BR: All right.

[End of Interview]