

The Global Wilderness Seminar for Government Agencies

A Meeting at the Crossroads of Wildlands Stewardship

BY NANCY ROEPER, PETER LANDRES, and DON FISHER

Two days before the 8th World Wilderness Congress began in Alaska, nearly 200 government wildlands managers from 17 countries met to share ideas about common challenges and to explore ways to improve wildland stewardship globally. The goal for this Global Wilderness Seminar for Government Agencies was to lay the foundation for an operating peer network of government professionals committed to fostering best management practices in wilderness and other wildlands. The seminar, hosted by the Wilderness Policy Council (the group of U.S. federal government policy level representatives from the wilderness management and research agencies) was designed to encourage discussion among the participants with a one-day field trip, presentations from a diversity of countries over a range of topics, and small-group discussions aimed at developing ways to improve global communication about wildland stewardship (see figure 1).

On the first day, participants traveled by train and boat from Anchorage to Seward, and out into Resurrection Bay, to experience a representative sample of Alaska's wildlands. Interpreters and local government agency resource managers pointed out historic, cultural, and ecological highlights, and discussed current wildlands management issues, as participants passed through a mix of private lands, the Chugach State Park, Chugach National Forest, Resurrection Bay State Park, and Kenai Fjords National Park. The many hours of traveling gave everyone an outstanding opportunity to meet one-on-one and in small groups, talk in a relaxed setting, share experiences, and enjoy the spectacular scenery. The high quality interactions on the field trip led Jeff Jarvis, group manager—Wilderness, Rivers, and National Trails with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, to remark, "This sets a new standard for the wilderness community. What a wonderful way to start the congress, a day with con-

servationists from around the world, meeting old friends and making new ones, surrounded by this beauty."

The more formal sessions started the next morning with a deeply inspirational talk by Dr. Ian Player, founder of The WILD Foundation. Dr. Player shared stories about his early years as a game ranger in KwaZulu-Natal and spoke movingly about the importance of the human spirit and its connection to wilderness.

Several invited speakers, chosen to represent the diversity of our global community, next demonstrated the commonality of wilderness stewardship concerns across global boundaries and cultures as they discussed some of their country's most pressing wildland resource conservation challenges and creative solutions. For example, discussing their respective wildland challenges, Adrian Stokes (Australia), Liisa Kajala (Finland), and Vicki Sanahatien (Canada) independently highlighted the need for, and the desirability of, working closely with aboriginal peoples. Their respective agencies have realized that as long as people remain connected with their aboriginal homeland, they will be strong proponents for their continued protection as wildlands.

Likewise, Freek Venter (South Africa) and Teresa Magro (Brazil) each addressed the challenges of balancing conservation and

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Figure 1—Discussion during the Global Wilderness Seminar. Photo by Teresa Magro.

development needs. In both their countries, for example, ecotourism associated with wildlands has provided economic, social, and ecosystem benefits, through the creation of employment opportunities and incentives for wildlife conservation. However, both acknowledged the potential negative consequences associated with growing ecotourism, such as the loss of wildland values resulting from the development of tourism infrastructure, and the importance of thorough planning and collaboration with all interested parties to assure the sustainability of wildlands.

All of the speakers highlighted the need for working with a broad array of partners. Steve Carver (United Kingdom), for example, works closely with several nongovernmental organizations that are attempting to rewild parts of the country. Lisa Eidson (United States) discussed the underlying structure that makes www.wilderness.net, itself a partnership, such an effective information delivery system. As the webmaster, she ensures that a diverse array of users can easily locate the wilderness information they want and need.

In the afternoon, participants divided into relatively small, facilitated

groups to allow more focused discussion on specific wilderness stewardship topics. Those topics were: improving global communication for wilderness stewardship, managing for ecological values, managing for social values, meeting the challenge of human use management, protecting the wilderness resource, and partnerships.

Each group identified priority stewardship issues and critical stewardship needs within their focus topic. Not surprisingly, discussions of these broad topics elicited many priority issues and needs, such as:

- Maintaining the natural ecological integrity of wildlands;
- Determining thresholds for wildlands management action;
- Managing user conflicts;
- Educating and informing the public about the importance of wilderness and appropriate ways to enjoy it;
- Bringing funding to the table to generate partnerships; and
- Developing a website for sharing information.

All of the discussion groups independently identified the establishment of a web-based clearinghouse for posting

information on wilderness stewardship challenges and solutions as a top priority. Other significant recommendations were to hold smaller or regional international seminars for government agencies between World Wilderness Congresses, maintain accessibility of the World Wilderness Congress to the international community, contribute articles to and subscribe to the *International Journal of Wilderness*, and develop new exchange programs and expand existing ones.

Of the many recommendations developed in this seminar, two resulted in resolutions that were passed by the World Wilderness Congress delegates: (1) hold future Government Seminars to further improve international coordination and cooperation on wildland protection, and (2) develop an umbrella global network to foster international communication and learning about wilderness stewardship.

A list of participants, presentations, small discussion group results, and photos are posted at www.wilderness.net. With support from the U.S. Wilderness Policy Council, the IUCN Wilderness Task Force, and the people who volunteered from these discussion groups to continue working together, we intend to move forward on several recommendations this year to improve our capacity and ability for global wilderness stewardship. **IJW**

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