

From the Archives

Protecting the environment continues to be a major concern for Minnesota citizens, tribal nations, and policymakers today. Thirty years ago author Mark Harvey expertly detailed the pivotal preservation history of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) between the years 1945 and 1964. Prior to the federal Wilderness Act of 1964, the area now known as the BWCAW had no formal name and no protection from damage caused by humans. During the mid-twentieth century, wilderness preservationists looked with growing concern at this vast region sprawling along the international



border between northeastern Minnesota and southwestern Ontario. Led by the Friends of the Wilderness in Minnesota and the Wilderness Society in the nation's capital, preservationists identified these boundary waters as a premier wilderness and sought to enhance protection of their magnificent wildlands and waterways.

Style note: The original article faithfully followed a policy of lowercasing pre-1964 references to the BWCAW and capitalizing them thereafter, and we have maintained that original style.

Sound Politics

Wilderness, Recreation, and Motors in the Boundary Waters, 1945–1964

Mark Harvey

DURING THE MID-TWENTIETH century, wilderness preservationists looked with growing concern at the boundary waters of northeastern Minnesota and southwestern Ontario. Led by the Friends of the Wilderness in Minnesota and the Wilderness Society in the nation's capital, preservationists identified the boundary waters as a premier wilderness and sought to enhance protection of their magnificent wildlands and waterways. Minnesota's conservation leaders, Ernest C. Oberholtzer and Sigurd F. Olson among them, played key roles in this effort along with Senator Hubert H. Humphrey. Their work laid the foundation for the federal Wilderness Act of 1964, but it also revived the protracted struggles about motorized recreation in the boundary waters, revealing a deep and per-

sistent fault line among Minnesota's outdoor enthusiasts.

The boundary waters had been at the center of numerous disputes since the 1920s but did not emerge into the national spotlight of wilderness protection until World War II ended. In June 1947, the governing council of the national Wilderness Society gathered at Oberholtzer's Mallard Island home on Rainy Lake. A central figure in numerous boundary-waters disputes, Oberholtzer was hosting more than a dozen of America's vaunted wilderness leaders, including Wilderness Society president Benton MacKaye, executive director Olaus Murie and his wife, Margaret, executive secretary and *Living Wilderness* editor Howard Zahniser, University of Wisconsin ecologist Aldo Leopold, and Forest Service hydrologist Bernard Frank.¹

MacKaye's invitation to the council had identified the boundary waters in richly symbolic terms:

Here is the place of places to emulate, in reverse, the pioneering spirit of Joliet and Marquette. They came to quell the wilderness for the sake of civilization. We come to restore the wilderness for the sake of civilization. . . . Here is the central strategic point from which to relaunch our gentle campaign to put back the wilderness on the map of North America.²

Putting wilderness back on the continent's map promised to be a daunting task, particularly when the expanding postwar economy heightened demands for minerals, timber,



Canoeing on Gunflint Lake, about 1950

flicts emerged over the use of motors by those entering the region. Activists fought to keep the boundary waters free of motors, which, they maintained, spoiled the wilderness experience; opponents contended that rising demand for access called for greater use of motorboats and airplanes. From the mid-1940s into the 1960s this debate proved significant regionally and nationally. In Minnesota, the controversy over motorized recreation defined the debate among sportsmen, resort owners, businesspeople, and wilderness activists that continues to this day. In addition, the conflict shaped key legal provisions in the Wilderness Act of 1964, a landmark in the nation's environmental history as well as a touchstone for subsequent battles over the boundary waters.⁴

and other natural resources. To the preservationists gathered at Rainy Lake, the obstacles seemed great, yet they also felt encouraged by previous efforts to safeguard the vast area of lakes and islands. The federal Shipstead-Nolan Act of 1930, capping a fierce controversy sparked by efforts of timber entrepreneur Edward W. Backus to dam several lakes for hydroelectric power and log timber along the shorelines, had "prohibited logging within 400 feet of lakeshores and barred further alteration of natural water levels." In 1933, the state of Minnesota bolstered this measure with the "Little Shipstead-Nolan Act" to "preserve shorelines, rapids, waterfalls, beaches, and other natural features in an unmodified state of nature" on state-owned lands in the Shipstead-Nolan area.

Then, in 1938 and 1939, the US Forest Service established Superior, Little Indian Sioux, and Caribou Roadless

Areas within the three-million-acre Superior National Forest in northeastern Minnesota's Arrowhead country. While logging and motorboats were allowed in these areas, public roads were banned. Two years later, the Forest Service created a "no-cut" zone covering 362,000 acres. Meanwhile, conservationists, led by Oberholtzer, had established the Quetico-Superior Council, and President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the Quetico-Superior Committee in 1934. Both bodies worked to secure a treaty between the United States and Canada to coordinate protection of this vast wilderness region.³

While the Wilderness Society council and Minnesota activists took satisfaction in these steps, the postwar years presented new threats to the boundary waters. Earlier disputes had often centered on proposed dams, roads, and logging in the roadless areas. Now, a growing number of con-

A CATALYST FOR THIS CONFLICT lay in the tremendous increase in outdoor recreation in Minnesota after World War II. According to environmental historian Samuel Hays, the sweeping economic and cultural changes fueled by wartime economic expansion spawned a growing interest in outdoor activities. Propelled by rising incomes, increased education levels, rapid growth of the middle class, and greater leisure time, Americans flocked to parks, forests, and beaches. With travel and outdoor recreation ever more popular, northern Minnesota communities close to the Superior National Forest increasingly turned to tourism. Towns such as Ely and Grand Marais, where logging and mining had steadily declined, welcomed tourism as a vital and growing source of income. Catering to boating and fishing enthusiasts had been a part of northern Minnesota's economy since the late nineteenth century, but the

post-World War II years proved to be a boom period.⁵

Rapid growth in numbers of visitors, coupled with improvements in outboard motors, spawned new lakeside resorts in the boundary waters of ferrier canoe and motorboat services. Motorboat usage increased apace; Basswood Lake, with more than a dozen resorts and private camps, was especially popular, and Crooked and Knife Lakes each had two by the early 1950s. Resorts catered to either those who preferred motors or those who did not, yet by one estimate, about 25 percent of canoeists used square-stern models designed to accommodate small motors.⁶

The proliferation of motorboats was accompanied during the war years by airplanes flying into private resorts deep inside the roadless areas. Hydroplanes proved attractive to many resort owners, who found a growing base of customers desiring quick access to the dozens of remote lakes along the international border that held bigger and more plentiful fish. The lure of “virgin fishing” thus increased the use of planes and spawned new resorts on private lands within the roadless areas, including one established in 1942 near Curtain Falls at the outlet of Crooked Lake and another on Friday Bay on the same lake in 1943. Other new resorts cropped up on Lac La Croix, Lake Saganaga, and Kekekabic Lake. In the summer of 1945, 11 private planes flew out of Ely “carrying passengers and supplies to the various interior resorts and even transporting lumber and other materials for new construction.” This relatively small number of flights increased, with 69 planes accessing the roadless areas in 1948.⁷

Motorboats mingling with nonmotorized craft on the water at End of the Trail Lodge, Saganaga Lake, in Superior National Forest's roadless area, 1960



Renowned conservationist Ernest Oberholtzer, 1940

Wilderness lovers generally scorned the airplanes. They believed that motor noise spoiled the solitude that made the boundary waters a distinctive place to gain peace and serenity away from the sights and sounds

of civilization. They contended that, besides being noisy intrusions, airplanes violated the principle that the roadless areas were to be managed for public enjoyment. Individuals like Sigurd Olson, often accused of being elitist for their interest in preserving wilderness, believed that resort owners who flew customers to private lands deep in the boundary waters were the primary beneficiaries of the roadless areas. As Olson put it, the resorts “are beautifully situated for they are protected and completely surrounded by federal lands. They are immune from competition. It is as though the government had given them the exclusive right of monopoly to the wilderness canoe country around them.”⁸

While the attempt to bring quiet to the boundary waters was a shared effort, no individual proved as important in that campaign as Olson. After teaching school and serving as a school administrator in Ely, Olson became a full-time conservationist in 1948 when he joined the Izaak Walton League and served





Men fishing from a seaplane, a north woods scene captured on a large-format color postcard, 1945

as its chief spokesman for protecting the boundary waters. He later joined the council of the Wilderness Society and played a crucial role in lobbying to include the boundary waters in the 1964 bill establishing the national wilderness system. Like Oberholtzer, Olson had explored vast reaches of the boundary waters by canoe and was dedicated to protecting the roadless areas from commodity interests and motorized recreation. Olson's distinctive contribution proved to be his many essays for sporting and conservation publications—such as *Nature Magazine*, *Living Wilderness*, and *National Parks Magazine*—that eloquently presented the values of the wild.⁹

Olson believed that the boundary waters were among the last great parcels of primitive America. In a 1947 letter, he wrote that the boundary waters “is the playground of the middle west, the only area of its kind between the Adirondacks and the Rocky

Mountains, the only area where there is any extensive stretch of wild and undeveloped country.” Although portions had been logged, much of the region appeared relatively unchanged since the heyday of the fur trade when Northwest Company canoe brigades crisscrossed the region. Fascinated with that era, Olson thrilled in following the same routes and portages as Alexander Mackenzie, Sieur de la Vérendrye, Pierre Esprit Radisson, and Sieur de Groseilliers. He was captivated by their journals, and he adored the names that they left: Lac La Croix, Deau Riviere, Saganaga, and Kahnipiminanikok. “When I entered the fastnesses of the Quetico-Superior I would become a part of all that,” he wrote. “It would be like lifting the curtain on another world. No longer would I belong to the twentieth century. I would be a voyageur of the seventeenth, a man from Trois Riviere or Montreal. I would see the country through his eyes.” For Olson, to enter

the wilderness meant taking a journey into the past.¹⁰

Olson maintained that wilderness outings brought physical and emotional restoration to tired, stressed urbanites beset with noise and crowds. In his years as a canoe guide, he had met numerous individuals who experienced spiritual and physical renewal after a few days of paddling and fellowship around a campfire.

Far from the towns and all they denote, engrossed in their return to the old habits of wilderness living, men begin to wonder if the speed and pressure they have left are not a little senseless. Here where matters of food, shelter, rest and new horizons are all important, they begin to question the worthwhile-ness of their old objectives. Now they have long days with nothing to clutter their minds but the simple problems of wilderness living, and at last they have time to think.¹¹

Olson also associated the pleasures of the boundary waters with the work required to survive there, with the toil and energy required to hoist a heavy pack, brave the elements, and accept nature's demands on body and mind. He believed that people ferried into the boundary waters by air missed a crucial aspect of this encounter. Once, after being jolted by the droning engine of a floatplane, Olson acknowledged that those on board would likely enjoy their outing but had been "robbed . . . of their sense of achievement. Real understanding of wilderness was reserved for those who worked for it. It was impossible to drop into a remote area by plane and get the full meaning of exclusion."¹²

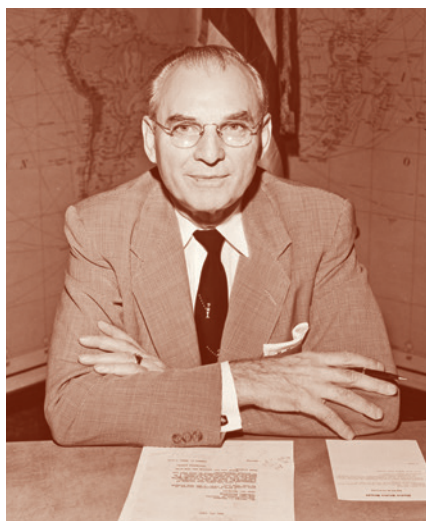
These beliefs sustained Olson's determination to keep airplanes from intruding into the boundary waters. Yet the amount of private lands within the national forest and roadless areas made finding a solution difficult. During the war, the Izaak Walton League had established a fund to purchase private lands and add them to the national forest. After the war, the League and its allies stepped up this effort by pushing for federal legislation for land purchases. In 1947 the Minnesota legislature adopted a resolution favoring one such bill promoted by Minnesota Congressman John Blatnik and Senator Edward J. Thye. After working out the complex and highly sensitive issues involving fair reimbursement to local counties for a reduced tax base, Congress passed the Thye-Blatnik Act in 1948, authorizing the secretary of agriculture to acquire private lands within the boundary waters wilderness. The act provided an initial fund of \$500,000; wilderness proponents soon realized that additional money would be required to complete the land purchases.¹³

While the League's efforts and the Thye-Blatnik land purchases took



Writer and conservationist Sigurd Olson, about 1960

effect, fly-ins to resorts continued, prompting the search for a more immediate solution. By 1948 Olson, Oberholtzer, Ely canoe outfitter William M. Rom Sr., and a new organization called Friends of the Wilderness had joined with several Forest Service officials to secure a presidential order designating an airspace reserve over the boundary waters. As preservationist Miron L. Heinselman succinctly put it, this effort proved "bitter, drawn out, and legally com-



Minnesota Senator Edward J. Thye, 1955

plex." But it worked. On December 17, 1949, President Harry S. Truman signed the order prohibiting flights below 4,000 feet as of January 1, 1951. Flights into private resorts would be permitted for one year beyond that date, "provided that air travel was a customary means of ingress to and egress from such lands prior to the date of this order."¹⁴

Creation of the airspace reserve was a major triumph for wilderness lovers, but it did not put the issue to rest. Pilots and fly-in resort owners protested the ban as an intrusion into Minnesota affairs and a burden on their livelihoods. As the ban took full effect in 1952, one pilot, Elwyn West, challenged it by flying to the Curtain Falls resort and to another at Friday Bay on Crooked Lake. In September 1952, federal district court judge Gunnar Nordbye in Duluth upheld the air ban. When other violations followed, federal marshals seized planes. Several more years of wrangling elapsed before a federal district judge ruled in May 1956 that the only legal access to private resorts was by canoe, boat, or portage.¹⁵

As the finality of the airspace reserve settled on northeast Minnesota in the mid-1950s, the cultural and political divide over motors in the wilderness deepened. While effectively prohibiting flights, the ban had also crystallized public debate over sound in Minnesota's recreational economy. Lovers of silence rejoiced. To them, the ban capped years of controversy and furnished a layer of federal protection supplementing the safeguards of the Shipstead-Nolan and Thye-Blatnik Acts. Resort owners and tourist businesses in Ely and other communities, however, considered the air ban unfair and burdensome. For those who had relied on planes and continued to utilize motorboats, noise was not a troubling problem. They argued that the sounds were temporary; when the planes or motorboats arrived at the cherished fishing spot, motors were shut off. To resort owners, of course, maintaining easy access to their lands was the most crucial issue.¹⁶

This standoff provided the backdrop for an equally contentious dispute in the late 1950s over a bill to protect wilderness nationwide. Ironically, the status of the boundary waters had little to do with this newest campaign by American preservationists. As Olson, Oberholtzer, and Friends of the Wilderness knew, no other wilderness area in the nation enjoyed such privileged legal status. With shorelines and parts of the roadless areas closed to logging and insulated from airplane use, the boundary waters was the nation's best-protected wilderness.

WILDERNESS AREAS had been designated inside many national forests since the 1920s. Foresters Aldo Leopold and Arthur Carhart were among the leading advocates; at Carhart's urging, the Forest Service in 1926 had



National Forest Service employees portaging in Superior National Forest, about 1920

established the first regulations protecting the primitive character of the Superior National Forest. In 1929, the Forest Service established "primitive areas" across the United States where logging and road construction would be minimized, though not prohibited. In 1939, more stringent regulations banned logging and motorized vehicles in primitive areas while also setting into motion Forest Service reviews of these areas that continued into the 1940s and 1950s. These reviews involved public hearings and close study of primitive areas in order to evaluate their boundaries and the demands for logging, mining, and recreation. The Forest Service then altered some boundaries before reclassifying primitive areas into "wilderness" and "wild" areas.¹⁷

Reclassification, however, by no means guaranteed permanent protection. Wild and wilderness areas remained subject to Forest Service regulations, leaving them vulnerable to shifting demands for timber, minerals, and grazing as well as state and national politics. Following World War II, increased timber sales, fueled by a growing housing and con-

struction industry, caused the Forest Service to reduce the size of several primitive and roadless areas in order to open more acreage to multiple uses. Seeing such reductions, the Wilderness Society and its grassroots supporters concluded that only a new federal law would protect wilderness permanently. In 1956 the Wilderness Society determinedly launched a campaign for a national wilderness preservation system.¹⁸

Leading the Wilderness Society's effort in the nation's capital was Howard Zahniser, executive secretary and editor of *Living Wilderness*. Zahniser had worked with Oberholtzer and Olson for more than a decade and had himself canoed the boundary waters on two occasions. His speech in 1955 in Washington, DC, "The Need for Wilderness Areas," caught the attention of Minnesota Senator Hubert Humphrey, who understood the growing desire to preserve the boundary waters wilderness within his home state. Humphrey felt confident that national interest in wilderness was growing. With a strong base of support in the Twin Cities and from some resort businesses in the boundary

waters, Humphrey sought a leading role in promoting the wilderness bill. He began by inserting Zahniser's speech into the *Congressional Record*, signaling his intent to help launch the wilderness-bill campaign. Then, on June 7, 1956, he introduced the bill in the Senate, joined by several co-sponsors. Humphrey proved to be the single most important proponent in Congress during the early years of this lengthy legislative effort.¹⁹

The bill proposed to codify wilderness by federal statute, to recognize by law that wilderness was "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a member of the natural community, a wanderer who visits but does not remain and whose travels leave only trails." The legislation sought to prohibit logging, mining, and motorized vehicles in wilderness areas, although the first drafts of the bill were ambiguous on the final point. As the controversy unfolded, the use of motorboats quickly became the most contentious issue.²⁰

Along with Senator Humphrey, Olson, and Oberholtzer, Minnesota supporters of the bill included Friends of the Wilderness, led by William Magie of Duluth. "Wilderness," Magie wrote in 1957, "is needed to preserve the core of America's strength; it is our last remaining link to our sturdy pioneer past and it can be our salvation in the harried necessary environment of our present." Friends of the Wilderness emphasized the growing value of wilderness recreation to northern Minnesota's economy; it stressed that the boundary waters promised to become a dominant recreational area for many who cherished the quiet and remote waters "where the beaver slaps his tail at night, and the lonesome call of the loon is heard day and night." Friends also emphasized that communities like Ely and Winton could no longer

rely for economic security on timber harvesting and sawmills and argued that tourism offered long-term economic security.²¹

Local support for the bill was quickly overshadowed by a strong wave of opposition, primarily from northeastern Minnesota. The forest industry disliked the legislation, aware that it meant reductions in harvesting levels and curtailed business. The American Forestry Association (AFA) objected that the bill violated the time-honored multiple-use principle governing the national forests. Wilderness, argued the AFA, was a "single and exclusive use" and could not be reconciled with logging, mining, or grazing. The AFA also objected because the bill would take control of wilderness designation away from Forest Service officials—whom the AFA considered to have the scientific and economic expertise to make such judgments—and place it into the hands of uninformed, easily pressured members of Congress.²²

The mining industry, having experienced rocky times since the Great Depression, also objected. Iron mining had been a major sector in Ely's economy, but since the 1930s several mines had closed, unemployment had increased, and property values had dropped. Many residents of Ely and other communities found it troubling that the wilderness bill proposed to prohibit all prospecting. To counteract their opposition, Sigurd Olson remarked that mining had devastated the landscape around Sudbury, Ontario, and noted that the wilderness bill would prevent such a calamity on lands surrounding the boundary waters. Yet the mining industry continued to express its concerns. One executive felt certain that "the canoe-ist and boyscouts are more of a detriment in their slovenly woods habits than any serious-minded prospector ever was."²³

A particularly outspoken opponent of Humphrey's bill was Fred C. Childers, editor of the *Ely Miner*, whose criticisms of the restrictions on motorboat usage helped turn that issue into the focal point of the growing controversy. In a sharply worded editorial, Childers quoted long passages from the bill to emphasize its prohibitions on mining, logging, and airplane and motorboat use. "We wonder," the article continued, "how sincere the senator is in serving his constituents or when he loudly proclaims in his campaign on Labor Day about being a friend of the people and the working man." Such language revealed the editor's conviction that working-class sportsmen were among the biggest recreational users of the boundary waters and would not tolerate laws prohibiting motorboats. That message was reinforced by the Ely Chamber of Commerce, which complained to Humphrey that "through the years, we have seen this area regulated step by step [and the bill] is about the final step in tying up a program by certain conservationists who don't care about Ely."²⁴

Childers hit a nerve with Humphrey because northern Minnesota was a Democratic-Farmer-Labor (DFL) Party stronghold. Many working-class residents of its lumber, mining, and resort towns were among the biggest gainers from America's middle-class prosperity in the postwar years. They were also a backbone of the DFL. While Humphrey felt secure in relying on the Twin Cities for support of the wilderness bill, he understood that he risked losing political capital in northern Minnesota. But Humphrey did not waver. He believed that Ely and other communities had relied on corporate timber and mining firms for too long, and that these industries had earned substantial profits from the area and shown little regard for its long-term economic well-being.

Destroy This? **NEVER!**



Yes, we are deeply concerned about the canoe country. Many people love it and yet they do not realize what a priceless treasure we have in it; it is a matchless, a unique possession, which nothing can replace once it is gone. There is nothing just like its wild loveliness. We would as soon shatter the Hope diamond into small media-

cre bits as to spoil this country with resorts and airplane noise and confusion. We need to keep this tiny residual fraction of what was once a mighty wilderness as a primitive area where we can find clarity, solitude and peace.

FLORENCE PAGE JAQUES



Senator Hubert H. Humphrey addressing the Hibbing Chamber of Commerce in 1956, as controversy swirled around the proposed wilderness bill; poster with Francis Lee Jaques drawing, about 1960, in support of the still unpassed legislation

Friends of the Wilderness

FRANK ROBERTSON, President

BILL MAGIE, Secretary-Treasurer

Humphrey remained confident that repeated cries from timber and mining firms claiming that the wilderness bill would “lock up” valuable resources would not be universally accepted. Olson, for his part, reminded Humphrey that Ely “has always been a hot bed of dissension as far as wilderness preservation is concerned.”²⁵

Humphrey also sensed that Childers’s editorial was meant to settle old scores. The senator told a member of his staff, “This fellow Childers is a reactionary editor in Ely. He hates my guts, and he has been after me for years. He feels he has a good issue now, so I want to take him on—head on.” Humphrey responded to Childers with a long letter charging that his editorial “is the same kind of propaganda that comes from the large mining companies and the timber interests.” He added that the bill “does not in any way jeopardize, threaten, or remove any rights that any person now has under present law relating to recreation, mining, forestry, land use, grazing privileges, mineral exploration. The bill specifically states that present rights and property rights are fully protected and honored.”²⁶

WHETHER OR NOT this was indeed the case shaped much of the controversy that played out in Minnesota. For the first two years of the legislation’s course, Humphrey and wilderness proponents found themselves on the defensive, struggling to clarify the bill and dispel misconceptions. Many Minnesotans felt that, if enacted, the legislation would place “undue restrictions” on tourism, logging, and mining; ban outboard motors; and even lead to seizure of private homes and resorts. Although some of these fears were groundless, their expression compelled wilderness advocates to emphasize how little the bill would

alter existing management practices. After all, much of the roadless area was already closed to logging and mining, and the bill merely sought to place those regulations into statute law. This explanation generated more opposition: Was the bill really needed if it were merely going to implement policies already in place?²⁷

Sharp reaction against the bill partly reflected the urban-rural tug-of-war over wilderness fought in Minnesota and much of the country during the 1950s. Small towns such as Ely, historically dependent on extractive industries and motorized recreation, resented the attempts of conservationists from the Twin Cities and distant Washington, DC, to change the rules.

Tensions at times also seemed to reflect class differences, with some northern Minnesotans accusing the bill’s supporters of being wealthy elitists who wished to have the boundary waters as their own playground. “I’d call that class legislation,” wrote Stan Pechaver, secretary of the Ely Chamber of Commerce. This barb touched on a host of deeply rooted social and cultural perceptions and prejudices often entangled in debates about wilderness. Pechaver voiced the common perception in working-class communities such as Ely that outsiders, typically urban environmentalists, would try to dictate how the boundary waters were to be enjoyed. His view also bolstered another deep-seated conviction that



Ely, about 1947, a town whose economy increasingly depended on tourism; (below) postcard of “car campers” at the town’s tourist park, about 1935

wilderness recreationists lacked respect for the livelihoods—indeed the physical work itself—of timber and mine workers. How people worked and how they enjoyed their leisure time thus became wellsprings of conflict about how the boundary waters should be utilized. In addition, Pechaver charged, “If regulations are carried out, it means only those physically able to paddle and pack can enjoy our wilderness.” Thus, the issue of motorboat usage became the center of the mounting controversy.²⁸

BARRING MOTORIZED VEHICLES from wilderness areas had been the aim of activists since the 1920s when roads and automobiles first became a threat. Yet Zahniser wrote the first draft of the wilderness bill in 1956 in a compromising spirit, saying that in national forests where airplanes and motorboats had been customarily allowed and usage was well established, such uses “may be permitted to continue.” He adopted this wording from a 1954 amendment to a Forest Service regulation, which held that the landing of airplanes and use of motorized vehicles (including boats) would not be permitted “except where such use . . . has already become well established.” That policy was already in force in the Superior Roadless Area. Regional forester Jay Price had made that clear in a 1950 memorandum, stating that motorboats would be allowed “on lakes on which there are developed resorts and which are now reached by larger boats by truck or tramway portages.”

Given this established policy for the roadless area, the wilderness bill’s phrase that motorboat usage “may be permitted” was ambiguous. Opponents of the bill quickly seized on this ambiguity, noting that the word “may” was not the same as “shall.” Minnesota resort owners

Lac La Croix Lodge
AND CANOE OUTFITTERS

ON THE CANADIAN BORDER
COMPLETE MODERN FACILITIES
OUTFITTING FOR CANOE TRIPS
SPORTING GOODS STORE

OFFICE 114 EAST SHERIDAN STREET • TELEPHONE 192-R
ELY, MINNESOTA

August 14, 1957

MARTIN SKALA, JR., OWNER

Honorable Hubert H. Humphrey
United States Senator
Washington, D. C.

Re: S. 1176

Dear Senator Humphrey:

I am much concerned about this bill. It is very harmful to me and to the many others who make their living from the tourist industry in this part of the country. I believe that if you will give the resort people an opportunity to present their side you will see how harmful this bill is to us without giving any real benefit to the public.

My wife and I have spent many years developing our resort business. We have a substantial investment of both time and money. Our resort makes it possible for hundreds of people from all parts of the State and the United States to see and enjoy the border lakes country. We employ approximately thirty-five people who make their living in this business. Many of our employees do not have any other occupation. The air ban very seriously hurt us but we have managed to survive and are doing fairly well under the most trying circumstances. This new bill will make it almost impossible for us to remain in business or even get to our property by outboard motor boats.

Letter (detail) protesting the wilderness bill from Martin Skala Jr., a resort owner “very seriously hurt” by the air ban but “doing fairly well under the most trying circumstances”

also expressed their worries. Martin Skala Jr., a canoe outfitter and lodge owner on Lac La Croix, told Humphrey that the bill would be “very harmful to me and to the many others who make their living from the tourist industry in this part of the country. . . . The air ban very seriously hurt us but we have managed to survive. . . . This new bill will make it almost impossible for us to remain in business or even get to our property by outboard motorboats.” Meanwhile, the National Boating Association called the bill “an example of the creeping acquisition policy of the rabid conservationist.”²⁹

The stiff backlash made it clear to Humphrey that resort owners were the most important element of the opposition and that they must be appeased. Florence Frederickson, a resident of Ely and a resort owner, kept the senator aware of public

sentiment. Frederickson wrote to Humphrey that the most damaging wording in the bill was that motorboats “may be permitted”; if Humphrey would substitute “shall” for “may,” the ambiguity bothering most resort owners would be removed, ensuring their support for the legislation.³⁰

Humphrey took her advice. By 1957, after a year of sometimes harsh criticism of the bill, he realized that compromise with motorboat users would be necessary to achieve support from a majority of Minnesotans. By then Sigurd Olson had also concluded that a complete ban on motorboats would not be accepted—while he also vehemently denied that he had ever supported a total ban. Humphrey soon took steps to reassure resort owners and motorboat users. At an important meeting in St. Paul in December 1957, he told a room

packed with owners and sportsmen that while the original bill did not specifically preclude motorboat use, his revised draft clearly stated “that nothing in this act shall preclude the continuance within these roadless areas of an already established use of motorboats.” Humphrey quipped, “I told the men drawing up the bill to put it in language even I could understand.” Humphrey’s loophole permitting motorboat use proved to be a key to gaining support for the bill across Minnesota’s north country.³¹

CONTROVERSY OVER THE wilderness bill now quickly diminished in Minnesota, and the battle shifted to the far western states. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Rocky Mountain and West Coast states became the center of the acrimonious debate as mining and logging companies, ranchers, and advocates of water development stridently opposed the wilderness bill, while dude ranchers, outfitters, and hunting and fishing enthusiasts supported it. In Congress, the controversy swirled around senators Gordon Allott of Colorado, Joseph O’Mahoney of Wyoming, and Clinton P. Anderson of New Mexico. In 1959 and 1960, Allott and O’Mahoney introduced amendments to the legislation to protect the ranching and mining industries and to ensure that Congress would establish wilderness by “positive legislation” rather than by merely vetoing a designation of wilderness by the executive branch.³²

For his part, Allott deeply resented Humphrey’s compromise permitting motorboats in the boundary waters. Allott felt that Humphrey had cleverly split the political ground in Minnesota to avoid offending anyone; he also resented the prospect that no wilderness area in Colorado or the West would be permitted similar motorized access. “Let Hubert Humphrey eat

the same cake as the rest of us eat,” the Colorado senator fumed, as he proposed an amendment to eliminate the special provision governing the boundary waters. But Allott could not gain sufficient support for his amendment, so the unique provision allowing motorboats within the boundary waters remained in the final bill.³³

Congress at last enacted the bill in the summer of 1964, and President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Wilderness Act into law on September 3. The law declared that it is “the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.” The words “an enduring resource of wilderness” were penned by Howard Zahniser, whose intense lobbying for the bill ended on May 5, 1964, when he died in his sleep at age 58. While Zahniser did not live to see it enacted, the new law fulfilled much of what he, along with Sigurd Olson, Ernest Oberholtzer, and Friends of the Wilderness had wanted to achieve. It created a national wilderness preservation system with an initial nine million acres, including the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, or BWCA, as it was now called. Permanent roads, motorized vehicles, and commercial enterprises were barred along with logging, while grazing and mining prospecting were permitted for several years. It set into motion a review of remaining primitive areas for future designation as wilderness by Congress. The Wilderness Act stands as a landmark achievement in the protection and management of lands defined as wilderness in the United States.³⁴

Ironically, the new law also ensured that the long-standing controversy over motorized recreation in Minnesota would continue. Its major provision affecting the boundary waters held that “nothing in this Act shall preclude the continuance within

the area of any already established use of motorboats.” While that loophole capped years of controversy, it also planted the seeds for a subsequent phase of the debate that peaked in the 1970s with the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness Act that eliminated much motorboat use from the BWCA.

Nor did the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness Act of 1978 put to rest the sometimes passionate arguments over how much motorized access should be allowed in wilderness or national park areas. In recent years the popularity of jet skis, snowmobiles, and all-terrain vehicles has prompted debates reminiscent of earlier battles over motorboats and airplanes. In some respects, the current debates must be distinguished from those of 50 years ago; much concern is expressed now, for instance, about the impact of snowmobiles on wildlife and on the landscape itself. Nonetheless, the older conflicts remain at the core of the discussion today. The place of motorized equipment in Minnesota’s recreational economy opened a rift in the populace more than a half century ago, and that rift continues to divide lovers of Minnesota’s prime recreational lands. □

Notes

1. “News Items of Interest,” *Living Wilderness* 12 (Autumn 1947): 29. The most comprehensive histories of the boundary waters during the first half of the twentieth century are R. Newell Searle, *Saving Quetico-Superior: A Land Set Apart* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1977), and Miron L. Heinselman, *The Boundary Waters Wilderness Ecosystem* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996). On Oberholtzer, see Joe Paddock, *Keeper of the Wild: The Life of Ernest Oberholtzer* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2001).

2. Benton MacKaye to Council, June 2, 1947, file 14, box 170, MacKaye Family Papers, Special Collections, Dartmouth College, Hanover, NH.

3. Kevin Proescholdt, Rip Rapson, and Miron L. Heinselman, *Troubled Waters: The Fight*

for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (St. Cloud, MN: North Star Press, 1995), xii; Chester S. Wilson, "Gun Lake Road Project, St. Louis County, in relation to the Roadless Wilderness Areas of the Superior National Forest," memorandum, July 21, 1954, in Senatorial Files, Correspondence (Legislative), box 102, Hubert H. Humphrey Papers, MNHS, St. Paul; Searle, *Saving Quetico-Superior*, 220; Heinselman, *Wilderness Ecosystem*, 276. For a fine discussion of the early Quetico-Superior program, see Searle, *Saving Quetico-Superior*, 60–142.

4. For an analysis of the debate over motors in more recent years, the standard works are Proescholdt et al., *Troubled Waters*, and James N. Gladden, *The Boundary Waters Canoe Area: Wilderness Values and Motorized Recreation* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1990).

5. Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955–1985* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 2–5, 13–39.

6. Bill Rom to author, Aug. 12, 2000, copy in author's possession. Rom operated a canoe concession in the boundary waters from 1946 to 1975.

7. Chester Wilson, "Last Chance to Save Quetico-Superior Wilderness," *Conservation Volunteer* 9 (May–June 1946): 5. Airplane statistics in Galen Pike to I. H. Polk, Exhibit C, Mar. 23, 1949, Superior National Forest Records, roll 13, MNHS. On the proliferation of resorts, see Sigurd Olson, "Wings Over the Wilderness," *American Forests* 54 (June 1948): 279.

8. Sigurd Olson to J. Hammond Brown, Dec. 10, 1947, copy in box 36, Sigurd F. Olson Papers, MNHS.

9. See the splendid biography by David Backes, *A Wilderness Within: The Life of Sigurd F. Olson* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Olson's writings include "We Need Wilderness," *National Parks Magazine* 20 (Jan.–Mar. 1946): 18–23, 28–29; "Why Wilderness?" (1938) in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 97–102. See also Mike Link, ed., *The Collected Works of Sigurd F. Olson, The Early Writings: 1921–1934* (Stillwater, MN: Voyageur Press, 1988).

10. Olson to Brown; "Voyageur's Return," *Nature Magazine* 41 (June–July 1948): 290. See also Grace Lee Nute, *The Voyageur's Highway: Minnesota's Border Lake Land* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1941).


11. Olson, "Why Wilderness?" 101.

12. Olson, "Wings Over the Wilderness," 254.

13. Heinselman, *Wilderness Ecosystem*, 276; Searle, *Saving Quetico-Superior*, 143–64.

14. Heinselman, *Wilderness Ecosystem*, 278; order quoted in Searle, *Saving Quetico-Superior*, 176. Founded in 1949 to coordinate the volunteer efforts of individuals and organizations working to preserve the wilderness character of Superior National Forest's roadless areas, Friends of the Wilderness claimed 3,800 members nationwide (350 in Ely alone) and 128 sup-

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Poster by the Boundary Waters Conservation Alliance, formed in 1977 to lobby for broader access to the area, including by motorized vehicles

porting organizations: Frank Robertson and William Magie, "Statement from Friends of the Wilderness in Support of the National Wilderness Preservation Act," Aug. 5, 1957, Senatorial Files, Correspondence (Bills and Resolutions), box 146, Humphrey papers; Robertson and Magie, "A Statement from Friends of the Wilderness in regard to the recent attack upon it by Lake Superior North Shore Association," Sept. 16, 1957, box 44, Olson papers.

15. Searle, *Saving Quetico-Superior*, 178–92, ably chronicles the legal battle over the air ban. See also, "US Restrictions on Forest Flights in Minnesota Area Upheld by Judge," *New York Times*, Oct. 4, 1952.

16. Martin Skala Jr. to Hubert Humphrey, Aug. 14, 1957, box 146, Humphrey papers; Gladden, *Boundary Waters Canoe Area*, 8–9.

17. Searle, *Saving Quetico-Superior*, 17–33;

David Backes, "Wilderness Visions: Arthur Carhart's 1922 Proposal for the Quetico-Superior Wilderness," *Forest & Conservation History* 35 (July 1991): 128–37; Michael Frome, *Battle for the Wilderness*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1997): 121–26. Wilderness areas comprised 100,000 acres or more; wild areas embraced 5,000–100,000 acres.

18. In 1957, for example, 53,000 acres were eliminated from the Three Sisters Primitive Area in Oregon's Willamette and Deschutes National Forests: "Decision of the Secretary of Agriculture Establishing the Three Sisters Wilderness Area," copy in box 45, Olson papers. A general account is in Craig W. Allin, *The Politics of Wilderness Preservation* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982), 102–8. See also James P. Gilligan, "Wilderness in a Democracy," *Living Wilderness* 20 (Spring–Summer 1955): 25–29.

19. Zahniser's speech appeared originally in the *Congressional Record*, June 1, 1955, and has been reprinted in *Where Wilderness Preservation Began: Adirondack Writings of Howard Zahniser*, ed. Edward Zahniser (Utica, NY: North Country Books, 1992): 59–66.

20. An early draft of the bill is found appended to remarks of Hubert Humphrey and Richard L. Neuberger, *Congressional Record*, Feb. 11, 1957, 85th Cong., 1st sess., p. 11 (quote).

21. Robertson and Magie, "Statement . . . in support of the National Wilderness Preservation Act," Aug. 5, 1957; L. H. Furcht to Hubert Humphrey, Aug. 14, 1957; Charles H. Stoddard, letter to the editor, *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, Aug. 11, 1957—all in box 146, Humphrey papers.

22. The executive committee of the AFA passed a resolution opposing the Humphrey bill in July 1956. The resolution and AFA chief forester Kenneth Pomeroy's July 16, 1956, letter to Humphrey are in box 48, American Forestry Association Records, Forest History Society, Durham, NC. See also Pomeroy's statement on the bill before the House Subcommittee on Public Lands, published in *American Forests* 63 (July 1957): 7; Lowell Besley to Hubert Humphrey, Apr. 5, 1956, Senatorial Files, Research Files, box 649, Humphrey papers.

23. See editorial, "Will Ely Become A 'Ghost Town?'" in *Ely Miner* and *Mesabi Daily News* (Virginia, MN), Aug. 22, 1957, clippings in box 44, Olson papers; Willard S. Domich to Hubert Humphrey, May 10, 1957, Senatorial Files, Correspondence (Bills and Resolutions), box 145, Humphrey papers.

24. Fred C. Childers, "Humphrey Bill Threat to Ely's Economic Life," *Ely Miner*, July 18, 1957, clip-

ping, and Stan Pechaver to Hubert Humphrey, Aug. 3, 1957—both box 146, Humphrey papers. Childers first expressed fears about a ban on motorboats in a letter to the editor of the *Duluth News-Tribune*, Nov. 14, 1954.

25. Sigurd Olson to Hubert Humphrey, Sept. 1, 1957, box 44, Olson papers.

26. Hubert Humphrey to Herb [Waters], memorandum, July 20, 1957, and Hubert Humphrey to Fred Childers, July 22, 1957—both box 146, Humphrey papers.

27. Sigurd Olson to Ted Bergquist, Sept. 17, 1957; Sigurd Olson to Hubert Humphrey, Aug. 14, 1957—both box 44, Olson papers. Einar Karlstrand, editor of the *Duluth News-Tribune*, informed Humphrey of this current of public opinion in a letter, Aug. 2, 1957, box 146, Humphrey papers.

28. Pechaver quoted in *Mesabi Daily News*, n.d., clipping, box 44, Olson papers. In a provocative essay, historian Richard White has examined the myriad ways that environmentalists tend to overlook the physical labor of those who rely on natural resource industries; this, in turn, adds to the rift between them and the people who typically reside near wilderness areas. See "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?: Work and Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), 171–85.

29. The initial version of the bill is found along with Humphrey's remarks in the *Congressional Record*, Feb. 11, 1957, 85th Cong., 1st sess., p. 17 (quote). "Wilderness Regulation Clarified," *Living Wilderness* 19 (Winter 1954–55): 33; Jay Price, untitled memorandum, May 19, 1950, Superior National Forest Records, roll 12, MNHS;

Martin Skala Jr. to Hubert Humphrey, Aug. 14, 1957; Elliott B. Hoffman to Hubert Humphrey, July 31, 1957—both box 146, Humphrey papers.

30. Florence Frederickson to Hubert Humphrey, July 30, Aug. 27, 1957, box 146, Humphrey papers.

31. Backes, *A Wilderness Within*, 272. Humphrey's skirmishes and compromise are clearly detailed in Proescholdt et al., *Troubled Waters*, 7–10. Humphrey quoted in *Minneapolis Tribune*, n.d., clipping, box 146, Humphrey papers.

32. Joseph O'Mahoney explained the amendments in *Congressional Record*, Feb. 18, 1960, 86th Cong., 2d sess., vol. 106, pt. 4, p. 2894–98.

33. Gordon Allott quoted in *Daily Sentinel* (Grand Junction, CO), Feb. 27, 1963, clipping in box 139, Wayne Aspinall Papers, Penrose Library, Special Collections and Archives, University of Denver.

34. Here and below, Wilderness Act of 1964, quoted in Heinselman, *Wilderness Ecosystem*, 280, or see Public Law 88577, 88th Cong., 4th sess. (Sept. 1964). James Gladden concluded that the "BWCA was designated a wilderness area, but at the same time legislators allowed uses that the Wilderness Act of 1964 declared were incompatible with such a designation": see *Boundary Waters Canoe Area*, 23.

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Members of a snowmobile caravan on a trip from Crane Lake, Minnesota, to Fort Frances, Canada, 1967



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