

DID WILDERNESS GROUPS MISS THE CUT?

A Natural Alliance, Finally

A new Outdoor Troika formed between three powerful coalitions should quickly become the 900-pound green gorilla in efforts to protect roadless lands and promote non-motorized recreation. Finally, anglers, climbers, hikers, hunters, mountain bikers, paddlers and skiers all on the same page! To paraphrase Obi-Wan Kenobi, I feel a great disturbance in the (Political) Force.

By Bill Schneider, 4-02-09

For years, I've been writing about natural alliances, or lack thereof. (Go to end of this column for links.)

First, I bemoaned the rift between two key constituencies who should work hand-in-hand, hikers and mountain bikers, who became adversaries instead, mainly over the issue of Wilderness. Hiking groups want it; mountain biking groups oppose it. Consequently, efforts to preserve roadless lands suffered mightily.

Then, I wrote about a natural alliance that still had a chance, hunters and wildernuts. Ironically, the Sierra Club deserves the credit for creating this concept--even coining the words "natural alliance." Back in the mid-1990s, the Sierra Club launched its Natural Alliance program to convince hunters they had a common ground with Sierra Clubbers, primarily the protection of wild land. A positive stroke by the Sierra Club, no doubt, but the bond never developed because some Sierra Club chapters, not the parent organization, have taken anti-hunting stands. The National Rifle Association rushed to the podium and shot down the Natural Alliance idea and told hunters that getting cozy with the Sierra Club was sleeping with the enemy.

That background seems important because yesterday, I received a press release. Actually, I receive enough PRs to wear out a delete key every three months, including five or six each day from Ken Salazar's office, plus two or three daily from his boss in the White House. But unlike 98 percent of the PRs, this one was a Red Alert for me, as it should have for anybody interested in keeping roadless lands roadless.

Here's the first paragraph: "A consortium of prominent outdoor-oriented groups has united in support of responsible management of inventoried roadless areas with a goal of sustaining the high-quality sporting and recreational opportunities provided by America's backcountry. The Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, Outdoor Industry Association and Outdoor Alliance, together representing millions of public-lands users, have sent a letter to U.S. Department of Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack urging that a directive be issued requiring high-level review of proposed development of roadless areas until permanent rules for their management can be resolved."

The wording might be a yawner to some, but to me, it shouts "About Time!"

A triumvirate of these three powerful coalitions all pulling hard, side-by-side, in the same direction--like a troika--could quickly become the most influential lobby in protecting roadless lands and non-motorized recreation. Finally, anglers, climbers, hikers, hunters, mountain bikers, paddlers and skiers all on the same page! To paraphrase Obi-Wan Kenobi, I feel a great disturbance in the (Political) Force.



It might be easy to underestimate the significance. Most media didn't cover the creation, let alone earlier joint efforts by the same consortium in support of ongoing climate change legislation and the Omnibus Public Lands Bill signed by President Obama last Monday. In addition, I suspect many readers don't know much about these three collectives. Each is actually a combine of partners representing many thousands if not millions of like-minded people.

The Outdoor Industry Association (OIA) is a trade group for most outdoor manufacturers and a few retailers; hundreds of companies that make virtually anything you buy at an outdoor retailer.

The Outdoor Alliance (OA) is a relatively new union of six "human-powered" recreation groups that really needed to get together: Access Fund, American Canoe Association, American Hiking Society, American Whitewater, International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA), and Winter Wildlands Alliance.

The Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, only formed seven years ago, has rapidly put together a stunning consortium of major "hook and bullet" groups such as Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (BASS), Ducks Unlimited, Izaak Walton League, Mule Deer Foundation, North American Grouse Partnership, Pheasants Forever, Trout Unlimited, Quail Unlimited, Whitetails Unlimited, plus professional groups like the American Fisheries Society and Wildlife Management Institute, plus land trusts like The Nature Conservancy and Trust for Public Land, plus the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, which represents most state and federal land-managing and wildlife agencies, plus the Union Sportsman's Alliance, which represents twenty trade unions, plus many hunting and fishing equipment manufacturers such as Benelli, Beretta, Buck Knives, Chevrolet, Orvis, Patagonia, Remington, Scott Fly Rods, and Triton Boats.

Bet you've never seen those companies and nonprofits (and I listed less than half of them) on the same list going the same direction on the same issue. If I were a lobbyist for the motorized recreation, mining or other single-use industries that fight every attempt to protect roadless lands, I'd add up the numbers and start thinking career change or retirement.

Now, back to the subject of the press release--urging Vilsack to put a hold on any development (translate, new roads) that might compromise roadless lands. ([Click here to read the letter.](#))

I called all three members of the new troika to drill down a little deeper. What they want is no more roads for two or three years. In the meantime, they will, hopefully, develop and go to Congress with a detailed strategy for the future of those 58.5 million acres of national forest. We have 193 million acres in our national forests, roughly two-thirds already devoted to natural resource extraction and crisscrossed with around 375,000 miles of roads, but we have been running in place for twenty years trying to decide what to do with the remaining one-third.

Let's be clear. This consortium immediately becomes the 900-pound green gorilla with enough political muscle to finally make something happen. When talking to the groups, I detected some hesitancy on whether they would collectively come up with a plan for those 58.5 million acres, but to me, they must take the lead. They can't just say: Protect them until somebody else decides what to do.

But developing a plan will cause some internal strife, to say the least, hopefully not too much to rip

apart this desperately needed coalition. Witness the incredibly skillful wording of the press release and letter, obviously intended to avoid stepping on the toes of that proverbial Elephant in the Room--Wilderness.

Assuming Congress finally gets in the mood to actually do something to protect roadless lands, our elected representatives have three general options:

1. Codifying the Roadless Rule and leaving us with more or less what we have today, one-third of our national forests open to all forms of muscle-powered recreation and two-thirds devoted to motorized wreckreation. (Interesting, don't you agree, that two-thirds is not enough for motorheads.)
2. Designating many roadless lands as Wilderness, which thanks to the Forest Service's questionable interpretation of the Wilderness Act of 1964 would ban mountain biking.
3. Opt for an alternative designation (yet to be named) allowing bicycle use, climbing anchors, and some other current prohibitions, but otherwise providing the same protection Wilderness does. I've started calling this the "Wilderness Lite" option.

For many roadless areas, the Wilderness Society, Sierra Club and many groups won't want anything less than Wilderness. But will the Outdoor Troika support Wilderness? Probably not. The internal debate for the future will certainly test the will of partners of today, especially in OA where IMBA casts a long shadow and has been fighting Wilderness proposals for decades, but also in OIA, which represents some bicycle manufacturers and retailers selling bicycles.

It seems likely to me that avoiding an implosion within the triumvirate will be so important that in line with the current craze for collaboration, it could lead to a national Wilderness Lite proposal. If this happens, and I hope it does, it should have enough political wind behind it to blow over objections from not only the usual suspects who oppose anything without roads, but also opposition from wilderness groups. To me, this seems like nothing less than a Perfect Storm for roadless lands.

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[A Natural Alliance Foiled](#)

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Comment By Rick, 4-02-09

Kudos on this excellent article!

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