

# WILD EARTH

## *Seeking Shelter*

The National Wildlife Refuge System

The Journal of the  
Wildlands Project

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**WILDLANDS PROJECT**



reconnect restore rewild

**WE ARE AMBITIOUS.** We live for the day when grizzlies in Chihuahua have an unbroken connection to grizzlies in Alaska; when wolf populations are restored from Mexico to the Yukon to Maine; when vast forests and flowing prairies again thrive and support their full range of native plants and animals; when humans dwell on the land with respect, humility, and affection.

Toward this end, the Wildlands Project is working to restore and protect the natural heritage of North America. Through advocacy, education, scientific consultation, and cooperation with many partners, we are designing and helping create systems of interconnected wilderness areas that can sustain the diversity of life.

*Wild Earth*—the quarterly publication of the Wildlands Project—inspires effective action for wild Nature by communicating the latest thinking in conservation science, philosophy, policy, and activism, and serves as a forum for diverse views within the conservation movement.

## **WILD EARTH**

**Editor** Tom Butler

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**Science Editor** Reed Noss

**Poetry Editors** Gary Lawless, Sheila McGrory-Klyza

**Publisher Emeritus** Dave Foreman

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Wildlands Project  
P.O. Box 455  
Richmond, VT 05477  
802-434-4077  
802-434-5980 (fax)  
info@wildlandsproject.org  
www.wildlandsproject.org

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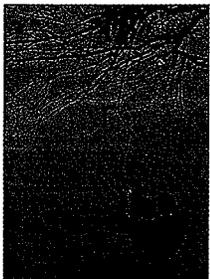
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"Solitude," acrylic by Steve Oliver, ©2003



## The Rewilding Institute

I SET MY TOILET PAPER aflame and stand. A movement over my shoulder catches my eye. I turn my head. A black wolf walks past me less than 100 feet away. It glances at me and continues unhurried on its chosen path across the tundra. A minute or so later, it fades away over a rise.

I am standing with my pants around my ankles in the middle of tens of millions of acres of unbroken Arctic tundra between Hudson's Bay and the Great Slave Lake. My mind drifts back to Aldo Leopold in 1936. After a bow-hunting trip to Mexico's Sierra Madre, he understood that, for the first time in his life, he had seen a healthy landscape. So it is with me this August of 2003. The Thelon Game Sanctuary and a vast sweeping swath around it may not be pristine (nothing is in the twenty-first century), but it is as wild as land comes today—untrammelled, self-willed, self-regulating.

Although I've been in many wilderness areas over the last 40-some years, the Thelon has set a new stan-

dard of land health for me, or, as Leopold would have said, a new "base datum of normality." With all native species present in ecologically effective population densities and free to wander over hundreds of miles of unfettered land—for whim or ancient urges—the Thelon is normal. It's what land should be like. It's what land was like before we began to stomp our will over it.

Canoeing the Thelon River for 17 days gave me an unmatched chance to mull over my past years and think about the next chapter in my conservation life. For the 33 years I've been in conservation, my strategy has been fixed to a pole star of finding and then pushing new approaches to protect wildlands and wildlife. I first helped to found American Rivers to focus more attention on the "forgotten" system of National Wild and Scenic Rivers. In The Wilderness Society I worked hard to get conservationists to prioritize Forest Service and BLM roadless areas. With Earth First!, I aimed to expand the terms of the land

management debate and to create new issues. In all of these efforts, I worked with wonderful colleagues.

After leaving Earth First!, in December of 1990 John Davis and I sat down to plan a new conservation magazine—*Wild Earth*. One of our major goals was to blend traditional wilderness and wildlife conservation with the science of conservation biology. The first issue of *Wild Earth* in the spring of 1991 showcased that goal. As the first issue was being published, the eminent scientist Michael Soulé wrote me to suggest a small meeting of conservation activists and biologists to talk about an ecological vision for North America. That meeting was hosted by Doug Tompkins in the fall of 1991 and created what was to become the Wildlands Project. From their respective beginnings I have served as the executive editor and later publisher of *Wild Earth* and chairman of the Wildlands Project. I am proud of how *Wild Earth* and the Wildlands Project have helped to create a twenty-

first century conservation movement that emphasizes ecological values.

Now it is time for me to move on—to continue paddling toward that pole star of effective Nature conservation, but to do so in a new canoe. This summer, just before my Thelon trip, I set up (with the support of the Wildlands Project Board of Directors) The Rewilding Institute—an independent nonprofit “think tank” dedicated to developing and promoting ideas and strategies that advance continental-scale conservation in North America. I have left the Wildlands Project to become executive director and a fellow of The Rewilding Institute, although I will continue to write for *Wild Earth*.

The Rewilding Institute’s overarching goal is to combat the extinction crisis. But for me personally, it is a welcome shift that will allow me to step back from the very detailed kind of work that goes into drafting regional wildlands network designs so that I can focus more on the big picture, as Doug Tompkins has always encouraged me. In The Rewilding Institute, I will have time to work with conservation ideas and wrap them into new public presentations on continental-scale conservation. As a “think tank,” albeit an activist one, The Rewilding Institute will work with the whole conservation community. We’ll continue exploring the fundamental question Aldo Leopold raised a half century ago: What are the characteristics of healthy land, normal land?

Here, the Thelon country teaches. First, native species thrive in more or less their natural density. Highly inter-

active species, such as wolves, are here in ecologically effective populations. They play their role in shaping and regulating other species and the ecosystem. Second, an area the size of, say, New Mexico and Arizona, is unfragmented by the works of humans. Whether you are a muskox, Arctic tern, lake trout, or blackfly, the landscape is permeable for your movement for hundreds of miles. Ecologically effective populations of highly interactive species and landscape permeability are the foundation for continental-scale conservation—for rewilding.\*

But even the Thelon is not big enough. The Thelon country and conservation experience, along with current scientific research and theory, tell us:

*To do serious conservation in North America, we must do conservation on the scale of North America.*

This is the message of The Rewilding Institute. In order to be quick and nimble to spread that message, The Rewilding Institute has an organizational philosophy to stay small, lean, and focused, with minimum overhead, staff, and bureaucracy. Much of its work will be done through Rewilding Institute fellows of two kinds: Science Fellows and Conservation Fellows. Science Fellows, including Michael Soulé and Brian Miller, will develop and advocate the ideas and strategies of continental-scale conservation, while Conservation Fellows will help to get these ideas and strategies embraced by the larger conservation community. We have a clear strategy of how to embed a hopeful vision of continental-scale conservation throughout the broader conser-

vation community. (In 2004, Island Press will publish my book, *Rewilding North America*, which will cover the ideas and strategies of continental-scale conservation in detail.)

I look forward to working with friends and colleagues across North America on this exciting new project. In this dark political time in the United States, with a “shock and awe” war being waged against more than a century of bipartisan conservation achievement, we conservationists need a hopeful vision to buoy us through the attacks and to inspire people with hope for the future. And we need to be prepared with bold ideas and strategies when the political landscape changes for the better. I pledge to you that I will do my best to bring to more people that vision of continental conservation.

~ Dave Foreman

*Lookout Point, Thelon Game Sanctuary (I know, I know, I'm sitting in Albuquerque writing this, but part of me is still—and ever will be—standing with pants down, blackflies all around, enthralled by the wolf so at home, so in place—a wildeor in a wil-der-ness.)*

The Rewilding Institute will need your help. As do I. If you are interested in supporting The Rewilding Institute and being informed of ongoing projects, you can reach us at: The Rewilding Institute, P.O. Box 13768, Albuquerque, NM, 87192; 505-292-9764; eltigredave@comcast.net. Please provide a mailing address to receive a fact sheet that explains what we are going to do and how we are going to do it.

\* Michael Soulé and his fellow researchers lay out the concept of ecologically effective populations of highly interactive species in a recent issue of *Conservation Biology*. Soulé, Michael E., James A. Estes, Joel Berger, and Carlos Martinez del Rio, 2003, “Ecological Effectiveness: Conservation Goals for Interactive Species,” *Conservation Biology* 17(5) October: 1238–1250.

