



FROM THE QUETICO-SUPERIOR FOUNDATION • SPRING 2001

LET THE FIRES (CONTROLLED) BEGIN

Earlier this year, U.S. Forest Service released a Draft Environmental Impact Statement which calls for fires to be intentionally ignited over the next 7 years in the BWCA. The purpose of the controlled burns is to reduce the chance that a large fire might develop in the area heavily damaged by the wind storm of July 4, 1999.

Under the plan, the area of severe blowdown would be burned in a checkerboard style in patches ranging from 5 acres to over 2000 acres. Many areas scheduled for burning are next to natural barriers such as lakes, streams and swamps. Under the Forest Service's preferred plan about one-fifth of the blown down trees in BWCA will be ignited.

The Draft Statement details 5 proposed alternatives for prescribed burning in the BWCA blowdown area. The alternatives are: A) no action; B) prescribed burning of 78,000 acres, the most aggressive plan; C) prescribed burning of 45,000 acres in high risk areas outside the BWCA; D) prescribed burning of 62,000 acres; and E) prescribed burning of 69,000 acres in an effort to reflect "The historical fire regime." The total blowdown severely affected 477,000 acres in northeastern Minnesota and approximately 108,000 acres in Canada. The majority of area affected was in the BWCA (approximately 367,000 acres).

The Forest Service has submitted the plan for public review and provided four open houses to explain the options. The selected plan will be announced in late May and the earliest date any prescribed burning may occur will be in mid-September.

Wildfire

The Draft EIS report acknowledges that the purpose for initiating the controlled burns is to reduce the possibility of high intensity wildfires which are especially dangerous in the blowdown area. The document observes, "Wildfires that occur within the blowdown have the potential to more readily become plume dominated fires

that are driven by extreme fire behavior. Plume dominated fires create their own weather, potentially including smoke columns reaching 30 thousand to 50 thousand feet high; strong indrafts on the perimeter that can quickly change to downdrafts of up to 40 miles per hour; fire swirls along the fire perimeter; high rates of spread; and the development of spot fires up to 3 or more miles away."

Looking forward, the U.S. Forest Service plans to continue past management practices of fighting wildfires when they develop in Minnesota's canoe country.

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement points to the dangerous Saganaga Lake fire of 1995 which began in the BWCA in Romance Lake, "on August 10th and spread over 9 miles under the influence of winds gusting to 35 mph. Before the fire was controlled on August 22, it burned 12,600 acres in the U.S. and Canada, threatened over 40 structures at the end of the Gunflint Trail in Canada and cost over \$4 million with an estimated additional cost over \$1 million in lost business to local outfitters. Active mop-up of the fire continued until September 15 when it was declared out." Fighting the fire in planes and helicopters required over 400 firefighters, more than 2 million gallons of water and 110 thousand gallons of fire retardant. The Saganaga Lake fire may be a modest precursor to bigger events ahead.

Wildfire Suppression Actions

Looking forward, the U.S. Forest Service plans to continue past management practices of fighting wildfires when they develop in Minnesota's canoe country. Airplanes and helicopters will be used extensively to fight fire with water and retardants. Fire camps may be set up in the wilderness to provide firefighters close access to the fire. Tractors and heavy equipment might be used in the wilderness to construct control lines. Even so, to meet management goals, a limited number of lightning-ignited wildland fires will be allowed to burn within the BWCA depending upon criteria such as location, time of year, wind and forecasted fire weather. Because of increased risk, lightning-caused fires in the blowdown will be contained.

The Draft EIS predicts, "The expected size of fires in the blowdown will most likely be 10 to 15 times larger than fires prior to the blowdown. For large fires, this number might be high and a value of 5 to 10 times larger might be expected. Fires in the blowdown can be predicted to burn at a higher and more prolonged intensity. The size of fires under moderate and hot fire weather conditions will be 20 to 30 times greater in the blowdown than in pre-blowdown conditions (Leuschen et al. 2000)."

Implementing a Prescribed Burn

Control lines will have to be completed before prescribed burning begins. Control lines are cleared to provide a boundary limiting the extent of the controlled burn and to create access routes for ground-based personnel. Crosscut saws will be the primary saws used in preparing control lines. Chainsaws may be used on occasion and will likely be used in the wilderness at the time of prescribed fires.

The Forest Service has determined that "limited motorized and mechanized equip-

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ment would be used to protect the health and safety of fire personnel." Helicopters and floatplanes will be used to transport personnel or equipment and also to accomplish ignition of prescribed burns. The plan calls for the use of a helitorch, a fuel ignition device, which drops jellied gasoline onto the blowdown. Such ignition will allow the prescribed burn to become hot quickly and will not require ground personnel to be situated at the burn when first ignited. Helicopters and airplanes will be used to drop water, foam or fire retardant to suppress the rapid advance of a prescribed burn.

The Forest Service has done thorough research on how prescribed burning might affect air quality, soil, water and fish, wetlands, vegetation and wildlife. It feels that prescribed burning will be less likely to damage important wildlife sites than wildfire infernos because prescribed burns are done when fuels are relatively moist and they burn less intensely than wildfires.

The Forest Service has addressed, as well, the question of how wilderness values will be affected. Burning requires mechanized equipment. The opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation will be reduced during prescribed burning. The Forest Service acknowledges that the use of equipment in the construction of control lines and helicopter landing pads will be noticed by BWCA visitors. Certain BWCA entry points will be temporarily closed during prescribed burning operations and quotas will also be reduced for certain entry points when prescribed burning is planned. During the implementation visitors may well hear waterpumps, helicopters and chainsaws. Impact on solitude will be short-term in nature in all cases.

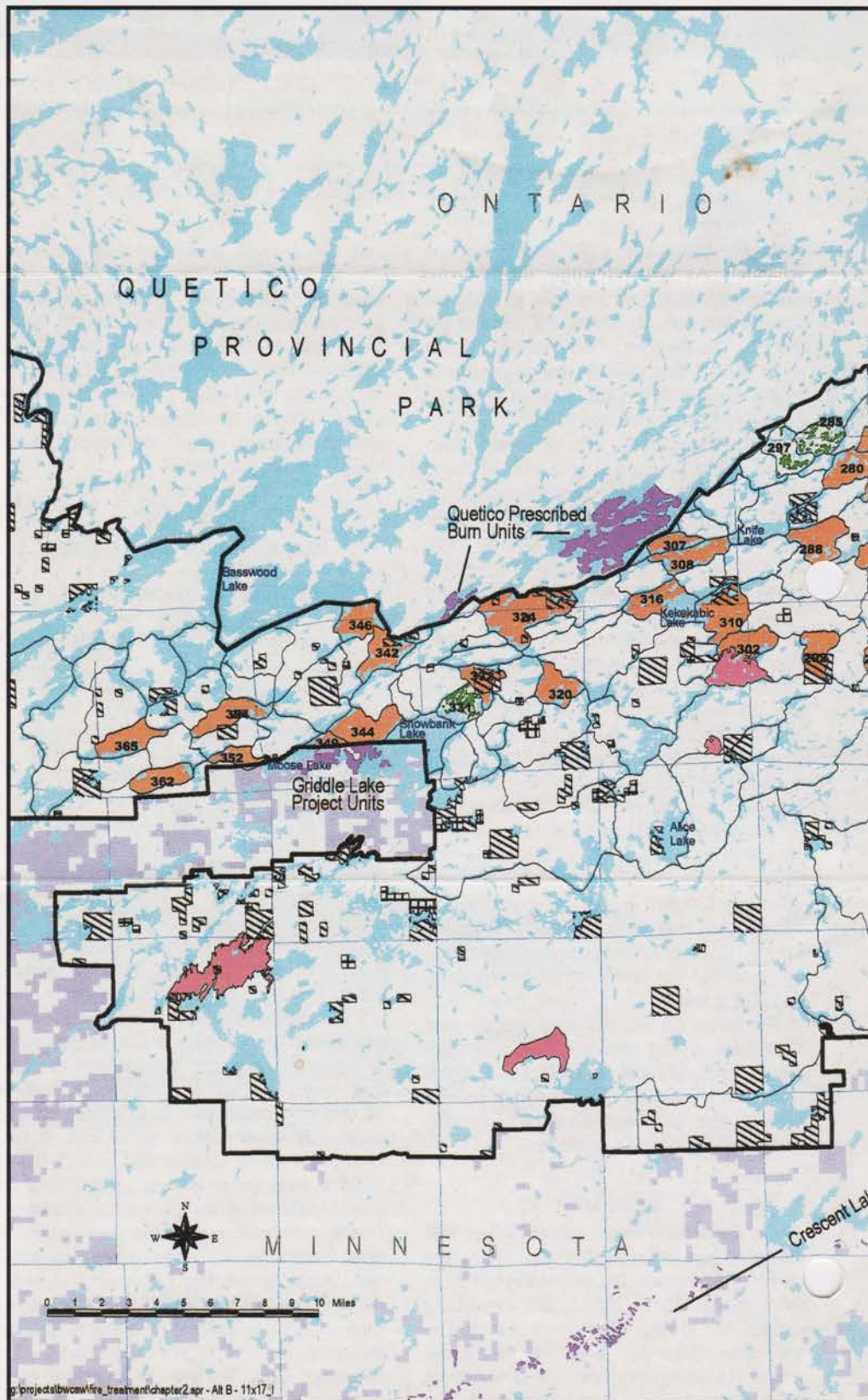
The Forest Service's Draft EIS concludes that prescribed burning will impact solitude throughout the visitor use season. "While most burns would actually take place in the spring or fall, preparation for the projects would be going on throughout the visitor use season. Most impacts to solitude would occur during July and August when most visitors are in the wilderness. Impacts during the burning operations may be more severe because of the use of helicopters, but fewer visitors would be around to notice them."

Public concern about prescribed fires going out of control may be unnecessary. The report states that nationally 98.7 percent of all prescribed fire actions have been successful and have been completed without fire escaping the intended boundary. The report concludes that adverse environmental results cannot be avoided. Valued vegetation including old cedar forests may be harmed. However, the impact of all alternatives will

be less detrimental than the massive sweep of a wildfire conflagration.

Alternative Plan (F) designed to reflect historical fire patterns is the preferred choice of some wilderness watchers. Alternative (F) will leave larger areas of untreated blowdown materials than the Alternative (B) plan. The Forest Service believes that

Alternative (F) will provide less protection from fire for many areas in the BWCA. Alternative (F) will result in a higher probability of wildfire endangering Quetico Provincial Park than Alternative (B) because blocks of blowdown acreage along the Canadian border will not be assigned for prescribed burning.



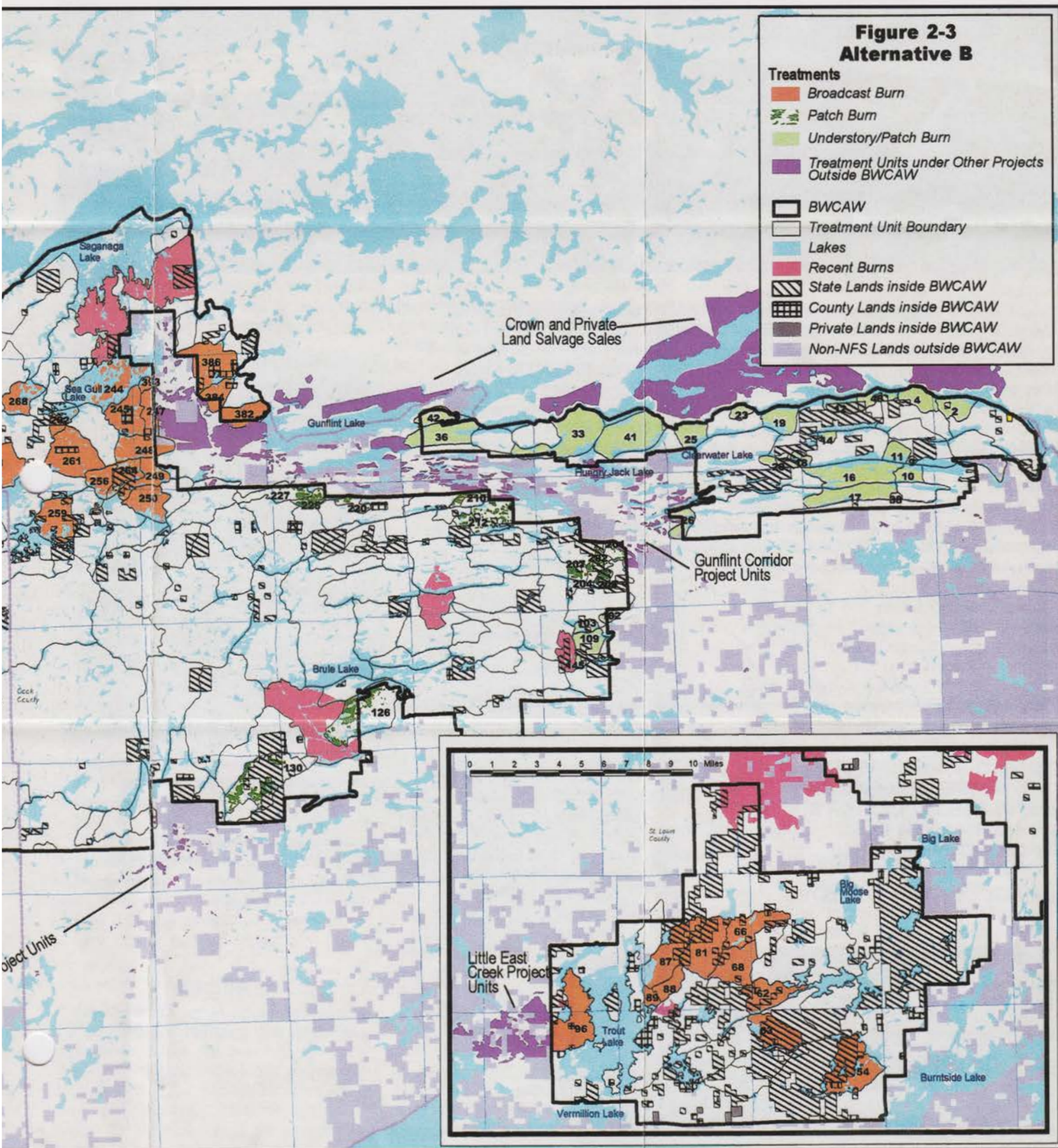
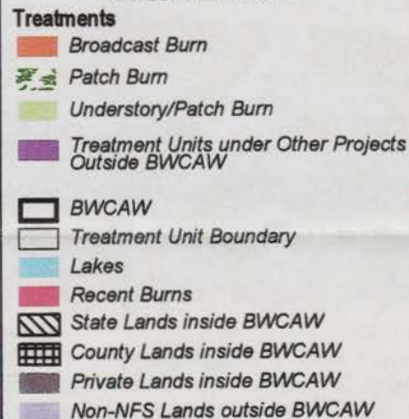
The Forest Service Preferred Action

The Forest Service has selected Alternative (B) as their preference for action. Alternative (B) is the choice because it provides the most aggressive reduction of wildfire danger in the largest area of the

blowdown and it provides the best reduction in risk to life and property from a wildlife leaving the wilderness and entering private property or Quetico Provincial Park. The Forest Service has conducted an exhaustive and impressive study. Quetico Superior Foundation supports the recommendation of the U.S. Forest Service. Because of the

danger now existing in the blowdown area, extraordinary measures must be taken. Quetico Superior Foundation urges the U.S. Forest Service to move forward rapidly with the project before the whole blowdown roars into a blaze sweeping the horizon from Snowbank to Kekekabec, Knife, Saganaga and Northern Light lakes.

**Figure 2-3
Alternative B**





Crane Lake from Three Mile Hiking Trail. Courtesy of Sally Martineau

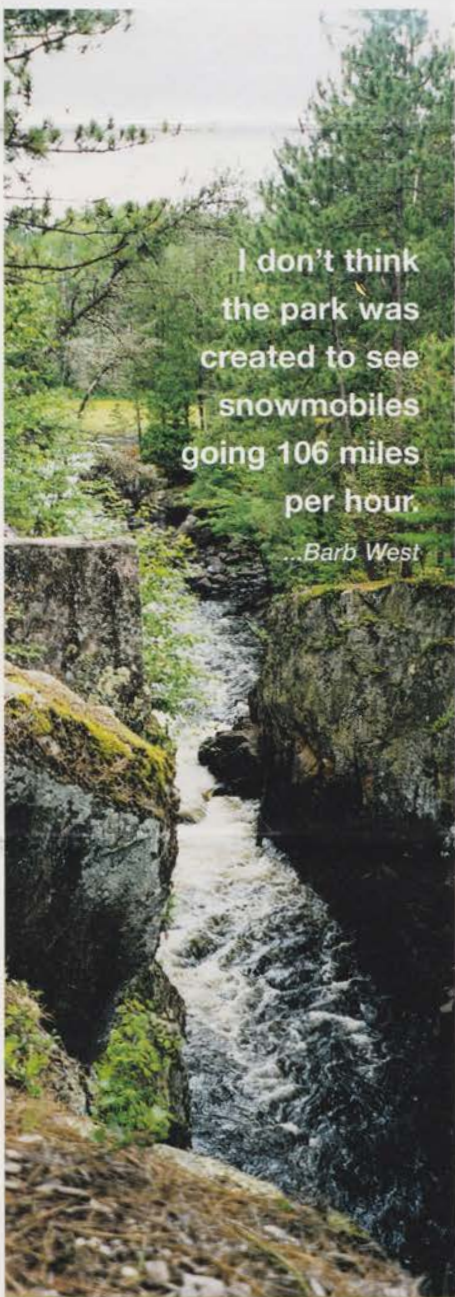
POLARIS POLARIZES IN VNP

By Jennifer R.S. Hunt, Executive Director

and John Holmquist, Secretary, Voyageurs Region National Park Association

I don't think
the park was
created to see
snowmobiles
going 106 miles
per hour.

...Barb West



Vermillion Gorge, Crane Lake
Southern Gateway to Voyageurs
National Park
Courtesy of Sally Martineau

On February 13, 2001, the National Park Service denied a Kabetogama snowmobile club a permit to hold its two-day "radar race" on Lake Kabetogama in Voyageurs National Park. The race had been held for the previous 12 years. Proceeds from it (reportedly \$1,800 to \$2,200 annually) were used for snowmobile trails, including trails in VNP. The VRNPA has opposed the race as being inconsistent with the purpose of a national park. It was slated to be discontinued in the latest VNP draft General Management Plan that had been discussed in public meetings over the past year.

To their credit the Kabetogama Snow-drifters Club, having had their permit denied, worked with the Ash River snowmobile club to hold a combined race on the lake outside the park. VRNPA wrote to many northern Minnesota newspapers applauding this decision as a positive reaction.

However, the permit denial antagonized factions within the International Falls community and on Saturday, March 17, the Koochiching county board acted on their threat to hold a race, without a permit, on Lake Kabetogama. The county officials conceded that this was illegal.

Coverage of events in the International Falls Daily Journal was instructive:

- An editorial from a local resident claimed promises were broken, based on pre-park (pre-1971) discourses.
- A Daily Journal editorial said Lake Kabetogama needs a special-use zone on the lake, in the park, for purpose of raising funds for charitable causes or for holding events to "drum up business for the area."
- In an article, Kabetogama resort owner Allan Burchel was quoted: "That Lake is our back yard. If we aren't allowed

to do anything there, it will kill us economically."

- State Rep. Tom Bakk: "When word gets out that the park is banning snowmobiling, things are only going to get worse."
- State Rep. Irv Anderson: "Her (Supt. Barb West's) personality does not fit the role of park superintendent. ... She is a vindictive woman filled with hatred for the people of Northern Minnesota. She is arbitrary and dictatorial in her decisions in operating the park."

We are reminded that it was Rep. Anderson who slipped through last-minute legislation in 1979 establishing the Citizens Council on Voyageurs National Park. The council, until its elimination in 1999, opposed park projects, promoted an extensive snowmobile trail network on the Kabetogama Peninsula wilderness area, and managed in the final hours to subvert a 17-month-long federal mediation process to reconcile park management differences among public, private, local and national interests.

The Koochiching County illegal action came on the heels of a meeting in St. Paul between NPS officials and representatives of the county board, where the attendees had agreed to work more cooperatively together. The meeting was requested by county board members who had afterwards described it as an opportunity to cooperate with the NPS.

Supt. West, in defense of her decision, said a snowmobile race is not consistent with the operation of a national park and that she has "... gone to bat for snowmobiles inside the park and firmly believes that snowmobiles are an appropriate way to tour the park in the winter. ... But for me to allow special events, they have to be compatible with the purpose of why the park was

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created. I don't think the park was created to see snowmobiles going 106 miles per hour."

On March 29, 2001, U.S. Rep. Betty McCollum (D-MN 5th Dist.) weighed in with an open letter to Rep. Irv Anderson that ran in the International Falls Daily Journal. In part, she said:

"I was extremely disappointed in the tone of your statement. Your decision to launch a mean-spirited, personal attack against Superintendent West... is certainly beneath the dignity of a member of the Minnesota House of Representatives, especially a former speaker of the House.

"Rep. Anderson, the policy differences you have with Superintendent West regarding Voyageurs National Park should be addressed through appropriate park service channels. As you well know, the challenge of managing a national treasure like Voyageurs requires maintaining a delicate

balance between this fragile ecosystem and the economic well-being of the surrounding community and its residents. Unfortunately, your comments do not contribute to an environment conducive to respectful and productive dialogue between the park service and the community..."

"As a member of the U.S. House of Representatives Resource Committee; the Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation and Public Lands; and as a former member of the Voyageurs National Park Citizens' Council, I believe Superintendent West is acting completely appropriate and in accordance with her obligation to uphold existing federal laws. Please know that I will continue to strongly support Barb West in her role as superintendent of Voyageurs National Park."

...We are indebted to the International Falls Daily Journal for portions of this article.



Ek Lake Trail — On Kabetogema Peninsula
Courtesy of Susan Hilber

THE MINNESOTA WILDERNESS TRAILS ALLIANCE

The Minnesota Wilderness Trails Alliance (MWTa) was formed in 1992 to restore and maintain hiking trails in the Superior National Forest, with priority given to several long-distance hiking trails within the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. Today, the MWTa is led by a coalition of three Minnesota-based outdoor groups — the Kekekabic Trail Club, Parks and Trails Council of Minnesota, and Minnesota Rovers Outing Club.

Hundreds of MWTa volunteers have helped clear wilderness trails in the Superior National Forest. You are invited to become part of this exciting effort by participating in our annual schedule of trail-clearing trips, which are open to any able-bodied adult. Trip brochures listing trail-clearing trips for the coming season are mailed in the winter.

About the Trails

BORDER ROUTE TRAIL (70 MILES). This trail follows the historic "Voyageurs Highway" chain of lakes atop high ridges with panoramic views.

KEKEKABIC TRAIL (40 MILES). A historic fire trail from the 1930s which meanders through the heart of the BWCA. Reopened in 1990 by the Kekekabic Trail Club.

POW WOW TRAIL (27 MILES). A remote loop trail in the Kawishiwi District of the BWCA. Abandoned in the late 80s and reopened in 1995 by the Kekekabic Trail Club, the trail visits remote lakes and old-growth pines.

SIOUX HUSTLER TRAIL (32 MILES). Reopened by the MWTa in 1994, this trail was named one of the American Hiking Society's "Trails for Tomorrow." A remote wilderness trail offering extensive granite outcrops, rarely visited lakes, and carpets of reindeer moss underfoot.

The MWTa also works on several shorter trails in the BWCA.

Who Should Participate

Almost anyone can help. Adults from all experience levels and ages have participated in our groups. The work is physical but there are many tasks for varying levels of fitness.

You will need to be responsible for your own physical well-being by properly preparing your own personal gear, but you will receive plenty of guidance and assistance in this area. All crew leaders are experienced.

What You Can Expect

You should be prepared to supply your own personal gear (clothing, sleeping bags, rain gear, etc.). Meals are provided.

Most trips will camp out in tents. Some may be in lodging. Group equipment such as tents, cooking equipment, etc. will come from within the group and may be supplemented by cooperating rental outlets.

Your group will canoe or hike into its assigned work area. You'll work hard but there's time for fun, too.

Clearing trails consists of sawing fallen trees, clearing brush, and other minor trail repairs. The work is physical, but the power of teamwork is amazing!

MWTa trips practice shared responsibility. Camp chores are shared equally among all participants.

After You've Chosen Your Trip

You will be assigned to a crew leader. Your leader will contact you with trip details, transportation arrangements (car pooling), group gear needs (you supply your own personal gear), and to answer any questions you may have.

If you are a first-time participant, you will be required to attend a pre-trip training seminar. These seminars address safety, use of tools, techniques and methods of trail-clearing, and basic wilderness skills. This also is a good time to ask any questions about your trip.

For More Information

For more information on the MWTa, its trail-clearing trips, or the MWTa member organizations, contact:

Parks & Trails Council of Minnesota
Kekekabic Trail Club
Minnesota Rovers Outing Club

John Leinen 651.433.4456
www.kek.org 800.818.4453
Pat Ryan 651.699.9800

Participating Organizations

Participation in the MWTa is open to any adult, but its activities are sponsored and coordinated jointly by the following organizations: Parks & Trails Council of Minnesota, Kekekabic Trail Club and Minnesota Rovers Outing Club.

Sponsorship

The volunteer efforts of the Minnesota Wilderness Trails Alliance are conducted in partnership with the USDA Forest Service through staff and management of the Superior National Forest. The MWTa is also grateful for the generous support of several Twin-Cities area outdoor stores. We thank these sponsors for their support of our efforts: EMS, Midwest Mountaineering and REI.



All Canoe country enthusiasts are grateful that, under a proclamation of President Theodore Roosevelt, Superior National Forest was established in 1909 and in 1926 Secretary of Agriculture William Jardine set aside 1,000 square miles of the land as wilderness. The area was designated the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. The border lakes country was thereby set aside in perpetuity for public enjoyment.

In contrast, day hikers in Big Sky, Montana attempting to hike the north trail into Beehive Basin above Lone Mountain have encountered big changes in the past 24 months. Unlike the public set aside we enjoy in Minnesota's canoe country, the north trail to Beehive has been blocked by a high-tech metal gate which reads, "No trespassing — violators will be prosecuted." A several-million-dollar home has been constructed on land where the trail once crossed.

Thanks to those who came before us, access to Lac La Croix, Basswood and Saganaga lakes will never be closed off with a metal gate and video lens from above which reads, "Smile, you are on camera."

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