

INTERVIEW WITH EDWARD ZAHNISER
BY LAURA BUCHHEIT and MARK MADISON
AUGUST 11, 2004, NCTC, SHEPHERDSTOWN, WV

MS. BUCHHEIT: Can you introduce yourself and tell us how you are working with wilderness?

MR. ZAHNISER: I got into working with wilderness by accident of birth. My father Howard Zahniser worked for the Wilderness Society in Washington, D.C. from a few months before my birth in 1945 until his death in 1964. I grew up among the people of the early Wilderness Society and the early wilderness movement. And just as any young kid growing up would, I merely thought of these people as my father's associates and people who showed up in Washington occasionally. We lived in the Washington, D.C. suburbs, in Maryland. But we spent many summers in the wilderness of the Adirondacks, and later in other wild areas throughout the country. At age 15 I was able to go to the Sheenjek country in Alaska—in what is now part of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge—with Olaus and Mardy Murie. From there we went down to what is now Denali National Park and Preserve with Adolph and Louise Murie. It was then Mount McKinley National Park, Adolph was in Denali working on his book on Alaska bears then, so we had a couple of weeks there in Mount McKinley National Park. That was probably the most influential summer of my life. From that trip, when I got back to the Washington area, I just went up to the Adirondacks with my mother and one of my siblings for the rest of the summer. It was a wild summer, but very influential in my future career choices and in my continuing interest in wilderness as something that needs to be preserved.

MS. BUCHHEIT: Is wilderness a part of your current work as this point, or is it more something that is an avocation outside of work?

MR. ZAHNISER: My present work doesn't involve wilderness work in a major sense, but my job description includes public speaking about conservation history, including

wilderness. So I do a certain amount of that. I am also involved with various authors who are writing about wilderness, in particular, from a historic standpoint in terms of the history of the Wilderness Act. I have a certain amount of background just by growing up around my father and his associates in the 1950s. I was the youngest child, so I was still at home until the year before he died. I did a lot of traipsing around Washington with him to North American Wildlife Conference meetings, and other conservation happenings. They were just interesting things to do at the time. I've been working closely with my father's biographer, environmental historian Mark Harvey. He has been engaged with a biography scheduled for publication in September 2005. I have worked with a number of other people on writing projects that deal with wilderness and related topics. For the last 15 years, particularly, I've had to educate myself to help these people out! It has been a good education, much of it from them.

MS. BUCHHEIT: It sounds like wilderness is a way of life for you. It seems to infiltrate all aspects of your life.

MR. ZAHNISER: Yes, I think wilderness values have an impact on my whole life. The experiences in the Sheenjek country in 1961 gave me a real sense of wildness that has been very influential.

MS. BUCHHEIT: How has wilderness inspired you? Are there some specific ways?

MR. ZAHNISER: Wilderness has inspired me in the sense that it's very instructive about what I feel is our role in the world. Bill McKibben puts it very well, writing that we are very, very small, but we can matter so much. That's one of the understandings that drives my involvement in continuing attempts in our culture to preserve wilderness and to try to see it preserved in perpetuity—which is the huge challenge. It's one thing to set aside areas. It's another thing to make sure that they remain wild. My father wrote in his essay, *The Need for Wilderness Areas*, that the defining character of wilderness is it's wildness. That's what must be maintained, wildness.

MS. BUCHHEIT: Do you have a sense of how a place can be preserved wild in perpetuity? How can that be done?

MR. ZAHNISER: To preserve something in perpetuity in our culture is obviously a great challenge. Politically, in our culture perpetuity means every two years because there is a new Congress every two years. The decision to preserve wilderness lies with the Congress. One hopes that the Congress is, as it is by design, responsive to the people. But to preserve something in perpetuity in a culture such as ours is definitely a challenge. The cultural ecologist E.N. Anderson has written that conservation is not about natural resources, it's about the social contract. So that's both the good part and the bad part as you think about preserving something in perpetuity in this culture. Wilderness really is at the mercy of the social contract. We will only preserve wilderness in perpetuity if we will to do so as a culture. In that sense, yes, it is difficult, but in the sense that we indeed in this nation have a Wilderness Act, which was a pretty difficult chore to accomplish, I think that there is hope that we can preserve wilderness in perpetuity.

MS. BUCHHEIT: How can individuals, how can people make that happen? What can people do today to ensure that wilderness and wilderness are preserved in perpetuity?

MR. ZAHNISER: I think people can do two things. On the state and national level they can be involved in advocating the preservation of wilderness. But as Leopold wrote, particularly in the second part of his career as a writer, we must begin to preserve wilderness where we live as well. He does not say that if we do that we don't need to preserve wilderness. Both are important. We do need these big wilderness areas for the purposes that he and many others have enumerated—of science and recreation and the evolutionary record of who we are and where we came from. But we must learn to keep wilderness alive where we live as well, because wilderness is the true contact with who we are. We are products of this world that we live in and wilderness is the picture of the world as it operates by its own will and not by the projection of human desire.

MS. BUCHHEIT: Does somebody have to be in wilderness in order to appreciate it? Does someone have to have that contact, that immersion in wilderness, in order to benefit from it and to appreciate it?

MR. ZAHNISER: I think to appreciate wilderness one need not be in wilderness. The greatest value of wilderness in our culture is the so-called 'knowledge that it is there' value. In the hearing records of the Wilderness Act, time after time people say that they have no expectation of going to this or any specific wilderness area, but it's very important to them just to know that it is there. I think people have a real sense of the value, to them and to the future, of all of us having access to a glimpse of what the historian Bill Brown has called, "the world as it was." Every child can benefit by having access to seeing firsthand the world as it was. I also think that the greatest value of wilderness lies in the generations yet unborn. This is echoed in Theodore Roosevelt's great statement that the greatest value of conservation "...lies in the womb of time." If we are truly democratic we will try to project that opportunity into the future, whose interests should numerically, we hope, greatly outweigh our own interests. The value of wilderness lies very much in the knowledge that it's there now and in the future option. It's a great responsibility of our culture to keep that option alive.

MS. BUCHHEIT: What are some of the challenges facing the preservation of wilderness today?

MR. ZAHNISER: The challenges that face wilderness preservation today are the challenges of increasing urbanization of the nation. Many, many children used to grow up with access to wild lands of one sort or another. I was in the Adirondack Mountains last week and talking with a resident there. Someone brought up the topic of hunting. He said, "Well hunting is becoming increasingly passé, there's just not a lot of people doing it." Some people would feel that hunting is inimical to some of the values that we're talking about here, but historically hunters and anglers were great proponents of first, saving wild game, and second, saving the land that people understood you must save if you were to have these animals. In a recent outdoor magazine a high school teacher

wrote that when he first started teaching, if he asked about hunting and angling, maybe forty percent of the students in his class would say that they did that. Now, it is unusual for anyone in his class to say, 'Yes, I do hunting or fishing.' There's that lack of exposure to the natural world. I was with the Leopold Education Project a couple of years ago in Wisconsin. That organization deals mainly with teachers and nature center staff, training them in teaching Leopold's land ethic. Those educators, one hundred percent, say that if you are going to transfer these values to another generation you have to get the kids outdoors. You have to have these pockets, these places where the natural world is still functioning. It doesn't necessarily have to be wilderness. That's one of the great challenges: today's lack of exposure, among many young people, to the natural world.

Another challenge is the extreme consumeristic streak in our society. It teaches at every turn, with tremendous reinforcement in the imagery of commercial discourse, that we find happiness by having things. I think history proves that this is not the case. Not that we don't enjoy televisions and the communication that are possible now. We enjoy and benefit from these things, but if we order our lives around them, then we can quickly lose touch with the natural world. On the other hand, you can see the appeal of the natural world because some of those things most inimicable to wilderness—like offroad vehicles, ATVs and snowmobiles, are marketed in print ads and on television with images of isolation in nature, in complete solitude in some of the most glorious wild landscapes in North America. Even Madison Avenue recognizes the psychic value of these natural values and our wild places because they have found that they sell such vehicles. SUVs are marketed with the same strategy, even though most people drive them in urban traffic, in gridlock on metro beltways. That consumeristic streak in our society is a real problem for the long-term preservation of wildness and wilderness.

MS. BUCHHEIT: If a young person, a student, if anybody wanted to work with wilderness, designated or with federal wilderness as opposed to the images or the concept of wilderness as advertised on television, how would you recommend that they get involved? Where would they start?

MR. ZAHNISER: Go to www.wilderness.net on the web and start surfing and connecting to the links. See what intrigues you and then go for it. There are many conservation groups active nationally, internationally and on state and regional levels. All are worthy of support and most welcome volunteers. The way to learn is to get involved and find out what needs to be done. That's the way you teach yourself that what you don't yet know shouldn't keep you from getting started doing what you want to do. Just get involved, and you will grow towards what you probably want to do most.

MS. BUCHHEIT: One thing will lead to another and it will all open doors.

MR. ZAHNISER: Yes. The wilderness advocacy movement has always been a self-selecting movement. You don't find recruiters for wilderness at high school and university job fairs. The people who have ended up working for wilderness identified themselves by getting involved. Many started by going to a public hearing and getting so involved that somebody finally put them to work because they didn't want them to wander off. It's a self-selecting phenomenon. You don't get recruited for wilderness at Harvard or Yale or Greenville College, where I went to school. There are no recruiters out there saying that you can earn big bucks in wilderness. The best thing to do is to find out what's happening as close to you as possible and get involved in that. If you happen to live in the Washington, D. C. area you are in great shape because you not only have wilderness areas nearby in Pennsylvania, Virginia, and West Virginia, but you have access to Congress where you can go and make your views as a citizen known.

MS. BUCHHEIT: From your perspective, what do people need to know about wilderness? What should they know about wilderness?

MR. ZAHNISER: I think the public needs to know that there is a National Wilderness Preservation System that is a substantial body of the publicly owned estate of federal public lands that has been set aside by the U. S. Congress for preservation as wilderness. That needs to be better known than it is. There are also some states that have designated

wilderness. New York State has its sixteen or seventeen designated wilderness areas on its Forest Preserve lands in the Adirondack and Catskill state parks. People need to know about these federal and state wilderness areas because there are always public policy decisions being made about them. And if people do not make their views known, the decisions will be made without benefit of their views. In a democracy it's one's own views that one must make known. People need to know that there is a National Wilderness Preservation System, that there are designated wilderness areas in the United States and that these lands are subject to the political process. In order to preserve wilderness, people will need to learn more about the values of wilderness and wildness and why people over several generations have struggled to make sure that some of these lands are preserved and not just put into the industrial hopper, not just turned into a variety of commodities. It's the genius of our system to commodify anything. For example, one of the challenges of preserving wilderness is recreation. Because recreation can obviously be greatly commodified, and as such it could gobble up wilderness if we are not careful. People need to keep this in mind. My father said, in introducing his concept of a wilderness bill back in 1955, that the wilderness legislation would not establish any particular use of wilderness. The only purpose of the Wilderness Act was to establish areas of wilderness that would be maintained in perpetuity both as to their natural conditions and as to what is termed their wilderness character. There's a lot of educational work to be done about wilderness, now and in the future, particularly as we become increasingly urbanized—and exurbanized even.

MS. BUCHHEIT: What does it mean then for an area to be designated as wilderness?

MR. ZAHNISER: You're asking what is the political process?

MS. BUCHHEIT: What does it mean to the area? How does it differentiate from other public lands, to have an area that has that extra designation under the Wilderness Act?

MR. ZAHNISER: The Wilderness Act was very consciously meant to be an overlay to the other systems of public lands. That's why my father was very insistent, right up

through the latest hearings on the Wilderness Act from 1961 to 1963 and into 1964, that the act be named the “National Wilderness Preservation *System* Act.” Repeatedly some members of Congress tried to get the title of the Act changed from the National Wilderness Preservation System Act to something like the National Wilderness Act. But my father was very insistent that The National Wilderness System Preservation Act was to be a *system* just as the National Park system, the National Forest system, and the National Wildlife Refuge system are. At that time the Bureau of Land Management lands were not involved, but they became subject to the Wilderness System in 1976 with subsequent public lands management legislation. My father was very insistent that the Wilderness System was to be a system and a national system and that it is an overlay of protection on the other systems. The Wilderness Act did not create any separate land managing agency. The wilderness that is designated in a national forest is managed by that national forest; in a national park, by that park, in a national wildlife refuge, by that wildlife refuge. On BLM lands it would be managed by that unit, or that agency. The importance of the Wilderness Act is this overlay of protection that says, “We are setting these lands aside.” In my father’s language, “We would preserve some lands and so manage them as to leave them unmanaged.” These lands would be self-willed. These lands will be self-willed and function by their own dynamics, not by being trammled by humans or by having our desires projected onto them not even by having our always-limited knowledge projected on them.

MS. BUCHHEIT: What does that mean? How does designation as wilderness differentiate it from public lands? How then, does an agency or a bureau manage a place to be ‘unmanaged’ particularly today, when the boundaries don’t keep all of the threats and impacts out? So how does one manage an area then?

MR. ZAHNISER: Obviously managing something as wilderness in today’s world is a big challenge for many reasons. Not the least of these challenges is that posed by the concept of island biogeography. In studying islands, people found that speciation, the differentiation of species, and extinction rates, and other phenomena are different on islands than on mainlands. And today, any piece of wild land in most parts of North America and especially outside Alaska is circumscribed by managed lands or lands

subject to agriculture, industry, second home development, residential development, and so forth. Natural areas today have a tendency to become circumscribed by incompatible uses and to become island-like. That poses a great challenge. Another great challenge in managing wilderness is that our dominant concept of management is manipulation.

Freeman Tillman developed the concept of interpreting heritage for the National Park Service. Tilden once pointed out that we preserve things mostly through inaction. Yet what organization do you find that rewards people even for innovative inaction?

Managing wilderness is an oxymoron—to manage something that is self-willed is an oxymoron. But if we are to care for wilderness in the future, somewhere, some university is going to have to get the idea that within their environmental, natural science, or natural resource programs, they are going to have to come up with a way to train what we would now call “managers” to care for wilderness through something like innovative inaction. They’ll have to find a way for organizations to reward innovative inaction, because you do not create career paths for management without rewards. We must discover how to reward people who can be with a large piece of land and learn from it and learn not to project their imperfect knowledge on it. They need to learn from it—to see what it wants to do. But in the meantime, try to protect it from these outside influences that do tend to turn any natural area into an island.

MS. BUCHHEIT: I like that “innovative inaction”. That’s a good term.

MR. ZAHNISER: Friedrich Nietzsche touches on it. He got interested in eastern thought and Taoism with its sense of wu-wei, which is inaction.

MS. BUCHHEIT: Looking back at the legacy that was given to us, and to future generations, you talked about the Adirondacks and the state wilderness areas, how did the Adirondacks contribute to the wilderness legacy that we have today?

MR. ZAHNISER: The Adirondacks are an interesting historical study in the American urge to preserve some of this federal public estate as wild lands, to protect it from progress, the myth of progress. The Adirondack lands are not federal; they are state

lands. But the Adirondack Forever Wild, Forest Preserve lands are really a legacy of the national Forest Reserves movement. The forest reserves were the attempt of John Muir and Charles Underwood Johnson and others to protect some of the vast forested public domain lands in the West. They wanted to protect them in perpetuity as they were. The forest reserves were created in 1891. There was no logging, no grazing, no mining, and they were closed to homestead entry. That was a big step then. The forest reserves did not last long. Gifford Pinchot soon convinced Congress to convert them into national forests, which were open to mining and grazing and logging but not to homestead entry. So then the American people, working through their Congressional delegations tried again and they created a national park system. To build a constituency the early leaders of the national park system developed a very close relationship with the good roads movement and with the See America First movement. The growth of the automobile movement and automobile based touristic enterprises became a big part of the national parks movement. The Wilderness Act is really another attempt by the American people working through their members of Congress to achieve this more enduring protection of the wildness of these places. You can see a progression of national forest reserves, national forests, and national parks, and then wilderness. What is interesting is that in the 1890s of course, New York was the most politically potent state in the United States, measured by Congressional votes. Many of those people who were actors in the national Forest Reserve movement were New Yorkers. They simply accomplished in their own backyard, with the state lands of New York—the state lands there are called the Forest Preserve, not a very different term from Forest Reserve—what the nation was not able to make stick with the Forest Reserve movement. That's what makes the Adirondacks a very important historical link in our picture of American concern for wild lands throughout the history of the public domain, basically from the Civil War forward.

MS. BUCHHEIT: That brings up a question that is interesting to me. I am not sure if I am going to be able to articulate, but I'll give it a try. In talking about the Adirondacks and how the citizens of New York were able to accomplish in their own backyard, what the nation as a whole had difficulty sustaining on federal public lands in terms of preserving the wildness of an area; yet today, it seems currently that many people resist

the idea of preserving wild lands and wilderness areas; areas to be self-willed, in their own backyard. Whereas for people across the country it seems the tendency in urban areas do see the value of having that self-willed or wild land. How could that have changed? Maybe it didn't change, but how is reflected today in the public opinion and public perceptions of wilderness areas and wild lands? How can it be that people don't want that in their backyards now? Did that make sense?

MR. ZAHNISER: It's very interesting that the critique of the wilderness movement often goes like this: the westerners say, "You easterners want to have all of this wilderness, but it's at our expense." But again, the Adirondacks and Catskills are a good instructive example of people in an eastern state deciding that they need these areas. The eastern national forests are a little different, but if you step back in time you can see that there are values that come into play that show that people will enact this kind of preservation of wilderness close to where they live. Both the Adirondacks and Catskills and the eastern national forests, ironically, can be seen as aids to navigation. The Adirondacks were set aside greatly to protect the watershed that fed the Erie Canal. The people who were involved in that movement happened to own more stock in the canal than they did in the railroads that were developing during that period. The eastern national forests were largely set aside, initially, to protect the Intra-Coastal Waterway. In a sense these protected natural areas were aids to navigation whose values over time became perceived much differently. There's a book about the eastern national forest titled, *The Lands Nobody Wanted*. But of course now everybody wants them. Many people do want them set aside. It's a tremendous resource. Eastern mega metropolitan areas empty out on weekends to these relatively natural areas and to these wild areas. The argument that people don't want to preserve these lands near them is a continuing argument, but I don't think it's universally true by any means. I recently attended a conference at which people were talking about the fact that developers are now building golf course home developments without the golf courses. Why? Because they found that only about six percent of people play golf and only a few percent of people who live in golf course communities use the course, so why go to the expense of building it if it's obvious that the people just want these nice open fairways? So they build golf course communities

that have no golf course, but they have these things that look a lot like fairways! People have access to this, and they pay a premium for it. The opportunity cost of these things is very high, but people are willing to pay for the access to that sense of being part of a functioning natural world. And I almost forgot to talk about green infrastructure. I've got to say something about that.

MS. BUCHHEIT: We could go back to that.

MR. ZAHNISER: Mark has kids; he has to get home by six!

MS. BUCHHEIT: Also looking back and into history at the national desire, need and support for wild lands, that seems to be evident in the fact that the House of Representatives passed the wilderness bill with only one dissenting vote. How could that be? How could any bill for that matter, but how could the wilderness bill be passed with only one dissenting vote?

MR. ZAHNISER: People are often amazed that the Wilderness Act passed in the House of Representatives with only one dissenting vote. But I think the key to that was that the bill had been worked over, word by word, for eight years. It had been through nineteen public hearings. It had been through some sixty-six drafts; that is various levels of playing with the language. It had been staffed by the committees very heavily, and one Congressional committee member who testified on the passage of the bill— toward the very end of the Wilderness Act history from 1956 to 1964—said that he believed this was the best staffed piece of legislation that had ever gone through the halls of Congress. So the reason it passed by such an overwhelming margin is that it had been turned into something that everybody, except perhaps that one member from Texas, felt that they could vote for in the interest of their constituents. It really was a very heavily brokered piece of legislation. From my father's perspective, he had said many years before the bill passed that the importance of the wilderness bill, and what he hoped would one day become the Wilderness Act, was not so much the step that had been taken, but the fact that so many people would take that step together.

MS. BUCHHEIT: Being a part of that history, personally and you growing up in that time period with your father so involved with shepherding this wilderness bill to passing as a law; what was it that compelled your father to devote so much time, energy, passion and work and effort [into seeing that the legislation was passed]? What is your sense of his motivation?

MR. ZAHNISER: My father's devotion to the wilderness bill effort, which consumed the last nine or ten years of his life, indeed seems quite remarkable. I'm not sure I could explain it. He was very much driven by a religious sense of life. He had inherited from his parents the feeling that we should leave the world a better place than we found it and that this is not merely a noble sentiment but a moral obligation. That was in his background. He was also, from a very early age, a great lover of birds. The more you love birds and the more you learn about birds, the more you realize their ties to the land. And you can see in the history of bird conservation concern for the birds and then concern for this piece of habitat. Then comes the concern for flyways because they've got to get from this habitat to that. Pretty soon, you understand that birds need to live in this world and you have to make accommodations for this to happen. I think my father grew from this appreciation of birds, to this appreciation for wilderness by a similar path. I think he was also very attracted to the personalities that he was around when he was working for the Bureau of Biological Survey and then U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Washington, D. C. from 1930 to 1945, when he went to work for the Wilderness Society. His mentors there were people like Edward Preble for whom I am named. Preble was a self-taught naturalist and just a wonderful guy. He took my father under his wing and instilled in him this sense of the values of nature. Olaus Murie was an early contact of my father's at the Bureau. As early as 1937 they did a radio program together. Olaus Murie was someone who was able to call down owls. There is an incident in the movie about his wife Mardy Murie, the movie *Arctic Dance*, that shows this. Olaus was a great influence on my father. My father also knew Robert Marshall through my father's charter membership in the Wilderness Society. There were people involved like Aldo Leopold, Ernest Oberholtzer, and, later, Sigurd Olson. These were wonderful people, all

of whom I knew except Marshall and Leopold. I never knew them. These people certainly were role models. That they felt so deeply and were so committed themselves to these values was enormously attractive to my father. With his religious view of life and background, when this opportunity to become a full-time part of this movement presented itself in a viable way, I believe he took it on as a life mission.

MS. BUCHHEIT: He has become a role model in his own right. [To Mark Madison who is in the room] Are there any other questions in terms of history?

DR. MADISON: Yes, I have a couple of questions. Let's do history before we get to knowledge. I was just curious about when you spent time in the Sheenjek with the Muries and so on. What lessons did they instill in a young man traveling with them?

MR. ZAHNISER: Traveling in the Sheenjek in what is now the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge with Olaus and Mardy Murie and then down in Mt. McKinley National Park with Adolph and Louise Murie was an experience that took me years and years to assimilate. Just to be in the presence of people like that, who were so knowledgeable about the natural world and so fiercely dedicated to its preservation, was very instructive to me. Plus, I had the background of my own family's valuation of wildness and naturalness. The striking thing about the Muries—all four of them, Olaus, Mardy, Adolph and Louise—was how such gentle people could be such fierce advocates. I guess that meant to me that you didn't have to be an angry person to be an effective advocate. These were some of the most gentle people I've ever known, and yet they were fierce advocates. That was the greatest life lesson for me.

DR. MADISON: It's still close to Mardy's passing on. We are all sensitive to it. I have a more mundane question, one that ties into your reading and so on. You mentioned that as a young man you went to Alaska and the Adirondacks; did you guys refer to these places as wilderness and think of them as wilderness actually back then? Or did you think you were just going to the woods or the mountains or to the river?

MR. ZAHNISER: When I was a child and we went to areas like the Adirondacks and the North Cascades and the Tetons and when I was in the Sheenjek as a fifteen year old, we were very conscious that these were wilderness areas. Even in those days, these were unusual areas because they were roadless. The big contest for wilderness has really been a contest with the automobile. The attempt to protect roadless areas was the big contest for wilderness. So yes, we were conscious that these were wilderness areas. None of those were designated wilderness in those days, except the Adirondack Forest Preserve lands. We were aware that they were wilderness. When my father first went to the Adirondacks in 1946 he was very conscious that that was wilderness. He indeed needed access to a wilderness because he worked in Washington, D.C. with almost no travel budget. Olaus Murie was director of the Wilderness Society, operating as a half-time director out at Moose, Wyoming. But being in the West, Olaus had the travel budget. My father needed a wilderness that he could reach, and one that ideally he could reach with his whole family. So the Adirondacks happened also to be the wilderness of Robert Marshall, who was the great champion of wilderness. It was Robert Marshall's father Louis Marshall who was instrumental in getting the Constitutional Amendment passed that created the Forest Preserve in New York State. My father was very conscious of that as wilderness and as a wilderness that he could get to from Washington, D. C.

DR. MADISON: You just mentioned the Wilderness Society. That's pretty interesting historically. Your father was there at the founding and an early leader in it. How did the Wilderness Society differ from the other conservation organizations that already existed like the Sierra Club and Audubon? What distinguished the Wilderness Society from those other groups?

MR. ZAHNISER: I think that the distinguishing factor of the Wilderness Society in particular in the 1930s, 40s and probably even into the mid to late 1950s was its ecological grounding. This was largely due to the influence of Aldo Leopold, who was very involved in the Wilderness Society up until his death in 1948. Robert Marshall tried to cajole Leopold into being president of the Society. But Leopold worked in Wisconsin and thought that the president should be in Washington. He had a lot of commitments

that caused him to feel that he should not do that. He was however very influential in introducing ecological concepts into the Wilderness Society. This was at the time when, according to a number of students of Leopold, that Leopold himself was really adopting this ecological point of view—of understanding that the land is an organism and that everything is connected and that all problems are part of a larger problem. This distinguished the Wilderness Society from other groups, up into the late 1950s or so. They had an ecological point of view and awareness that drove their advocacy and their policy thinking. A great deal of that resulted from Leopold's influence on the Society even though he died in 1948.

DR. MADISON: What about the Wilderness Act itself? You talked a little about that early with Laura, but a lot of people think that it's the best-written piece of legislation ever. It certainly has a rhetorical flair to it. Did your dad do that on purpose? Was that just the way he wrote, or just the way he felt? It is different from most legislation that you read.

MR. ZAHNISER: Many people have commented on the fact that parts of the Wilderness Act are almost poetic in character. Was that intentional? Yes, I think any piece of writing like that is intentional. At one point in the drafting of the Act, my father wrote to George Marshall, Robert Marshall's brother and said, "This is very frustrating; trying to draft legislation. If I had to do this over again, I'd rather do it in a sonnet or in rhyming couplets." My father's literary heroes—and he was a lifelong, avid student of literature—were Dante, Blake, the Book of Job material, and Henry Thoreau. He was very aware of truly great writing. I think he felt that because wilderness was such an unlikely candidate for a national system, in the context of the 1950's, that this Act had to be a statement that set itself apart. The opening sections of the Wilderness Act were consciously crafted to be high statements. Not poetry, because it's hard to work so many where-as's and wherefore's into great poetry! But high statement about the value of wilderness and the value of protecting it. Aldo Leopold himself really wrote a two-sentence summary of the Wilderness Act in the first issue of *The Living Wilderness*. He wrote an article called "Why the Wilderness Society?" This is a paraphrase, but Leopold

said that the Wilderness Society existed as an antidote to the biotic arrogance of “homo Americanus.” In the next sentence Leopold said the Society represented an intelligent humility about the land and about what we don’t know about the land. In a sense, Leopold wrote a two-sentence precis of the Wilderness Act. It is instructive to read the Wilderness Act in the context of my father’s essay, *The Need for Wilderness Areas*. This was the May 1955 essay that opened the wilderness bill campaign. In it he said what this legislation meant, this legislation that was about to be put before the public. Read against the early statements of Aldo Leopold, and read against my father’s essay, the Wilderness Act embodies a theory of knowledge. And to me that theory of knowledge is that all human knowing is temporal and provisional. That is, all human knowledge is bound by the time in which we live. And it’s only true provided that everything else we think we know is true. The poet William Bronk succinctly characterizes that. Bronk writes that “We live in the permanence of ignorance.” The Wilderness Act is a statement of our permanent biotic ignorance. Most of today’s natural resource challenges are the results of what was yesterday’s best science. Fire suppression has given us fire fuel build-up problems. Killing off the predators has given us problems of exploding populations of prey species in some cases and of decimation of songbirds by mid-level predators in other cases. We don’t criticize what we knew in kindergarten when we are in high school. We recognize that these are stages. But in William Bronk’s terms we are always in such a state of ignorance. The Wilderness Act really gives expression to the humility to recognize that we do not indeed know the natural world. We tend to project our desire for that knowledge onto the natural world and then act on our projected desire. But the Wilderness Act says, ‘look we should admit that we don’t know enough about how this wonderful world works to justify tinkering with *all* of it.’ We should set some of the natural aside to learn from it. We should allow some small parts of the natural world to be themselves so there will be something for other people to learn from. I was up in the Adirondacks and I checked out this book about William Bronk from the Johnsburg Public Library. Bronk was a fairly obscure poet who was greatly respected among other poets. I had been thinking about this knowledge aspect for quite a while, about Nietzsche and the wu-wei concept from Taoism, and Bronk had that permanence of ignorance. I thought “that’s it.” The Wilderness Act expresses an epistemology of

humility. Leopold says it in those two sentences in the essay Robert Sterling Yard asked him to write. I have it here. [reading] “The Wilderness Society is philosophically a disclaimer of the biotic arrogance of homo-Americanus. It is one of the focal points of a new attitude and intelligent humility towards man’s place in nature.”

That is a precis of the Wilderness Act.

MS. BUCHHEIT: The Wilderness Act never uses the word ‘humility’ but yet, as you said in the context of your father’s writings and Aldo Leopold’s writings, the Wilderness Act is a statement of humility, or intention for humility.

MR. ZAHNISER: Yes, the Wilderness Act really is a statement of humility, and of the fact that we don’t know and probably will never know enough about this huge, complex world in which we live, to manage it. We need to have some of it to instruct us, just through being itself. When acid rain, or acid deposition became a great problem, we finally had to learn about how soil works. The more we study soil, the more complex it gets. It’s just like sending the Hubble telescope out into space. That doesn’t simplify anything. You just find out, wow, there’s even more stuff out there we don’t understand! We do live in a sort of permanence of ignorance. You send Hubble telescope out into space and it’s far more complex than anything that motivated you to send it out there. There is humility here, but we human beings don’t want to be humble. My brother says “I’d be a really neat guy if I weren’t so humble.” It’s not in our character to be humble, particularly when we become collectives, as any society is. We need to set aside some spaces for humility for ourselves.

The humility aspect of the Wilderness Act also is what presents a future challenge, I think, to us to find new ways of what we would call managing wilderness. It’s what I would like to call caring for wilderness. That’s why I say we need something like innovative inaction as a management ethos—an ethos that has a way to reward innovative inaction built into it. If we are going to care for wilderness, we’re going to have to do it as though wilderness is a subject, just as we are a subject; not that we are the subject and wilderness is the object. It needs to be a subject, subject relationship. And

beyond that, it needs to be a subject (singular), subjects (plural) relationship—if we’re going to perpetuate wilderness and wildness into the future. That takes collective humility, and I think this will be a learning curve for us. Barry Lopez once said, “You know, we don’t manage anything. We’re not even stewards of anything. We’re participants”. In a sense, until we can really participate in wilderness without trammeling it, and without projecting our desires upon it, we’re just going to have to restrain ourselves and somehow learn to relate to it on a subject-to-subjects basis. That goes beyond what Martin Buber called an “I-Thou” relationship. It’s even beyond that if you study what Buber wrote about it. That’s a real human challenge. It probably makes going to the Moon look like a piece of cake.

I guess it takes you two hours to get a sound bite! You know for that *Wild By Law* video, they came to us with a script obviously. They wanted us to confirm things that were in their script, but they didn’t tell you what those things were. They were trying to get my brother to say something about my father’s religious life; because they knew that my brother was an ordained minister and taught in a seminary. They shot two hours of film just trying to get my to [say something like that].

MS. BUCHHEIT: They were trying to lead him to one statement?

MR. ZAHNISER: Yeah.

DR. MADISON: Is your brother in that film?

MR. ZAHNISER: Yes, very briefly.

DR. MADISON: I show that every year. I guess I don’t pay attention. I watch the opening segments and then I start grading papers!

MR. ZAHNISER: He says something like; “I think my father had a sort of missionary zeal”. I think by then my brother was exhausted and was beginning to catch on to what

they were doing. He just wanted to get out of there because they had already filmed my mother and me. We were at my mother's house. They were filming at my house, but they didn't want any of the other family members in the house while they were doing it. They didn't want any interaction or feedback. We were waiting out at my mother's house and my brother doesn't show up and we don't want to call because we think they might still be filming. They went on for two hours worth of 35mm film! They needed a sound bite that fit their slot. It was bizarre!

MS. BUCHHEIT: I have two more questions.

MR. ZAHNISER: She wants to know what time dinner is!

DR. MADISON: I'm all done.

MS. BUCHHEIT: Right! Where is the baklava?! They are big questions. Why is wilderness important?

MR. ZAHNISER: I believe wilderness is important because basically it's who we are. In the Koran of Islam, it says that God is as close as your jugular vein, or your carotid artery. And with no disrespect for Islam, we can say that the same is really true of wildness. I've heard a cellular biologist say that there are more cells of other beings in and on our bodies than there are cells of our own. So in a way, we are walking wild areas. We are walking pockets of wildness. I think wilderness is just fundamentally very important to us because it's who we really are. I don't mean that in any primitivist sense, but when Thoreau in his essay, *Walking*, says, ". . . in Wildness is the preservation of the World," he does not say that we preserve wildness. Thoreau says that wildness preserves us. I think he had that basic insight that our culture, in a sense, is defined by wildness. And that if we totally lose that wildness, there will be no definition of our civilization or culture. It will be like a kid raised with no boundaries. We all react against boundaries. But to deny children boundaries is the worst thing you can do to them. I think Thoreau had an intuition of that sense. He never articulates what he means

by the fact that “in Wildness is the preservation of the World,” but it’s a very rich statement because he uses the word *world* in the Greek sense of *kosmos*. This means beauty, order, pattern, as well as world, not simply what we think of as the globe. It’s not something Thoreau hadn’t thought about. But I think he himself knew that what he means is beyond the reach of language, even for someone who was such an astounding writer as Thoreau. I think that Wilderness is important because it’s who we are and where we came from.

MS. BUCHHEIT: How does someone inspire the appreciation of wilderness in somebody else?

MR. ZAHNISER: In terms of promoting the values of wilderness, the best inspirer of people is probably the wilderness itself. John Muir made great attempts to take large numbers of people into the wilderness. This was because Muir felt that by experiencing it, they would want to preserve it. I think there is still a lot of truth to that. I’ve also seen people grow into the wilderness values from illustrated slide shows about wilderness—in the context of knowing that there were people who were watching it with them who were very committed to preserving these places. They see the slide show and say, “Oh, now I see why!” We can inspire through these means of visual communication as well as introducing them to wilderness. Leopold went one step beyond Muir, to the ethical sense. Muir thought that if people experience wilderness, they’d want to save it. Leopold said that he thought people want to save something when they feel that they are part of the same community. Anyone who can figure out a way to make people feel that they are part of the wilderness, part of wildness, part of that same community of life, will probably have discovered the key to inspiring people to preserve it. If you feel that it’s part of your community, you go to bat for it.

If you go to enough lectures here at the NCTC, you pick up all of these good lines to use in interviews like this!

Land law expert Eric Fryefogle says, “We remain such a knowledge focused culture that we have no good mechanisms for taking what we know and then adjusting or supplementing it to take into account what we plainly do not know.” Aldo Leopold’s land ethic was designed to do just that! Eric once spoke here at the NCTC. He has a book called *Bounded Lands, Boundless People: Envisioning a New Land Ethic*. He is a land law expert and student of Leopold’s work.