INTERVIEW WITH DR. ROBERT KREAR
BY ROGER KAYE NOVEMBER 21, 2002

MR. KAYE: This is an oral history interview with Dr. Bob Krear. The subject will be his involvement in the 1956 Murie Expedition of the Sheenjeck River and the Arctic Refuge. Bob, thanks for providing this interview. Maybe you could first start off with talking about how you happened to become involved with the Muries, and got invited in the 1956 Sheenjeck Expedition.

DR. KREAR: I met the Muries first in 1948, I guess, when I was still a Forestry student at Penn State. I was traveling west to the State of Washington and dropped off so that I could meet them. Since then, I practically became a member of their family. In 1949 I began my Masters work at the University of Wyoming. On almost every holiday after that I was up at Moose, at their place. I was up there for Thanksgiving and for Christmas. Their son, Martin Murie and I both served together in the Tenth Mountain Division during the War. That's another reason why I got to meet them. I was a Naturalist at Grand Teton Park for three seasons. Of course that was near their homestead. I got to see them often. In 1951 I was on an expedition to Ungaba, which is near Quebec and Labrador on the eastern side of Hudson Bay. Olaus apparently considered that qualified experience to join him on the Arctic Wildlife Range. He also was instrumental in my getting a job as a Biologist, first doing research on the [unintelligible] Islands in 1953. So I had signed up to go back to the Purpolip [sounds like] Islands in 1956. Mardie Murie called me up on the phone and I told her my plans. She said, "Why don't you come with us up to the Arctic Range, up to the Brooks Range"? So I changed my mind immediately, and then essentially felt like I was on the expedition.

MR. KAYE: Interesting. Maybe in just a few sentences, can you summarize your career after the Murie Expedition, and where you ended up?

DR. KREAR: After the Murie Expediton I went right down to the University of Colorado and began work on my Doctorate. I finished that in 1965. I took nine years getting that Doctorate done. But I interrupted it numerous times. One of those times was to go out to the Aleutian Islands, and Manchitka to do research on the Sea Otters. I worked seasonally with the Park Service several times. I worked for fifteen years as a seasonal professional naturalist at eight different National Parks. My main job of course was as a professor of Biology at [unintelligible] University. I ended up at Michigan Tech University on the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. I liked a great variety in my life.

MR. KAYE: Yes. Ok. What I'd like to get to here is the Muries, and some of the other people who were instrumental in establishing the Refuge. I'll ask you about them. And particularly, I am interested in your impressions on the beliefs that Olaus and Mardie held about this area that became the Arctic Refuge, and what their hope was for it's future.

DR. KREAR: Let me first give you my impressions that the Muries had of the area up there. I think this was a second honeymoon for them. It was a return to the wilderness country they had traveled in by dogsled in 1922 I believe, during their wedding honeymoon. They went down the Yukon, up at Anvek and up to Koyuakuk. My impression was that they were supremely happy up there in the Sheenjeck Valley. And Olaus was certainly back in his element. After we moved to Lash Lake, our second camp, the two of them put backpacks on their backs and hiked up the Sheenjeck to be by themselves for several days. I believe that was to recapture the memories of their honeymoon together, west of the Brooks Range about thirty-four years earlier, up the Koyakuk. Your other question was what?

MR. KAYE: What about their hopes for the place? What was their, what motivated them to work for protecting this area as wilderness?

DR. KREAR: It was in 1953 that Olaus took a flight over the whole Brooks Range area. They selected from the air the Sheenjeck River Valley as a possible source for an expedition. That was the only part of the Brooks Range that was left unexploited. After we got there, we had no reason to believe that he had made a bad choice. There was no human activity in the area, except for the Indians of course. But their hopes were just to preserve some of the…they knew that the Grizzly Bear was being exploited, and the Wolverine, and in some areas, the Caribou. They wanted an area where those animals could be at peace so to speak.

MR. KAYE: William O. Douglas was there for a period when you were there. Tell me about your impression of him and what interested him in this area. Why did he come up to get involved in this campaign?

DR. KREAR: William Douglas and Olaus Murie were on the canal hike near Washington, D.C., I forget the name of it now. They were trying to preserve an old canal. [C&O Canal] Olaus got acquainted with Douglas at that time. Because of that he invited him to visit us up there at the Brooks Range. Douglas and his wife Mercy came in and spent about a week with us. They spent most of their time with Olaus and Mardie so I was not privy to most of their conversations. Nor do I think that Brian Kessler or Joyce Sheller had a chance to talk much with them. [name accuracy?] You might ask Brian about that. I did take Douglas fishing for Grayling once, and he mentioned that in his book titled *My Wilderness.* He caught fish by the way. I found him to be very personable. Of course I preferred to listen to him around the campfire. I was somewhat overwhelmed with the man of his experience. He told of us his recent experiences in the Soviet Union. He had been over there recently. He was very much interested in this project.

MR. KAYE: In what way? What was his hope for this place?

DR. KREAR: He was very much a wilderness person himself. He was a good mountain climber and that sort of thing. He knew it was pretty much an unchanged, unexploited. There was no commercialization up there yet and he wanted to keep it that way. His ideas were almost identical to those of Olaus Muries.

MR. KAYE: I found in the Archives a letter that you wrote in 1980. Actually, you addressed it to then President Jimmy Carter, protesting the renaming of the Arctic Refuge after William O. Douglas. It of course temporarily had that name. It's a very interesting issue. I know that Olaus and Mardie opposed place names in the area too. Tell me about what your thought was, related to why you were against place naming. You mentioned in that letter that you believe William O. Douglas was against naming places in the wilderness as well.

DR. KREAR: That was very interesting. Around a campfire one night, he and Olaus were discussing that very thing. I don't know if I brought it up or not. But once when I was doing my research over on [sounds like] Ungada, there was a nearby camp of Geologists and they told me that the head of our lake which was Menehet Lake, that there was a rapid entering the lake called Murie Rapids. I told Olaus about that and he was pretty much disappointed to hear that because he did not believe in the naming of beautiful, natural areas after people. Certainly, Douglas was against this too. I heard him agree with Olaus on it. They both believed that often it was done for political reasons and for political persons whose names mean nothing to the generations that follow. They often rather cheapen the significance of the object or area. Many times such areas have been named after people who have never there or never had anything to do with the area, such as perhaps the Molly Beatty Wilderness in Anwar. Natural restrictive names always seem best when applicable. That's pretty much the thoughts of all of us on that expedition.

MR. KAYE: In what sense, do you think, that Douglas and the Muries felt it cheapened the area? What place names like people did they represent they resisted?

DR. KREAR: They were mostly concerned that politicians would name areas for their…to perpetuate their name and that sort of thing. Olaus was very much in favor of natural names. He would even have accepted Indian names. What he preferred mostly were descriptive names for the area rather than a person's name given to the area.

MR. KAYE: Olaus is often described as a humble person. Is it perhaps that maybe he and Douglas as a result of humility that the place shouldn't be named after them?

DR. KREAR: I would agree with that. Olaus was a very humble person. He was very intelligent, very quite, very unassuming. His personality was unique as far as that is concerned.

MR. KAYE: What was it like to be in the field with him?

DR. KREAR: Wonderful. Wonderful. He was interested in everything; the plants and the animals. Of course, one of his favorite things was animal tracks, and making casts of the tracks and that sort of thing. While we were up there in the Brooks Range he had us all looking for Wolf tracks, and the tracks of any other animals. If we found something interesting he would immediately go to the area. He always carried his plaster of paris with him, and poor it in the tracks. Olaus was a naturalist, a complete naturalist I would say.

MR. KAYE: What other things did Olaus and Douglas talk about, say over the campfire on evenings and so on?

DR. KREAR: They talked a little bit about Douglas' latest experience over in the Soviet Union, but I can't remember much about that. Otherwise, that's about all I can tell you about that.

MR. KAYE: Yes, it was a long time ago.

DR. KREAR: It was a long time ago, yeah.

MR. KAYE: Do you recall anything that the Muries, either Olaus or Mardie said maybe about Aldo Leopold or Bob Marshall, Howard Zonheizer, Henry Shore, other people that indicated that some of the Murie ideas may have been influenced by these people?

DR. KREAR: Let's think about Bob Marshall and his experience in the Brooks Range which was about in 1930, I guess.

MR. KREAR: Tell me, if you remember, what they said about Bob Marshall. What was the context?

DR. KREAR: They told me that he had visited them at Moose, Wyoming. They had great respect for him as a pioneer in the wilderness movement. They mentioned that Bob was instrumental in getting them involved in the Wilderness Society. Of course, Olaus became the President in 1957. Mardie has an especially fond memory of Bob when he told her that she was fondly remembered on the Koyukuk as the most beautiful that had ever passed through there.

MR. KAYE: Oh!

DR. KREAR: That was kind of interesting! That's about all I remember about Bob Marshall. I never had the pleasure of meeting him. I met his brother Jim.

MR. KAYE: How about Leopold? Did the Muries talk about Leopold at all?

DR. KREAR: A little yes, but again, I can't tell you much about it.

MR. KAYE: Are they any other authors or writers that the Muries might have mentioned that stick out in your mind after all of these years?

DR. KREAR: No, I'm afraid not. Somebody else might be able to do better for you on that.

MR. KAYE: O.K. That was a long time ago. Another question: The Muries and other people, founders, that were involved with them, often described wildlife, but it was usually in the context of wildness. Do you have a sense of how or why wildness was so important to them? Why was it such a predominant theme in the campaign to establish the refuge?

DR. KREAR: Up there in the Sheenjeck Valley we saw that the Grizzly's had very little fear of us. The Wolves came right into camp once. Foxes and the bird life was very tame. They had never had any bad experiences with people. I guess that was one of the things that Olaus Murie hoped to preserve in a global wildlife refuge. I don't know what else to say about that.

MR. KAYE: O.K. You mentioned 'intangible values', and in fact, you know Olaus used that term quiet a bit in his writings. In fact, in his testimony before a Senate Committee he talked about saving the intangible values as being one of the purposes of establishing the Arctic Range. What do you think he meant by intangible values?

DR. KREAR: I guess it was just to be surrounded for three months by that great, pristine arctic beauty, and that incredible wildlife that was almost constantly in sight. It had to have affected us all deeply. It something that you couldn't touch, couldn't describe. It did affect us. We didn't want any contact with the outside world. We twice turned down offers for the loan of two-way radios. Olaus and Mardie and all of us, we wanted the feeling of peace that could come only by being totally isolated in what was going on in the world. Since we reverted to the blessings of primeval nature. We even disliked the occasional planes that flew over the route up to Keptovick and the dew line installations. There were several visitations while we were there; people that wanted to visit Olaus, and especially when Justice Douglas was there some reporters came up. We didn't exactly favor that sort of thing, but those interruptions were short though. It was just being isolated and living the feelings of nature. I am not very good at expressing it. Olaus considered it to be a spiritual, as well as a religious thing. Olaus, I know that Olaus was not a religious person; Mardie was. But as to spiritual values, one benefits. It has to be an individual thing as far as I am concerned. I can only speak for myself. I can say

that I am not a religious person, but yet I do have those spiritual values when I am out in the wilderness. I think you described it best.

MR. KAYE: O.K. So, is it a secular thing for you, is it a relationship with something?

DR. KREAR: It's definitely a secular thing. It's a thing I can't describe. It's a great gratitude for being able to feel the influence of the wilderness.

MR. KAYE: O.K. Another thing that I was going to ask; "evolution" is a word that I see reoccurring through Olaus' writings. He uses it in relationship both to human beings and to the natural world. Do you have a sense of what this concept of evolution meant to him? Why it was significant?

DR. KREAR: As near as I can figure, it is something like this; the value of wilderness has affected the evolution of human attitudes towards wilderness preservation. I think that the changes that can or will take place are profound, especially in the minds of confirmed urbanites like members of the U. S. Congress. Urbanites lead a totally artificial way of life in my opinion. And wilderness confronts one with the beauty of reality, and with the obvious values of simplicity. Wilderness teaches a person what one really is, and not what one thinks one is. I think every wilderness experience could bring about a change in mindset, and always for the better. If you've never had an experience with the wilderness before, and go into it for the first time, one's mind or one's attitude is bound to evolve I think, for the better. That's about all I can say on that.

MR. KAYE: I wanted to talk about recreation for a minute. Olaus described recreation in this area as having a great potential for what he called, or described as, "satisfying an important human urge". He said it was the use of "wilderness as wilderness and not as make believe". What do you think he meant by this? Did you guys talk about recreation, or the recreational potential, or what about recreation would be special or unique in this place?

DR. KREAR: Yes, we certainly did. He thought that, it almost goes without saying that there are numerous recreational values associated with Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. It depends on the type of wilderness experience. At Anwar, these would include rafting, fishing, canoeing, camping, observing and photographing wildlife and flowers, hiking and climbing, ecological research, experiencing twenty-four hours of daylight in the summer, and the Aurora Borealis in winter. He just thought that all of these recreational delights were limitless, and that's just some of them.

MR. KAYE: You mentioned scientific values; do you have a sense of what he thought the scientific value of this place would be in the future?

DR. KREAR: While we were there, I helped Ronnie Castle set up some permanent plots for John Buckley at the University. Some ecological research would be occurring indefinitely. It was just describing the changes that would occur in those plots over a long period of time. Where we were, it seemed pretty obvious; the northern limit of course was extending itself northward, that is just one of the things that he was going to be describing. I assume those plots are still up there in the northern Sheenjeck Valley. George Strouder and I helped him set them up. I think the Indians from Arctic Village would come over there to hunt Wolves, there was a bounty on them at the time; I don't know of there still is, or not.

MR. KAYE: No.

DR. KREAR: There would be continuous, or long-term, and those sorts of studies; what was happening to the wildlife over a long period of time.

MR. KAYE: Did Olaus talk about the bounty that was on Wolves at the time?

DR. KREAR: Yes. He didn't particularly like it, but he understood why it was necessary for the Indians. They didn't take too many Wolves. That was a topic of conversation. The Atabaskan Indians were pretty much dependent on the $50.00 they got for a Wolf at that time. I think I shot a couple while we were there.

MR. KAYE: Did Olaus have empathy, that you saw, for native peoples and their use of this area?

DR. KREAR: Oh, very much, yeah. And the Indians knew it. Every time our bush pilot visited us; he'd go to Arctic Village first and he'd bring some Indians over to our camp. We got to know them pretty well, and they got to like us. They commented that we were quite different from most white people in Alaska. They didn't like the discrimination that was directed at them. We got to know them well, and we liked them very much.

MR. KAYE: Interesting. I wonder if they understood what you people were up there for; in terms of getting information that would be used to protect this area?

DR. KREAR: I think Olaus explained that. He was collecting small mammals and mounting them and that sort of thing. That really enthralled them to watch him do that. He pretty much explained why we were there, and what we intended to do with the area. He explained to them that they would still be permitted to hunt the area after it had been established as an Arctic National Wildlife Refuge; that it wouldn't in any sense be a threat to their lifestyle. They liked that.

MR. KAYE: You mentioned humility once, and the notions of humility and restraint again, kind of reoccur through the writings of Olaus and Mardie. Why were these concepts important to them?

DR. KREAR: Mainly for the long-term protection of wilderness, I think. On the Sheenjeck, we were camped near the northern-most limit of timber. There is no timber on the mountain slopes. In the valley there was white spruce. Olaus suggested that we look for and utilize only the dead timber for tents poles, etc. We all felt the terrain was somewhat fragile, and did our best to make certain that when we left the valley we left no evidence that we had been there. As far as humility is concerned, I think a wilderness experience creates a feeling of humility, as well as a feeling of profound gratitude for the presence of the surrounding natural beauty. It stimulates these feelings, and the pleasure and joy and realization of how humble we should be in the presence of pristine natural beauty, it can never be improved upon by man. We made sure while we were there that we didn't harm anything. We looked for access someplace of course. When we were done with our tent poles we stacked them for the next people who would come in. The value of restraint and humility in wilderness is to preserve wilderness unchanged, essentially.

MR. KAYE: Are there any other values that the Muries mentioned, or that you feel might be important to them in terms of the purpose of this place?

DR. KREAR: Well, I think I have mentioned most of them. They were particularly interested in the Caribou herd. There was a very large Caribou herd that came through the valley a couple of times. They knew that value of that for the Attabasken [?] Indians, and those at Arctic Village and those down on the Crow River. They wanted to make sure that this continued for them, that their lifestyle would never change. They very much worried that oil drilling at Anwar might represent a very serious change for the native peoples in the area. I don't how else to comment on this.

MR. KAYE: How about any sense of value to other peoples who will never go there, but maybe might enjoy knowing that it's there?

DR. KREAR: Just knowing it's there [is important]. Several people have commented that to me. It takes a pretty noble person to offer that concept, I think. I think I can understand that. There are many places in the world that I can't go, but I am very glad that they are always going to be there.

MR. KAYE: Do you think that was part of the Murie's thinking then?

DR. KREAR: It would have been, yes. That was a central part of his thinking. It was mainly just to preserve the wildlife, and the Arctic vegetation.

MR. KAYE: Are there any other things you'd like to add Bob, about either the Muries, or the effort, or the Arctic Refuge in general?

DR. KREAR: No, not that I can think of. Some friends of mine have done some rafting up there on the river. That's become an important thing there, from the south side of the Brooks Range, and the north side. They said that sometimes when they were up there on the Arctic slopes, there was some seismic exploration going on. I guess that would be illegal, but nevertheless, it was going on. Long term scientific research that doesn't disturb anything…our most important value is the land. This getting away from the cities, and getting to have an experience that would probably be one of the most wonderful experiences in their life. Wilderness changes a person. The change is usually for the good. And I think… I wish I could speak more eloquently on all of this for you, but it's just that it's been a long time. Now our National Forests are very much at stake. It seems to be that the present administration is trying to open them up to unlimited logging. We've had too much of that down here in the lower forty-eight as it is. It's interesting to know why people are becoming so concerned because there are those that don't get out into these places. I am glad to see it's happening. We've got many conservation organizations now that we never had before and they are doing an awful lot of good.

MR. KAYE: Well Bob, I want to thank you for this interview, and your time, and your contribution to the history of this place.

DR. KREAR: You are surely welcome.

MR. KAYE: And one final thing, Bob. Do you feel that your time with the Muries and especially at Lash Lake in the Arctic Refuge influenced the direction of your career?

DR. KREAR: Yes. I was always impressed with Olaus, even before that. But when I saw the way he operated, and what his attitudes were towards wilderness and wildlife, it definitely did. Since then I went into Animal Behavior, and Animal Ecology with a specialty in the Arctic and Alpine. Olaus did an awful lot for me. When I applied for the job in the Purpolop[?] Islands, why, I didn't realize it but he wrote to Victor Sheppard who was in charge of the research up there. He wrote a letter on my behalf. When I went out to the Aleutian Islands, he did the same thing. He was instrumental in my getting both of those jobs. I really appreciated that. And he didn't even tell me about it! I just liked, I liked that fact that Olaus was such a humble person. He was totally at ease with everyone. He was never pretentious. Almost all of the biologists I knew or had heard of, had a great respect for Olaus Murie because of his simplicity, his very eloquent statements, and what he believed in. He was an inspiration to almost everyone. I spent a lot of time at that ranch in Jackson Hole and many, many students came there. It was obvious that he was the inspiration for their going to work in wildlife conservation.

MR. KAYE: Well again, thank you.