

# Committee on Resources

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## Witness Testimony

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Testimony on HR 1739 and HR 2149  
PAM LESCHAK  
President  
Northeastern Minnesotans for Wilderness  
Before the  
House of Representatives  
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health  
September 9, 1997

MS. CHAIRPERSON AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to speak for wilderness and its protection.

on behalf of Northeastern Minnesotans for wilderness, I urge you to support HR 2149 sponsored by Congressman Bruce Vento and vote against HR 1739 sponsored by Congressman Jim Oberstar.

Northeastern Minnesotans for Wilderness is a grassroots organization, founded and funded by people who live in northeastern Minnesota, specifically the 8th Congressional District. We have a mailing list of well over 4,000 people - all from northeastern Minnesota -- all from Congressman Oberstar's district.

First, I want to set the record straight -- NORTHEASTERN MINNESOTANS WANT WILDERNESS.

There is a myth that northern Minnesotans want motorized portages and motors in the BWCA and that people from the Twin Cities and out-of-state are forcing wilderness values down our throats. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The statistics show otherwise, as you will hear repeatedly.

Poll after poll has shown that between 70-75% of Minnesotans in the 8th Congressional District (Congressman Oberstar's district) want status quo or strengthened protection for the BWCAW. Northeastern Minnesotans for Wilderness is here to make that point.

According to the U.S. Forest Service 83% of local people who use the BWCAW do so by paddle or hiking. Only 17% of local people want to use motors. Why, therefore, are we considering degrading and compromising wilderness for a very small minority?

Second, ACCESSIBILITY IS BEING USED AS A POLITICAL TOOL.

Closing three motorized portages does not mean the portages are closed. None of the portages are closed. It simply means the portages will operate by non-motorized means. Non-motorized portages work.

The issue of accessibility can be settled tomorrow. -there is nothing stopping anyone from providing access across the portages. Anyone can operate the portage and provide access if they are truly concerned with access.

Anyone can form a business, non-profit or otherwise, to operate the portages. Users of the portages already have to pay for that service. Therefore why doesn't an advocacy group run the portages using college kids to do the work -that's what operators of the portages are doing now.

Or, resorts on the surrounding lakes could work with the U.S. Forest Service to ensure the portages are manned during the season. If additional funding is necessary isn't that easier to accomplish than full-scale legislative combat?

There are any number of ways accessibility can be addressed if that were the issue. But a small group of people who want more motor access in the wilderness is shamefully using the handicapped accessibility issue as a smokescreen.

If accessibility is the issue aren't there better ways to deal with that problem than Congressional and senatorial legislation? Can't we resolve that issue without government?

Third, the phase out of motors on Sea Gull Lake is part of the BWCA legislation of 1978. The law calls for the phase out of motors on Sea Gull by 1999. There is no reason to make an exception for Sea Gull cabin owners. They are fortunate to live on the edge of a beautiful wilderness, isn't that enough.

Dorothy Molter, the last woman to live and die in the BWCAW, loved the wilderness. She was one of the lucky few who would enjoy it day in and out all year long. She did not complain that she didn't have electricity, a car or a TV -those things were not part of the wilderness where she lived until her death. she came voluntarily to Knife Lake and voluntarily stayed -- accepting the splendor and the limitation of the wilderness. She did not seek to change it into a replica of the rest of the world (although she did make a hellava bottle of root beer) but lived there on its terms.

The conservationist and writer Sigurd Olson fought Most of his life for the BWCAW. He did not start out a wilderness advocate. He started out using the roadless area of northern Minnesota much as everyone else did -- he hunted , he used motors. But once he learned the value of wilderness, solitude, and the beauty that is the unspoiled BWCAW he worked tirelessly to protect it from mining, logging, snowmobiling and motors.

I was present during the hearings in Ely for the 1978 Boundary Waters hearings. Sig Olson and fellow conservationist Micron Heinselman were hanged in effigy. Yet they and many others spoke out for the protection of the wilderness and the need to keep it clean, quiet, and undeveloped.

Their voices have grown and many more have joined them in the effort to protect and enhance the wilderness. Northeastern Minnesotans for Wilderness is evidence of that legacy.

I've been going to the BWCAW for nearly 25 years. My most recent trip was during the long Labor Day holiday -one of the busiest use times in the season.

My party of seven included a teenage girl and a 5 year old boy. In fact, it was the third trip for the 5 year-old - he took his first BWCAW trip when he was 5 months old.

On our way down the Indian Sioux River we met several parties of women who had been in the wilderness for a week or more. We met a handicapped man who was on a solo trip. On the way out we ran into a party which included a 79-year-old man.

I don't mention these things to show that paddling, hiking, portaging and camping in the BWCAW is so easy anyone can do it -- obviously that's not true any more than it would be to say that everyone can and should be able to climb Mt. Everest.

I mention these people to show that it can and is being done. We all deal with our own limitations. For me that means a slow and steady portage and sometimes two trips across a portage instead of one. When I was younger I carried two packs and made it in one trip.

When the day comes, and it will come, that I can no longer pack and portage into the BWCAW I will leave it to those who can -- and I plan to leave it in as good a condition as I found it -- or better. For me, that will be a sacrifice -- but one that must be made by everyone who cares about the wilderness.

Saying no to motors in the BWCAW will also mean sacrifice, But there are 15,000 lakes in Minnesota that have no motor restrictions. There is no other place in Minnesota or in the United States like the BWCAW.

The BWCAW is beautiful beyond words. it is sparkling water, jagged bedrock outcroppings, ancient pines, wonderful wildlife, starry nights, and silent shores. It is wilderness. Yet it is the only wilderness in the U.S. Wilderness system that has motors. it is the most popular and heaviest used wilderness in the county, yet it does not have full wilderness protection.

Northeastern Minnesotans for Wilderness urge you to listen to the majority of northeastern Minnesotan's. We urge you to vote against HR 1739 sponsored by Congressman Jim Oberstar and vote for HR 2149 sponsored by Congressman Bruce Vento.

We urge you to work long-term for full wilderness protection for the BWCAW and remove all motors from the wilderness. We know it won't be easy but we are confident w\* can work toward that goal. The BWCAW has been good for northeastern Minnesota's economy -- full wilderness status will be even better.

In conclusion I ask you to consider the great natural beauty that is the BWCAW. If you haven't seen it and experienced it -- you must -- I can put you in touch with some great wilderness outfitters.

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