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## Feature Article

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# Conservationist in a Conservative Land

by Ray Ring

## A New Dialogue for Idaho

**Environmentalist Rick Johnson and Republican Congressman Mike Simpson are crafting a new language for wilderness protection, but not everyone wants to speak it.**

BOISE, Idaho — On a hot October afternoon, in the nation's most Republican state, Rick Johnson looks pleased but a little weary. He's on his feet behind his wraparound desk, fielding a burst of phone calls and e-mails commenting on his leadership of Idaho's biggest environmental group, the Idaho Conservation League.

The issue of the day is wilderness, the purest goal of the environmental movement. Six years ago, Johnson hatched a new strategy for wilderness protection in Idaho. And today it has emerged as a bill in the U.S. House of Representatives, sponsored by a conservative Idaho Republican.

The calls come from journalists and old friends, many of them congratulatory. The e-mails tend to come from angry critics within the environmental movement, who think Johnson is selling them out by making too many concessions. "It's very discouraging," one veteran Idaho environmentalist says later. "There is this chasm (between disagreeing environmentalists) that was never here before. I fear there will be lingering damage."

There is no denying that this wilderness bill is one of a modern species, a Frankenstein creature made of stitched-together pieces that can't live on their own. To critics, it's ugly with compromises, giving too much to ranchers, local governments, dirt-bikers and snowmobilers.

Johnson sees some ugliness in it, too, but he also sees hope: It attempts to protect nearly 300,000 acres of icy peaks, lakes, forests and sagebrush valleys in the Boulder and White Cloud mountain ranges. Explaining his willingness to compromise to get such results, Johnson says simply, "I'm a political person."

He's wearing jeans and a plain short-sleeve shirt, no politician's outfit. On the walls around him he

has tokens from which he draws strength, including an Idaho flag, wildlife pictures, and printouts of quotes from wise men, such as the Greek philosopher, Epictetus: "It's not so much what you do, it's how you do it."

With such thinking, Johnson is leading his group toward the difficult middle ground. He's working with Rep. Mike Simpson, a jack Mormon with a passion for Corvette sports cars and flashy neckties, and a near-zero rating from the League of Conservation Voters.

The story of how these two leaders came to cooperate on a wilderness bill provides a window into not only Idaho politics, but also the wider politics of the environmental movement.

With the whole nation bitterly divided and bound for four more years of hard-line Republican rule, this seems like an improbable time to make headway on any progressive environmental or social initiative. Yet if Johnson and Simpson succeed in staking out middle ground in ultra-Republican Idaho, perhaps it can be found everywhere.

"I'm trying to create a politics where we get past the default positions," Johnson says. "If all I am doing is fighting things, it means more fighting. If I extend my hand, who's to say what will happen?"

Some people who don't care for Idaho politics scornfully refer to this state as "Planet Idaho." And by the typical yardstick — Democrats versus Republicans — Idaho does look like a lost planet for one party.

Republicans have largely dominated here since the 1940s, and since the early 1990s, their domination has become almost total. In the wake of the Nov. 2 elections, Republicans will hold fully 80 percent of the Idaho Legislature, the highest percentage of any state, as well as the governor's office and the entire congressional delegation in Washington, D.C.

With their supermajority, the Republicans in Idaho's Legislature have concentrated on protecting business interests. Huge factory dairies have become the top farm sector here, for instance, and the Legislature has shielded them from citizen complaints about pollution and degradation of neighboring property (HCN, 4/15/02). Meanwhile, the congressional delegation's senior member, Sen. Larry Craig, is a champion of the archaic 1872 Mining Law and of salmon-killing dams that benefit power companies and farmers.

Environmental issues play a role in Idaho's distaste for Democrats. The Democratic Clinton administration asserted federal power during the 1990s, reintroducing wolves, toughening regulations on grazing and mining, and attempting to preserve millions of acres of roadless forest by executive action. Clinton became the bogeyman to many people here, and they reacted by leaning further to the right.

That tilt made it tougher for environmentalists to designate new wilderness areas. Idaho had an impressive run of wilderness bills from 1964 to 1980, protecting 4 million acres. But since then, every attempt to designate more wilderness has failed, even though the state has another 9 million roadless acres that could qualify under the 1964 Wilderness Act. Idaho environmentalists have responded to each failure by drawing up bigger and bigger wilderness bills, which have no chance

of passing in the current political climate.

Meanwhile, an onslaught of snowmobiles, four-wheelers and dirt bikes erodes the quality of Idaho's unprotected backcountry. Four-wheelers alone have increased more than a hundredfold since Idaho's last wilderness bill passed. Led by the Pocatello-based BlueRibbon Coalition, the backcountry drivers have become some of the noisiest opponents of wilderness protection.

On the wilderness issue, Idaho looks hopelessly paralyzed. But Rick Johnson hasn't accepted that view.

Johnson grew up in Republican upstate New York, earned a bachelor's degree in history and political science, and moved west in 1979 to the Sun Valley area, where he drove a forklift in a lumberyard, then ran his own construction company. He got into hiking, saw firsthand the impacts of mining, and started environmental work in 1984, first as a volunteer, then as a staffer for the Idaho Conservation League.

Climbing a rung, Johnson hired on with the Sierra Club in 1987. Based in Seattle, he spent eight years shuffling between the Northwest and Washington, D.C., lobbying Congress on national issues such as the logging of old-growth forest and spotted owl habitat. Johnson admired Clinton's effort to compromise and make peace in the Northwest. Then in 1995, Johnson took the opportunity to return to Idaho, to run the Idaho Conservation League.

At that time, the Idaho Conservation League was caught in the anti-Clinton backlash. The group was founded in 1968 to lobby the Legislature, but had shifted its focus to stopping timber sales to protect roadless federal lands. That had put the group at odds with much of the state's Republican leadership.

Johnson began repositioning the ICL, seeking to improve its credibility, and to broaden its issues and base of support. He paid more attention to public relations, making presentations to Rotary clubs, Kiwanis and chambers of commerce, manning booths at county fairs, and advertising on public radio. Within a few years, he launched a "community conservation" program, reaching out to the neighbors of cattle feedlots and factory dairies, many of whom are Republicans, to help them deal with water pollution and odor.

"First, we have to have a dialogue with the public — we have to talk to people who don't think like us," Johnson says. "The underlying values of wilderness, and clean air and water, and habitat, are shared by everybody in this state. But we've allowed the legislative process to become dysfunctional."

Johnson believes that many Idahoans across the political spectrum are ready to cooperate on environmental issues, because they have no choice. They face crises they can't ignore.

With Idaho wrenched by the fifth-fastest population growth in the nation, Boise and its suburbs suffer increasing air pollution, highway gridlock, and sprawl. These ills erode the quality of life that attracts people and businesses here, so cities have begun to seek state funding for mass transportation, and the authority to impose local taxes for auto-emission testing. To get that, they need the cooperation of rural legislators.

In return, rural interests need the urban legislators to act on Idaho's worsening water crisis, caused by drought and chronic overallocation of water rights. They want millions of dollars in state money to buy out farmers' water where there's no longer enough for all the irrigators, Indian tribes and salmon.

"There's a recognition that things are changing," says Brad Little, a rancher, Republican legislator and former *High Country News* board member. "Some of us are hating it, but some of us are accepting it." Statewide polls conducted by Jim Weatherby, chairman of the Department of Public Policy and Administration at Boise State University, reveal Idahoans' underlying values. One recent poll found that more want wolves in the backcountry than not (about 42 percent to 40 percent), 54 percent want action on air pollution, and 55 percent support restoration of salmon runs.

Even more telling is the response to Weatherby's question, "What is your political orientation?" Though those answering "liberal" hardly register, and 42 percent answer "conservative," another 42 percent say "middle of the road."

The conservatives and middle-of-the-roaders are "people who generally take the position that government is wasteful, taxes are bad, agencies interfere in people's lives," says Rick Foster, chairman of the political science department at Idaho State University. "It's an isolated, Old West assumption, but it's not mean-spirited or wacky. Those people also tend to be pillars-of-the-community type of folks. They're not so ideological, so you can reason with them."

Johnson has tapped into those currents. Taking over an ICL fund-raising campaign that was sputtering out, he's built a \$1 million endowment. He raised additional money to buy an old mansion in Boise, two blocks from the state Capitol, where he installed ICL's high-profile headquarters. Under his leadership, the group has grown from about 2,300 members to 3,200, and from nine staffers to 14; the annual budget has more than doubled, to about \$1 million.

The Idaho Conservation League has reached out to Republican leaders, most noticeably in Boise, where the group worked on a Republican mayor's 2001 initiative to impose a local tax to buy \$10 million of open space in the foothills. The initiative won 59.6 percent of the vote (HCN, 6/18/01). So far, it's protected more than 3,000 acres of popular recreation areas within the city's viewshed, providing residents with a tangible reminder of the conservation league's work. It's also good for Boise's economy.

Johnson isn't soft on all the issues: His group has sued to reduce pollution from factory dairies and a pulp mill's toxic waste, and against logging sales. But he frames the issues in terms of neighbors' property rights and the public's right to clean water. He circulates press releases that talk about "improving" timber sales, not stopping them. "We've let ourselves, the conservation movement, be portrayed as the problem," he says. "We need to be seen as the problem-solvers."

And, still trying to protect more federal lands as wilderness, Johnson has reached out to another problem-solver, Congressman Mike Simpson.

On another day in October, Mike Simpson is taking a break from Washington, D.C., holed up in

his home in small-town Blackfoot, south of Idaho Falls. It's a modest beige stucco, a half block away from a trailer court. Across the street, a neighbor has a pickup truck up on blocks with its wheels removed.

Simpson is wearing jeans and a checkered shirt. To have a talk, he puts down a book he's reading, titled *Who owns the West?* by William Kittredge, which describes a region in "a time of profound transition." His walls display one of his hobbies, landscape painting. He also likes to quote famous wise men, and rattles off the words of French novelist Marcel Proust: "The real voyage of discovery is not in seeing new lands, but in seeing with new eyes."

Simpson is full of surprises. He's a dentist's son, and practiced dentistry himself for 22 years while dabbling in politics part-time, working his way up to be speaker of the Idaho House of Representatives. He gave up dentistry to run for Congress in 1998, because, he says, he finds politics "fascinating."

He represents Idaho's 2nd Congressional District, which stretches from the farm country of southeast Idaho to Boise. It includes the liberal Sun Valley resort area, but overall, it's one of the most conservative, Republican, Mormon districts in the nation.

But Simpson is proof that Idaho voters still admire an independent spirit. They've demonstrated that in the past by electing Democratic statesmen, such as Frank Church, who served 24 years in the U.S. Senate, ending in 1980, and Cecil Andrus, who served 20 years as governor, ending in 1994.

Not that Simpson doesn't often take conservative positions: In Congress, he's voted for oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, snowmobile traffic in Yellowstone National Park, and for suspending environmental regulations where fire-prone forests need to be thinned.

But Simpson doesn't cater to the far right. He breaks with his party on abortion and sometimes tax policy, and he also breaks his Mormon religion's taboos with an occasional glass of wine or a cigarette. He sold his last Corvette to raise money for his first congressional campaign, and still buys 30 to 40 neckties a year, explaining, "The only thing that adds color to menswear is a tie."

When asked if he's a hunter, in a state defined by hunting, he says he's tried it, but doesn't care for it. "I don't shoot animals; they're too pretty." He has no problems with hunters going for the meat, but says, "I don't agree with trophy hunting."

In person he's a dynamo, and clearly, he likes to mix it up. "I like to read things I disagree with, talk to people I disagree with, like to understand how people come to different conclusions," he says. "If I agree with you, the conversation is over." He even sees drawbacks in the state's Republican domination: "The system works best when you have two vibrant parties, and there's a real contest of ideas."

Simpson got to know the Idaho Conservation League's lobbyists when he was in the Legislature, and he respected them enough to make a small donation to the group. When a journalist asked about the gift during his first congressional campaign, though, he refused to admit it. Then, shortly after he became a congressman, he got an invitation from Rick Johnson: Come up to Redfish Lake

in the summer of 1999 and speak to ICL's annual Wild Idaho Conference.

It was a crucial encounter. At the conference, Johnson and Simpson began to get to know each other. And Johnson brought up the idea of designating wilderness in the nearby Boulder and White Cloud mountains.

Johnson has the usual environmental reasons for picking the Boulder-White Clouds: spectacular scenery, prime habitat for mountain sheep and mountain goats, wolves, elk and salmon. He also has political reasons. The Boulder-White Clouds have no significant logging industry, traditionally a tough opponent of wilderness. Lots of Idahoans already know the mountains' beauty: Their crowns are visible along the popular highway through the Sawtooth National Recreation Area. They're also close to an ICL pocket of strength in Sun Valley.

At the Wild Idaho conference, Johnson took Simpson on an overflight of the mountains. It brought back Simpson's memories of family camping trips in the area when he was a kid. Simpson agreed to think about a wilderness proposal. From then on, Johnson courted Simpson, sending him postcards and letters, visiting him, having dinner together. "We started listening to each other more and more," Johnson says. "He began to understand wilderness better, and I began to understand the needs of rural Idaho better, the needs of his constituents."

For a wilderness bill to fly, Simpson needed to satisfy the ranchers who have grazing permits in the Boulder-White Clouds, the off-road drivers, and the local government leaders who see wilderness protection as another federal power play. It's a challenge Simpson relishes. "My goal is to improve the lives of people I represent," says Simpson, "and to accomplish something long-lasting. I want to try to solve problems — that's why I'm here, to solve problems."

There are a lot of problems in the area that need solving. The ranchers are going under, hit by regulations and lawsuits protecting salmon, competition from cheap imported beef, and rising costs. Custer County, on the eastern and northern flanks of the mountains, has watched its mines as well as its ranchers busting out. It's hard for the locals to see any economic alternatives, with about 4,200 people scattered over 4,900 square miles, almost all of which is federal land. And the off-road drivers are worried about being shut out; they want to know exactly where they can — and can't — go.

Simpson set out to solve all the problems at once, and made it his own wilderness effort, not Johnson's, because that was the only way it could work politically. He ran it as shuttle diplomacy, meeting with each interest in small groups. He took each side's demands to the others, and brought back the reactions, working toward something that would be acceptable to all. The demands started out large, but he whittled them down. It took two-and-a-half years.

The Idaho Conservation League took the lead representing the environmentalists, and made another strategic move by helping to produce an economic study of Custer County. It showed that the county might reshape itself with better schools and a new post-high-school education center, high-speed Internet access, affordable housing, and better medical facilities. It helped the locals realize what they might ask for in return for supporting some wilderness protection.

Three months ago, Simpson took his proposal public in a big way, with a speech to a group of Idaho's movers and shakers at the City Club in Boise that was broadcast to a statewide public radio audience. Vowing to craft an "Idaho solution," he said, "Everybody has to see some benefit in it, and everybody has to give up something." He acknowledged both the fun of dirt-biking and the way the machines disturb the solitude of hikers in "God's cathedrals." He said his goal is to "separate uses that are inevitably conflicting uses ... We don't have to put a snow machine or dirt bike on every acre in Idaho, just because we can."

Simpson had crossed a threshold in modern Idaho politics: A Republican had come out strongly for wilderness. Then, he went backpacking in the Boulder-White Clouds, and endured three days of hail, snow, sleet, and rain. "Nothing prettier than a good lightning and thunder storm," he says.

The bill that Simpson introduced in the U.S. House in October was a rough draft still lacking important details. Simpson says he'll reintroduce it in the current lame-duck session of Congress, and the negotiating will continue, more in the open. Predictably, the competing interests — including the Idaho Conservation League — say they want the details adjusted in their favor.

"It's not a bill I would have written," Johnson says, "but I am not in charge."

The blandly named "Central Idaho Economic Development and Recreation Act" would hand out millions of dollars of federal money to local governments and ranchers. It would give several thousand acres of federal land to the locals for development. And it includes strange odds and ends, like a promise to build "motorized recreation parks" near four cities that are hundreds of miles from the wilderness (see story at right).

The bill would kick motorcycles off some trails, while allowing riders to continue using many others, including one that splits the wilderness areas. It would protect much of the best habitat, the most famous peaks, and the watersheds of key rivers, while leaving more than 100,000 acres of equally wild land outside of wilderness boundaries.

Twenty-four environmental groups — 17 of them based out-of-state — have come out against the bill. They range from the Sierra Club to Wilderness Watch. They know that protecting wilderness has often required compromise, but they believe this bill gives away too much for too little gain.

The bill's most controversial proposals are two land giveaways to Custer County: about 150 acres along Valley Creek in tiny Stanley, near the Salmon River, and 960 acres in the Cape Horn area near Marsh Creek, off the highway from Stanley to Boise; both are habitat for elk and spawning salmon. Many residents of Stanley also oppose developing these parcels. Developing both parcels would violate the rural character of the Sawtooth National Recreation Area, warns Jon Marvel, director of Western Watersheds Project, based in Hailey. The land giveaways are "a bribe, to get the counties to sign off on the bill," he says. "Not that bribery isn't effective — it's extremely effective. But why bribe them with something that has inestimable value? Instead, we should give them something that has very little value: money. Let them fight and quibble over money."

The critics also want the off-road vehicles forced off more trails, to reduce the stress on wildlife. "This is a brutal, cold country, where wildlife really struggles to make it," says John Osborn, the

conservation chair for the Sierra Club's regional chapter. He has family roots in Stanley, and has worked in Idaho's conservation movement for decades. As traffic continues to increase, any backcountry left out of the wilderness, he says, will become "an ORV hell."

Critics worry that the bill reinforces the trend of Frankenstein-style wilderness, like the designation of Oregon's Steens Mountain Wilderness in 2000 (HCN, 11/6/00) and Nevada's proposed Lincoln County Conservation, Recreation and Development Act (HCN, 9/13/04: A water-and-wilderness bill kicks up dust in Nevada). Many of them also oppose another wilderness collaboration effort, in southwest Idaho's Owyhee canyonlands, where the Idaho Conservation League is working with Republican Sen. Mike Crapo on the Owyhee Initiative (HCN, 12/8/03: Riding the middle path).

"I like him personally," Jon Marvel says of Rick Johnson. "But I think he's become too enmeshed in the legislative system — it's a spider's web."

Strictly on environmental grounds, the critics are probably right, but the politics can't be ignored. The land giveaways, for instance, have more than a dollar value for Custer County — they help calm the prevailing local belief that the federal government has too much land.

And the ICL is not entirely alone: The Wilderness Society and Trout Unlimited also support the Boulder-White Clouds process. "This is hard stuff," says Craig Gehrke, who's in his 19th year with the Idaho branch of The Wilderness Society. "There's a lot of information and concepts in this bill, and right now, we're saying, the possibility of all the good outweighs the bad. Let's keep running this, to make it as good as we can make it."

With the national election results handing George W. Bush the White House for another four years, and conservative Republicans increasing their hold on Congress, it seems we're all living on Planet Idaho now. Suddenly, the Boulder-White Clouds process has become widely relevant.

The Bush administration will likely stay its course on environmental issues. It will continue to weaken regulations, appoint federal judges who share its philosophy, and develop more oil and gas on public and private land. And it will likely have support for this course from the Republicans running Congress.

On the wilderness front, Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Calif., chairs the key House Resources Committee, and he hardly ever sees a wilderness bill he likes. Pombo has recently blocked Washington state's 106,000-acre Wild Sky Wilderness bill, for instance, even though it has bipartisan support and is riddled with compromises.

Snowmobilers, other backcountry drivers and environmentalists who don't think they've gotten enough in the Boulder-White Clouds may try to enlist Pombo or block the bill in Congress some other way.

Simpson, who won re-election with 71 percent of the vote in his district, is optimistic. He thinks he can get enough fellow Republicans and enough Democrats to go along with the bill, because he's negotiating enough support from each local interest.

"Most people want to see some resolution," he says. "Most people don't want conflict."

Environmentalists everywhere face the same questions as those focused on the Boulder-White Clouds. They can work for increasingly ugly-looking solutions, perhaps making some new friends along the way, or at least defusing some old enemies. Or they can hold out for better times.

"There is hope" for better times, says Michael Garrity, director of Alliance for the Wild Rockies, one of many groups seeking the ultimate wilderness victory in Idaho and neighboring states: the Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act. It would designate 20.5 million acres of wilderness in Idaho, eastern Oregon and Washington, western Montana and western Wyoming. Painstakingly, its backers have recruited 185 co-sponsors in the House — but they're still several dozen short of victory. "Obviously, (the Northern Rockies bill) and any other good alternative isn't going to pass while Bush is president," Garrity concedes.

Those who hold out, though, risk losing more ground, as the backcountry traffic continues to increase, and as the administration and Congress push more rollbacks of regulations and laws.

Rick Johnson and Mike Simpson remind us that even now, reasonable people can be found on opposing sides. They also remind us that, as Simpson says, "Politics is about relationships."

Politics is also — as the late Democratic speaker of the House, Tip O'Neill put it — fundamentally local. In Idaho, four more years of Bush won't create more water. It won't thin Boise's winter smog, which robbed residents of views of the spectacular aurora borealis — the northern lights — on several nights this month. It also won't solve the conflicts between off-road drivers and those wanting peace and quiet.

But like people everywhere else, Idahoans will continue to work on the local problems. And the Idaho Conservation League will likely continue to gain credibility with people not normally considered part of the environmental movement.

Johnson is eager to track this progress. He has hired a pollster — the same one Idaho's Republicans use. In a poll last year, Johnson learned that 78 percent of Idahoans were "aware" of the Idaho Conservation League, and of those, 26 percent had a favorable opinion; another 34 percent had no opinion. Says Johnson, "Everything I'm doing should have a positive effect on that 34 percent." He expects the next poll to show better numbers.

**Ray Ring is *HCN* editor in the field.**

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