Hidden deep in the Kenai Mountains lies a small lake rimmed by towering snowcapped peaks. Few of the peaks in this wildly scenic place have names; in fact, the massive glacier whose blue ice face looks down over this lake is unnamed. Like a hidden Shangri-la from another land and time, the spruce-shouldered mountains leap directly up, out of the lake, to summits above 4,000 feet. The gin-clear waters along the shores are peppered with scrappy rainbow trout, and below them the lake falls away to profound depths. Other than a few trappers from a bygone era and a hiker or two ferried in by bush pilot, the place has been little explored. It is known, well-known, by only a few.

It is my good fortune to have spent 30 years getting to know this place. My wife and I built a cabin there, and during the past three decades that cabin has become our home, and a home to many guests who have come to love its majesty and wildness as we do. But it is more than a take-your-breath-away scenery kind of place, more than lumber and tar paper; it is the axis of my heart, the center of my being, my hidden refuge. Even when I am not there, it comes to me in dreams. It is part of me, and if it were blemished, damaged, destroyed, and even when it has been threatened, it is as if the knife is poised over my heart.

So Many Special Places in Alaska
Every Alaskan village, town, and city is encircled by and held in the embrace of wilderness—special places such as mine. From any vantage point an observer’s gaze can fall upon trackless expanses that seldom see a person, and not far beyond that, places that have never even seen a footprint.

My nameless valley is but one arm of a basin with four glaciers, and it represents an idealized sort of Alaska, for it hides wild places that no living person has ever seen. There are flower-strewn meadows as lovely as god ever made, and dark evergreen forests where low branches are hung with carpets of shamrock-colored moss. There are uncounted numbers of bears and moose, wolverines, wolves and coyotes, otters, minks, and beavers. Their game trails, as old as history, pulse with life and flow through this wildness like veins and arteries.

White-blanketed mountain goats gaze serenely down at this idyllic scene from clouded pinnacles, while everywhere there is the sound of moving water. As it has done since time out of mind, water continues to lure and seduce, to rip and tear, to push and pull, and to shape the very soul of this place. There are murmuring trickles and pulsing freshets and melodious watercourses half hidden in boulder piles by deep mosses. There are white-feathered cataracts roaring from high cliffs and crashing to the valley below. There is crystal clear water from melting snowfields, pond water tannic-stained as dark as chocolate, high country water as blue as a robin’s egg and glacial water so full of silica that it grinds between your teeth.

It is simply not possible to be anywhere in the embrace of this valley without hearing moving water, and in salmon season there are bright reds to be found in every clear stream. There are arctic char in fern garden pools, and there are birds. There are hawks and owls, eagles and falcons, ducks and geese and...
trumpeter swans and yes, even hummingbirds find refuge in this glacier-carved fastness.

From its source at the crown of the glacier 5,000 feet above sea level, this melt-water winds about 15 miles to the ocean through some of the most picturesque country in the world. These nutrient-rich waters drain a vast riparian corridor and then fertilize the intertidal estuaries of Kachemak Bay, documented as some of the richest on Earth. Nineteen glaciers feed Kachemak Bay, and the 35-mile-long bay holds this vast amount of fresh water inside a long sandbar, where it mixes and remixes with oceanic water to create a diversity and productivity earning its recognition by the World Bank environmental assessment program as one of the 132 of richest marine environments in the world.

Many Wilderness Areas in Alaska Are in Jeopardy

Impossible as it might seem in visualizing such a place, the forests in this priceless valley were sold for clear-cut logging as recently as 10 years ago. Bulldozers were poised to cross the bay by barge and begin grading roads up the valley and through this wilderness that had remained unchanged since the land emerged out from under the ice sheets of the Quaternary era. Alaska has a long history of the abuses of bulldozer and log trucks permanently altering the productivity of salmon rivers.

The reason that this area was spared was that a group of local people bonded themselves together as the Kachemak Bay Citizens Coalition, and they eventually overwhelmed the politicians in the state capitol. Against all odds, $23 million was appropriated by the state, and the lands were bought back from the logging company and Native Corporation. These lands are now protected in perpetuity for the use of local people, Alaskans, Americans from the lower 48, and the people of the world. The Kachemak Bay State Park and the adjoining Kachemak Bay State Wilderness Park together comprise approximately 345,000 acres (139,725 ha).

But care is needed, for the powerful interests that would destroy wilderness needlessly are unrelenting, and those who protect it can only afford to lose once.

With colleagues around the world who are the keepers of wild areas, Alaskans share the difficult and ongoing challenge of balancing the need for resource extraction with the values of wilderness. Clearly, the money from logging, oil, fish, and minerals is needed to fund schools, roads, and the myriad other public needs, and Alaska needs more such development. But care is needed, for the powerful interests that would destroy wilderness needlessly are unrelenting, and those who protect it can only afford to lose once.

Too often in Alaska and elsewhere decision makers have waged the wilderness debate as an either-or struggle. In our global community, and especially in today’s information age, we can and must work harder, and work together, to save what’s irreplaceable and be sensible and careful in developing what wise heads agree we must.

Continued on page 21
But as good fortune would have it, one of the SMAC members, Cindy Witzel, and her husband, John, operate a family business, Steens Mountain Packers, Inc. John Witzel, an inventor as well as an experienced wilderness outfitter and packer, created a nonmotorized, manually operated, portable fence remover that could quickly and efficiently roll up barbed wire into factory-size rolls (see Figure 1). Thus, John Witzel’s Steens Wire Roller became a key to the fence removal project, making it possible to use volunteers in a minimum tool approach and increasing their efficiency and safety (see Figure 2).

During one recent volunteer work effort, a group called Wilderness Volunteers removed and rolled two miles of fence in two days using the Steens Wire Roller (see Figure 3). Less pack stock is now required to pack out the miles of wire, because they are in compact factory-style rolls rather than hand rolls. Furthermore, it is safer for the pack stock as well. And, the wire and steel can more easily be recycled or used for other fencing.

BLM Burns District wilderness specialist John Neeling mobilized the volunteer effort to remove the fence. Organizations such as the American Hiking Society, Wilderness Volunteers, Sierra Club, and Oregon Natural Desert Association, among others, are cooperating in this effort to “put the wild back in the wilderness” at Steens Mountain. It is hoped that sharing information in this short IJW article will encourage similar wilderness restoration elsewhere.

Additional Information

For additional information on the portable and manual fence remover, the Steens Wire Roller, and other outdoor innovations, contact Frenchglen Blacksmiths, 39269 Highway 205, Frenchglen, OR 97736, USA. Telephone: 541-495-2315. URL: http://www.steensmountain.com/wireroller.htm. For information on the Steens Mountain Wilderness, use of volunteer groups, or to volunteer, contact BLM wilderness specialist John Neeling at John_Neeling@or.blm.gov or telephone: 541-573-4400.

CINDY WITZEL is the recreational permit holder representative on the Steens Mountain Advisory Council. Contact Cindy at info@steensmountain.com.

JERRY SUTHERLAND is the statewide environmental representative on SMAC. Contact him at JerrySutherland@comcast.net.

From SPECIAL PIECE OF ALASKAN WILDERNESS on page 19

Figure 3—The backcountry tourism industry in Alaska is highly dependent upon the use of float and bush planes for transportation. Photo by Vance Martin.

The 8th World Wilderness Congress, in Anchorage, Alaska, September 30–October 6, 2005, will feature open dialogue about Alaskan and global wilderness and sustainable development issues. Make plans to be there. The dialogue and action will be for the benefit of all people.

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