

Looking back helps with looking forward

Recently members of my staff and I met in Missoula with several Native American tribes to discuss the bison hunt around Yellowstone National Park. The meeting centered on the rights granted to Native Americans as part of the 1855 Treaty of Hellgate, an agreement between the United States and the Bitterroot Salish, Upper Pend d'Oreille, and Lower Kutenai tribes. Through the treaty, signed by President James Buchanan and ratified by Congress, the tribes ceded ownership of most of their traditional homelands while retaining key rights for cultural and subsistence use of those lands, which include the area around today's Yellowstone National Park. In our meeting, we talked mainly about ensuring public and hunter safety during the annual Yellowstone-area winter bison hunt, in which both tribal and non-tribal hunters (the latter through an FWP lottery) take part.

One thing that struck me during our discussion was the willingness of the various tribes in attendance to work together. Their efforts could be an example for FWP. Though administratively divided among separate divisions and bureaus, we need to recognize that all of us here at FWP have a common purpose of providing stewardship and recreational opportunities that benefit Montanans and visitors.

I was also inspired by the tribal leaders' deep understanding of their history and the modern relevance of legal documents like the Treaty of Hellgate, negotiated 166 years ago. For me, their historical insight underscored how important it is for FWP employees and others in Montana's conservation community to know our own history.

That includes understanding and accepting provisions of legal documents like the Treaty of Hellgate. It also means recognizing the achievements of western conservation leaders who came before us, people like President Teddy Roosevelt and George Bird Grinnell, as well as Montana's conservation heroes. These include inductees into the Montana Outdoor Hall of Fame such as Korean war veteran Thomas "Bearhead" Swaney, champion of the nation's first tribal-designated wilderness; Stan Meyer, past board chair of The Nature Conservancy and past chair of the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission; legendary backcountry horseman and outfitter Smoke Elser; trout conservation legend Bud Lilly; and longtime wilderness advocate Doris Milner.

We also need to recognize the FWP giants on whose shoulders many of this agency's achievements rest: past employees such as wildlife biologist Bob Cooney, fisheries researcher Dick Vincent, state parks director Doug Monger, and Jeff Hagener, who was FWP director under three different governors.

Recognizing the achievements of these and other conservation leaders provides us with insight on how to manage the constantly changing political, social, and environmental landscapes affecting Montana's fish, wildlife, and state parks.

For instance, if 50 years ago FWP's wildlife managers, working with landowners, could bring Montana's elk populations back from

the brink of near-extinction, I firmly believe that today's wildlife managers and landowners are equally capable of working together to find innovative ways to reduce overabundant elk herds and maintain them at population objectives.

Looking at what has been accomplished in the past can also give us a sense of belonging to something bigger than ourselves. It shows how we are part of a long stewardship tradition that has protected and restored wild lands, clean water, wildlife and fish populations, and cultural resources that contribute to Montana's high quality of life and tourism-based economy.

But looking back can help you move only so far forward.

Yes, FWP and conservationists across Montana have achieved great things. And we should recognize and learn from those accom-



Hilde Hamilton, 14, of Potomac, is an apprentice falconer who helps rehabilitate injured owls and other birds of prey at the Wild Skies Raptor Center. She and many other young people working on wildlife, fisheries, and parks projects across the state represent Montana's conservation future.

plishments. But just as important as the conservation heroes of yesterday are the Bud Lillys and Doris Milners of tomorrow—the Eagle Scout who repairs state park trails while earning a merit badge; the 4-H club members helping care for injured wildlife; the young university researchers finding new and cost-effective ways to monitor bird populations; the recently hired FWP biologists, game wardens, IT specialists, technicians, and others who bring new insight and high-tech expertise to their professions.

We should definitely learn from and pay homage to Montana's storied conservation past. But let's also be sure to recognize the energy, enthusiasm, and achievements of those forging our state's conservation future.

—Hank Worsech, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks