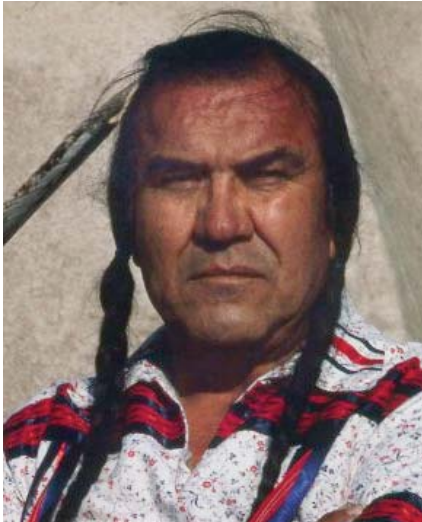


Bearhead Swaney

1931–2009



Gifted leader and orator, Thomas “Bearhead” Swaney inspired a generation of Montanans to advocate for environmental protection and tribal sovereignty.

Bearhead grew up next to the Flathead River in Dixon, Montana and lived most of his life on Post Creek, near St. Ignatius. A Korean War veteran, Bearhead was one of the most earnest tribal leaders of the 1970s and ’80s. As a member of regional and national American Indian councils, Bearhead was among the best-known Indian orators in the nation and recognized throughout Indian Country as a “warrior” –in the most respected use of the word –for wildlife, wilderness, water, and air.

“Bearhead probably had more innate qualities of leadership than anyone I’ve seen,” local historian Thompson Smith, told Char-Koosta News, the official newspaper of the Flathead Indian Nation. “He conveyed a sense of sovereignty in his being...He had a burning sense of justice – and for a more sustainable relationship with the earth. He had a deep love for the earth and all of creation and felt that nature and those among us with the least are very vulnerable; they both need protection and care.”

Indeed, as head of the CSKT Health Department, Bearhead incorporated his environmental ethos into drug and alcohol addiction programs by involving young people in their homelands’ natural resource setting.

As a young man, Bearhead advocated for Montana wildlife, helping to establish tribal-lands based conservation areas, including one for grizzly bears in the Mission Mountains. For these efforts and more, he received the American Motors Conservationist of the Year Award in the late 1970s.

Bearhead helped establish “Primitive Area” status for the 35,000-acre South Fork and wilderness designation for 95,000 acres on the westslope of the Missions – the nation’s first tribally designated wilderness area. In 1979, due in large part to Bearhead’s efforts, the Flathead Indian Reservation was designated as national “pristine” airshed, making CSKT one of the first Indian tribes to achieve the Class I designation for their lands. In Bearhead’s view, however, protecting the Flathead River was his greatest accomplishment – and the one with which he had the most personal connection.

When Bureau of Indian Affairs proposed to log old-growth ponderosa pine from the banks of the 72-mile-long lower Flathead River, he and his cousin Joe McDonald organized a float trip with world-renowned wildlife biologists Frank and John Craighead, BIA foresters, and his tribal council. The BIA soon withdrew its proposal.

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