

Cecil Garland

1925 – 2014



Cecil Garland initiated the “boots on the ground” approach to wilderness campaigns we’re all familiar with today. A resident of Lincoln, Montana, he worked for decades to protect the Scapegoat Wilderness, a 240,000-acre addition to the Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex. He succeeded and continues to be the inspiration behind citizen-created wilderness areas today.

Cecil grew up in North Carolina and, as he told Montana Wilderness Association Staffer Gabe Furshong, by the time he was 10, logging had removed the vast majority of the virgin forest in the Great Smoky Mountains. “Everything that I had romanticized in my mind had disappeared,” he said, “and I knew that if I’d find it anywhere again, it’d be in the West.”

Cecil said he found what he’d been missing in the Big Blackfoot Watershed after moving to Lincoln around 1955: “That night in Ringeye Creek, we had an elk bugling up above us on one of them benches and down the Webb Lake Hill was another elk bugling back and forth, and of course as someone who had never heard that or seen that before I was spellbound ... and I told myself, ‘They’ll destroy this, too.’”

Cecil pledged to protect Montana’s backcountry even if it meant risking his business and friendships in the small town of Lincoln. In 1960, he learned the United States Forest Service planned to log what is now the southern end of the Scapegoat Wilderness. So he and William Meyger formed the Lincoln Back Country Protective Association. Meyger died in 1962, but Cecil continued as association president. By 1969, despite community protests

and boycotts of his hardware store, Cecil gained enough support to delay the logging project. But he didn’t stop there. Instead, he convinced Montana Republican Rep. Jim Battin, who had helped stop the road plan, to introduce legislation to permanently protect the area.

Cecil, Battin and Montana’s two Democratic senators—Lee Metcalf and Mike Mansfield—succeeded in their monumental campaign despite tremendous pressure from logging interests. The Scapegoat Wilderness was designated in 1972, the first area to enter the system by citizen initiative rather than agency nomination. “The fact that I could do it and get it done is all the reward that I ever needed or ever will need,” Cecil later said.

“There was a burnout-letdown afterward,” he said more recently of the experience. “But I don’t have a lot of sympathy for that kind of stuff. I told myself I was tougher than that and kept going.”

Cecil served as vice president and president of Montana Wilderness Association from 1969 to 1973. He was living in Utah’s backcountry when he learned he would be an inaugural member of the Montana Outdoor Hall of Fame. He died on May 11, 2014, but it’s easy to imagine Cecil spent the autumn listening to those elk welcome him home and salute him up on Ringeye and Webb Lake.

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