

2022 INDUCTEE

JOHN G. GATCHELL

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After graduating from high school in Detroit, John Gatchell drifted west to Montana.

In 1975, “Gatch” settled in the Swan Valley and found work logging and building. However, he discovered his true vocation in wilderness conservation, starting with the wild Swan Range. As a volunteer in the Flathead, he developed a knack for building alliances with working people.

In 1985, the Montana Wilderness Association (now Wild Montana) hired Gatch as conservation director. Over the following decades, in countless interviews, news, testimony, and presentations, Gatch was the voice of Wild Montana.

Throughout his 36-year career, he drew on his blue-collar background to help develop practical and innovative agreements.

Amid heated “timber wars” of the 1980s and ’90s, Gatch negotiated an unprecedented agreement with Montana sawmill workers. Workers at seven mills joined conservationists in asking Congress to protect twice the amount of wilderness Congress or the Forest Service had ever considered on the Lolo and Kootenai national forests.

He worked with ranchers in the Big Hole and negotiated agreements to protect wild lands with snowmobilers in Seeley Lake, Kalispell, Great Falls, Philipsburg, and Lincoln.

Gatch moved people from entrenched positions into partnerships such as the Kootenai and Lolo Forest Accords, Blackfoot-Clearwater Stewardship Project, the Beaverhead-Deerlodge Forest Partnership, and Montana High Divide Trails.

He initiated the Montana Quiet Trails project in 1994, which led to Wild Montana’s successful

Trail Stewardship Program in 2012.

The work of stitching together challenging partnerships continues today with the Blackfoot-Clearwater Stewardship Act, sponsored by Sen. Jon Tester. The act seeks to expand the Bob Marshall, Scapegoat, and Mission Mountains wilderness areas near Seeley Lake by 80,000 acres and adds further protection to four Blackfoot River tributaries.

The neighboring Lincoln Prosperity Proposal builds on years of Gatch’s collaborative work. The proposal offers wilderness and conservation management covering 200,000 acres of national forest lands, focusing on local business, conservation, forest restoration, and recreation.

“You really can’t talk about Montana conservation without talking about John Gatchell,” says Wild Montana Deputy Director John Todd. “He’s really the godfather of modern Montana conservation, and he knows the state better than anyone.”

As a worker himself, Gatch respected people whose paychecks and businesses depended on mines, mills, and local backcountry tourism.

Since 1990, Gatch delivered unprecedented conservation agreements hammered out among the most unlikely alliances in Montana. Moving agreements through Congress, however, presents another challenge.

“We’ve demonstrated time and time again that the polarity that some elected officials peddle isn’t real or necessary,” Gatch said upon his retirement. “Down deep, Montanans share a great love of wild places. We have broken down barriers to build trust and solid partnerships. We should expect elected officials to recognize and act on that support.”

