

Profile: Charles Wellner
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by Kathy Barnard

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Over 100 Research Natural Areas have been set aside in Idaho thanks to a small group of volunteers led by Charles Wellner.

The biggest tree in Idaho – in fact it’s the biggest in North America, east of the Cascades – is named for Charles A. Wellner.

The tree is a 3,000 year old, 18 foot diameter Western Red Cedar, growing in a wet valley ten miles north of the town of Elk River.

The man is a 75 year old retired forester, living in Moscow, well-known and respected among those who value the land and active efforts to protect its beauty.

Charles Wellner has done more than anyone to establish Research Natural Areas (RNA) in Idaho, little pockets of undisturbed nature on public land, saved to be studied and enjoyed for generations. Because of his efforts and the work of the volunteer committee he founded, more than 100 of those natural areas have been protected statewide. And he is still looking for more.

A small man with wispy white hair, Wellner has visited nearly every one of the proposed RNA’s in the state. His shiny blue eyes sparkle when he talks about the relatively untouched spots tucked throughout Idaho’s varied terrain.

“I thought I knew Idaho until I got into this business and found all sorts of nooks and crannies hidden away,” he said.

Wellner grew up in Idaho and turned his love of the land into a bachelors degree in forestry from the University of Idaho in 1933. He graduated magna cum laude from Yale University with a masters degree in forestry in 1938.

He spent 40 yers working as a researcher for the US Forest Service in Idaho, Montana, and Utah. It was here he bcame intersted in preserving the undisturbed locations in the country.

“While I was still in the Forest Service, I was given the responsibility for researching the natural areas program,” Wellner said. “Our job was to try to push along the establishment of Research Natural Areas, but it was a very slow moving program.”

“It was sort of an add-on job. If you had a little extra time, you worked on it. If you didn’t have time, you didn’t get to it.”

During the 1950's and 1960's, some natural areas were identified and established by the Forest Service, as well as the Bureau of Land Management and other government agencies. But it wasn't until the mid-1970's that Wellner and the volunteer committee he created really made the program a priority.

"When I retired in 1973, I really started looking at this thing," Wellner said. "I thought: gosh, we're moving over the landscape so fast with all of our management activities—tree cutting, road building, etc—that if we're going to get these areas at all, we would have to go about it a little more fervently."

With the help of professionals throughout the state, Wellner assembled the Idaho Natural Areas Coordinating Committee. "A loosely-knit, volunteer group," its core members include Edward Tisdale, Fred Rabe, Nancy Savage, Doug Henderson, and Fred Johnson from the UI, as well as Charles Trost from Idaho State University, Robert Steele of the US Forest Service, and others.

"We pick areas as undisturbed as we can find them, which is difficult because almost every square foot of land on this earth has been disturbed to some extent," Wellner said.

The committee identifies different categories of nature to be preserved – types of vegetation, rare plants and animals, aquatic areas, and geological phenomena. It then lists where those things might be found in the state. The local forest supervisors or other land managers suggest possible sites, and committee members visit each potential area.

"A lot of times we find they've been too disturbed," Wellner said. "So much of our land has been grazed, and that produces a tremendous amount of disturbance."

Once the committee does find an appropriate area, however, it tells the local land manager, who usually cooperates by including it in the regional management plans. The National Forest Management Act of 1976 requires the Forest Service to include RNAs in their plans.

So far, 35 RNAs have been established in Idaho. Though they vary in size from 40 to 7,000 acres each (the average is about 1000 acres), all provide a sustainable area of unique and lasting interest. Pending approval of the state's forest plans by the federal government, at least another 100 will be established. Once set aside, RNAs will never be logged or roaded.

They are, however, still available and open to members of the public.

"We'd rather not mention that they're there. We want to keep them as natural as we can," Wellner said. "It's sort of a low key thing. We don't advertise them for recreation because a lot of use would ruin them, but the normal hiker isn't going to do much damage."

Wellner said preserving natural areas is important for many reasons, beyond the obvious aesthetic value.

"They are valuable for scientific purposes first of all," he explained. "Here are undisturbed natural areas where we can study and determine the natural processes of vegetation and wildlife."

Secondly, the areas give forest managers a baseline or reference point. “The Forest Service or anyone can go back to these and say: If we han’t done anything, this is what an area would look like.”

Thirdly, RNAs help preserve the integrity of different gene pools.

The retired silvaculturist said all of the RNAs he visited are beautiful, and joked that his favor one is always “the last one I went to.” As part of his desire to save examples of the ecological diversity of the state, Wellner emphasized the importance and beauty of all the areas.

“There are beautiful spots all over the country, but I think there’s something special about Idaho. There are some real gems here.”

And one of those gems is Charles Wellner himself.

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