Idaho Natural Areas Network: Chuck Wellner's Legacy Idaho Native Plant Society, Sage Notes, Volume 2, Number 3 (Summer 1998)

by Angela Evenden

Sometimes in life one is lucky to cross paths with especially spirited and passionate individuals, who in following their hearts, make significant contributions to the world. One such individual is Chuck Wellner, who throughout his career and life has dedicated enormous energy toward protecting natural areas in Idaho. I have had the good fortune of becoming acquainted with Chuck while pursuing mutual interests in natural areas conservation. I would like to provide a brief account of Chuck's remarkable involvement with Idaho natural areas.

Idaho has the most extensive network of research natural areas (RNAs) on federal lands of any state in the nation. This network has primarily resulted from the vision and leadership of Chuck Wellner, who started this work nearly 60 years ago. As a youn forester in the early 1930's, Chuck began working for the Forest Service conducting research on white pine forests in northern Idaho. The Forest Service had just initiated a natural areas program with the 1927 establishment of the Santa Catalina RNA on the Coronado National Forest in ARizona. Inspired by the idea of setting aside examples of ecosystems for conservations, research, and education, Chuck set about doing this work in northern idaho. He was instrumental in securing designation of the first RNAs in the Northern Region of the Forest Service, starting with the 1935 establishment of Tepee Creek RNA near Priest Lake.

Throughout Chuck's career he was employed by the Intermountain Research Station, in the research branch of the Forest Service. He began as a field scientist and retired as an assistant station director. Chuck was always interested in natural areas, and while conducting his field research he identified areas that would make good research natural areas. Early in his career there was an abundance of pristince landscapes, and accordingly many opportunites to set aside excellent examples of common and unique ecosystems. however, managers of the national forests at that time were not interested in saving and protecting natural areas; priorities were instead placed on extracting timber resources. It was difficult to get people excited about saving natural areas when it was

perceived that large amounts of undisturbed country remained. But as we all know, it was only a matter of time. Chuck saw many of the areas he and others identified as npotential natural areas succumb to timer harvest, and some of the RNAs he was successful ingetting designated are now islands in a landscape of old and new clearcuts.

By the 1960s interest in federal natural area programs began to pick up, and Chuck was appointed chairman of the Forest Service Natural Areas Committee for the Intermountain Research Station, a position he held until his retirment the early 1970s. Although a few RNAs and other special areas were designated in the late 1960s and early 1970s, by 1973 there were only nine established RNAs and a few botanical areas on national forests in Idaho. The real breakthrough for natural areas came later in the 1970's.

Upon retirement, armed with his extensive knowledge and love of idaho landscapes, Chuck dedicated himself to the natural areas cause in Idaho. By 1974, Chuck, along with Fred Johnson from the University of idaho, organized a meeting that led to the establishiment of the Idaho Natural Areas Coordinating Committee (INACC). This was a loosely knit group of volunteer scientists and specialists who set about identifying and establishing a natural areas network to rpeserve examples of natural diversity in Idaho. Chuck served as the INACC's chairman for many years and provided leadership to the technical committees: forests and woodlands, grasslands and shrublands, alpine, aquatic, geological, rare and endangedred plants, and rare and endangered animals. Committee members inventoried natural diversity across the state; field-checked the best areas; prepared and submitted natural areas proposals to the Forest Service, Burueau of Land Management (BLM), and Park Service; and met with land managers in the field at every opportunity.

The other turning point for natural areas came in the latter half of the 1970s, when Congress legislated land and resource management planning in the Forest Service and BLM. The legislation specifically addressed the need to identify and protect natural areas. Finally there was a mechanism in place for the agencies to take natural areas more seriously. Under Chuck's leadership, the INACC worked quickly and effectively to identify natural areas for inclusion in National Forest and BLM management planning efforts. Committee members logged long hours and scoured the mountains and valleys of Idaho. As a result, over 200 areas on National Forests and BLM land were identified and nominated for inclusion in an Idaho natural areas network, representing the biological diveersity within the state.

Inclusion of RNA proposals in Forest Plans was only the beginning of a long and slow bureaucratic process leading to formal establishment. Formalization of a Forest Plan resulted in an RNA being officially proposed but not necessarily established. Authorithy to establish RNAs in the Forest Service resided with the chief of the Forest Service until 1994 (that authority now resides with the regional forester). A detailed establishment record documenting the biotic and abiotic features, management needs, and conflicts of each area, along with

an accompanying environmental assessment, is require for an RNA to become established. Once the Forest Plans were finalized in the 1980s, the INACC became less active, and Chuck, often working alone, pursued the arduous task of working with the individual national forests to complete the required steps for formal establishment. He also worked with the BLM and other agencies to pursue natural area designations.

When I came to the Forest Service regional office in 1987 to manage the botany and natural areas program, there were about 20 established RNAs on national forests in Idaho; 10 of these were in the Northern Region. Chuck Wellner was one of the first people I met. We began a long association of working together on RNA establishment. Over the years I had the pleasure of accompanying Chuck in the field in Northern Idaho. Traveling with him was like being with a time machine. He would tell me of the changes with each passing decade – the 1930s, 1940s, 1950s, and into the 1980s; when a particular fire occurred, when a certain timber harvest happened, and by whom. His knowledge of the Idaho landscapes and their history is unique and exceptionally detailed.

Chuck volunteered his time to the Forest Service–full time, for many years–to prepare RNA establishment records and do the groundwork with forest supervisors and other staff to secure support for designation.

The roadblocks have been many in the path of RNA establishment. What seemed like a simple job has never been a priority within the national forests. Some areas, such as the Aquarius RNA on the Clearwater NF and Rocky Comfort Flat RNA on the Payette NF, became embroiled in controversy. But with perservance, progress has been made: in 1998 there are 106 established RNAs on national forests and 41 established BLM Areas of Critical Environmental Concern/Research Natural Areas within the state of Idaho. Over 30 of the Forest Service RNAs were established during the past two years. The current and future generations of Idaho owe a great thanks to this special person, Chuck Wellner, whose vision and tenacity have resulted in an exemplary natural areas legacy in the state of Idaho. We thank you Chuck!