

SUPPORTING THE PROTECTION OF QUETICO SUPERIOR CANOE COUNTRY

Spring 2015



# Wilderness News



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Northern Canoe Base

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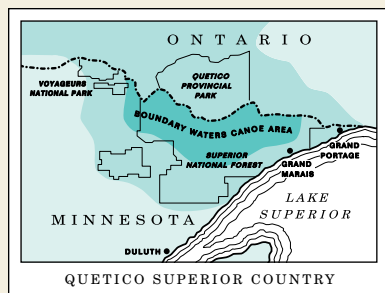
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QUETICO SUPERIOR FOUNDATION



The Quetico Superior Foundation, established in 1946, encourages and supports the protection of the wilderness, cultural and historical resources of the Quetico Superior canoe country and region.

### Wilderness News

Published by the Quetico Superior Foundation

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## LETTER FROM THE BOARD PRESIDENT

# Thank You

As this issue of *Wilderness News* goes to press, I am struck by the variety of stories we get to share about the Quetico-Superior Region. In this issue alone, we meet the superintendent of Quetico Provincial Park, Trevor Gibb, and we learn how girls benefit from girls-only canoe trips at Northern Lakes Canoe Base. We also get a look at how axe and saw use are taking their toll on campsites in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, and what some are doing to change that.

Your readership and continued financial support of the Quetico Superior Foundation make it possible for us to do this type of reporting. I'm grateful for the role you play in helping us meet our mission of protecting the wilderness character of Minnesota's Border Lakes Canoe Country and Ontario's Quetico Provincial Park.

I hope you'll continue on this journey with us as we cover ongoing stories like mining and the construction of the Namakan dam. Beginning in 2016, we will publish *Wilderness News* digitally. You can continue to receive *Wilderness News* for free in your inbox by emailing your name and email address to [editor@queticosuperior.org](mailto:editor@queticosuperior.org). You can also choose to pay for a print subscription using the enclosed envelope.

However you choose to subscribe, I hope you'll join us in taking an active interest in the ongoing evolution of the Quetico-Superior Region—we've been dedicated to sharing its stories since 1946 and looking forward to another 60 years of that tradition.

Sincerely,  
Jim Wyman

**On the Cover:** Visiting the pictographs on Lake Agnes. Photo by and courtesy of Alexa DeJoannis.





2014

Photos of the same site in 2014 and 1982, respectively, show how many campsites have become more open over time. All photos courtesy Dr. Jeff Marion.



1982

# ‘Before and After’ Leave No Trace

**Researcher warns of increasing impacts and urges end of axe and saw culture.** *By Greg Seitz*





The size of the core parts of most campsites did not significantly change between 1982 and 2014.

**A canoeist paddling along the shore of a Boundary Waters lake will see miles of unbroken forest. Trees grow and fall and rot, water washes against rock and soil, all unaffected by humans. Then, arriving at a campsite, a much different landscape often greets the paddler, abundant with human impacts.**

With stewardship by visitors and proactive management by the Forest Service, the experience at campsites could be nearly as wild as the surrounding shoreline, says researcher and Leave No Trace advocate Jeff Marion.

Marion says wilderness visitors should leave the axe at home in the future. After completing a study of campsite impacts, he believes ongoing degradation of trees at wilderness campsites means it is time to restrict the use of woods tools.

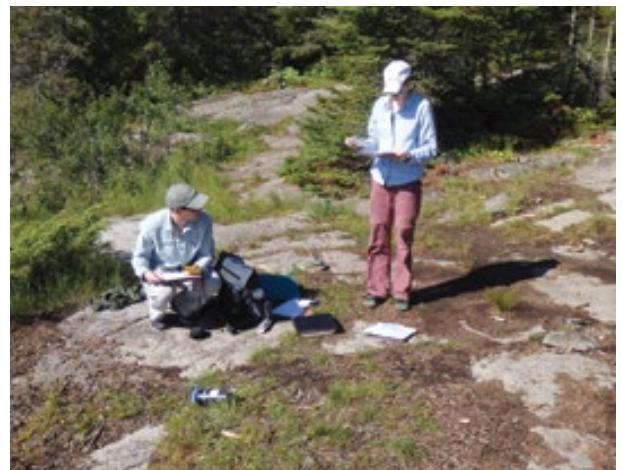
Marion is a professor at Virginia Tech University, a research biologist for the U.S. Geological Survey, and the author of a 2014 guidebook titled *Leave No Trace in the Outdoors*. He was also a founding board member of the Leave No Trace national organization. Marion first studied human impacts in canoe country in 1982, and returned this summer to examine conditions again and compare them to his findings from 32 years ago.

To conduct the study, Marion and three assistants surveyed 81 of the 96 campsites he examined in 1982, and made 94 measurements at each one. They collected

information about campsite size, vegetation cover, tree damage and root exposure, and soil conditions. The team is still compiling their data, but can see some trends.

While some issues appear to have improved, marking a more natural wilderness character, Marion says he was disappointed to see continued felling and damage to trees, which he called “avoidable impacts.” Stumps and scarred trees are apparent at many campsites, even though wilderness visitors are instructed to gather only dead and down wood, smaller than wrist-sized. There were two-thirds as many trees and half as many tree seedlings at the campsites in 2014 as in 1982.

Researchers perform measurements and collect other data about campsite impacts in the Boundary Waters during the 2014 study.





Photos of the same canoe landing in 1982 and 2014 show its eroded state and the intensive restoration performed.

“I’m not sure why the Leave No Trace messaging related to those impacts seems to be ineffective. I will be recommending to the Forest Service that they prohibit woods tools. When education is ineffective it’s time for regulation and my data would fully support such an action,” Marion said.

The Forest Service provided ‘seed money’ and collaborated on Marion’s study, and says it is reviewing his findings. But, Superior National Forest wilderness specialist Ann Schwaller said “banning wood tools doesn’t have to be the only solution, if more people were educated about low impact camping.”

“We need all kinds of advocacy groups to speak and write about wilderness Leave No Trace and tread lightly practices to... anyone that goes into wilderness, and not just about this issue, but also about many other resource issues as well,” Schwaller said. “Help be part of the solution. Try to reach as many people as possible about responsible camping.”

That call for individual action is not simply a way to avoid new regulations, but recognition of the limited resources available to the Forest Service. Schwaller says the time that rangers spend shoring up erosion, cleaning up campsites, and otherwise responding to poor visitor behavior, could be spent on critical issues like removing invasive species and tackling a backlog of restoration projects. She also said that restricting what tools Boundary Waters visitors are allowed to use could violate other wilderness management goals.

“Prohibiting tools is one more regulation that affects wilderness character—the primitive and unconfined recreation quality,” Schwaller said. “However, we agree that misusing woods tools damages campsites, hurting the wilderness character quality of naturalness.”

Tree loss caused by the use, abuse, and misuse of wood tools could be responsible for another negative trend that the 2014 study revealed: campsites are getting bigger. Marion theorizes that, as sites are getting sunnier because of tree loss, campers are carving new tent pads out of the forest to find shade. The number of these “satellites” more than doubled between 1982 and 2014, leading the growth of overall campsite size. It’s also possible that a new phenomenon has appeared in camper behavior: people don’t just want a good distance between themselves and the next campsite, they want privacy even from their companions, and don’t want to pitch their tents next to each other.

There are ways to subtly remedy this problem. On the Appalachian Trail, more than 600 campsites have been constructed on the sides of hills. “Small but ideal” tent sites are cut into gently sloping terrain to prevent campsite sprawl.

“Visitors then concentrate all their camping activity on these small campsites, which don’t enlarge over time due to natural topographic constraints,” Marion said. The practice has achieved “substantial success” in reducing camping impacts, including size, vegetation loss, soil exposure, and soil loss.





*“The slow but inexorable process of soil loss on campsites will cause tent spots in the core campsite area to become less attractive due to roots, rocks, or uneven soil,”*

– Dr. Jeff Marion

Marion’s research found that 43 percent of trees on campsites have moderate to severe root exposure.

The intense use of campsites in the Boundary Waters also means they are literally washing away, as soil, disturbed by campers and loosened by tree loss, erodes. Marion’s research found that each site had lost approximately 26.5 cubic yards of soil in the past three decades—almost 6,000 dump truck loads of dirt for campsites across the Boundary Waters. Four out of ten trees showed evidence of moderate to severe damage and root exposure. This process contributes to the cycle of expanding campsites.

“The slow but inexorable process of soil loss on campsites will cause tent spots in the core campsite area to become less attractive due to roots, rocks, or uneven soil,” Marion said.

The Forest Service can’t very well move all 2,200 sites in the BWCAW to hillside locations, but other options exist to contain campsites. Flat tent pads could be constructed and maintained in the core of sites, providing desirable locations and discouraging campers

from making their own pads elsewhere. From a Leave No Trace perspective, intensive management in a smaller area is preferable to a chaotically growing site, shaped by human desires rather than wilderness protection considerations. The Forest Service had been trying to replace soil and keep tent pads usable, but Marion says budget cuts have “nearly eliminated that capability” in the last decade.

Marion sees his findings and the recommended responses as fundamental understanding for sustainably managing the Boundary Waters. While prohibiting axes and saws might fly in the face of cherished traditions, it is better than the alternative: banning campfires. That approach has been implemented at many National Parks, primarily as a means to reduce damage to standing trees.

At right: Researchers found that 44 percent of campsite trees had moderate to severe tree damage in 2014.



## Leave No Trace: Be part of the solution

Ann Schwaller of the Superior National Forest shared some ideas for lessening human impacts on campsites in the wilderness. In general, Schwaller says visitors should "treat campsites the way they treat their own septic systems or backyards. I can't imagine people throwing trash in their toilets at home or burning cans/bottles/plastics in their backyard fire pits.

- **Consider camping in smaller groups:** This will mean more solitude and less impact.
- **Limit tent size and numbers:** Consider sharing a tent and use tents with the smallest footprints possible.
- **Consider leaving axes and saws at home.**
- **Use the smallest firewood you can find** scattered around the ground: small enough to fit under the fire grate. Large logs and big fires can sterilize the soil and, because they take longer to burnout, are more likely to cause wildfires.
- **Gather wood away from campsites:** This will ensure the nutrients, vegetation, and soil around the designated campsite remains intact, preventing soil loss, erosion and root exposure.
- **Pack food and trash out:** Throwing it in the woods attracts wild animals to dig up the ground, further damaging the campsite area.
- **Don't burn trash:** Pack it out! It's generally illegal to burn trash in the State of Minnesota because it becomes toxic to the water and air.
- **Keep trash out of latrines:** Nothing inorganic should go in the latrines. Food and fish remains invite animals to the site. The faster latrines fill, the sooner new ones are needed, which can further expand the site.
- **Watch where you walk:** Trampling vegetation causes more erosion, destabilizing soil and leading to compaction and less growth.
- **Speak up, say something:** If you see somebody in your group damaging natural features, like trees and rocks, ask them to stop.





# Wilderness News is going digital— be a part of the change!

Beginning in 2016, *Wilderness News* will become a digital publication. To continue receiving in-depth coverage of the issues facing the Boundary Waters and Quetico Park region for free, *simply send your name and email address to [editor@queticosuperior.org](mailto:editor@queticosuperior.org)* and let us know that you want to subscribe to the digital edition.

Go digital, save paper and help us put more resources into wilderness grants. Get every *Wilderness News* sent straight to your inbox. Digital edition always online at [wildernessnews.org](http://wildernessnews.org), available as a PDF and interactive magazine.

We're making the move so we can bring our coverage of the region to more readers and allocate more resources to our granting program. We've been covering wilderness issues since 1946, and as new developments like sulfide mining and the construction of the Namakan Dam unfold, we want to grow our reach and impact the issues that are important to the wilderness character and quality of the Quetico-Superior Region.

**Don't miss out on *Wilderness News*.** To continue receiving your **FREE subscription**, email us with your name and email address at: [editor@queticosuperior.org](mailto:editor@queticosuperior.org). You'll receive *Wilderness News* in your email inbox three times a year.

If you would like to continue receiving a printed copy, sign up for a print subscription for only \$25 per year (3 issues) using the envelope provided—your subscription will be good for all of 2016.

We hope you'll join us in making sure that today's issues are carefully monitored, with an eye toward maintaining the wilderness character of the Quetico-Superior Region.

*Sincerely,*

The Quetico Superior Foundation

**P.S. There are only two more issues before *Wilderness News* goes digital, so don't wait—email our editor today at [editor@queticosuperior.org](mailto:editor@queticosuperior.org) and let us know that you want to subscribe to the online version of *Wilderness News*.**



2014



2004



1964



# Northern Lakes Canoe Base

By Alissa Johnson



Every girl learns proper paddling strokes and techniques needed for wilderness travel into the BWCAW and Quetico Parks. All photos by and courtesy of Caroline Rose.

**Picture the Girl Scouts, and it's likely that young girls selling cookies come to mind. And while that can be part of the experience, Northern Lakes Canoe Base is offering up a very different image of what it can mean to be a Girl Scout: girls working together to meet the challenges of wilderness canoe tripping. Paddling against headwinds. Crossing muddy portages. Starting campfires in the rain. Exploring and getting to know a true wilderness area. Sitting around that fire at night, proud of their accomplishments and enjoying new friends. Based outside of Ely, Minnesota, Northern Lakes Canoe Base offers wilderness canoe trips exclusively for girls, whether they come on their own, with a friend, or as part of their troop.**

"We are trying to show girls that when you turn 12, that's when girl scouting gets really good. With all those skills you learned as a Brownie, you're ready to take the next step and go on an adventure," says Ann McNally, Summer Program Director for Northern Lakes Canoe Base. And adventure is something that girls are seeking. "A lot of councils are realizing that girls are seeking adventure and that they need to meet this need, so they're calling us because to my knowledge we're the only program exclusively for girls that offers wilderness canoe trips in the Boundary Waters."

Other programs in the region offer girls trips, but at Northern Lakes Canoe Base the entire experience is for girls only. Campers between the ages of 12 and 18 (as well as troop leaders and adults) go on three-to ten-day canoe trips in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and Quetico Provincial Park. And whether they come alone or with their troop, they get to be involved in every aspect of their trip. From learning to carry a canoe to helping cook, guides will be on hand to help but there's no one who will step in and do things for them just because they are girls.

"The social norm is that guys fix the tire on the car when it gets flat or are up on the roof fixing gutters. I





When exploring the wilderness girls discover things they'd never find in the city. Girl Scouts realize their own strengths on canoe trips through Northern Lakes Canoe Base.

know there are exceptions to that, but that's the social norm. So for girls to be in a situation that's challenging, and to have it be girls only, they always rise to the challenge," McNally says. "They really learn the power of teamwork because often the challenges they face are best solved if they put their minds together."

That kind of empowerment begins with teaching the girls wilderness travel skills. At the canoe base, guides show them the techniques they'll need on trail and give them a chance to practice. They also tailor expectations to the girls' ages, size, and experience. As McNally puts it, the guides would never expect at 12-year-old girl to flip up a 60-pound aluminum canoe on her own. But with three people and an emphasis on things like communication and good footing, it is possible for young girls to flip up a canoe and then have one of them carry it. From there, success is up to the girl under the canoe. "If a girl wants to take five steps and take a break, we're totally cool with that," McNally says.

Yet it's common for girls to set their own goals as they become more comfortable with trail life and learn that they're capable of more than they realized. This summer will be Eliza Vistica's fourth as a guide at Northern Lakes Canoe Base, and she sees it all the time. "On the first day we teach them how to carry canoes

and a lot of times they're very hesitant because canoes are very heavy, and they're waiting for you to instruct them. The last day, kids are fighting to carry the canoe and saying, 'I carried the canoe 30 rods yesterday, so I'm going to carry it 50 rods today,'" she says.

That transformation from hesitant to confident isn't limited to portaging. Campers routinely go from never having slept in a tent and being uncomfortable sitting on the ground to picking up insects to study them and comfortable sitting in the dirt. They know what it's like to sit around a campfire at night and feel great about their accomplishments, and according to Vistica, it's that hands-on experience that really makes the difference in the girls' confidence.

"When kids are in their everyday life, people tell them they can do anything—you can do whatever you want. In the wilderness—in our setting—we're able to show them rather than tell them. We have to get this fire started, we have to get across the portage, and no one can do it but us," she said. "At the end of a long, windy day paddling against headwinds and trying to get across portages, when you're sitting around the fire with them it's a crazy feeling. They just showed themselves that they can do it, and that experience will be with them forever."





Vistica believes that's the kind of experience girls need. During the school year, she taught environmental education in Georgia, sometimes working with fourth and fifth graders, and sometimes working with seventh and eighth graders. Among the younger students, she didn't see much difference between girls and boys. They were all confident and excited to try new things. Among the middle school students, the girls' confidence was much lower. When faced with something new, they were more likely to say, "I can't do that. Will you do it for me?" By contrast, girls who go through Northern Lakes Canoe Base adopt a more open attitude: "I've never done that, and I can't wait to learn."

In addition to fostering that kind of personal growth, McNally explained that Northern Lakes Canoe Base emphasizes wilderness values and Leave No Trace principles—and it goes beyond reading the rules and regulations for wilderness areas. Groups learn how their behavior affects other canoeists' experiences, and why it's important not to sing at the top of their lungs at campsites or litter or exceed group size limits. They also learn about the history of the wilderness areas.

"We talk about how, at one point, there was a movement to have resorts throughout the area and a road to every lake, and now the wilderness is threatened by

mining. This is a treasured resource. It's not a national park, a state park or a county park," McNally says. "Most of our participants have never been to a wilderness area and only know the colloquial term for it, like walking through a forest in their town and thinking it's wilderness. We make sure every girl, on the day she arrives, understands that this is a federally designated protected area, and we have to do our part to preserve it for generations to come."

McNally hopes that understanding will stay with them. Many girls go on to join college outing clubs or take trips of their own. "That word 'wilderness' has special meaning to them and we hope they'll do what they can after our trips to preserve wilderness areas for all," McNally said.

And perhaps that emphasis reveals how the Northern Lakes Canoe Base experience may in fact be similar to selling cookies—like all Girl Scout programs, it emphasizes the development of skills and values that will serve girls throughout their lives. That's something very much in keeping with the Girl Scout experience.

**Learn more about Northern Lakes Canoe Base at [www.gslakesandpines.org/pages/NorthernLakesCanoeBase](http://www.gslakesandpines.org/pages/NorthernLakesCanoeBase).**



Trevor Gibb while he was Assistant Superintendent of the Cochrane Cluster of Provincial Parks in Northeastern Ontario. Photo courtesy Ontario Parks.

## Quetico Provincial Park Superintendent Trevor Gibb: Maintaining a Pristine Wilderness Experience

*By Alissa Johnson*

At 32 years old, Trevor Gibb is relatively young to hold the position of Park Superintendent for Quetico Provincial Park, yet he is no stranger to remote and wilderness areas. He got his start in Ontario's Provincial Park System as a backcountry warden at Killarney Provincial Park in northern Ontario, which is smaller than Quetico but attracts a similar user group, and later became an assistant superintendent in the Cochrane cluster of 29 provincial parks. The latter includes Polar Bear Provincial Park, which is the largest provincial park in Ontario and home to some of the world's southernmost population of polar bears as well as an internationally important bird area. He also spent two years teaching in an Inuit Community on Baffin Island in the Canadian Arctic.



"I've been involved with managing three other wilderness parks in Ontario before coming to Quetico Provincial Park, and each had a different flavor and each provided different experiences that serve me well [managing Quetico]," Gibb said. He started as Superintendent in March of 2014, and has spent that time getting to know the park's stakeholders and users, and helping to review and shape an updated management plan for Quetico. The goal is to renew a park management plan every 20 years dependent on available resources. Continuing a process that began before he became Superintendent, Gibb hopes to see the renewed plan completed within the next couple years.

"Quetico is a park that's been around for over 100 years. It was the third park established in the province and it's a big park, almost 500,000 hectares [more than one million acres] of significant wilderness that is on the border between Ontario and Minnesota. So the management vision is very multi-faceted. It's a complex park," Gibb said. Nearly nine years of public consultation have gone into the preliminary management direction. Most recently, emphasis has been placed on making sure that the final document reflects the interests of local Anishinabe communities.

"We're looking to work as partners with the local First Nations to make shared resource decisions and generally work together where we can. Quetico Park is a big park and it's been around a long time, but it's also the traditional lands of the Anishinabe in the area," Gibb said. Over the last six months in particular, park officials have been working with the Lac la Croix First Nation, which is a First Nation surrounded by park and wilderness: the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness to the east, Voyageurs National Park to the west. The community has set up a park management advisory committee that has been weighing in on the preliminary park plan for Quetico. Gibb explained that in Quetico (as well as any place that lies within a treaty area), First Nations are allowed to practice treaty rights, which can include traditional activities like fishing, hunting, and harvesting wild rice. They also have the right to use "preferred means" to access the areas where they conduct those activities. That can mean canoeing and hiking, but it can also mean a motorboat or an ATV. And while the latter sometimes concerns wilderness canoeists, Gibb emphasized that First Nations around Quetico value the wilderness area as a wilderness.

"For the most part, the Lac la Croix First Nation who we've been working with closely with for many years really deeply value the environment in the park, and any sort of access that's would impair the visitor

experience and that kind of thing would be worked out between the community and the park before hand," Gibb said.

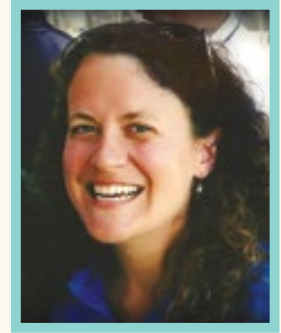
He also emphasized that while the management plan is not yet final, Quetico visitors shouldn't expect much to change in terms of their wilderness experience. A lot of management practices will remain the same. "We have managed in a way to preserve the wilderness experience, and that's one thing we have right," he said, "That's not something we're revisiting."

That means that visitor regulations will stay roughly the same, though there may be small changes in prices. The overall fee structure and quota system has been designed to do two things: generate funds for park operations and spread out the use of the park. "Occasionally we get questions about how come fees are higher here than in Boundary Waters, and the main difference is that our fees actually pay for the operation of our entire park system and protection. The Ontario Park system is almost self-sustaining, and all user fees are invested in the operation of the entire park system," he said.

"There are different fees for resident and non-resident backcountry campers and also different fees for different entry stations. Some entry stations along the southern border, like Prairie Portage and Cache Bay are more expensive than Lac la Croix or Beaver House or Atikokan, the reason being it's a park management tool to distribute the use of the park and minimize impacts on one particular region," he continued. "Right now, we don't have a over-use problem and this sort of pricing scheme is one of the tools we use to spread out use. We channel people into different parts of the park along natural travel routes so that we don't run into situations where certain areas of the park are overused and campsites are being impacted negatively and wilderness aesthetic impacted negatively," Gibb said.

And that is Gibb's main message to Quetico stakeholders: Quetico will continue to be maintained as a pristine wilderness. There won't be signs in the backcountry or designated campsites, and the core experience of backcountry paddling will continue as it has for many decades.

To help follow the management plan process, efforts are made to notify stakeholders and park users at each stage so they can provide park managers with comments. Quetico Park Management documents available for public comment are posted on the Ontario Environmental Registry at <http://www.ebr.gov.on.ca/> for each defined posting/comment period.



## Emilie Hitch

**Board member since 2010**

### **Please tell us what your involvement with the Quetico Superior Foundation mean to you:**

Being involved with the QSF means a few things to me. First, it means that I am a part of a community of people who share my belief that protecting the wilderness is important. Secondly, it means that I spend time and energy with people who are committed to the idea that the connection between people and the natural world is crucial for the health of our society. The Quetico Superior Foundation is dedicated to protecting the region, but we also believe it's our responsibility to help people understand why we all need wild places.

### **What other ways have you been active in the Quetico-Superior Region?**

I've been active in the region for as long as I can remember. Growing up, I spent every summer at Camp Warren where I learned the art of the canoe trip. Moving back to Minnesota after graduate school, I wrangled up some friends and we went to the Boundary Waters for a long weekend. It was like going back to a home I didn't really realize I had left.... I felt the benefits of that trip physically and mentally for months and made the commitment to myself that I would go every year from that point forward. I had started grad school, took a job with heavy travel, and briefly lived in Cambodia since then, but I have not broken my promise.

### **What is the most pressing issue you see in the region today?**

I know most people would say that "mining" is the most pressing issue for the region right now, but I think that this issue—along with others such as the legal battles over cell phone towers, land swaps, or wild rice rules—is an indicator of a much bigger problem. We, as a society, have lost sight of the long-term value of the wilderness. Each of these issues carves away at protection of the Quetico-Superior Region and with that loss of pristine land, water or air we lose a part of ourselves. The way I see it, we are, as a society, making excuses to rationalize the breaking of promises. And, many of these broken promises can have either long-term consequences or damage our land and people permanently.

### **What's one of your favorite memories from the Quetico-Superior Region?**

Most of my favorite memories include a beautiful view of nothing but water, trees, and sky, some kind of hot beverage heated over a fire, and great conversation. And, also, discussing great philosophical topics with adults, to strategizing the best way to find a chipmunk house with a toddler. All of my closest relationships have been strengthened by time spent together in the natural world. I believe I met a ghost in the Boundary Waters at the end of a portage one time... so that's high on my list of favorite memories as well.

### **What is your favorite spot or way to see the Quetico-Superior Region?**

My favorite spot is when the blue sky starts to peek through the trees on the portage... when you know you're almost there, and you can almost feel the water seeping through your boots from those first few steps into the next cold, clear lake.



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