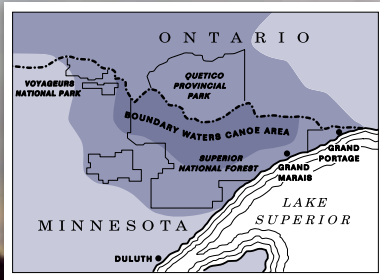


SUPPORTING THE PROTECTION OF QUETICO SUPERIOR CANOE COUNTRY

*Fall-Winter 2015*



# Wilderness News

WHY DO WE RETURN TO  
WILDERNESS?



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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*Wilderness News is published, in part, with a contribution from the Andrews-Hunt Fund of The Minneapolis Foundation.*

Design: Eaton & Associates Design Company  
Printed on 100% recycled paper with soy-based inks

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## LETTER FROM THE BOARD PRESIDENT

# Why Wilderness

As a wilderness enthusiast, you have probably been asked why you love it. Why go someplace where you have to “rough-it” for vacation? You have perhaps answered that it gives you a break from the pace of daily life and a chance to rejuvenate.

In this issue of *Wilderness News* we learn about the research of a Nebraska Wesleyan University professor who found that being in the wilderness enhances creative thinking capabilities. He confirms something you might have suspected: you feel and think differently in canoe country.

It’s a fitting way to celebrate wilderness in this issue of *Wilderness News*—your last one unless you’ve subscribed to the free online edition or a paid print subscription. We’re changing *Wilderness News* so we can reach a wider audience and direct more funds toward our grant program, which supports organizations who share our mission of preserving the wilderness character of the border lakes region.

Throughout this issue, you’ll learn more about that grant program, the individuals who have supported it, and the stories we’ve been covering online.

We hope you’ll continue to join us as we follow the news and stories of the Quetico-Superior Region. You can subscribe to the electronic version for free by emailing [editor@queticosuperior.org](mailto:editor@queticosuperior.org) or opt for a \$25 print subscription. It’s a simple and meaningful way to stay connected to the wilderness you love.

*Thank you for your continued support.*

Sincerely,

Jim Wyman  
President, Quetico Superior Foundation

**On the Cover:** A few days in the Boundary Waters can have profound effects on human cognition. Photo courtesy Dr. Frank Ferraro, Nebraska Wesleyan University.

# CREATING A LEGACY: The Quetico Superior Foundation Grant Program

At the Quetico Superior Foundation (QSF), our mission is to protect the wilderness character of Minnesota's border lakes canoe country and Ontario's Quetico region. We do that through the publication of *Wilderness News* and by giving grants to non-profit organizations that share our mission. We know that leaving a lasting legacy is better done through the actions of many. Here, we pay tribute to and thank some of the organizations that have put our grants to use over the last few years:



## Northeastern Minnesotans for Wilderness

With potential new mining projects on the horizon, Northeastern Minnesotans for Wilderness sought funding to develop and publish a regional hydrological model to understand water flow into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) as well as update a report on the economic impacts of the wilderness area. Both projects were undertaken in partnership with leading experts in their fields, and provide valuable information when it comes to having honest conversations about mining and its impacts—at home in Minnesota or with lawmakers in Washington D.C.



## Urban Boat Builders

In this unique program, boat builders mentor youth who have been, or are at risk of incarceration in the juvenile justice system. Students learn how to transform a pile of wood and supplies into a boat they can launch and paddle on local lakes in the Twin Cities and—with the help of a QSF grant—in the BWCAW. From boat building to five days in the wilderness, it's a truly transformative experience for kids who wouldn't otherwise have access to this life-changing experience.



## Voyageurs National Park Association

A QSF grant also helped Voyageurs National Park Association, in partnership with the National Parks Conservation Association, fund a water flow model for its watershed. The analysis helped show that acid mine pollution from sulfide mines as far as 100 miles away will increase mercury in the park's waters and impact Voyageurs' fish, wildlife, and ecosystems for decades. Having this type of information will help Voyageurs, the Forest Service, and the National Park Service manage and protect the health and vitality of the only National Park in Minnesota.



## The Trust for Public Land

Over the past decade, the Trust for Public Land has worked with donors and partners to protect islands on Burntside Lake near Listening Point, the historic retreat of environmental activist and writer Sigurd Olson. Most recently, a QSF grant helped the organization acquire and permanently protect Gusty Island by adding it to the Burntside Islands Scientific and Natural Area. The 4.5-acre island is easily accessible for a day trip by boat or canoe. Past QSF support has also helped the Trust for Public Land acquire nearby Gaul Island.



## Hamline Center for Global Environmental Education

“Waters to the Sea” is an internationally acclaimed multi-media education program that increases environmental awareness among elementary school children, particularly as it relates to North America’s water resources. QSF grants helped fund an education initiative to inform citizens, educators and students about the environmental challenges to the Boundary Waters region and engage them in addressing these concerns.



## Sustainable Ely

This Ely-based education center provides the public with factual information on the impacts of sulfide ore mining on the local economy, community, and environment. Year-round residents, business owners and seasonal residents volunteer their time to staff the Center and educate the public, inspiring them to act in opposition to mining in the Quetico-Superior Region.



## The Oberholtzer Foundation

The legacy of wilderness traveler and activist Ernest Oberholtzer is kept alive through the Oberholtzer Foundation. Oberholtzer, known affectionately as “Ober”, earned himself a reputation as an explorer when he paddled from Le Pas, Manitoba to Hudson Bay and back with Ojibwe trapper and guide Billy Magee in 1912. He became an advocate for the border lakes region, speaking out against plans to dam the Rainy Lake watershed for power generation and helping to form the Quetico Superior Council to lobby for the protection of the region. With help from QSF grants, the Oberholtzer Foundation has made ongoing capital improvements to Mallard Island, Ober’s home on Rainy Lake, and completed a commemorative tour of his 1912 canoe voyage in 2012.



## Heart of the Continent Partnership

There are more than 5 million acres of public lands along the Minnesota/Ontario boarder, encompassing everything from county lands to national forest. The diversity of land management organizations, individuals and communities can make collaboration difficult. The Heart of the Continent Partnership focuses on building region-wide dialogue and opportunities for groups to work together when it comes to caring for the health of the land and the people who live there. Quetico Superior Foundation grants have provided support over the years, including helping to fund a staff position during its inaugural years.

For more information on past grants, see [www.queticosuperior.org/grant-activity](http://www.queticosuperior.org/grant-activity)

To support our giving, visit [www.queticosuperior.org/support](http://www.queticosuperior.org/support)

**When you donate to the Quetico Superior Foundation and *Wilderness News*, you become part of a legacy of wilderness protection. Your contributions help support organizations that preserve the wilderness character of the border lakes region we all love. *Thank you* to all of our 2015 donors, and to those who have contributed in the past.**

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# Wild Minds: Scientists Study the Boundary Waters Brain

by Greg Seitz

**Does your brain work better in the Boundary Waters? Paddlers have been pondering the profound psychological shifts that take place in the wilderness for as long as humans have been seeking refuge there from the hectic modern world. Now, a researcher from Nebraska has shown that creativity and other cognitive abilities skyrocket in canoe country.**

By testing college freshmen embarking on a six-day canoe trip, Dr. Frank Ferraro of Nebraska Wesleyan University found their creative thinking capabilities essentially doubled in the wilderness.

The effect seems to be related to the fact that the pre-frontal cortex quiets down during time in the wilderness, allowing more creative thinking.

“The benefit of the outdoors is that it decreases activity in part of brain that does ruminating thoughts,” Ferraro says. Those ruminating thoughts, sometimes called brooding, can keep our attention largely focused inward. Being immersed in wilderness, free of distractions, we begin to notice beauty and wonder—and our creativity is free to flourish.

Ferraro’s research joins the findings of several other psychologists in recent years that have published papers about nature and mental health. He built his on a previous study by Dr. David Strayer of the University of Utah. Strayer first used a standardized creativity test

called the Remote Associates Test (RAT) on Outward Bound hikers on 4-6 day wilderness trips.

Each question consisted of three words that are somehow related, and the students were challenged to find that connection. For example: wood, liquor, luck. The answer is “hard”: hardwood, hard liquor, hard luck. Or, more abstractly: same, tennis, head. Answer: Match.

It seems pretty straightforward, but it gives quantifiable data about cognition. Strayer’s study found a 50 percent increase in scores after four days of backpacking in the mountains.

The results were also clear in Ferraro’s Boundary Waters study. Taking the test before the canoe trip, students averaged three-and-a-half correct answers. By the end of the trip, their scores had doubled to an average of seven. Students who stayed at school were used as a control group, and their results barely changed from test to test.

Strayer and Ferraro’s studies are two of several that have looked at the mental health benefits of nature in the past decade. Since the publication of Richard Louv’s book *Last Child in the Woods* in 2005. Louv coined the term “Nature Deficit Disorder” to describe what afflicts kids whose lives are too structured, and spent too much time indoors. Louv argued that this recent cultural shift away from lives integrated with nature was clearly leading to greater depression, anxiety, attention deficit, hyperactivity, and other mental illness.



Students from Nebraska Wesleyan University embark on a Boundary Waters expedition and take a test of their creativity while in the wilderness. Photos courtesy Dr. Frank Ferraro.

As researchers dug into the issue, the world has taken notice. A *New York Times* article in July wrote about researchers at Stanford, who found that a short walk in nature can reduce counter-productive and depressing “brooding”—negative thoughts that repeatedly run through a person’s mind.

Ferraro knows these benefits firsthand. He grew up in urban Omaha and never did much outdoors. He wouldn’t have even considered a wilderness trip, but then he took an introductory trip with the program’s leader, Dale Benham. Ferraro said it changed his life.

“I felt this rejuvenation. I started forgetting about things I thought were the big problems, stopped ruminating, started focusing on big problems, what am I doing with my career, what am I doing with my life? Things got real clear to me out there,” Ferraro recalls.

The psychologist in him wanted to know why the wilderness had such a profound impact on his brain. He started reading everything he could, from psychology journal papers to Sigurd Olson. He learned about Strayer’s research, as well as a related study at Stanford University, but he saw a need for a study in the Boundary Waters.

In the Stanford University study, a team measured brain activity in research subjects after they spent 90 minutes either walking through an arboretum or next to a busy highway, Ferraro figured the extended, immersive experience of nature in the Boundary Waters was important.

“To get the most robust effects, strongest data, you

would need an immersive experience. David Strayer has a theory that it’s three days of disconnection from technology and the modern world before you start to get benefits,” Ferraro says.

Those benefits may come from a reduction in stress hormones. Free of day-to-day worries, a chemical in our brain called cortisol decreases. Greater reductions come from more immersive natural experiences. A multi-day canoe trip can have a far greater impact than a short walk in a park.

But that is more true for experienced paddlers than novices. The fact is that for first-timers, the wilderness presents its own stressors.

Ferraro believes that this emerging science confirms what many people have known for a long time. Many wilderness visitors try to describe the unique state-of-mind that they enter in the Boundary Waters. It can be hard to put into words when we’ve returned to the modern world, probably because our brain quickly resumes its stressed-out brooding over jobs and families and everything else.

With still more questions than answers, Ferraro hopes to continue his study in the years ahead. Other tools could help connect the creativity to the brain activity that inspires it. Using perhaps portable EEGs, vials to sample spit and hormone levels, and other techniques, Ferraro thinks we could better understand how to get the most mental health benefits out of the wonder drug called *wilderness*.

## WHY DO WE RETURN TO WILDERNESS?

*thoughts from our readers*



*On my early trips it used to take several days for the wilderness to “sink in”; now I find myself immersed almost immediately. I think it is because it is now a comfortable place for me.*

*In my memories I can’t capture this feeling, contentment, and peace of mind. I can’t even describe it. Those who paddle often can understand this.*

*In the midst of this and without even consciously thinking about it, my mind clears and problems of the “real” world disappear. Before the trip I may have been in the middle of making important decisions about life or work. Without even thinking about it during a canoe trip, I often find everything sorted out at the end. What was complicated or uncertain is suddenly miraculously clear! I’ve made life changing decisions without even knowing it!*

— JOHN CASE

My boundary waters experiences never really end. They continue to live on in the sense of meanings and memories alive in mind and heart, in body and spirit. Personal character strengthens. Convictions deepen. Appreciation of the natural world heightens. And the enduring reality of the ongoing cycle of life and death and renewal creates a satisfying array of peaceful feelings of acceptance and contentment.

— LARRY CHRISTIANSON

*I paddle because, after 35 years of canoe travel, this is what I know best and it feels right. Travel on the water makes me feel more complete, somehow whole. Paddling is a meditation in motion.*

*I return to the wilderness to distill the elements of my life down to some essential set for a month or more each summer. The here and now of wilderness travel gives me a chance to leave the stresses of home life behind, if only for a month. The forced simplicity of travel in the wilderness strips away the mental clutter I carry. I gain clarity and perspective on my life from the seat of a canoe.*

— JIM GALLAGHER





Wilderness removes so many outside stressors and distractions that it frees your mind to wander and discover. When your role in the world is reduced to “paddle the canoe, portage the gear, set up the camp,” you let go of so much of the mental noise that we exist with every day. When you’re not worried about your “to-do” list or aimlessly refreshing your Facebook feed, you have so much more time for your brain to “do its best work”.

I think the effect of wilderness on the brain must be similar to why people get a runner’s high, or why writers often get their best ideas in the shower.

— ADA IGOE

*The BWCA has for the past 57 years always been my natural “shrink”. It is the place that dissolves all stress. It is the place where I can be a bit physical and feel good doing it. It is the place where I can unburden my life with just the basic chores of life: food, shelter and clothing. It is a great way to unwind, slow down the pace and pick up the raw feeling of being away from it all. Living outdoors on the land takes one back to the simplicity and at times difficulty, of how humans lived for centuries. It opens my eyes to how far civilization, as we know it today, has changed. How “modern” times are so different. It shows me the disconnect we are often having with our past—and our present which is constantly evolving. I find that one needs to do a mental reset to regain the proper aspects of how one should live their life, and become more aware of how present life can be a threat to future environments, and the ability for the earth and its creatures to survive. Call it back to nature, but it is also back to resetting your values.*

— BOB O’HARA



I return to the wilderness each summer for a re-set. A time to clear my mind and my habits away from screens and my workplace and even my friends and family... the routines of my whole world in general. Time spent in the wilderness is a different kind of “trip”. It’s one in which you carry the food that will give you the energy to be creative... it’s a trip that is spent problem solving... And it’s a trip that is spent in practicing my crafts.

It’s difficult to put words to the impact of this routine... the memories of peaceful, though hard-worked, days create a space in your mind to which you can retreat. But the further and fainter those memories, the more difficult that journey in your mind.

— EMILIE HITCH

*I think deep down many of us are meant to travel and not sit still. Motion and movement is part of our psyche and when combined with a natural or wilderness environment it fosters to energize our well-being. Self-propelled pursuits also create an environment where the mind is free to wonder.*

*I often seek out wilderness activities to aid my thinking. Paddling is an excellent way to free your mind so that it is able to mull over ideas without societal interference. This aids creative solutions and improved imagination... in general wilderness travel clears my mind, fosters focus and solutions, and improves my mental health.*

— BRIAN JOHNSON





Escaping to the wilderness has definite impacts on my mental health. It allows me to refresh and escape from the everyday norms and think about what I truly value. I find this to be especially true of solo travel. I try to complete at least one solo trip each year as a way to refresh and reflect.

When in the wilderness life moves slower, we are no longer surrounded by screens and constant stimulus. This forces us to live in the moment, observe our surroundings and focus on our basic needs.

— ADAM MAXWELL

*Why I paddle—Paddling my canoe is not easy, it is challenging, and portages get harder each year. Why do I push my limits to extreme, and abandon my normal comfort levels to sleeping on a rock ledge in the middle of nowhere? The answer is not in the mind.*

*Buried deep in my muscle memory, behind layers of memory, is a 10,000 year old continuous thread of survival and instinct. Body memory. This feeling gets re-activated when I hold this ancient shape of a paddle, transverse unknown lakes and paths, the mystery of wilderness, carrying my chance of survival in my pack. Trusting the guy at the back of the canoe that we can find a place to camp for the night.*

*I enjoy my comrades around the bonfires, the sighting of animals, the end of a tough day paddling into the wind. Ahhhh...in the elements. But the real satisfaction comes when my body sighs, aches, the stars come out, I fall into the deepest sleep in a year, and my unconscious rumbles with a long chain of memories and what it takes to be human.*

— MARK ODEGARD

When I returned from my 2008 deployment to Iraq, I began to struggle with PTSD, alcohol, depression and suicide. On the insistence of my wife and friends, I finally went back to BWCA. What I found back in the BWCA was a sense of peace that I thought I had lost forever. I could feel the poison that had infected my soul from the horrors of war being drawn out of me.

— ERIK PACKARD

*I crave the feeling of remoteness from other people that wilderness gives me. It forces me to slow down. I have to focus on discreet physical tasks. It centers me and relieves stress. Wilderness rewards a calm and deliberate approach to living.*

*Buildings, houses, rooms, walls all serve to constrain thought and imagination. Examine the lives of many great thinkers and a common pattern is walking. For some, the walk occurred along city streets, but for many it was a stroll through woods or a park. Imagine the genius unleashed by wilderness! Natural beauty does wonders for creativity and imagination.*

— BEAR PAULSEN



I return to the wilderness to unplug from the daily grind of life. Going into the wilderness helps me re-boot and forget about my responsibilities for a while.

Paddling is a therapeutic activity and the farther I get away from civilization, the better I feel.

Being in the wilderness allows me time to reflect on my life and prioritize what is important to me—I like to think of it as a yearly mental check-up. When I return back to my daily life I am refreshed and energized to focus on the things that mean the most to me, and feel confident in my decisions.

I find that after spending time in the woods, I come back humbly appreciating everything that I have in my life.

— JAKE RICHIE



*Just the name of Wilderness added to any place leads us to believe it is in the frontier, a place without signs or roads, but a place where wild things live, and we can be part of it with our imaginations.*

— JAMES VARCHO

After a bit of time being awestruck and gobsmacked by the beauty and sounds and smells, my brain seems to reignite. It isn't worried about work or about some public affairs issue that I'm struggling with. It isn't worried about the bills stacking up, the paycheck, the utility bill, whether there is cell phone reception.

What happens is that the deeper questions that I have start to unravel themselves and answers start to flow. Mixed in with that, often, are pictures in my brain of how to problem solve on home building/art projects, things I'm designing in my brain.

— STEPHANIE WEISS



Wilderness News would like to thank the many paddlers who shared their eloquent and thoughtful responses to our question—why do we return to wilderness?

Illustrations by Kari Finkler

# Are you receiving Wilderness News online?

**You're a loyal reader of *Wilderness News* magazine, but are you reading our weekly blog posts? Stay up to date with our objective coverage of the most important issues facing the canoe country wilderness. Here are a few of the most popular online articles you may have missed. Go to: [queticosuperior.org/blog](http://queticosuperior.org/blog) for more!**

## Top Stories:



Jessica Haines collects water samples at the Flambeau Mine Site in northwest Wisconsin. Photo courtesy Jessica Haines.

## Minnesota Student Studies “Best-Case Scenario” for Proposed Copper Mine

In the summer of 2012, teenager Jessica Haines was riding home from a Boundary Waters trip with her dad, brother, and friends. They were stuck in traffic on Interstate 35 when she saw a billboard asking a simple question: “Sulfide Mining Near the Boundary Waters?” The question, posed by the Mining Truth coalition, piqued the Forest Lake high school student’s curiosity, leading her on a four-year search for an answer and an award-winning science project. Three years into her study, Jessica says even if such mining near the Boundary Waters was done as safely in northern Minnesota as at the Wisconsin mine that is often held up as a poster child of modern mining, it could still have devastating impacts on northern Minnesota’s lakes, rivers, and groundwater.



Canoes in Quetico. Photo via Wikipedia.

## More People Are Canoeing and Camping in Quetico Park

The number of visitors to Quetico Provincial Park in Ontario was up 20 percent through the end of July this year, compared to 2014. This increase reverses a long-term decline, park superintendent Trevor Gibbs recently told the gateway community’s council, as reported in the *Atikokan Progress*. For the first part of this summer, more than 45,000 people visited the wilderness park. At the same time last year, there had been just 39,000 visitors. “Hopefully we can continue that next year, and reverse the trend,” Gibbs said. One reason the park manager believes numbers are up is the strong U.S. dollar, making it more economical for Americans to take a trip. Americans make up most of the park’s visitors, paddling across the border through the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.



Amy and Dave Freeman. Photo via Instagram.

## Freemans Set Off For a Year of “Bearing Witness” to the Boundary Waters

With a fleet of supporters, Ely explorers and environmentalists Dave and Amy Freeman will canoe up the Kawishiwi River on Sept. 23, and then enter the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. They won’t exit for 12 months. The married couple, who were named the 2014 National Geographic Adventurers of the Year, who last fall paddled and sailed from Ely to Washington, D.C., who have guided countless visitors to the Boundary Waters, who run a nonprofit that connects their adventures to tens of thousands of school children, are planning to spend a whole year in the wilderness.



A wetland near the PolyMet mine site. Photo by Greg Seitz.

## PolyMet's Pollution Would be Pointed at the Boundary Waters

A key error in the computer models that predict the flow of potentially contaminated water from the PolyMet copper-nickel mine in northern Minnesota means the discharge would drain toward the Boundary Waters watershed, not the St. Louis River and ultimately Lake Superior, as has been assumed since the project was proposed. Engineers had based their calculations on the assumption that the water level in a taconite pit next to PolyMet was higher in elevation than PolyMet. The error was based on using data from almost 20 years ago, during a period of record high water. *The Timberjay* newspaper reported that the mistake was discovered by scientists with the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission (GLIFWC). After running the model with the correct elevation figure, it became clear that the Partridge River, a tributary of the St. Louis River, would be uphill from the PolyMet mine.



Visitor hiking in Voyageurs. Photo courtesy National Park Service.

## Hiking Voyageurs National Park

Voyageurs National Park may be best known for paddling and boating, but for the hiker it offers spectacular vistas and a variety of forest scenery. The park has just launched a Hike to Health program—hikers record signposts throughout the park and after completion of trails, they receive recognition, stickers, and it's a fun way to explore new paths in the park. Trails in the park range from easy walks to strenuous, and include some that are accessible only by boat and a visit to a former gold mine. Check out more Hiking Trails and Maps at the Voyageurs National Park web site.



Grizzled skipper butterfly. Photo by Charles Sharp via Wikipedia.

## Rare Butterflies Flock To Special Site on Superior National Forest

In a clearing in the woods of northern Minnesota, some delicate butterflies have found their dream home. Carefully managed to provide the specialized habitat required by several species, the McNair Butterfly Area hosts about 50 species of butterflies, "nearly every butterfly, common or rare, found in northeastern Minnesota." Located about 20 miles north of Two Harbors, the 15-acre site has been kept mostly free of trees through years of prescribed fire and selective cutting by the U.S. Forest Service and the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. Today, the site is home to the Nabokov's blue, designated by the state as a species of "special concern." Another butterfly found at the site, the grizzled skipper, has not been found anywhere else in the state.

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## LISTENING . . .

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to wilderness wind  
sweeping through forest  
and across water,  
speaking with wisdom  
for all who pause.

In the distracting clamor  
of modern life,  
and the numbing noise  
of busyness.

Listening . . .  
to inner voices  
struggling to break free  
of new anxieties  
and old burdens,  
whispering spirit language  
beyond words.

In the comforting quiet  
of peaceful hearts  
and calming solitude  
of serenity.

– Larry Christianson, July 2011

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