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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.

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Protecting Our Wild Rice Heritage

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency is studying how sulfate and other chemicals affect the health of wild rice.

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Wilderness News
Published by the Quetico Superior Foundation

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LETTER FROM THE BOARD PRESIDENT

The Quetico Superior Foundation has supported the protection of ecological, cultural and historical resources in the Quetico-Superior Region since 1946. Over the years, our approach has changed to fit the times, and today is no exception. The Board of Directors recently finished an extensive strategic planning process to stay relevant in the face of changing environmental concerns. We identified three main goals: connect to a broader base of people through our online publications; support grant activity to address current issues; and balance expenditures between our granting efforts and the news reporting that support Wilderness News.

One of our top initiatives is to introduce younger generations to Wilderness News. As you will read in this issue, there is much to celebrate when it comes to protecting the wilderness character of the Quetico-Superior Region. In this issue, we celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act with an essay from long-time boundary waters traveler Bob O’Hara, who raises important questions about changing attitudes toward the wilderness experience. And, a counselor from Camp Lincoln reflects on leading kids through the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. We also learn about concerns over the health of wild rice, particularly as it relates to proposed mining. And lastly, the proposed dam on the Namakan River is back on the table with proponents trying to push the project forward again.

At the Quetico Superior Foundation, we believe that continued protection of the area’s wilderness character will require all generations to unite. We will be reaching out to a broader audience in coming months and we ask you to help us by doing the same.

Please consider sharing Wilderness News with friends and families of all ages, and remind them that they can sign up for the electronic version of the print edition by visiting www.wildernessnews.org/sign-up or by subscribing to Wilderness News Online at www.wildernessnews.org. We thank you for your support and look forward to the next 50 years of wilderness coverage.

Sincerely,
Jim Wyman

Contact us at:
Quetico Superior Foundation
editor@queticosuperior.org

www.queticosuperior.org

On the Cover: Wild Rice beds on Royale Lake, BWCAW.
The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency is reviewing its standards for protecting wild rice in Minnesota. With funding from the Minnesota State Legislature, the agency conducted a two-year study to determine how sulfate—the presence of which in water has been linked to an absence of wild rice—and other chemicals affect the health of wild rice. The MPCA will ultimately use the findings to assess whether the sulfate standard for water needs adjustments—a question that bears important merit in the context of proposed mining operations.

The MPCA adopted its sulfate standard for water in 1973, when it was also approved by the United States Environmental Protection Agency. The standard was based off of the work of Dr. John Moyle, who surveyed many of the waters across Minnesota during the 1930s and 1940s. Moyle wanted to understand the relationship between water chemistry and aquatic plants, and he found a correlation between the presence of sulfate in the water and the presence of wild rice.

“What came out of his work is that wild rice is generally uncommon in water above 10 parts per million of sulfate,” said John Pastor, professor and wild rice researcher at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. The MPCA contracted with Pastor to conduct parts of the study. “Moyle was correct but the problem was that he didn’t know why,” Pastor added.

The sulfate standard for water was set at 10 parts per million (mg/L). But in recent years, Pastor and MPCA scientists suspected that further research would yield more accurate information about the actual chemicals that harm wild rice. They suspected sulfide, which can be made from sulfate, to be the real culprit.

“We felt it was unlikely sulfate that was harming wild rice because plants pick up sulfate,” Pastor said. Anaerobic microbes in the sediment of wild rice beds turn sulfate into sulfide, which is a toxin. “Hydrogen sulfide is that rotten egg smell you get sometimes. It’s toxic stuff to life, not just to wild rice but you, me, everything.”

Ed Swain, MPCA Research Scientist, helped design the agency’s study, which sought to look at the effects of sulfate and sulfide on wild rice at three different levels: field research to survey lakes for various chemicals and wild rice; lab work to determine the effects of sulfate and sulfide on wild rice, and stock tanks that mimicked the conditions in wild rice beds. The latter allowed Pastor and his team to apply varying amounts...
of sulfate and track how much turned into sulfide, and how much that affected plant health.

“Our primary hypothesis was that sulfate is not toxic but could turn into sulfide, and that would be tough,” Swain explained. Thirteen university professors, seven federal representatives, six tribal members, five Department of Natural Resources representatives and five people of miscellaneous background commented on the plan prior to funding and implementation.

The scientists were correct—in the lab, sulfate did not adversely affect wild rice plants until 1,600 parts per million (ppm). By contrast, sulfide was toxic to young seedlings at a range of 300 to 700 parts per billion (ppb).

“That corresponded to what we saw in stock tanks. The more sulfate we added, the more sulfide we saw produced in the sediment right in rooting zone,” Pastor said. “We saw very reduced seedling emergence and seedling survival.”

The findings suggest that in reviewing the sulfate standard, the question becomes what level of sulfate will keep sulfide at levels low enough to protect wild rice. Pastor and his team calculated a narrow range.

“We found that given the range of toxicity of sulfide for the seedlings we have to keep sulfate between 7 and 20 mg per liter to keep sulfide below toxic levels. There’s not a lot of wiggle room for the standards,” Pastor said.

But some findings from the experiment suggest that analyzing the standard may be even more complex than simply understanding the effects of sulfide on the plants. In lake surveys, which were not conducted by Pastor, researchers found a correlation between the level of iron in the water—an element that is readily available in the region—and lower levels of sulfide. Lakes with higher levels of iron showed lower levels of sulfide. MPCA research scientist Swain explained that a dissolved form of sulfide that is toxic to wild rice plants can be precipitated (or turned into a solid) by iron.

“We believe that the precipitated [or solid] iron sulfide is not toxic to wild rice,” Swain said. He believes the findings suggest that once sulfide is produced, it’s not always toxic. “If there is enough iron in the sediment, it immediately precipitates it or turns it into a solid.

But Pastor worries that such an interpretation creates the impression that as long as there’s enough iron present, sulfide isn’t a problem. He and his team found that in some cases iron sulfide forms on the roots of wild rice plants, where it appears to inhibit nutrient uptake and cause the plant to produce smaller seeds. Plants with the iron sulfide on their roots—which shows up as a black coating—produced 40 percent fewer seeds. Seeds that did fill out were 15 to 20 percent lighter in weight. At sulfate levels of 300 ppm, wild rice populations can dwindle in three to four years.

“Looking at the interaction between iron and sulfate, if it precipitates iron in the sediment then it’s neutralizing, but if it’s on the roots it’s preventing nutrient uptake,” Pastor said. He and his team are continuing to study the impact of iron sulfide on roots with funding from the Minnesota Sea Grant and the Fond du Lac Reservation, testing the hypothesis that it prevents the uptake of nitrogen.

Swain agrees that it’s a good hypothesis to test, citing a lack of information in the scientific literature. But he seems convinced that the MPCA has enough solid information from its own study to assess the sulfate standard.

“Sulfide might have both direct and indirect ways of negatively affecting the growth of wild rice. From the point of view of protecting wild rice, it might not matter what the exact mechanism is; the point is to keep sulfate low enough so that negative effects don’t occur,” he said. “The MPCA study addresses this goal by integrating the results from studying wild rice in its environment. But we still have a lot more to learn.”
natural setting, where indirect effects can occur, with other results from controlled experimental settings."

As for what the formal recommendation will be, no determination has been made. According to Shannon Lotthammer, MPCA Division Manager, the agency’s analysis of the study will go through a peer review process first. “This peer review is the next step in MPCA’s ongoing efforts to enhance scientific understanding of the effects of sulfate on wild rice... It’s a step in the larger process in which MPCA will consider scientific information to determine if changes to the wild rice sulfate standards are needed,” she explained.

If the agency recommends changes to the standard, she added, public comment will be solicited. Any proposed changes would be adopted in accordance with Minnesota’s water quality standard rule (Minnesota Rules Chapter 7050), in accordance with the procedural requirements of the Minnesota Administrative Procedures Act, and require the approval of the USEPA. Additional information regarding the study findings and the review process are available on the MPCA website, www.pca.state.mn.us. Select the water tab at the top of the page, then select Water Rulemaking and finally, “Sulfate Standard and wild rice.”

Mining and Manoomin
By Greg Seitz

The issue of sulfate pollution and wild rice is particularly sensitive because of rice’s iconic role in Minnesota. It is the state’s official grain and a food staple for many, and it’s a big reason the Ojibwe people call the western Great Lakes their home.

Known as manoomin in Ojibwe, which translates as “the good berry,” wild rice is fundamental to the band’s culture. When the Ojibwe’s ancestors left what is now the eastern United States in search of a new home, they were instructed to find the place “where the food grows on the water.” It is still seen as a gift from the Creator. Wild rice is ideal because it can be dried and stored for times when other food is not abundant. According to the Great Lakes Indian Fish and Wildlife Commission, “manoomin has more overall nutrition than any other food once available to the native diet.”

Because new copper-nickel mines would have high sulfate discharges, rice has been at the center of the debate over PolyMet and other proposals. The Minnesota Chamber of Commerce sued in 2010 to overturn the state’s 40-year-old standard. When the suit was thrown out by the courts, legislators sought to weaken the regulations. Eventually, the legislature compromised by funding the two-year study that is just now seeing results.

For its part, PolyMet claims that it can and will meet the current standard. The company plans to use reverse osmosis water filtration and wetlands to control discharges. In October 2012, PolyMet announced that a pilot plant had successfully treated more than 1 million gallons of water for sulfate using reverse osmosis. The method involves forcing water through a membrane at high pressure.

The Ojibwe disagree that PolyMet will meet the sulfate standard, pointing to a history of weak regulation, the prospect of operating expensive reverse osmosis treatment plants for hundreds of years after mine closure without incident, and the assumption that rice is not growing in water just downstream of the mine. The Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, which has a reservation on the St. Louis River downstream of the mine, says the mine’s anticipated impact on wild rice is unacceptable, and obscured by reliance on untested technology, “These controls must function perfectly for hundreds of years. The assumption that this will occur is neither reasonable nor realistic.”
I doubt I fooled my parents much when—in the 1950s, at the age of 13—I hid under the covers with a flashlight reading Sig Olson rather than sleeping. As an environmental writer, Sig was a great wordsmith. He not only loved wilderness, he took you there with him through his stories of traveling northern Minnesota and Canada by canoe. I had only limited exposure to day trip canoeing through scout camp. Sig created a desire in me that I needed to fulfill: visit the region myself.

I did that in 1959, right after I graduated from high school. Three fellow graduates and I took a long ride from Minneapolis to Duluth, followed by a train ride to Ely, MN. We brought our sleeping bags and a homemade tent, and we rented everything else from an outfitter. We were 100% novice to the canoe portion, but were good campers. We traveled for 15 days from Moose Lake back to Shagwa Lake in Ely, and since it was early season, we saw virtually no one except a Canadian ranger. The area hadn’t been declared a wilderness yet, but it was my first true wilderness experience.

We were isolated, but not fearful. We were free of cars, roads, houses, power lines and mechanical noise. We embraced the silence. We marveled at the night sky. We watched wildlife, listened to the loons, ate fresh fish. Learned to read maps and locate portages. And we built fires for cooking.

I have faithfully returned to the boundary waters every year for the past 56 years. For me, time in the wilderness is like a big retreat in nature, where I recharge my batteries, revert to simple times and embrace all elements of nature. It resets my biological clock, and as a guide, I have seen the wilderness do the same for young students. I remember one student who lay out on the Precambrian rock looking at the heavens, and asked, “Why don’t these stars shine at home?”

On the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act, it is easy to see how the Act benefited my wilderness experience. It created a geographical boundary, which non-wilderness activity could not cross, and set aside a large landmass of the Superior National Forest for protection as the Boundary Waters Canoe Area (later the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness).
Things have changed over the years, of course. A permit system helped manage the number of people who wished to travel the area and prohibiting cans and glass bottles helped keep it litter free. Fiberglass toilets keep campsites clean. The popularity of the area means that a wilderness area is not a synonym for unpopulated. For some weeks in summer, finding a campsite is a challenge and there are wait times at portages. That busy time of year is short compared with the rest of the year, but it suggests that wilderness is needed more than ever in today’s fast paced world. It is savored by those who seek it. That is what strikes me most on the anniversary of the Wilderness Act—the attitudes we hold toward wilderness. When the Wilderness Act was passed, the digital world we now embrace had not been foreseen. And while the digital revolution will not change the boundaries of the wilderness, it is changing the mindset of travelers.

The social media mindset of the younger generation is a fabric of their everyday lives. When they go into a wilderness area with the capability of maintaining that contact, it is only natural for them to do so. Being connected is normal and natural. Announcing to all where you are camping, what you saw, how far you traveled, what is happening… This is the new norm of travel for many.

I have seen it myself. On one trip, I was aware that a companion was using a satellite-tracking device to send messages to his girlfriend. He let her know how he was doing and what was happening. For me, that would spoil the wilderness experience. But with young people today, it’s part of their lifestyle. Technology can cross boundaries, and that has the potential to change the solitude one finds in wilderness. The individual will define solitude, and how much he or she wishes to have.

The digital revolution has also changed some people’s mindset of preparedness. In today’s litigious society, it behooves organized groups to carry some form of digital communication with them. It adds a layer of security, and for many groups the device never comes into play unless there is a genuine emergency. However, it is also easier to call upon first responders to come to your rescue, and when paired with poor planning or inexperience, it can be irresponsible.
“The sounds of nature are what fill my soul, and the Wilderness Act provided a place for me to recharge.”
use resources and place a burden on surrounding communities, and it's important to be aware of that.

I am not saying the technological revolution is bad, but it may change the tenor and intent of the way people use the wilderness. Whether or not the digital mindset changes the Wilderness Act itself, it definitely affects how people travel and has the potential to tear down boundaries in a different way. For some, the music of nature may be replaced by an electronic beep. I prefer the peaceful experience of being away from the trappings of modern society. The sounds of nature are what fill my soul, and the Wilderness Act provided a place for me to recharge. Sig Olson so aptly described that over 50 years ago and it still rings true for me today.

As we look forward to the next 50 years of the Wilderness Act, let’s remember that wilderness is shaped by more than boundaries and rules. It is shaped by the attitudes we bring to it and the way we travel while we’re there.

**Editor’s Note:** Bob O’Hara has been an educator all of his adult life working with high school kids in science and coaching after school sports activities like Nordic skiing and track. He currently officiates in four sports from August through June. From 1969 through 2014 he has spent most of his summer months roaming by canoe the rivers, streams and connecting lakes far north of the 60th Parallel. He has mentored many young men and women paddlers on the finer points of arctic exploration and travel. In 1978 he was honored with induction into the New York Explorer’s Club. His love for the wilderness and wild places began in the BWCAW but has no boundaries; his canoe travel has taken him across Manitoba, Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, Quebec and Alaska. He has paddled across all of Finland from Russia to Baltic Sea. And, has ocean paddled on Hudson Bay from Wager Bay to Repulse Bay. 2014 marks the 56th consecutive year that Bob O’Hara has paddled in the BWCAW and Quetico wilderness.
During the summer of 2013, I spent my time leading wilderness trips for Camp Lincoln in Brainerd, Minnesota. Camp Lincoln is one of the oldest traditional summer camps in Minnesota. It hosts over four hundred campers each season, with campers generally staying at camp for a four week session. Some of the most popular activities at camp are archery, horse riding, fishing and swimming, as well as traditional athletic sports. However, a summer at camp is not complete without a journey into the wilderness; it serves as a means for campers to learn in small groups by challenging themselves and engaging with the natural world. For the oldest group of campers this journey is generally the biggest trek offered by camp, a week long journey into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness.

Last summer I added a new challenge to this extended trip by planning one of Camp Lincoln’s longest canoe trips and its first trip across the Boundary Waters from Lake One in Ely, MN to Seagull Lake on the Gunflint Trail. It was an ambitious goal which immediately became more daunting on the first day. The day began with our canoes moving from one shore to the next in an uncontrolled manner and ended as we were chased off the water by an approaching thunderstorm. As we sat under our tarp and cooked dinner it was soon evident to everyone that we were in for a challenging week that would test our limits both as a team and as individuals. During the challenging trip I observed three types of learning. The most easily observed growth in participants was their physical skills such as paddling, navigating and portaging. Although developing these skills are great for youth, the most important learning during a wilderness experience occurs on the personal and group level. The wilderness environment provides an irreplaceable setting for campers to develop closer relationships with each other, as well as more confidence and respect for themselves.

Developing Physical Skills
Within the first two days on trail campers had begun to hone their physical skills while moving across the wilderness. As I continued to teach fundamental canoe strokes our canoes began to move forward without swerving across the lakes. Within the first three days campers had taken over many roles including navigation, fire starting, cooking and setting up camp. As these hard skills grew campers became more comfortable and confident in their environment. Learning these types of skills is a critical and fun part of wilderness travel, however the deeper value of wilderness tripping with youth is the personal skills they gain, which directly relate to life off the trail. Skills learned on trail translate to life beyond the wilderness.
**Personal Skills for Life, Built on Trail**

Intrapersonal skills are related to one’s self and may include increased confidence, awareness and understanding of values. These skills are often learned and applied on trail, but must be reinforced at camp with discussion to instill meaning. As a trip leader it is important to intentionally facilitate the development of intrapersonal skills, but also understand that some of this learning will occur during personal reflection after the trip has ended. One easy step to take is to have each camper establish a personal and measurable goal each morning and then discuss the outcomes of that goal in the evening. In discussion it is valuable as a leader to ask questions which make campers think deeper into what they have experienced.

One major shift that took place on the fourth day of our trip, occurred when one camper developed the confidence to attempt to portage a canoe by himself. He was the first member of the group to attempt a one man canoe carry and excelled at the task. He made it to the end of the portage with a smile on his face, showing the pride he likely felt in his accomplishment. Throughout the rest of the trip, one by one each camper built the confidence to carry a canoe by themselves over a portage. Although some campers struggled and did not attempt the carry a second time, the important part was the confidence they had built to try something new and out of their comfort zone. This was a prime example of what Camp Lincoln calls personal growth and development or PG & D.

Interpersonal goals are related to how people interact in a group and relate to the people in their lives. Upon the arrival of the first campers at Camp Lincoln I was amazed at the interpersonal skills of many long time returning campers. I noticed a deep connection between campers that were far more inclusive than interactions in many school settings. During our trip across the Boundary Waters many members of the group had already formed relationships with each other over past summers. However, we were fortunate enough to have one participant that was at camp for the first time. He came into the trip as an outsider, but left the trip as an equal member of our team. Introducing a new member to a community of longtime friends can often be easier in a small group wilderness setting with little distractions. The isolation and team challenge involved in a wilderness trip helps individuals to express themselves and groups to form cohesive relationship.

By the end of our long journey campers had completed much more than a fifty mile paddle across the Boundary Waters. Their positive attitudes persevered as bugs swarmed on portage trails and rain fell as we paddled down long stretches of lake, showing great personal growth. Their growth as a group became evident through their teamwork and communication with their canoeing partner and while helping each other load up prior to each portage. In welcoming a new camper into their inner circle of friends they built character and learned how to interact with peers in an inviting way. In the final days of the trip after learning all the key skills needed to travel in canoe country, campers gained leadership skills as I took a step back from my role and allowed others to lead.
Have Fun and Come Back Soon
Perhaps the most important part of leading youth into the wilderness is having fun. In doing so, campers make lasting memories and build an appreciation for the beauty of nature. During our trip a few great memories were watching a bear strut across a portage, laughing into the night around a camp fire and the many fish which found their way from the depths of clear blue waters to the depths of our bellies. These memories serve the purpose of creating a lasting spark and desire to see more. With the addition of this spark, youth will grow up with a sense of wilderness in their soul. As they grow into adults I hope their spark will lead them on a path of both personal happiness and lifelong learning about that natural world. Furthermore, by placing this spark in young people we are ensuring that the next generation will continue to preserve the Boundary Waters and other beautiful natural places that have become a part of so many of us.

My First Experience at Camp
It took me awhile to get around to spending a summer at camp, but at the ripe age of twenty five I finally had my first experience at camp. At times it was trying and tested my patience, however as I look back I realize everything I took away from the experience. I came into the summer at camp with a lot of experience as a paddler, but not nearly as much as a leader and mentor. While traveling with kids ranging from seven to fifteen years old, I found amazing wonder in wild places. I gained a deeper appreciation for the small things as they were seen through the eyes of a new generation of wilderness travelers. I relished the time we spent watching flies land in pitcher plants and snakes slithering through the grass. I enjoyed watching the excitement in my camper’s eyes grow during my interpretation and stories, but was left wishing I had even more knowledge to share.

If my school work in the Environmental and Outdoor Education program at the University of Minnesota, Duluth had not sold me on the value of experiential education my summer at camp had. It was rewarding to see kids excited to learn about critters, events and places as we observed them. During our trips I would always bring books like *The Singing Wilderness* by Sigurd Olson to further explain and magnify natural events that we witnessed. Often times the stories would answer many questions, but the spark of curiosity would leave even more. The camper’s curiosity to learn when confronted with real life exciting situations solidified my value of experiential education outside the classroom. Their enthusiasm resonated in me as I realized that each one of them was capable of learning and obtaining information, while having fun and building connections with the people and environment that surrounded them. The combination of hard skills, personal growth and group development learned on our journey, along with the spark of natural curiosity provided the campers a foundation for lifelong adventure and instilled in me the fulfillment of introducing new souls to the wonder of the wilderness.

Editor’s Note: Adam Maxwell graduated with a B.A.S. in Environmental and Outdoor Education from the University of Minnesota, Duluth in the spring of 2014. He grew up in the Chicago suburbs and made his first canoe trip in 2006. He then moved to Grand Marais, Minnesota to be closer to canoe country and to work at Voyageur Canoe Outfitters in the summer months while attending college. From 2007-2010, while at Voyageur’s, he was able to complete a two-night personal canoe trip every week. In 2011 he and three companions traveled by canoe from Lake Superior to Hudson Bay; 77 days. In 2012, Adam and friends paddled from the Canadian Rockies to Hudson Bay; 86 days. In 2013 Adam lead backpacking and Canoe trips for Camp Lincoln. And, on June 16th of 2014, he and five others set out from Saskatchewan to paddle to Whales Cove on Hudson Bay. More online here: https://sites.google.com/a/d.umn.edu/2014-expedition-to-the-arctic/.
A dam that would be built between Quetico Park and Voyageurs National Park has new life, but may also have hit a final roadblock. Ontario’s government has turned down a request by the Lac La Croix First Nation to pay $16 million to connect the dam to the electrical grid, which proponents say is necessary to make it financially feasible.

The dam is seen as an economic development project for Lac La Croix. It would create 20 construction jobs, two permanent jobs, and electricity for about 2,800 homes, enough to support the community’s needs as well as for export.

**Transmission troubles**

If there is a dam, there has to be a way to get the power from the river to the electrical outlet. But, in a story in the *Toronto Star*, Ontario Energy Minister Bob Chiarelli said the government refuses to pay for an upgraded transmission line.

“Every single [feed-in] contract ... requires that the responsibility and cost of transmission to be on the proponent ... so no provincial entity is required to pay or provide the transmission,” he told the newspaper.

Existing power lines between the community and the main power grid are insufficient, and the Lac La Croix government says it represents a broken promise by the provincial utility. The band says that when the community was first connected to Canadian electricity in 1993, the lines were supposed to be able to bring in enough power and eventually feed electricity out to the grid. Neither is the case, with frequent disruptions in electricity another of the band’s complaints.

But the terms of the band’s 2010 feed-in contract with the province specifically require the First Nation to pay for the upgraded connection.

‘Irreversible damage’

Many environmental groups have partnered to oppose the dam, saying it would damage the free-flowing Namakan River’s wild nature and threaten the region’s fish.

The Coalition to Protect the Namakan cites a list of concerns: “The High Falls hydro-electric development will directly impact eight kilometers of the Namakan River, destroy its wilderness character, irreversibly damage its fragile ecosystem, threaten critical Lake Sturgeon habitat and migration patterns, impair water quality throughout the Lake of the Woods and Rainy River watersheds, and negatively affect the ecological integrity and value of the Quetico-Superior wilderness area.”

In 2009, the Quetico Superior Foundation formally opposed the project. At the time, president Jim Wyman wrote that “the relatively small amount of power that would be generated does not justify the irreversible impact to the river.”

After financial difficulties, an environmental review which did not satisfy environmental concerns, and other problems, the proposal was thought to have been cancelled in 2013. But Voyageurs National Park Association now says on its website, “We are seeking clarification on the current status and details of the project and are asking the Ontario government to work with the community to seek economic development opportunities that do not threaten the ecological integrity of the area and its wilderness parks.”

While the transmission line issue represents an impasse for the project, pro-dam columnist Cohn says another consideration is that the line will have to be replaced soon anyway, so the province ought to do it now and enable the dam project to go forward. Ontario’s government has asked the First Nation to meet and discuss options, but the province’s Premier says the band has not yet responded to the request.
The Wilderness Words of Stephen Wilbers

By Greg Seitz

There is the Boundary Waters, there are the people who go there, and at the intersection of those two is where canoe country exists. Because, though wilderness is a place where “man himself is a visitor who does not remain,” we experience it as humans, perceiving it with our subjective senses, through the lens of our own personal histories. So it is natural how Stephen Wilbers joins his stories to the land in A Boundary Waters History (History Press, 2011) and Canoeing the Boundary Waters Wilderness: A Sawbill Log (History Press, 2012).

In these books, Wilbers describes three decades of canoeing the region with his father, his children, and a rotating cast of other friends and family. Wilbers’ personal history, written on the northern landscape, cements the wild to the human. It is clear that for the author, the Boundary Waters contains milestones marking the progress of his life. On a trip in 1983, his first with his four-year-old son Eddy, they return to a campsite on Hazel Lake that Wilbers had stayed at three years before. The fact that it looked just the same inspires reflection on his own life, “Camping there now made me realize how much life had changed since Eddy’s birth. Debbie and I had become parents to not only a son but also a daughter, I had changed jobs twice, and we had moved from Iowa City to Minneapolis.”

Years later, when they camp on South Temperance Lake, Wilbers recalls that they last stayed on this site six years ago, when Eddy was just five years old and Wilbers’ dad was getting ready to retire. But more years go by and, after a hard and rainy trip with his now-teenage son ends in cross words, Eddy doesn’t rejoin him for seven years. The next year is the first time Wilbers does not record a trip journal, saying only that he “wasn’t in the mood.” Time quietly passing and people inevitably changing stands in sharp relief to the steadfast landscape.

The melancholy that comes with seeing kids growing up and parents growing old is sweetened by the fact that canoe country is clearly where some of Wilbers’ fondest memories with loved ones reside. Familiar sights like a big rock, a tree, or a portage are not just places, but stories. On the first year Eddy is back, a jubilant Wilbers writes about returning to his “favorite campsite on his favorite lake in the Boundary Waters.” He pauses and admires the view from his son’s “lookout tree,” where the boy had once spent hours watching the lake.

Wilbers is a teacher of writing and the author of books and newspaper columns about writing well, so it shouldn’t be surprising that his prose is pleasingly clear, straightforward, and full of immediacy. He kept careful journals during his trips, and the books are largely comprised of revised entries. These logs are rich in the sorts of fleeting moments, sights, reflections that are essential to capturing the magic of a trip.

Much has been written about the Boundary Waters, and it could be daunting as a writer to seek a place in the canoe country canon. But Wilbers claims his place with grace, avoiding redundancy by frequently quoting from many other writers. He has clearly read just about everything that has been written about the Boundary Waters, and frequently finds occasion to augment his observations with excerpts from other writers and wilderness characters.

While this may not be the philosophical prose of Sigurd Olson or Paul Gruchow, it carries its own weight. The central idea quietly woven through the text is that going to the Boundary Waters is going home, that the demands of simple survival are enough to strip away the nonsense of the modern world, and connect us with something old in ourselves, and with our companions.
Please tell us what your involvement with the Quetico Superior Foundation means to you:

Taking care of our environment is critical to our and our children’s future. Preserving the Quetico-Superior region wilderness provides a unique opportunity for people to connect with the natural world and the not-too-distant past when our country was sparsely populated and a much stronger equilibrium existed between people, animals and the environment. The wilderness region also preserves a natural, healthy habitat for many animals and plants.

My involvement in the foundation has followed my father’s, and his father’s, dedicated work in this area. I am proud of the stewardship of family members and friends for the foundation and the region.

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

I’m very concerned about the impacts of potential sulfide mining in the region. Sulfide mining contaminants inevitably spread through the environment, causing serious damage to lakes and rivers, and potentially completely destroying their living ecosystems of fish, other animals and plants. The short-term gains from the mining industry would be heavily outweighed by the long-term damage to the ecosystems, which are also the basis for the strong and unique tourism industry in the region.

What’s one of your favorite memories from the Quetico-Superior Region?

I learned about true wilderness on Boundary Waters canoe trips as a kid. I remember the awe of paddling across a seemingly never-ending lake with no other humans in sight, and the experience of stripping down our complex lives to the essentials, carrying all we needed with us. We worked hard to fulfill our basic needs of shelter and food, while really seeing our natural world.
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Kawishiwi River near Ely, photo courtesy of Bob O’Hara.
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