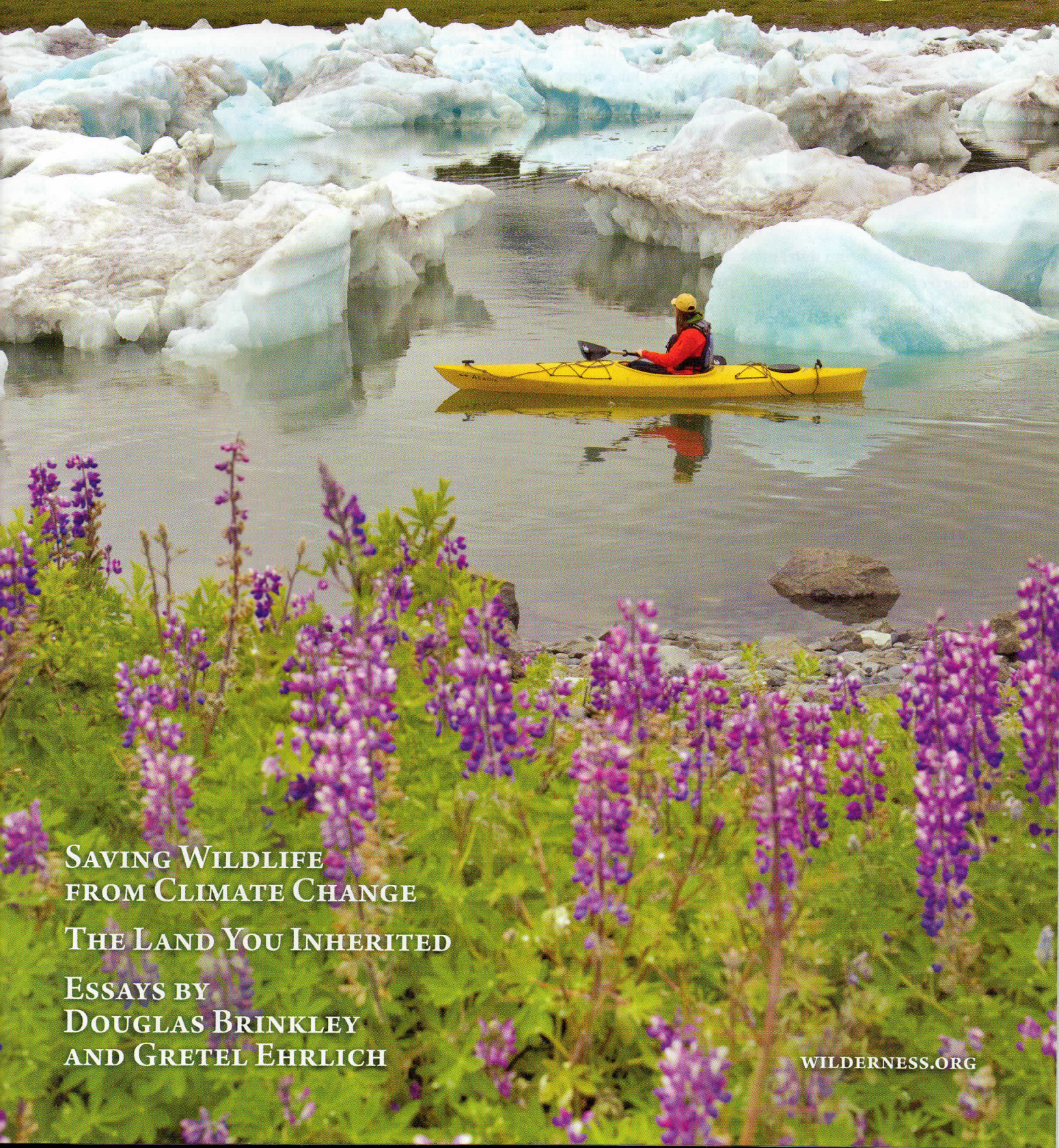




THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY 2010-2011

WILDERNESS



SAVING WILDLIFE
FROM CLIMATE CHANGE

THE LAND YOU INHERITED

ESSAYS BY
DOUGLAS BRINKLEY
AND GRETEL EHRLICH

WILDERNESS.ORG

Q&A WHAT'S SPECIAL ABOUT BEING ON A HORSE IN THE BACK COUNTRY?

In 1973 four horseback riders at a campfire in Montana's Flathead Valley decided that they needed an organization to ensure that national forests and other public lands provided reasonable access for visitors riding horses. They created Back Country Horsemen, and in the next few years other Montana chapters were formed. As they added riders outside Montana, they became the Back Country Horsemen of America. With the recent addition of a Michigan chapter, there are now affiliated groups in 32 states, with total membership of 17,000.

Besides weighing in on land management policy, BCHA educates citizens on Leave No Trace rules and other sound outdoors practices. Based in Grant, Washington, BCHA also helps maintain the trails that riders use, with its members contributing 345,690 hours to trail work on the public lands in 2009. That volunteer work was worth an estimated \$8 million. Sometimes members help with search and rescue missions in the back country.

The Wilderness Society is always seeking new partners and joined forces with BCHA in 2009, naming the partnership the Wild Riders. Our goal is to ensure that traditional, historical, and responsible pack and saddle stock

use in wilderness areas is recognized, protected, supported, and sustained consistent with the capabilities of the land.

Wilderness magazine spoke with BCHA President Terry Morrison to learn more about the use of horses in wilderness areas and on other public lands. Morrison grew up on a ranch at the base of northeastern Utah's Uinta Mountains and for the last 42 years has run a flooring business that he started.



© MICHAEL BODIN / BCHA

Q: What got you concerned about horse riders' access?

A: When I came home from the service in the late sixties I headed to a place called Maple Grove just to be by myself in the back country for awhile and try to put the war behind me. My relatives had been riding in that area for generations. But I ran into fences and gates and was told I couldn't ride there anymore. That turned me into an advocate for riders, working on my own, and then in 1992 I discovered BCHA, people who shared my passions and beliefs.

Q: As our population grows and as citizens seek peace and quiet from urban life, there is increasing demand for public land getaways. Is it possible to accommodate all the different groups?

A: We certainly think so. For example, a couple of years ago we helped put together an event in Missoula, Montana, to discuss trail classification with the U.S. Forest Service. We had mountain bikers, ATV riders, people in wheelchairs, hikers, and of course, horse riders. We talked about trail width and lots of other things, and every group had to give up a little. I think it was a good outcome.

Q: For most visitors, seeing wildlife is an important part of the back country experience. How is it different on a horse?

A: Last spring my wife and I rode up into a meadow filled with elk. They seemed to recognize the smells of the horses; those smells weren't completely foreign to them. So the elk didn't scatter. Now if your horse senses a bear is nearby, he'll get skittish. Somewhere in the back of his mind he knows he's lunch. Horses understand they are down the food chain, and the ears will go up, and they'll kind of dance a little bit, looking for an escape. Some horses don't like moose or bison either.

Q: How would you compare a wilderness visit on foot and one on horseback?

A: There's not a huge difference. The main one, I think, is that I can cover much more ground on a horse, so I can get farther away from civilization, so to speak. Also, hikers often establish one campsite and return to it every night, whereas a horse rider is probably going to have a different one every night, and I like that.

Q: Are the younger generations showing an interest in horse riding?

A: There has been some drop-off, but a number of pony clubs have been created to spark interest in kids, and that should help. I thoroughly enjoy riding with my grandchildren. One is a 14-year-old boy who's just getting into gasoline and perfume, but he came out with us on a recent ride. There are a lot of other activities for a youngster nowadays.

I want to see this tradition kept alive. U.S. history, across the country, was built on the backs of horses and mules. I hope that Americans will always have a chance to experience what our forebears did by traveling through the back country, on horse or on foot.

Q: What misconceptions do you think other outdoors people have about people on horseback?

A: It comes down to the simple fact that today not as many people understand horses. We often hear complaints about manure, which is really just recycled grass that breaks down.

Q: Why is The Wilderness Society a good partner for BCHA?

A: We share a belief that there are many benefits to protecting wilderness, and we both feel strongly that we have a responsibility to take care of the resources we have inherited. We are guardians. We also have found common ground in our commitment to supporting federal trails, rivers, and forest restoration programs. I think we have worked very well together and look forward to future efforts to protect our natural legacy.

For more information, visit www.backcountryhorse.com.

