

Campaign To Save The Boundary Waters

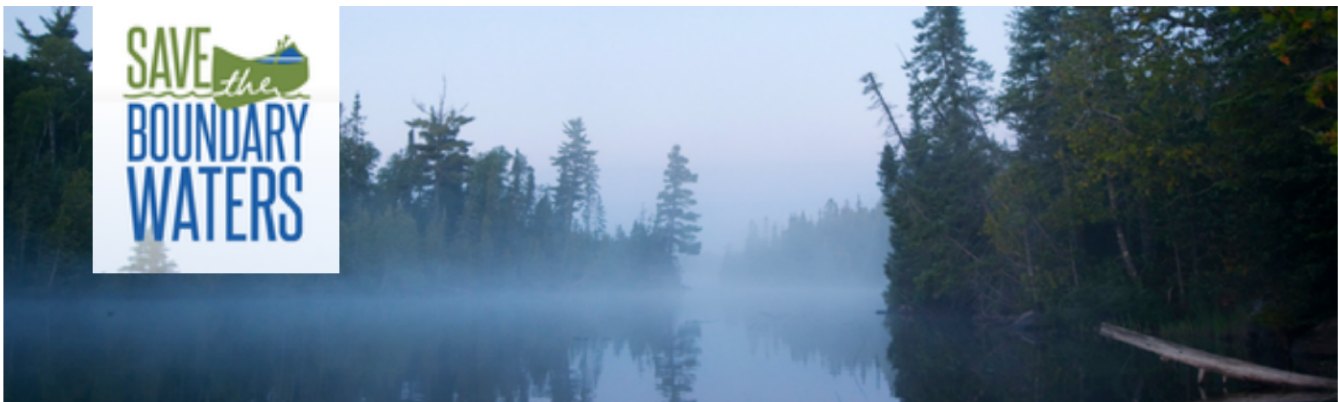
By Steve Piragis

In northern Minnesota lies America's most popular wilderness with over 250,000 visitors each year. The 1.1 million acres, containing over 1,000 lakes, holds more than 20% of all the water in the entire national wilderness system. From the air, the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) appears to be more lake and stream than land. Some 80,000 people from around the US and the world come to camp and travel each summer by canoe without the use of outboard motors, and by dog team in winter. The BWCAW links across the border with the Quetico Provincial Park of Ontario to make a canoe wilderness that is unmatched anywhere in the world. It is the land of voyagers and trappers of 300 years past, and the homeland of the Ojibway people who migrated here for the wild rice harvest and the fishing and hunting.

Over the past 100, years the wilderness has met many challenges from proposed dams to float planes and motor boats and remote resort

development. The Boundary Waters was permanently protected in 1964 by the Wilderness Act and again in 1978 with the Boundary Waters Wilderness Act. In these extensive protections, however, one provision was neglected: the withdrawal of mineral leases that lie outside the wilderness but in the watershed that drains through the wilderness area. That detail has led to another great environmental effort to rectify the oversight.

In 2013 our company called a meeting of informed environmentalists in our wilderness edge town of Ely, Minnesota to discuss what had become a looming threat of sulfide ore copper and nickel mining in the watershed of the BWCAW. We formed a group that came to be known as The Campaign To Save The Boundary Waters savetheboundarywaters.org. We opened a visitor center in Ely that summer to educate tourists and local people about this threat that could easily pollute the waters of the BWCAW. Research led us to believe that this type of



mining, known to the US Environmental Protection Agency as the most polluting industry in America, was just not appropriate for this rich ecosystem. Examples abound around the world of accidents from such mines, such as acid drainage into the ground and surface water and blow-outs of tailings dams that destroys assets downstream. Our livelihood and those of our employees absolutely and unequivocally depends on clean pure water throughout the canoe country. We are proud to be able to drink the water directly from our lakes and eat the fish we catch for dinner around the campfire.

The Campaign now has grown to a full time staff of 12 people and hundreds of volunteers across the country. Our efforts in Washington, DC have led to serious consideration of at least a temporary withdrawal of mineral leases with the prospect of further action to permanently ban sulfide ore mining in our watershed. We continue with our meetings in Washington every month with Congress and with agencies like The Bureau of Land Management and the US Forest Service. The effort has been expensive and time consuming, but also rewarding for our team at Piragis Northwoods Co. Our efforts will go on into the next administration unabated.

Why do you consider LT&C an important initiative and why are you interested in membership?

Our business caters to wilderness paddlers and nature loving people. Our town is itself dependent on tourism and its proximity to the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness, and it seems that similar threats exist near many eco tourist destinations. I believe we may be able to

be an example to others facing similar threats, and I hope our efforts here give others some hope that battles like this can be won if the strategy is good and the work supported by many.

Why is your case a good example of linking tourism and conservation?

As a tourist related business at the edge of one of America’s great wilderness areas, I believe our business and our industry of outfitting canoe trips and dog sled trips into the Boundary Waters has particular value in the fight to stop polluting industries like sulfide ore mining. Politically, we can bring to bear the issue of employment and long term sustainability. Our business and those of a hundred other local tourist operators relies on clean water and air. We have a proven record of employing thousands in the summer but also year round. Politicians have to listen to a business owner when another industry threatens the existence of the employers already in place.

Of course, big campaigns on a national scale like the Campaign To Save The Boundary Waters are very expensive. In our business, we have contact with over 6,000 people on our email news letter list and over 10,000 via Facebook. We contact these people regularly to explain the mining issue and ask for their support. They are a core of supporters who already have affinity for wilderness, and we can raise funds from these appeals tour list and other local support from around the region. These local folks are the core of our financial support of the Campaign. They know our business from being around for 37 years, trust us, and are willing to support us financially.



Through our e news letters, our blog, our Facebook site, and in our retail store we strive to inform everyone we can about the need to come to the rescue of the wild canoe country.

Are there plans to further improve your example of tourism supporting conservation in the future?

Yes. We are constantly finding new ways to leverage our position as employers in a wilderness edge community and to our clients. As an example, by joining with Back Country Hunters and Anglers we are accessing sportsman's groups to join the fight now and in the future. First and foremost, we have to keep up the level of customer support we have been known for and keep our business successful in order to have more influence with more constituents who can then recruit even more folks to join the fight to save the watershed from pollution.

How could your example be transferred to another protected area and how could your

experience be shared with others?

A national campaign for wilderness and natural areas is a big undertaking. Expert leadership is necessary. Our experience over the past four years could be invaluable for others facing similar challenges, and of course we'd be willing to help to the extent we have time to assist others.

For more information, please visit www.ltandc.org/campaign-to-save-the-boundary-waters/

