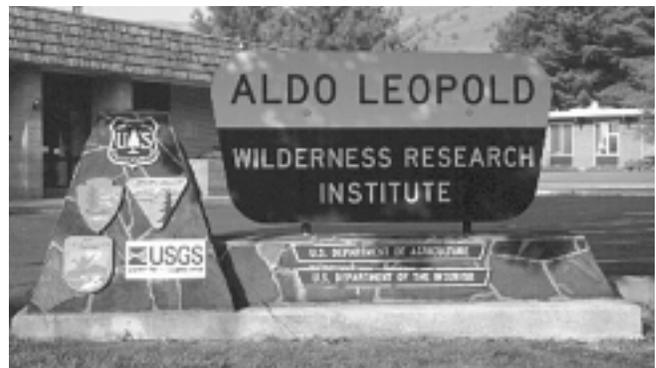


A Decade of Coordinated Wilderness Research

BY DAVID J. PARSONS

On August 21, 1993, high-ranking officials from the U.S. Department of the Interior and the Department of Agriculture, along with representatives from universities and nongovernmental organizations, joined Minnesota congressman Bruce Vento in ceremonies dedicating the newly established Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute in Missoula, Montana. Envisioned as the focal point for the development and application of information necessary to understand and manage wilderness ecosystems and their use, the institute provided a mechanism for the federal agencies charged with wilderness management responsibilities to address their research needs (Bureau of Land Management, Fish and Wildlife Service, Forest Service, and National Park Service). Although the Leopold Institute was initially formed from the Forest Service's pre-existing Wilderness Management Research Work Unit, the intent was that all four agencies would be active partners in support of projects and programs to provide the science necessary to address important wilderness management issues.

Now that 10 years have passed since the Leopold Institute's establishment, it is instructive to reflect on what has been accomplished during this time. Perhaps most significantly, the institute's programmatic scope has broadened considerably from its original focus on recreation use, impacts, and management to include such issues as the understanding and management of fire, nonnative species, and wildlife, as well as the understanding of the role wilderness plays in larger social and natural systems. This expanded scope has been responsive to the needs expressed by the partner agencies. It has led to the study of such diverse topics as the effects of recreation fee programs, subsistence use, the risks and benefits of restoring natural fire, surveys of invasive species, the effects of stocking nonnative fish in mountain lakes, and the causes of declining amphibian populations. Institute scientists have



helped to articulate research needs as well as conduct research and serve as brokers to engage university and other federal scientists in cooperative and collaborative studies. A significant program of research application, the linking of science to management through improved understanding of the need for and use of research information, has also been developed. However, the fact that this increased breadth has come largely without increased financial or staffing support has now stretched limited resources to the point that the institute's ability to continue its current level of activity may soon be threatened. Compounding this dilemma is the interest of the partner agencies in the institute expanding its effort into a collaborative or coordinating role with scientists working on topics such as air, water, wildlife, and global change—areas for which the Institute has only limited expertise. To achieve this goal, efforts would need to focus on identifying and developing new partnerships and funding sources.

In developing a program of work, institute staff has worked closely with representatives from the wilderness agencies to assure that research and application priorities address important management needs of all the agencies. The 1999 establishment

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decades, this study found problems to address in three transfrontier parks: displacement of indigenous people, conflicting local and national interests, and missed socioeconomic opportunities. Many examples and opportunities noted in the interviews with key informants are encouraging in terms of progress being possible. Such progress is essential in realizing the goal that “Transfrontier Parks ensure peace, prosperity and stability for generations to come” (Borchert 2002).

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Figure 7—Villagers living along the Shingwedzi River in the GLTP completely rely on the natural resources of the area to survive. Photo by Richard Slater-Jones.

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of a high level Wilderness Policy Council has, for the first time, provided an inter-agency forum for discussion of programs and priorities. Much of the council's initial efforts have been focused on responding to the recommendations in the 2001 report of the Pinchot Institute for Conservation, *Ensuring the Stewardship of the National Wilderness Preservation System* (see [http://](http://www.pinchot.org/pic/wilderness_report.pdf)

www.pinchot.org/pic/wilderness_report.pdf). Recognition of the importance of common problems faced by the wilderness agencies, together with the synergy found in leveraging limited resources to address common issues, provides hope that the model of a dedicated, base-funded inter-agency program of wilderness management science is here to stay.

More information about both the research and application programs of the Leopold Institute, including summaries of key projects and publications, can be found at <http://leopold.wilderness.net>. 

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