

Christians who love creation come together

By COURTNEY BROWN

<http://www.cnnw.com/Christianswholovecreation.html>

CANBY — People in the Northwest love the outdoors, and Russ Hall, a Northwest native, is no exception.

After completing a degree in biomedical electronics and a graduate certificate in Biblical studies, Hall worked for almost 20 years as a technical consultant and sales manager at a large company. Then, a vision was born 10 years ago as he was flying back from training in California and looked out the window. Inspired by the wilderness he saw below, it dawned on him that despite the huge environmental fervor in the Pacific Northwest, there were few Christian conservation groups around. After much prayer and talking with people, Hall resigned from his job and started Wilderness International in January 2005.

Located in Canby, Wilderness International is, according to its mission statement, “a nonprofit conservation organization dedicated to educating, enabling and encouraging as many people as possible to enjoy the wonder of nature, observe God’s majesty as it is displayed through His creation, and as a result, enhance their lives through this knowledge and experience.”

“I really wanted to engage Christians in the conservation and environmental movements, giving people opportunity not only to help, but also to enjoy the great creation the Creator has given us,” Hall said.

As executive director, Hall is the only full-time employee. The operations are directed by, and get oversight from, a board of an additional seven members. Each board member gives many hours of volunteer time to keep the organization moving forward.

Wilderness International is working to increase the membership ranks. Becoming a member of Wilderness International is vital to the organization, says Hall; not only does it help the group with projects and activities, it helps people stay connected with each other as they work together to care for, and enjoy, God’s amazing creation. The membership ranks consist primarily of everyday hardworking Christians who enjoy the outdoors, whether it’s fishing, boating, bird-watching, camping, hiking, taking pictures, or any other outdoor activities.

Wilderness International has something for everyone. Projects and outdoor activities are open to the general public and all are welcome. Anyone can sign up for events, members or not.

The fifth annual John Day River Float and Fish rafting trip was focused on women only this year and took place in June. Similar events are held throughout the year, some specifically for men, women or kids while others are open to anyone who wants to join in. One such event with everyone in April was the Community Conservation Day, a habitat restoration project at Meldrum Bar Park on the Willamette and Clackamas rivers near Gladstone. Forty-five volunteers worked for a whole day, clearing invasive plants, spreading mulch and topsoil, and then planting more than 1,000 plants. “It really rallied the community together,” said Hall.

The opportunity for believers to work with non-believers is huge. Not only are Christians helping to conserve nature, they are building or restoring and repairing relationships with non-Christians. “We work with many organizations throughout the community and have a diverse amount of support,” Hall said.

Susan Barnes, a wildlife diversity biologist with Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife, agrees: “(Wilderness International) provides people with opportunity to show people that the church does care about the environment and natural resources.”

A Christian herself, Barnes recently joined the board of directors. She worked with Wilderness International last year on a habitat restoration project in conjunction with the state in Clackamas, where she picked out plants to replace non-native invasive species. “I’m passionate not only about faith and God but also His creation so I really clicked with Wilderness International and wanted to get involved,” she said. Hall and Barnes both hope more people will join or volunteer with the organization, whether it’s going on an adventure, helping out at a conservation day, or donating money.

Donations help fund habitat projects, educate the public, and provide scholarships for outdoor adventures for people who cannot afford it, and opportunities to work with troubled youth. A recent grant is enabling Wilderness International to work with unemployed youth this summer doing conservation work at parks around the southeast Portland metro area. These youth are restoring native habitat, building wood duck nesting boxes, and improving fences that offer protection for both people and habitat at these parks.

Early this month, Wilderness International is putting on its first “Eco-Adventure” — combining a conservation project at the White River Wildlife Area in central Oregon and white-water rafting down the Deschutes River for men. Later in the month is an Oregon Coast salmon fishing trip. Future conservation projects include stream improvements and restorations, continued native habitat restoration projects, maintaining wood duck nesting boxes in surrounding areas and developing a strategy to even further increase the Christian community’s involvement

For more information, email info@wildernessintl.com, go to www.wildernessintl.com or look it up on Facebook.