

editorial

If you build it, they will come.

Watchable Wildlife was the movement; a stylized set of binoculars was the logo; and they came – 400 strong, from all over the U.S. and even from Canada and Mexico – to the 1st National Watchable Wildlife Conference, Sept. 10-12 in Missoula, MT.

For three jam-packed days, representatives of eco-tourism, and federal and state agencies with fish, game, and/or recreation interests, interacted both inside and outside of 34 intensive working sessions. The subjects covered almost every conceivable way of incorporating watchable wildlife into entertainment, enjoyment, education, the economy, and ethics. Whether the individual conferees came motivated to make money or to promote biological diversity, the watchable wildlife theme was inclusive and binding.

Fifteen entities – federal agencies (including the National Park Service) and conservation organizations – were signators to the Memorandum of Understanding that supports the movement, but none of the 15 evidenced a “guiding hand.” Rather, it was the yeasty mix of celebrants, eager to share information and success stories, that provided the conference signature. The working sessions showcased story after story testifying to the public hunger to be involved in wildlife activities.

Hal Salwasser, formerly a deputy director of the U.S. Forest Service and soon to be the Boone and Crockett professor of forestry at U/MT, sounded the upbeat conference note in closing:

“Don’t lose the magic,” he said. “You’re building a coalition here of public and private sectors that can do more than any legislation. You aren’t dependent on any agency or leadership group or pot of dollars. You’re people from many different places and interests, bringing meager resources to the table and making of them something much larger than the sum of the parts.

“You’re excited. You’re having fun. You’re pulling together. You represent a promising alternative to polarization. You have the enormous task of recreating the old sense of community whose actions are based on collective self-interest.

“So celebrate your successes; share your information. These are goals enough for now.”