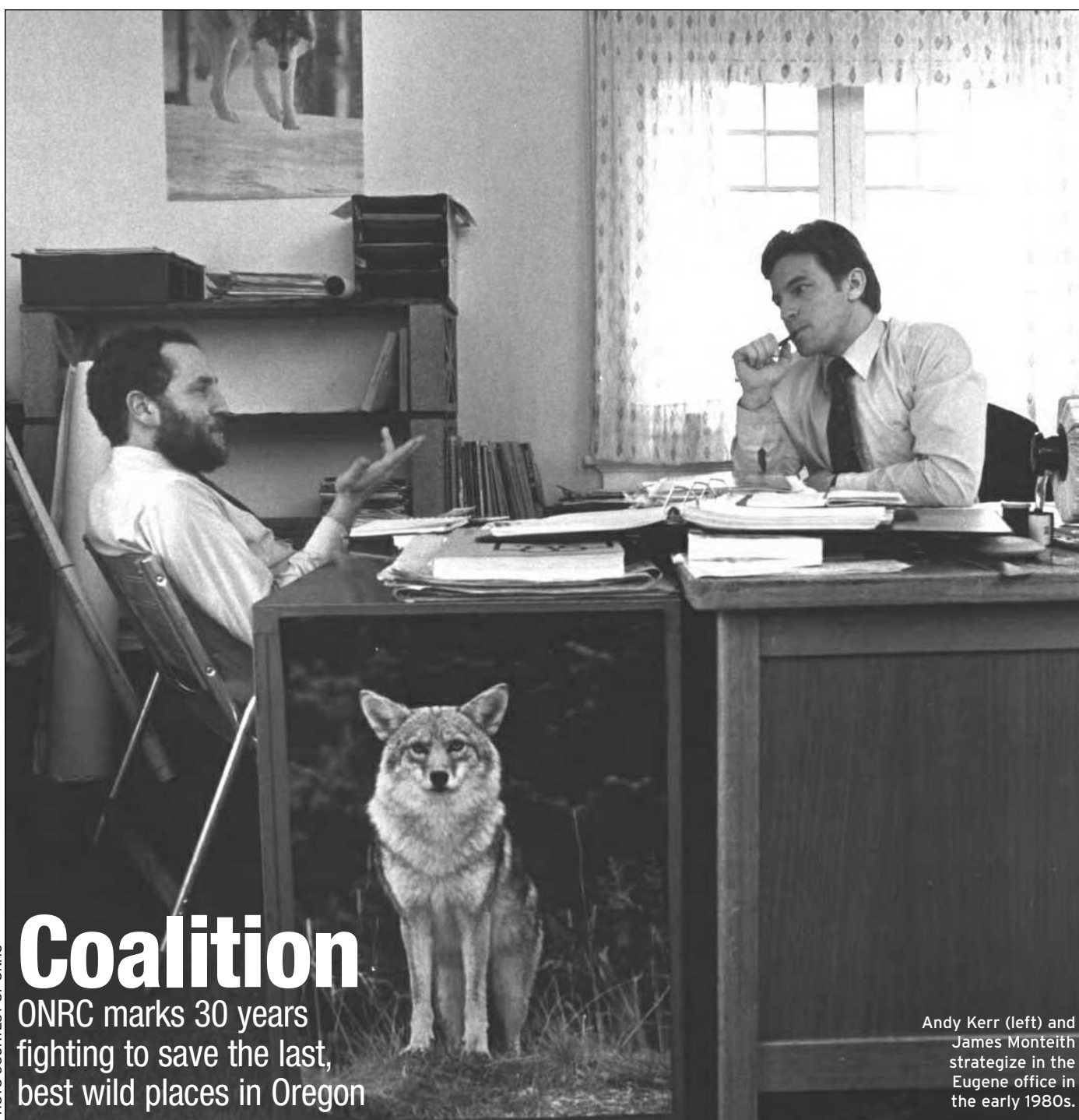




Coalition

ONRC marks 30 years fighting to save the last, best wild places in Oregon

Andy Kerr (left) and James Monteith strategize in the Eugene office in the early 1980s.

By Lance Robertson

Tim Lillebo's world changed when he walked into a bar in Baker City nearly 30 years ago. So did Oregon's environmental legacy.

Sitting there was a young man by the name of James Monteith, talking to some ranchers about how to keep a mine from being built in the nearby Elkhorn Mountains. Lillebo was making a living falling trees and building logging roads but had grown tired of seeing his favorite Eastern Oregon hunting and fishing spots get roaded and cutover, often by his own hand.

Lillebo struck up a conversation with Monteith and liked what he heard: If like-minded folks in rural parts of the state could just band together, we could save the last, best wild places in Oregon.

At the time, Monteith was running the fledgling Oregon Wilderness Coalition (OWC), which had been formed in 1974 by three Eugeneans to push for wilderness protection throughout the state. With seed money from the Sierra Club, Monteith was pulling together homegrown environmental groups and activists in places where big timber ruled: rural towns like Roseburg, LaGrande and Prairie City.

Monteith eventually recruited Lillebo to work for the coalition. At the same time, another young native son and a OSU dropout, Andy Kerr, joined the group. Tim covered Eastern Oregon; Andy, the west side. Together, Jim, Andy and Tim set out to

change the world, or at least their little corner of it.

The rest is history. The coalition, renamed the Oregon Natural Resources Council (ONRC) in 1982, became the leading statewide environmental group in Oregon and has been instrumental in protecting nearly three million acres of wildlands in the state. The charismatic Kerr, with his colorful sound-bites, became a media darling and the most well-known, home-grown conservationist in Oregon. The group has grown from a handful of impoverished zealots and a budget of a few thousand dollars a year to a statewide environmental organization with a staff of 15 and a \$1 million annual budget.

'From the beginning, we tried to establish a very different conservation group. We were home-grown. We had a lot of Republicans and conservatives, hunters and fishermen. It wasn't a cowboy mentality, but maybe a redneck approach. This wasn't an intellectual movement.' — James Monteith

ONRC, which turns 30 this year with a Feb. 21 celebration in Eugene, can take credit for a long list of environmental accomplishments, among them: drawing national attention to the battle over the Northwest's old-growth forests, halting the Elk Creek and Salt Caves dams in southern Oregon, securing wild and scenic designation for more 1,500 miles of rivers in Oregon, and helping to

protect (at least for now) 58 million additional acres of forestlands nationwide under the Clinton administration's roadless and riparian management policies.

It didn't do it alone, nor did ONRC always take the lead on every issue. Plenty of other environmental groups and individuals can share in the accomplishments. The group has taken plenty of criticism, including from some fellow conservationists who think it either has sold out, has strayed too far from its original vision or has hogged too much of the limelight. But no other Oregon-based group has played such a key role in so many environmental successes over the past 30 years.

"At every important turning point in the

West has had more influence and impact than ONRC in protecting public lands, water and wildlife."

Even ONRC's foes acknowledge its influence.

"They were the major player" in the epic battle over the region's old-growth forests that has been waged for 20 years, adds Chris West, vice president of the American Forest Resource Council, which represents timber companies in 13 Western states.

Evolving Movement

The environmental movement was much different in the early 1970s than it is today. Then, about the only way you could get an area protected was to work with one of the big national environmental groups, who then lobbied your local U.S. senator or congressman to sponsor a bill in Congress. It often was a drawn-out process that sometimes left local activists unsatisfied or feeling disaffected.

But three Eugeneans — Sierra Club activists Holway "Holly" Jones and Joe Walicki, and the Wilderness Society's Bob Wazeka — had a very different idea: Organize the small grassroots groups that were springing up across Oregon. By forming a coalition, they could gain the political and financial clout to effectively push for wildlands protection.

They formed the OWC in April 1974 and hired OSU grad Monteith to bring these groups together. Monteith would talk with anyone who would listen: activists, ranchers, small business owners.

"It was visionary," says longtime political commentator and journalist Russell Sadler. "What Monteith did was organize these little disaffected groups, both politically and financially. ONRC became a very effective group, because the national organizations had to make compromises that left some grassroots groups feeling unhelpt and unsatisfied."

Recruiting Kerr and Lillebo also gave the coalition a truly home-grown flavor. Lillebo went to grade school in LaGrande and worked in the logging industry near John Day. Kerr grew up in Creswell and helped his father build houses during summer vacations.

"We were all native sons," says Monteith, who grew up in Klamath Falls. "From the beginning, we tried to establish a very different conservation group. We were home-grown. We had a lot of Republicans and conservatives, hunters and fishermen. It wasn't a cowboy mentality, but maybe a redneck approach. This wasn't an intellectual movement."

The fact Kerr, Monteith and Lillebo grew up in rural Oregon helped counter the timber industry's mantra that urbanites from Portland and Eugene were trying to force their will on rural Oregon.

"These were not urban elitists," says Sadler. "The fact that they were rooted in the land, sons of the soil if you will, gave them a lot of credibility."

"We felt had a message that came from Oregon, not from some far-off urban area," adds Monteith.

Between 1975 and the late 1980s, the coalition achieved a series of successes, often with the help of national groups that weighed in with lobbying muscle in Congress. About 131,000 acres was protected around Hells Canyon in 1975. The Endangered American Wilderness Act of 1978 added 285,000 acres of wilderness in Oregon. In 1984, Congress passed the Oregon Forest Wilderness Act in 1984, protecting another 828,000 acres. The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act was passed in