

# Public Defenders (Of the Wild)

## Defending Wild Washington: A Citizen's Action Guide

By Edward Whitesell, Benjamin Shaine, et al. (Mountaineers Books, \$19.95, 2004)

REVIEW BY MADELINE OSTRANDER

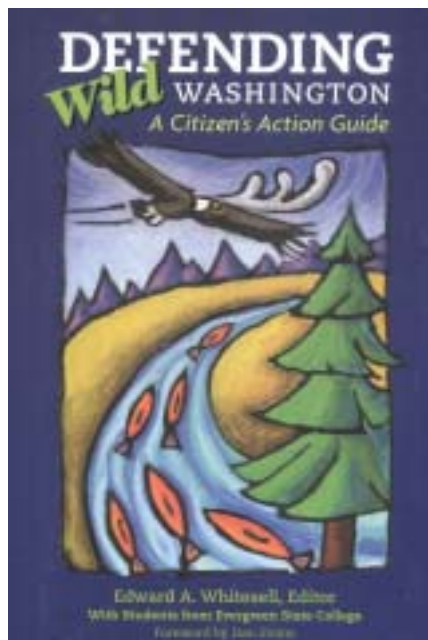
At least once a year, I get a knock on my door from an environmental canvasser. Young, overeager, and underpaid, the canvasser, who usually hails from Sierra Club, PIRG, or another tightly organized national group, is harder to turn away than a Girl Scout peddling cookies. If I make a donation, within a few weeks I accumulate a pile of direct mail from groups seeking a share of my cash. Sometimes I'm also placed on an e-mail list and receive "action alerts" from DC-based professionals. These alerts invite me from my home to send letters, faxes, and e-mails (about issues I have not researched) to politicians I need never face. Although the experience is not entirely disempowering (it's nice to know that the Internet makes armchair activism so effortless), it is, to say the least, impersonal.

When Edward Whitesell, Benjamin Shaine, and their troupe of Evergreen State College students set about writing *Defending Wild Washington*, they envisioned a different kind of activism. *Defending Wild Washington* proclaims itself a "Citizen's Action Guide" for those wanting to "get their hands dirty" and work on a personal level to defend our state's parks, wilderness areas and other natural stomping grounds.

The book offers no easy solutions. There are no Internet sign-ups, sample letters to Congress, step-by-step programs, toolkits, self-help principles, or even concrete recommendations to light the way for the would-be activist. The authors make no call to action, and the book is relatively devoid of philosophical or factual arguments for wilderness

protection. The book assumes you know why you have arrived in its pages.

For those who have already found their calling as activists, *Defending*



*Wild Washington* offers a wide-ranging set of histories covering everything from the state's geology to its environmental policy. The book's strongest chapters depict the Washington conservation movement's coming of age: its transformation from groups of back-porch amateurs to a diverse and specialized movement stacked with highly trained scientists, lawyers and professionals on one side and direct-action activists (e.g., Earth First!) on the other. The book also profiles the personal stories of the movement's defining leaders.

These histories demonstrate the power of a few to change the minds and actions of many. In 1953, Polly

Dyer, then a housewife without a college degree, helps organize a letter-writing campaign that prevents the removal of forested acres from Olympic National Park. In 1977, Harvey Manning and 100 hikers disembark from the Metro 210 bus and trek into the Cougar Mountain footpaths to publicize the area's need for official protection. In 1995, Evergreen State College student Sarah Vekasi bangs on doors in the conservative, rural town of Randle and convinces residents to oppose a land swap that would permit logging in a nearby old growth stand.

The prose itself is uneven. The authors' academic roots show plainly. Chapters begin with theoretical frameworks and occasionally lapse into ecological jargon. Some sections read like exam answers, exhausting recitals of the authors' knowledge.

But the book's message rises above its academic awkwardness: "Mobilization and empowerment mean more than getting large numbers of people to make financial contributions and respond to action alerts," Whitesell writes in the concluding chapter.

The message admonishes both the environmental professionals and those of us who have been too content to write our checks to the canvassers and avoid engaging in the "blood and sweat" varieties of activism. And although the book does not point us in any one clear direction, it does provide inspiration—dozens of examples of working activists and their hard-won successes. It's a good read for those wanting to dig deep into Washington's conservation movement and understand the accomplishments that have been made and the work that still remains for all of us. ♦