

# West First!

*We'll rewild the rest of the planet later....*

*Words by Dave Skinner. Illustration by John Bardwell.*



For nearly 30 years, Earth First! and Wildlands Project co-founder Dave Foreman has written an Earth First! Journal column entitled “Around the Campfire.” You might like to know that a number of billionaires and millionaires, well-and-not-so-well-known, are now keeping Dave company not just philosophically, but critically, fiscally.

**I**n the story “High Anxiety” last issue, *RANGE* discussed outgoing Montana governor Steve Bullock’s volunteer grizzly council (and management plan), briefly noting how one of the “producer” appointments had an affiliation with a little-known, six-years-new Western Landowners Alliance (WLA), a small “nonprofit” based in Santa Fe, N.M.

Given the name, one would expect a western “landowners alliance” would be, yep, ranchers or farmers interested in market power and probably property rights. But in reality, this alliance is a branch operation of the Wildlands Network, which itself is the renamed Wildlands Project, initially birthed in 1991 by biologist Michael Soulé, Esprit and North Face sportswear tycoon Doug Tompkins, and Earth First! founder Dave Foreman as the Wild Earth Society. (See sidebar, page 29.)

Significant? Could be. This writer had previously learned that one of the major-party candidates for Montana’s 2020 U.S. House race, Kathleen Williams (D), had taken a sabbatical from her “day job” to run, first in 2018 and then in 2020. The day job? Associate director for the Alliance. She lost the election—missing her chance to be the first Earth-First! employee elected to Congress.

Finally, just days after the *RANGE* deadline for “High Anxiety,” a Montana rancher and *RANGE* subscriber telephoned. He’d been mailed, unsolicited, a beautifully produced magazine, “On Land, the Voice of Stewardship in the American West.”

Of course, he wanted help finding out from whom, and why. After some discussion focused on the magazine’s “masthead,” we determined it was a Western Landowners Alliance product. As for why, our rancher observed his gift as “nice, well written, but I get the feeling I’m getting a free magazine because they want something from me.”

So with Wuhan disease blowing up, meaning stay home, *RANGE* headed down the Western Landowners Alliance Wildlands Wormhole of World Wide Web Weirdness. It was an unpleasant, yet very informative trip. Let’s just say that you, humble producer, will be hearing about (or hearing from) the WLA.

### **From Small Beginnings Come, What?**

For years, the concept of “rewilding” has struggled to go mainstream. Many radical ideas have gone mainstream over time, at

least for a while. Karl Marx’s delusions are a good example. So, is rewilding about to take off? After all, the vast majority of Americans can’t tell you what rewilding means, but it sounds cool.

Regardless, the very idea of turning vast chunks of the earth back to nature so evolution may continue unmolested by mankind is

## **Who’s paying, even if it’s nearly impossible to find out precisely how much?**

quite simple, on the surface deeply altruistic, and therefore attractive to some, especially when framed in the context of the pseudo-science of “conservation biology.”

The Wildlands Project/Network/Wild Earth has always managed to scrape together enough money from its anonymous supporters to function over its 29-year history, mostly by producing fancy maps and fancier words. Compared with mainstream environmental groups with budgets in the hundreds of millions, Wild Earth’s 2013 income of about \$830,000, hitting a million dollars the next year, is unimpressive. But with Donald Trump in the White House, funding began to increase more quickly, to \$2.1 million in 2019.

The Western Landowners Alliance is a bit newer. A report from the Blackstone Ranch Institute explains it was born out of an August 2012 meeting at Ted Turner’s Vermejo Park Ranch, spurred in part by a Blackstone grant-making challenge (more about Blackstone later), getting 501(c)(3) tax status from the Internal Revenue Service in 2014. WLA’s take that year was \$765,000 and 2019 income is just over \$1 million, down a bit from 2018.

But the Alliance’s website today hints that 2020 has been a great year, although verification won’t be publicly available before December 2021. A vast array of publications, videos, reports (including some specially written by Bank of America), and yep, a magazine, is available for download from the site, with all of it being top-shelf, quality that only well-paid talent can and will produce. So who’s paying, even if it’s nearly impossible to find out precisely how much?

### **High Education**

To start with, the WLA website features an item on “rancher Lenox Baker,” owner of the Pitchfork Ranch near Meeteetse, Wyo. Yes, back when Marlboro TV commercials were still legal, a couple were filmed on the Pitchfork.

*RANGE* chose to dig a little deeper, a task helped by the fact that Lenox Baker is a much less common name than John Smith. So our landowner hasn’t always been a rancher. He is the son of a famous doctor, Lenox D. Baker Jr., who retired in 2010 from a successful Norfolk, Va., cardiothoracic surgery practice. His pediatrician spouse, Fran, is also a doctor’s daughter.

But Baker also enjoyed enormous success as founder and chairman of International Medical Prosthetics and Research Associates. Founded in 1974, IMPRA was sold in 1996 to C.R. Bard for \$143 million.

Out of their share of the proceeds, the Bakers donated \$10 million in 1996 to their alma mater Johns Hopkins to establish a deanship in their names at the medical school. In 1999, the Bakers bought the Pitchfork for an undisclosed sum after it had gone on the market in 1998 for \$25.5 million. They also donated a million dollars to The Nature Conservancy’s “Wyoming: Wild and Working” campaign in 2014 and were listed in the Wyoming Nature Conservancy’s \$100,000 to \$999,999 donor class another year.

### **High Lonesome**

WLA chairman and co-founder Paul H. Vahldiek has been in this writer’s permanent research files since February 2010, when the Wildlands Network (yep) put out a breathless press release (listing Michael Soulé as a contact, too) announcing wolf scat had been found on Vahldiek’s 260,000-acre High Lonesome Ranch, near DeBeque in western Colorado.

The *Denver Post* reported that Mr. Vahldiek is a “Houston trial attorney [married to a newspaper heiress, since divorced] who owns or co-owns other ranches in Colorado and Texas and an island in the Bahamas.” A 2011 *Forbes* article on trophy hunting at High Lonesome explains that Vahldiek “mixes in a little cattle farming and mineral and oil extraction to help pay the bills.”

Obviously, in 2010, real wolf poop in Colorado was big news because DNA proof of an Endangered Species Act listed species means



“occupied habitat,” which in turn triggers federal ESA oversight.

Don't forget the 1998 “discovery” by a former federal biologist gone “nonprofit,” of lynx DNA in samples gathered from Oregon, news that sent shock waves through the Northwest and triggered a congressional investigation. Funny thing, in 1995, this same guy had been profiled in *High Country News*, which approvingly noted that he kept (with the proper permits, of course) Chirp, a pet lynx! The initial discovery turned out to be an “error.”

Is that why, in his report on the possible scat finds, the *Post's* writer asked, “Are pro-wolf biologists and a ranch owner who are bent on biodiversity being overly enthusiastic?” Um, as *High Country News* (and nobody else) followed up in August 2010, of 18 samples, 11 were coyote, while the “rest weren't readable.”

Roll your eyes, but neither the lynx guy nor the “conservation biologist” who



Soon-married Western Landowners Alliance co-founders Kenyon Fields and Mary Conover enjoy a moment with Mary's father, former U.S. Sen. John Warner (R-VA).

“found” that scat ever suffered any professional consequences for failing; in fact, both are prospering.

#### High Finance

One Internet item revealed that Wall Street hedge funder Louis Moore Bacon (net worth

about \$1.5 billion) is a fiscal supporter of the WLA's “educational outreach” through his Trinchera Blanca Foundation, itself a subsidiary of the Moore Charitable Foundation, which had 2017 holdings north of \$315 million. A Moore press release explains the foundation “supports conservation nonprofits that protect threatened landscapes, habitats and water bodies across the world.” Ten million dollars in grants were made by Moore in 2017, but the foundation's later IRS Form 990 reports are nowhere to be found.

Bacon, of course, bought the Forbes (Malcolm and Steve) Ranch as well as the adjacent Blanca Ranch on Colorado's southern Front Range, combining 175,000 acres, of which 167,000 acres were a “conservation easement donation.”

According to a 2012 *Forbes* profile, Bacon has spent years “assembling a portfolio of landscapes in New York, North Carolina and Colorado, quietly and painstakingly putting them into conservation easements, permanently saving them from further development.” He has also spent “close to \$400 million on 202,000 acres of land in the U.S. that are either in easements or soon will be.”

#### High Society

Western landowners Kenyon Fields and Mary Conover are married and co-own the 32,000-acre Mountain Island Ranch. Multiple sources credit the pair as “helping found” and/or “co-founders” of the WLA.

In the 2000s, the New York-born Mr. Fields (WLA's current secretary) was executive director of the Sitka Conservation Society (which has partnered in litigation with the Center for Biological Diversity), then left Alaska, eventually becoming western strategic director of the Wildlands Network by 2012.

Then came the late-August meeting at Ted Turner's ranch noted earlier, attended by both Fields and Conover. A report by the Blackstone Ranch Institute brags how Blackstone offered seed funding of \$40,000 and by the next morning, Western Landowners Alliance had a name, Fields was interim director, and \$110,000 was in the bank. Later that year, after another WLA meeting, Fields and Conover started a relationship leading to marriage.

Interestingly, Mary Conover is featured in not just one, but two long *New York Times* profiles in 2001 and 2013, by “Vows” colum-

## The Not-So-High Bar.

Even though they're not multimillionaires (yet), two other Western Landowners Alliance board members are worth relating here. First is George Cooper, a former CNN producer who was the first president of the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (Louis Bacon gave TRCP \$100,000 in 2017). He is now a Washington, D.C., lobbyist with Forbes Tate. One interesting 2019 client: Greater Yellowstone Coalition.

Then comes Ken Mirr, owner of the Mirr Ranch Group realty, which specializes in “legacy ranches and fine sporting properties” and/or “legacy and sporting properties with conservation values.” Mirr's marketing materials note his clientele of “many conservation and ecological buyers” and one of the best tools for this “special breed of buyers is conservation easements.”

One of Mirr's recent deals involves the Cross Mountain Ranch in northwest

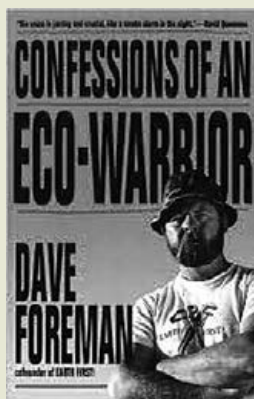
Colorado, over 60,000 private acres (16,000 acres under a 2014 conservation easement) plus government and private leases adding up to “close to 400,000 acres” in two units, upper and lower.

The price for the “family homestead of development tycoon Ronald Boeddeker,” first offered for sale in 2017: \$100 million. It hasn't sold.

Mr. Boeddeker, who passed away in 2010, began developing the high-end Lake Las Vegas residential resort in 1990 with Texas billionaires Sid and Lee Bass, buying the Cross Mountain from Bogle Farms in 1991.

Today, the lower Cross Mountain unit, 27,500 deeded plus leases, is on offer for \$21 million. Mirr lists another chunk, now called Sanctuary Ranch: 4,800 acres for \$15 million, featuring a “9-bedroom, 9.5-bath, 11,000 sq. ft. main log lodge designed by an acclaimed Santa Barbara architect.”

Special breed? Indeed!—DS



# Earth First! We'll lock the other planets up later...

One cannot discuss rewilding today without understanding its origins over 30 years ago. Dave Foreman, as is well documented, remains infamous for facilitating the evolution of misanthropic novelist Ed Abbey's fantasies of "monkey-wrenching" into very real "direct actions" through the vehicle of Earth First! Others evolved direct actions even further into acts of political terrorism. Foreman himself barely avoided jail over power-line sabotage efforts in Arizona.

Foreman, however, also gets credit for first articulating the concept of the Wildlands Project in the early 1980s. His premise was that, even if every single acre of potential wilderness in the United States and Canada became formally designated, the world would not be wild enough for animals to exist and evolve unimpeded by man. Rather, formerly developed areas had to be cleansed of mankind, or "rewilded."

But turning campfire visions into policy and therefore into reality on the ground is hard work. To do so on a continental scale requires the creation of a new science with a new language capable of shaping a new politics. The task of starting that effort was left to Michael Soulé. Long story short, Soulé got the Wildlands wagon rolling. Others slowly climbed aboard, with plenty pulling hard, while Michael Soulé gets to enjoy his position as "Father of Conservation Biology," a field that simply didn't exist prior to 1990.

Many know the Wildlands Project for the spectacular, colorful maps the group began producing in the mid-1990s, accompanied by a completely invented new "science" and language: Gigantic "core habitats" joined by "linkage corridors," "keystone species" (basically, predators) triggering "trophic cascades" across landscapes with "wildlife connectivity."

But Mr. Soulé and his academic associates couldn't have done all that without

cash, plenty of which came from Doug Tompkins, who had made a \$200-million sportswear fortune, then retired young. Why him? Tompkins was an adherent of the teachings of Norwegian "Deep Ecology" philosopher Arne Naess. Among other things, "deep ecologists" believe humanity has "no right to reduce [biological] richness and diversity except to satisfy vital human needs," and further, the "flourishing of human life and culture is compatible with a substantial decrease in



COURTESY MOORE CHARITABLE FOUNDATION

Three of America's finest enjoy one another's company at National Audubon Society's Jan. 16, 2013, Gala Dinner. From left, Natural Resources Defense Council senior counsel Robert F. Kennedy Jr.; western landowner and hedge funder Louis Moore Bacon; and billionaire failed presidential candidate and soda-pop-cop Michael Bloomberg. BELOW: Ted Turner with fellow land baron Vladimir Putin. BOTTOM: Earth First! founder Dave Foreman, circa 1990: "My three main goals would be to reduce human population to about 100 million worldwide, destroy the industrial infrastructure and see wilderness, with its full complement of species, returning throughout the world."



CBS SUNDAY MORNING WEBSITE VIA LONDON DAILY MAIL

the human population and the flourishing of nonhuman life requires such a decrease." Requires, mmm? And who defines vital?

If that seems kind of cultish, you're right...there's actually a Church of Deep Ecology. More importantly, there used to be a Foundation for Deep Ecology, which Doug Tompkins founded, funded and ran until his death in 2015.

Prior to 2000, according to a circa-2012 FDE web page that is still available, Tompkins donated no less than \$53 million to American nonprofits such as "Wildlands Project (now Wildlands Network), the Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y), and RESTORE: The Northwoods, as well as leading champions of endangered



WEB PHOTO

species such as the Center for Biological Diversity and Sea Shepherd Conservation Society." Then Tompkins shifted gears, funding a years-long personal Wildlands Project in far South America's Patagonia province, until he drowned kayaking at age 72. The money then went to Tompkins' second wife, who now runs a San Francisco-based "nonprofit"

called "Conservacion Patagonica" with help from a couple buddies from Doug's sportswear days (Yvon Chouinard and Peter Buckley). The apparent end goal is for the governments of Argentina and Chile to either purchase or accept Tompkins' nine-million-acre real-estate empire and preserve same as national parks. Chile accepted the gift in October of 2019.—DS