

## WILDERNESS CONCERNS

# Great Old Broads travel to Ely area

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**KAWISHIWI RIVER** – A bunch of Great Old Broads invaded the Kawishiwi River National Forest Campground last weekend.

This group visited the Ely area to learn firsthand about the potential threats to mining in the vicinity of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness and to use their national influence to help promote a responsible and safe approach to sulfide mining.

Great Old Broads for Wilderness was started in 1989 on the 25th anniversary of the Wilderness Act by a feisty bunch of lady hikers who wanted to refute Utah Senator Orrin Hatch's notion that wilderness is inaccessible to elders, according to the organization's website.

As Rose Chilcoat, the group's associate director, related, "The founder Susan Tixier and her fellow activists were outraged, and saw that an important voice was missing from the environmental movement: the older woman—impassioned, experienced, not afraid to speak out, and definitely not needing roads. The group committed themselves to grassroots advocacy to preserve wilderness and wild places for future generations."

Chilcoat was joined in Ely by Great Old Broad executive director Shelley Silbert and their national grassroots leader Lauren Berutich, all from Durango, Colo., and about three dozen other members from all over the world, for a weekend of learning, stewardship and advocacy.

They set up their tents and made base camp at the Kawishiwi Campground and spent four days involved in various projects, including pulling invasive plants



**Members of the Great Old Broads for Wilderness sign letters to legislators advocating for the protection of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness. The organization held a gathering in Ely last weekend.** photo by K. Vandervort

with the U.S. Forest Service, paddling to Hegman Lake with Sustainable Ely, hiking around Dry and Bass lakes, learning about bears with the North American Bear Center, visiting Wintergreen Dogsled Lodge, touring Sig Olson's Listening Point, touring the Twin Metals test drill sites with Steve and Jane Koshchak of River Point Outfitters, and various other hikes and outdoor activities.

"These are the most amazing, experienced, passionate, committed women I've ever met anywhere," Chilcoat said. Members range in age from the 30s to the 80s. "We're not all old and we're not all broads, either," she said. They welcome men, called "Great Old Bro's."

"We are all very committed

to wilderness. Very committed to insuring that these lands and waters are still here for our children and grandchildren," she said.

There are about 36 chapters, called "Broad Bands," across the country. Their newest chapter just formed in Duluth.

"We recognize that the BWCA is an area that is gaining national attention in the onslaught of increased sulfide ore mining and we want to lend our unique perspective as to why keeping the BWCA clean is so important," she said.

"This issue has been brewing for some time," Silbert said. "We have one chance to save a national treasure and this is an area pretty high on our radar. This isn't an Ely issue. This is a national

issue."

Silbert said the national membership of their organization helps position them to spread the message, and educate. "Many of our members are seasoned activists," she said. "They grew up in the 1960s and they know the importance of citizen engagement, writing letters, and making their voices heard with direct action."

The Twin Metals exploratory drilling sites virtually surround the nearby Kawishiwi River and Birch Lake areas. Many sites date back to the 1970s. The Koshacks took some of the visitors on a "ground zero" tour Sunday morning. "The test drill sites were backfilled with sand, but the sulfide ore, which generates sulfuric acid, leaches out and there

are some places which remain sterile after 40 or 50 years," Chilcoat said.

Silbert said the issue of sulfide mining dangers is particularly difficult for the Great Old Broads. "Our main office is based in Durango, Colo., and we have just experienced a major spill on the Animas River where three million gallons of waste matter spilled. There is that orange sludge everywhere and you know there are heavy metals there and there is no way to clean it up. This is what could happen here and we don't want to see that possibility."

Berutich added, "This is a national issue and it is happening all over the world. We have an opportunity to have a Broad Band chapter in Minnesota. These members know the lay of the land and are intimately connected to this place."

## History of the Broads

The early framework declared Broads to be a nonprofit, social organization dedicated to the protection, use, and enjoyment of the wilderness (designated, proposed, or imagined).

The early days were informal—there were no dues. To become a member you just had to declare yourself one, and then you could buy a T-shirt to proclaim it to the rest of the world.

The Broads sat around kitchen tables and brainstormed. The plan was to spend their time and energies on action protecting wilderness, not creating a formal organization with a paid staff.

By 1993, with a growing membership and expenses, the board decided to institute annual dues—though payment was still optional. In 1994, it became necessary to hire someone to maintain the membership database.