**National Wilderness Stewardship Alliance and Society of Wilderness Stewardship**

**National Wilderness Stewardship Awards**

The wilderness stewardship community is filled with ordinary people doing extraordinary work in some of America’s most amazing and remote landscapes. Unfortunately, their work often goes unnoticed, leaving Wilderness to suffer as a result. By showing people their work is important now, we can build a more sustainable wilderness stewardship community for the future.

This awards program allows organizations and partners to nominate a steward, organization, or Federal land agency whom they feel has demonstrated outstanding wilderness stewardship.

The four categories and this year’s awardees are:

**Wilderness Rising Leader**

* Jessi Mejia, Glacier National Park and University of Montana Wilderness Institute
* Amber Wong, Coconino National Forest
* Sarah Rodriquez, Kaibab National Forest

**Wilderness Stewardship Champion of the Year**

* Alan Rockwood, Friends of Mt. Evans and Lost Creek Wilderness
* Jack Hanley, Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance

**Agency Partner of the Year**

* Andy Smith, San Bernardino National Forest, R5, Forest Service

**Wilderness Rising Leader Award**

**Purpose:** To recognize young stewards who have demonstrated outstanding potential to lead the stewardship community into the future. We typically give awards to those who are later in their career for outstanding projects or career long accomplishments. This award is to recognize a newcomer to wilderness stewardship, who through their dedication and passion shows outstanding leadership potential, dedication to wilderness, and the ability to accomplish important tasks early in their careers. This award is intended to recognize an individual who will one day become a future leader for the wilderness community.

**Awardee:** Jessi Mejia, Glacier National Park and University of Montana Wilderness Institute

**Rationale**: Jessi is employed by the Wilderness Institute as part of the Wilderness Connect Inclusive Language Project. She has demonstrated leadership and savvy in interacting with an advisory committee of people of color to drive meaningful, lasting wilderness communication changes that will be presented at the 2021 National Wilderness Workshop. The products she is helping to create are likely to be used in wilderness communications throughout the wilderness community starting next year. In the context of her work so far, she has spearheaded significant personal growth and learning and demonstrated commitment to research and developing accurate narrative. As a woman of Latinx heritage and emerging journalist and author, she is the recipient of the Bob Marshall Wilderness Foundation’s first diversity residency in the Bob Marshall Wilderness this summer and fall.

Jessi is also employed seasonally by Glacier National Park and is leading ongoing goat volunteer monitoring work in Glacier.

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**Awardee:** Amber Wong, Coconino National Forest

**Rationale:** Amber has spent several years working in conservation, primarily with wildlife, though also with conservation corps. Amber is an avid Wilderness visitor, however she had not studied and applied Wilderness management until this position. Her role includes solitude monitoring and developing a wildlife monitoring plan for a Wilderness area (to be completed by Oct 15, 2021). She is the only candidate, when interviewed for the position, who asked about how to incorporate tribal voices and perspectives into this Wildlife Monitoring in Wilderness report. She proactively thinks about inclusion and this is an asset to the Wilderness community. Since the Wilderness skills workshop, she has thrown herself into learning about Wilderness and monitoring. She will present to a college Wilderness class in 2 weeks about her position and about the importance of Wilderness Character Monitoring and Wilderness Stewardship Performance. Amber is someone who is and will continue to apply Wilderness values and stewardship and management principles into whatever position she takes on after this internship is completed. I anticipate she will be a Forest Supervisor some day who knows about and cares about Wilderness. And this is just as important as the excellent Wilderness Ranger.

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**Awardee:** Sarah Rodriquez, Kaibab National Forest

**Rationale:** Sarah started in 2017 as a wilderness/trails seasonal on the Kaibab National Forest (KNF).

Fast forward a few years and Sarah decided to go back to school after a season on trail crew in Idaho. She decided that she wanted a career in Wilderness Management but didn’t see an avenue with her current situation. Sarah graduated in 2020 with her master’s degree in Conservation Leadership and a Bachelor of Science.

In 2020 the resource assistant (RA) program, a noncompetitive hiring program, was offered to Sarah, who was beyond excited and grateful and her internship was wilderness centric work.

Sarah was by far the most competitive candidate to help the Kaibab with wilderness work (e.g., wilderness character monitoring (WCM) and recreation site inventory). Sarah traveled alone in the backcountry and spent weeks in the wilderness collecting data.

Sarah completed the wilderness character baseline for both Kanab Creek and Saddle Mountain Wilderness areas on the North Kaibab Ranger District. Sarah also completed a full-scale recreation site inventory for both wilderness areas. Sarah agreed to extend her internship to assist the Prescott NF in the completion of WCM for 7 wilderness areas in 2020. This was a huge undertaking, as WCM documents are generally around 85 pages each. Overall, Sarah successfully completed 9 WCM reports for wilderness areas in the Kaibab and Prescott National Forest Wilderness.

Shortly after her work on the Prescott NF, Sarah found and applied for a permanent position in recreation/wilderness management on the Carson NF and was soon appointed. She has been working in her first permanent government job for only a few weeks, and her dedication shown during her internships will continue to benefit the public and the Wilderness Preservation System.

Over the past 4 years Sarah has persevered and worked her way toward a career in Wilderness Management. Sarah is a true wilderness warrior, with passion and intellect for the protection of wilderness values. We have high hopes that she will continue to share her expertise and grow into a lifetime steward, while inspiring others to follow in her footsteps.

**Wilderness Stewardship Champion of the Year Award**

**Purpose:** To recognize an individual wilderness steward that has demonstrated outstanding ability to steward their wilderness areas, complete a needed project, or overcome challenges and obstacles that led to improvements in wilderness stewardship in their areas.

**Awardee:** Alan Rockwood, Friends of Mt. Evans and Lost Creek Wilderness

**Rationale:**

Invasive plants – noxious weeds that invade an area and displace native species – are one of the most insidious types of human influence on wilderness. Without human activities before a wilderness designation or the effects of humans visiting wilderness and around the perimeter of wilderness, the opportunities for invasive plants to become established would be minimal. And while to the untrained eye the encroachment of invasive plants is easily overlooked, the effects nevertheless reverberate throughout the wilderness ecosystem. Addressing the problems of invasive plants is unglamorous and hard work, and it is too easily overlooked.

One person’s efforts – Alan Rockwood of the Friends of Mount Evans and Lost Creek Wildernesses (FOMELC) – stand out in this area. Alan Rockwood was nominated as a Wilderness Stewardship Champion based on his long**-**term effective contributions in seeking to eradicate invasive plants from the Mount Evans and Lost Creek Wildernesses and preserving the wilderness character derived from a healthy, native vegetation ecosystem.

Alan has achieved these contributions by coordinating efforts across multiple state and federal agencies, by motivating a deep volunteer base, working with contractors, and applying a relentless passion to achieve eradication of invasive species. His leadership efforts have diminished Canada thistle and yellow toadflax infestations in select areas to the point where the idea of eradication seems plausible, and considerable progress has been made by multi-year treatments in long-established infestations.

Alan’s success is aided by annual grants from Colorado, two NWSA grants for invasive species inventories in the Mount Evans (2018) and Lost Creek (2019) Wildernesses, and charitable contributions to FOMELC. This year Alan coordinated a workday that included USFS staff, Colorado state staff, and volunteers to collectively treat musk and Canada thistle across state and national forest lands, including the Mount Evans Wilderness. Some projects require assistance from other volunteer organizations like Back Country Horsemen, who provide water drops for treatment projects.

This year hundreds of pounds of musk thistle heads were removed from plants at two sites on the Captain Mountain trail (Mount Evans) to arrest the spread of seeds and limit the growth of these infestations. Alan has stewarded the FOMELC invasive plant program so carefully that, to the best of our knowledge, FOMELC is the only volunteer organization that is allowed by the USFS to apply herbicide in wilderness. To maintain this distinction, Alan coordinates training by USFS experts each year to ensure that all volunteer sprayers understand how to complete the job well. In addition, reporting of each treatment is recorded and submitted to the USFS by Alan. He has also coordinated invasive plant training sessions with other organizations (e.g., Audubon Society) with instruction from county and other federal experts.

Given the breadth and depth of Alan’s efforts to manage invasive plants in the Mount Evans and Lost Creek Wildernesses, we believe Alan deserves recognition as a Wilderness Champion.

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**Awardee:** Jack Hanley, Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance

**Rationale:**

Jack has served with SUWA as the primary (and only) Stewardship Coordinator for the past three years. When SUWA’s Stewardship Program began a half decade ago, Jack - traveling through Utah as an impassioned supporter of wilderness - chose to volunteer with our young program. His enthusiasm, character and integrity had made numerous positive impressions on partners at the BLM in Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument, and the entire volunteer crew.

Jack’s leadership skills have refined how we work on public lands in Utah. He interfaces with the US Forest Service in the High Uintas and Manti-La Sal National Forests and with regional BLM offices across the state of Utah.

Collaborating with long-term SUWA staff working in the GIS, legal, and fieldwork divisions at SUWA, Jack has advanced our Stewardship Program’s formalized work protecting the over 663,000 acres of wilderness designated two and half years ago in the San Rafael Swell via the John D. Dingell Conservation, Management and Recreation Act. Jack has borrowed strategies from the Forest Service (including: deadplanting and iceberging) and adapted them to drylands desert environments as a strategy to mitigate incursions into protected wilderness areas across the San Rafael Swell and Utah at-large.

Jack’s creative ingenuity, attention to detail, and top of the line facilitation and group management skillset have helped us to reshape the demographic of volunteers we serve. From First Generation College Students at the University of Utah to Stewardship Scholars (enrolled students from historically underserved and underrepresented communities of color), to 20/30 year olds who learned about us via Instagram, to our traditional base of elder members and supporters, Jack proves a friend and leader to all.

During the pandemic, as we adapted our program to health and safety realities, Jack persisted in his role and work, laying the groundwork for this year and subsequent years by collecting field data necessary for future Stewardship Work Proposals submitted to the agencies.

Jack is a brother to the wilderness movement, and a dear co-worker to those that know him. As far as wilderness culture is defined, he exemplifies its resilience and adaptability.

**Agency Partner of the Year Award**

**Purpose:** To recognize an agency employee or unit which has demonstrated outstanding ability to work with wilderness stewardship organizations to improve the stewardship of their wilderness areas, complete a needed project, or overcome challenges and obstacles that led to improvements in wilderness stewardship in their areas.

**Awardee:** Andy Smith, San Bernardino National Forest

**Rationale:**

Andy Smith was the Wilderness/Trails staff for the San Jacinto Ranger District-San Bernardino National Forest and is now the Recreation Officer for that unit. He has always been helpful, supportive and collaborative in his approach to getting work done. For the PCT, he coordinates with multiple volunteer groups including the PCTA, Backcountry Horsemen and Forest Service Volunteer Association (FSVA). He is the driving force for getting work done on the PCT on the San Jacinto Ranger District.

In recent years he has out done himself with his dedication to getting the Mountain Fire (and Cranston Fire) areas rehabbed and open! He formulated a phased approach for our work plan, did significant advanced scouting, met with the AmeriCorps Crews on most every hitch, provided support for spike camp pack-ins, pursued additional Forest Service funding to make sure there was adequate AmeriCorps Crew funding to complete the work on the trail and saw to all of the other details needed to sustain long term, backcountry crew work. He has been operating to this unparalleled standard since the fire was contained, in 2013. After 5 years of diligence, all his efforts have paid off as the area is now open.

Andy has been described by his volunteers as “the one constant we can turn too” and “no matter what the job is, [he] will be there to help in any way he can.”

Another PCTA staff member said “in relation to the reconstruction of the trail affected by Mountain Fire, his support has been nothing less than incredible. He consistently took time out of his busy schedule to meet us at the project site, listen to our concerns and offer suggestions.” “On top of this, he always made a point to connect with our on the ground AmeriCorps crew members and provide career guidance if they were interested. He's a phenomenal asset to the trail and I'm so glad to have worked with him.”