

Jewel Basin Advocate Awarded Honorary Doctorate Degree

For Immediate Release May 14, 2007.

Contact: Keith Hammer at 755-1379 (attended the Friday reception for Clifton Merritt)
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A leading advocate for creation of the Jewel Basin Hiking Area in 1970 was awarded an honorary doctorate degree by the University of Montana May 12th, where he received a standing ovation during commencement ceremonies. Clifton Merritt, now 88 and living near Hamilton, Montana, also helped secure Congressional wilderness designations for many areas in Montana and wrote the Montana Wilderness Study Act that has given interim protection to nearly a million acres of outstanding threatened wildlands and their associated wildlife and fisheries.

Merritt grew up working cattle ranches near Gates of the mountains along the upper Missouri River, where he also observed that his best fishing and hunting was found beyond the end of the road. His citizen work in conservation got its start in the Flathead, where he helped start Flathead Wildlife and was involved with other citizen efforts to conserve fish, wildlife and wilderness.

Merritt worked as national field director for The Wilderness Society from 1964 to 1978, where he helped pass the Wilderness Act of 1964. Merritt carried forward the work of Bob Marshall, a Forest Service forester who in 1928 surveyed on foot and later wrote regulations to protect what would become the Jewel Basin Hiking Area, Bob Marshall Wilderness, and Mission Mountain Wilderness.

Kathryn McKay wrote the following in her 1994 “Trails of the Past: Historical Overview of the Flathead National Forest” prepared under contract for the Forest Service:

“Cliff Merritt and other Flathead Valley residents had urged that the area now known as Jewel Basin be designated as wilderness. . . The Flathead National Forest arranged a trip to the area for lumbermen, ranchers, sportsmen, and others, and as a result the group recommended that the best use of the area was for wilderness-type recreation. In 1970 the Forest Service classified the Jewel Basin as a Special Roadless Area.”

The University of Montana hosted a reception for Merritt on May 11, 2007, where Governor Brian Schweitzer and others paid their respects and expressed their appreciation for his life-long work in fish, wildlife and wilderness conservation. Merritt

drew a standing ovation during commencement ceremonies on May 12th when he said he hoped others would carry on the work of protecting wilderness.

A photo taken by Keith Hammer of Merritt receiving congratulations at his May 11th reception is attached and more background on Merritt follows.

More Information about Clifton Merritt
Prepared by Larry Campbell – Friends of the Bitterroot

Clif Merritt took an early interest in conservation as a youth working on his father's and neighbors' cattle ranches near the Gates of the mountains along the upper Missouri River in Montana. There, he witnessed the results of such bad land practices as overgrazing, as well as deep-plowing the shallow topsoil of the rangelands. The results convinced him that "we must do right by the land or perish."

Along with hard work on the ranch, he fished and hunted, and observed that usually the best fishing and big-game hunting were found where the roads end, a term he later associated with wilderness. He is now writing a book on the subject.

After attending school and college, Clif spent a 25 year hitch with state and federal agencies stabilizing jobs and natural resource industries.

He became involved in wildlife conservation and served as a member and officer of several wildlife organizations, among them Flathead Lake Wildlife Association, Flathead Wildlife inc. (of which he was a founder); District 1 of the Montana Wildlife Federation, both of which he served as secretary. In 1958, he helped found the Montana Wilderness Association and supported the protection of numerous public wildlands and associated wildlife.

From 1964 to 1978, Clif Merritt was national field director of the Wilderness Society. In this capacity, he first lobbied Congress to pass the Wilderness Act (which created the basic National Wilderness System), then recruited and organized one of the strongest field forces for wilderness that ever existed. These field representatives—among them Montana's Bill Cunningham—led the struggles that placed millions of acres of magnificent wildlands throughout the United States in the Wilderness System.

As strategist and leader, Clif was deeply involved in getting the Scapegoat, Absaroka-Beartooth, River of No Return and many other wildlands throughout the West designated as Wilderness Areas.

Clif was instrumental in protecting conservation values through creation of the Jewel Basin hiking area in the Swan Mountains of Montana.

He originated the proposal and worked to get 253,000 acres designated as the Lee Metcalf Wilderness Area, protecting portions of the wild Madison Range in Montana from Bear Trap Canyon to Yellowstone National Park.

Clif wrote the Montana Wilderness Study Act, which has given interim protection to nearly a million acres of outstanding threatened wildlands and their associated wildlife and fisheries.

He was founder of American Wildlands in 1978 and became its executive director. He initiated and led the successful campaign to establish the 161,000 acre Elkhorn national Wildlife Management Area southeast of Helena, Montana. The area is the only large tract in the national forests of the United States to be managed primarily for our world-class wildlife that requires significant solitude and security from man and his works. Since its establishment, the elk increased from 900 to about 3,000 head. And the Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks Department reports that the Elkhorns have become the most popular elk hunting area in Montana.

After headquartering in Washington D.C. and Denver, Colorado, for nearly 25 years, Clif Merritt returned home to his beloved Montana and settled down in the beautiful Bitterroot Valley. He joined the newly established Friends of the Bitterroot and worked to safeguard the region's irreplaceable wildlands and wildlife habitat.

In 1990, Clif led American Wildlands to initiate the first scientific program (named "Corridors of Life") to identify essential routes for major wildlife migrating between the Salmon-Selway-Bitterroot, Northern Continental Divide and Greater Yellowstone Ecosystems. The program includes some of the first Geographic Information System (GIS) satellite mapping in the West, and the information obtained is being used by other conservation groups and agencies. The objective is to link with corridors designated wilderness areas, roadless units, parks and refuges, so that wild-ranging, world-class wildlife can move, in response to changes in environmental conditions and seasons, between undeveloped key habitat areas, genetic interchange can occur, and threatened species can be replenished from other areas. Without such linkage, internationally noted wildlife authorities say that the wild-ranging, world-class wildlife of the northern Rockies will not long survive.

In conclusion, Clif observed that an environmental leader ordinarily does not achieve much without the support of many volunteers. They are the people, he said, who deserve the credit.