

Thurman Trosper

1918 – 2007



Thurman Trosper of Ronan, Montana was a well-respected conservation leader in three realms that rarely intersected: Federal government, non-governmental advocacy and the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes, of which he was an enrolled member.

He earned his bachelor's degree in forestry and range management from the University of Montana in 1941, then joined the Marine Corps. After surviving the terrible Battle of Guadalcanal as a commissioned officer, he returned to Montana to join the United States Forest Service and quickly became one of the first Native Americans to serve in a management position with the Forest Service.

After working on the Kootenai and Clearwater National Forests, he was supervisor on the Bitterroot National Forest from 1955 to 1959. His leadership there was marked by advocacy for wilderness and a strong resolve to ensure watersheds not be damaged as a result of political pressure to aggressively increase logging on national forests. Later, he was assistant regional forester for the Eastern Region in Wisconsin, moved to the U.S. Bureau of Outdoor Recreation and eventually retired in 1973 from the National Park Service.

Even while employed by the federal government, Thurman followed the path of his long-time friend and predecessor on the Bitterroot National Forest, Guy "Brandy" Brandborg, into a leadership position at The Wilderness Society. He served on the Governing Council of the non-governmental advocacy group from 1965 to 1980, including three years as president following his retirement from federal service.

Returning to Ronan upon his retirement, Thurman quickly assumed a leadership role in tribal and state-level environmental issues. He chaired a broad-based coalition to fight a proposed open-pit coal mine in British Columbia that threatened the quality of Flathead Lake. He was also appointed by Governor Ted Schwinden to the newly formed Flathead Basin Commission and immediately elected chairman of this unique commission of citizens and local, state, tribal and federal agencies. His continued advocacy for wilderness on national forests was rewarded in 1978 when Congress established the Great Bear Wilderness.

But perhaps Thurman's greatest legacy is found on the Flathead Reservation where he was born. He returned to the reservation in the midst of great controversy over proposed clearcutting in the Mission Mountains behind his home. Three "yayas," or grandma elders, lobbied tribal members to oppose the logging plans and Thurman proposed a tribal wilderness area as a solution.

For eight years, he organized allies and politely engaged opponents. He led field trips and educated fellow tribal members about the value of wilderness. Finally, in 1982 the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribal Council voted to establish the nation's first tribal wilderness area, the Mission Mountain Wilderness, unlogged and unroaded forever.

Perhaps Thurman Trosper's greatest legacy was his fight to establish the Mission Mountain Wilderness on the Flathead Reservation where he was born.
