

Cultivating a Stewardship Ethic

Statement of interest for the position of Executive Director at the Wyoming Wilderness Association

Erik Hoversten

You can feel the pulse of the sublime when you crest the rim of Highland Park from Little Goose Creek. The world opens before you in a sea of rugged green. You entered the sky as one thrust into the oldest of battles, with vast swathes of perfect blue fending off the powerful march of grey thunderheads. The wind acts as mediator, carrying wisps of white into clear-sky territory – fig leaves of a temporary truce. Across the alpine lea and directly beyond the craggy buffalo back, stoic Black Tooth rises, flanked by sawtooth ridges that intimidate while they draw you toward them.

When nature is open before you, unbroken by traces of human imposition, its vastness defies comprehension, and you marvel at your smallness.

Entering untrammelled wildlands offers a respite from the constant churning of humanity, and their power instills a greater appreciation for human machinations – both their value and their limitations.

I'm a Sheridan native who has spent the last ten years exploring the urban wilds of New York. My natural connection to Wyoming's wide open spaces has only been heightened by this perspective-expanding experience. There is no more fitting path for me than to return to my home and serve the lands that have defined who I am. For this reason, I humbly submit my application for the Executive Directorship of the Wyoming Wilderness Association.

BACKGROUND

For the first quarter century of my life, Wyoming was my only home. The Big Horns are a source of countless warm memories from my childhood in Sheridan. I am most fond of my family's late-summer trips up Red Grade to harvest firewood and perhaps to listen to the Broncos on the radio during the trip down. On winter weekends, our destination would be the Sibley or Willow Park trails.

During my seven years of study at the University of Wyoming, which culminated in an MA in Philosophy, I spent numerous hours laying skinny, parallel tracks through the Snowys. I would use the quiet confines of the Medicine Bow to clear my mind, letting ideas slowly unfold how they may as my skis pointed in whatever direction suited their fancy. What understanding I have of philosophy I owe as much to skiing through the forest as to pulling books off the shelves (though that, too, is something I very much enjoy).

Ten years ago, I moved to New Jersey to pursue further education at Rutgers University. I studied the philosophy of language and cognitive science, and I'm currently wrapping up my second Master's degree. I'm greatly intrigued by the project of studying natural language discourse as a means of limning the structure of the mind. Though we all use our language every day without much thought to its production, this facility hides a deep mystery of how our linguistic knowledge is organized.

I currently live and work in Brooklyn, New York. Together with my wife, Caitlin, I have witnessed beautiful art and skillful performance, eaten delicious and varied cuisine, and blazed trails through miles and miles of urban jungle. But we both consider Wyoming to be our home. We were married at the Equestrian Center with the Big Horns witnessing our union through a smoky veil, and we will heed the call of the mountains for the rest of our years.

EXPERIENCE

I've always had a deep appreciation for nature. My time in New York has animated a drive for protecting the environment. And Big Reuse gave body to this pursuit. Big Reuse is a nonprofit dedicated to salvaging building materials and home furnishings from landfills and finding them a second life. The organization also serves as a host site of the NYC Compost Project, which strives to improve community and soil with compost. We divert over one million pounds of organics from landfills every year by composting it at our two sites in Queens and Brooklyn. The finished compost is donated to support community greening efforts. In my capacity as Operations Coordinator, I developed the operations plan for our compost site situated along the Gowanus Canal in Brooklyn. I now head up all activity on the site from processing raw materials and monitoring decomposition to maintaining equipment, leading tours, and supporting volunteer efforts.

I ultimately decided that my passion is in environmental advocacy rather than academic philosophy. But I learned a great deal during my time dedicated to research and teaching undergraduate courses. I found that I greatly enjoy (and am fairly good at) preparing and delivering lectures. It's not a simple matter to be truthful to the message while creating a story that is vivid and engaging for your audience, and my teaching experience has helped me develop techniques for meeting both of these demands.

Through my research interest in philosophy of language and logic, I've acquired a fair amount of technical skill in coding and database management, which I was able to put to work in helping to design and implement efficiency improvements in Big Reuse's operations. My favorite project has been developing an automated donations pipeline that functions to generate donation receipts, record donors to our contact list, and track the items donated from drop-off to resale. This system has greatly improved staff efficiency and opened up possibilities for leveraging our donor base.

Working in the nonprofit world has given me a chance to interact with a wide variety of individuals, community groups, and government agencies. These connections are always fruitful, though they aren't without their share of contention. In our outreach and education efforts, we interact with thousands of New Yorkers every week, many of them skeptical and squeamish community members for whom waste management is something they would rather never think about. It's a difficult but rewarding challenge to unlock ways of easing the burden on their participation without sacrificing

Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.

—Aristotle | Nicomachean Ethics

We inherit the earth, but within the limits of the soil and the plant succession we also rebuild the earth – without plan, without knowledge of its properties, and without understanding of the increasingly coarse and powerful tools which science has placed at our disposal.

—Aldo Leopold | The Wilderness Ethic

our fundamental mission to reduce waste. We need genuine buy-in from community members for the program to work, and in a city as diverse as New York, there is no single trick for universal support.

I've also had the opportunity to liaise with regulatory bodies at the Departments of Sanitation and Environmental Quality on permitting and licensing for our site. The experience has made me aware of a number of tools and techniques for asserting our interests in the face of looming bureaucracy. I'm proud that our efforts help to shape the waste management policy of a city of eight million people.

The Gowanus Canal Conservancy, with which I've collaborated on efforts to manage stormwater runoff and mitigate combined sewage overflow events in the canal, has been an invaluable partner for me both professionally and personally. Their staff is incredibly well-versed in navigating the weeds of nonprofit administration. They also have a dedicated board and an amazingly motivated volunteer force. I've taken them as a model of how to manage the many interests to which a nonprofit must respond in order to flourish at its core competency.

My time at Big Reuse has been deeply rewarding. It immersed me in the environmental advocacy community, and it feels wonderful to share with others a cause that I feel makes a genuine, positive impact on the health of the city. In a place like New York, it is easy to be convinced that humanity is a necessity. Every swathe of land, whether green or concrete, is maintained by human hands. Interestingly, it is this wealth of humanity that opened my eyes to the promise of the nonprofit sector to implement widespread environmental change. While the context in Wyoming is very different, the strategy for spurring the public to action is much the same. I feel that many of the things I have learned in the New York nonprofit world – about donor engagement, messaging, and collaborative involvement with partner organizations and agencies – would benefit me in my work at WWA.

VISION

I believe that environmental conservation provides a crucial balance to sustainable development, and my mission would be to spread that viewpoint. We can be encouraged by the efforts of brilliant people to discover ways to correct environmental damage of our own creation. But as Aldo Leopold noted back in 1933, when it comes to the environment, our power outstrips our understanding. As long as we are acting first and responding to the results of our action, we will constantly be marring with the imprint our mis-steps. Wyoming provides a special and important context for environmental action. Its vast stretches of wild space are beautiful and stable. We have an opportunity to learn from them and be inspired by them, if only we can find the wisdom not to interfere.

I know that land use is a contentious topic in the west, and there can be strong pushback against perceived restrictions of the basic right to pursue one's interests, whatever they be. But I also think that Wyomingites are responsive to a sense of responsibility. The challenge for conservation lies in shifting perspectives away from the sense that protection represents an outside force imposing a restriction on property and toward a sense of pride in the flourishing of our wild spaces. We are *stewards* of the land, not its owners, and we are responsible to interests beyond our own in protecting our charge.

The greatest gift that wilderness provides to me is presence of mind. I think that we can return the favor by striving to develop for wilderness a presence *in* mind of our fellow Wyomingites. Few people actually get to experience the power of wildlands on a regular basis. Nor can the continued existence of wildlands sustain the regular use by many people. Keeping wilderness present in mind carries some of the power generated by direct experience, and it leaves no trace.

Nature gives us the capacity to care; to faithfully exercise that capacity we must put in the work to develop a habit. My strategy would be to direct more regular and organized presentation of our efforts across multiple channels – the website, social and traditional media, outreach events, and in the platforms of partner organizations. I would use my knowledge of systems development and data management tools to build a comprehensive donor engagement plan. There are ample human resources available both locally and nationally, from individuals and large organizations. With the right plan in place, we can mine them – one type of resource extraction that is fully sustainable.

The eyes of donors are attracted to things that move. In addition to being versed in our causes, WWA must seek out new avenues of action to create a sense of liveliness in donors' eyes. Developing a lasting donor base requires frequently revisiting relationships. Returning with the same story every time will deaden the resolve of even the most dedicated patron. I revel in the idea of exploring new ways to express my own appreciation for wildlands, ensuring that we have a lively presence that donors will be proud to support. But this is not a task to be accomplished by one individual. I envision a project that extends beyond staff efforts to commissioning involvement from partner organizations, members, volunteers, and the community to let a thousand wildflowers bloom. The power of nature does not have one manifestation, and it cannot have just one voice. WWA can serve to direct and amplify those voices, and I would love to help them echo through the mountains.

I'm encouraged that many of the pieces are already in place at WWA. Having direct involvement in the development of policy that implicates wilderness, such as the Shoshone Travel Management Plan and the Wyoming Public Lands Initiative, is crucial, and WWA should be present and vocal at every juncture of their evolution. I'm able to serve as this representative and to guide others in being advocates for wilderness interests. Presence in mind starts with physical presence; WWA's efforts to provide access to wilderness through organized outings and YAW are a great foundation for developing a stewardship ethic. I was fortunate to join a WWA hike into Rock Creek and over Stone Mountain in July 2006. Experiencing nature with those who genuinely appreciate it is a strong motivator for action. I'm eager to lead my own trips through Rock Creek and share my enthusiasm.

A little idealism is valuable in nonprofit endeavors, but I'm not so Panglossian to believe that all minds are moved by what we take to be painfully obvious. Competing interests are strong, and not everyone who experiences nature will be motivated to protect it. But believing in the inspiring power of wilderness does not entail foregoing a fight in the face of opposition. I am fully prepared to insert myself into policy-making discussion and assert our interests – forcefully, if needed, but always respectfully. I appreciate that Wyomingites are independent-minded folks whose interests are genuine. There are many paths to wilderness protection, and I'm comfortable walking them all.