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FRIENDS OF THE CLEARWATER
DEFENDING THE WILD CLEARWATER SINCE 1987

The Big Wild Biodiversity and Climate Preserve

Establishing the first and largest preserve
of its kind in the United States

Big Wild Initiative III: Old Growth Forests and Climate
August 2026



A subalpine lake in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness, Idaho, part of the largest contiguous wild area in the United States outside of Alaska: The Big Wild. Brett Haverstick photo.



LEADERSHIP

Nez Perce Tribe, Friends of the Clearwater, Nimiipuu Protecting the Environment, Old Growth Network, Friends of the Bitterroot, Sierra Club, Wilderness Watch, WildEarth Guardians, Yaak Valley Forest Council, and other regional conservation partners.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The climate and biodiversity crises are accelerating across North America. Habitat fragmentation, species decline, and increasing pressure on public lands threaten some of the most important remaining wild landscapes in the United States. At the same time, the global "30x30" initiative challenges governments and communities to protect 30 percent of lands and waters by 2030.

Friends of the Clearwater and its partners propose the creation of the nation's first large-scale **Climate and Biodiversity Reserve** in Idaho's Big Wild. Encompassing one of the largest intact ecosystems in the lower 48 states, this initiative would safeguard globally significant biodiversity, protect irreplaceable old-growth forests, maintain wildlife connectivity, store vast amounts of carbon, and secure clean water for fish, wildlife, and local communities.

The reserve would serve as a model for landscape-scale conservation while making a substantial contribution toward achieving Idaho's 30x30 conservation goals. Through science, public engagement, coalition building, and policy advocacy, the project will advance permanent protection for the region's ecological values and ensure the continued development of mature forests into future old growth.

BACKGROUND: THE BIG WILD

The area known as the Big Wild is actually two adjacent wild regions. Clearwater Country is a land of moist cedar-fir forests and lower elevation mountains. This is where Friends of the Clearwater has focused its efforts. Salmon River Country is a higher, drier region of ponderosa break lands and glacier-carved peaks. They are joined by the Frank Church-River of No Return Wilderness. Our core region, Wild Clearwater Country, contains 3 million acres of wilderness and roadless forest. Altogether, the entire region covers more than 10 million contiguous acres of wild, undeveloped country, making it larger than Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks combined. This unique and irreplaceable region, jointly owned by all of us, is rich in biodiversity. Friends of the Clearwater will secure the largest intact wildland preserve in the contiguous United States for biodiversity and climate health.

The Big Wild has been central to Friends of the Clearwater's mission since 1987, and a core focus of the proposed legislation, Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act (NREPA).
<https://allianceforthewildrockies.org/nrepa/>

Friends of the Clearwater has worked to protect the wild character of this landscape. Building on that legacy, the Big Wild campaign advances a comprehensive vision to conserve and reconnect the region's most important habitats through three integrated initiatives:

1. Wild Salmon Sanctuary
2. Carnivore Corridors
3. ***Old Growth Forests, and Climate***

This proposal addresses the third initiative.

THE BIG WILD: INITIATIVE 3

Wild Forests and Climate

We will design and establish the largest biodiversity and climate preserve in the Lower 48; this preserve alone would nearly meet the “30x30” conservation challenge for Idaho.

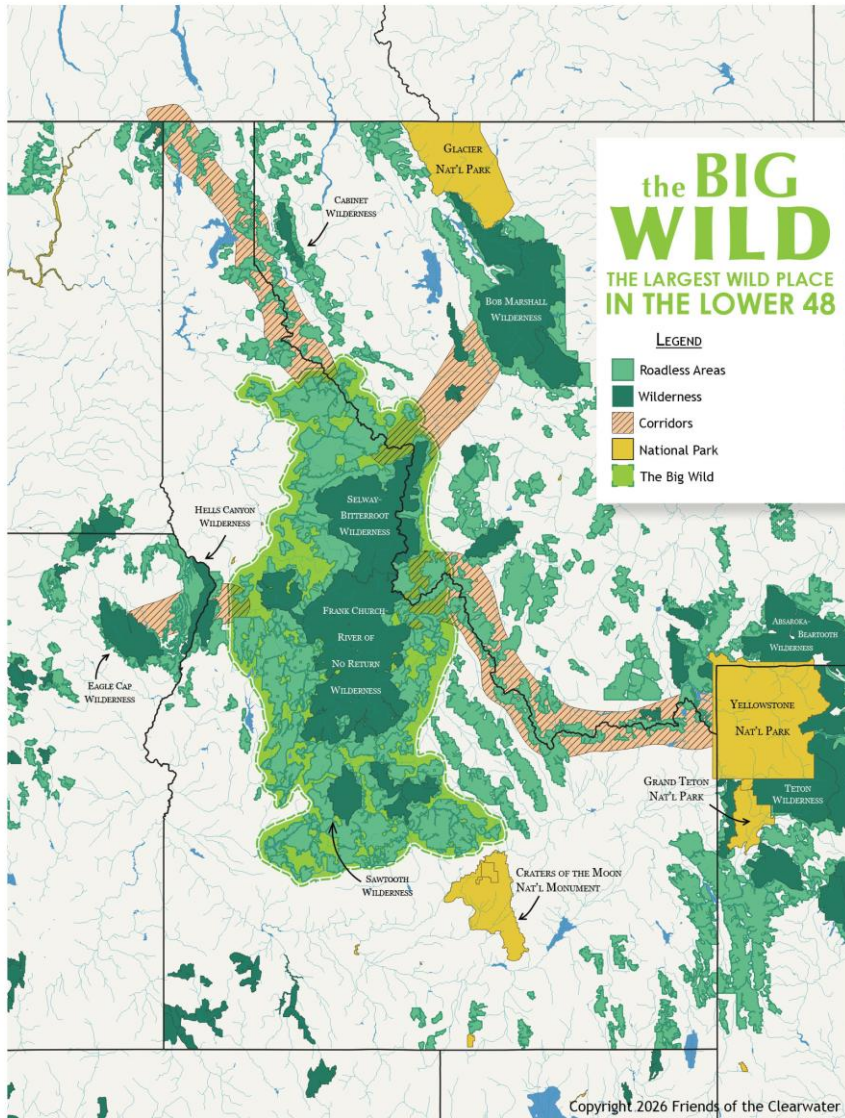
The roadless areas of the Big Wild include mature and old growth forests; other parts of the Big Wild also contain pockets of old growth. These forests provide essential habitat for carnivores and other wildlife, sequester enormous amounts of carbon, and produce cold, clean water sources that are critically important to salmon and steelhead.

Large, protected native landscapes are increasingly rare on planet Earth. The 30x30 initiative aims to protect 30% of the land and waters of the planet by 2030. Public lands are the best option for large-scale land conservation in the United States.

To ensure preservation of all old growth forests in the Big Wild, FOC will:

- Work on the ground and obtain data from other researchers and organizations to identify old growth and biodiverse forests in targeted areas;
- Ensure future old growth by identifying mature forests and indicator species;
- Mount a public information campaign on the essential benefits, including carbon sequestration, that old-growth forests provide;
- Resist all attempts to log or otherwise “manage” old growth forests in The Big Wild;
- Partner with scientists and regional organizations to provide education on wildfire’s natural role and how homeowners can manage fire-wise properties.

BIG WILD MAP



FRIENDS OF THE CLEARWATER

BIG WILD INITIATIVE

NEED FOR THE PROJECT

Climate change and habitat loss are driving significant declines in biodiversity worldwide. Large, connected, protected landscapes are among the most effective tools for conserving biodiversity, sustaining ecological processes, and increasing climate resilience.

The Big Wild contains extensive roadless areas, mature forests, and old-growth ecosystems that store substantial amounts of carbon and provide critical habitat for sensitive species. However, ongoing land management pressures and changing policies threaten these ecological values. Without proactive conservation measures, important old-growth habitats and future old-growth forests will be lost or degraded.

Protecting this landscape offers a rare opportunity to address climate and biodiversity challenges simultaneously while creating a nationally significant conservation model.

PROJECT GOALS

The project seeks to:

- Establish the largest biodiversity and climate preserve in the contiguous United States.
- Create the nation's first Climate and Biodiversity Reserve.
- Protect all remaining old-growth forests within the reserve.
- Identify and conserve mature forests that will become future old growth.
- Protect roadless area landscapes and critical wildlife habitat in the reserve.
- Advance Idaho's contribution toward the 30x30 conservation goal.
- Build a climate-positive conservation landscape across the greater Big Wild.
- Develop a foundation for achieving future 50x50 conservation objectives.

OBJECTIVES

Over the next **XX years**, the project will:

- Map and inventory old-growth and mature forest stands throughout priority areas.

Commented [1]: XX years?

- Develop spatial designs and conservation strategies for the Climate and Biodiversity Reserve.
- Establish biodiversity and forest-health monitoring systems.
- Identify and monitor indicator species associated with old-growth ecosystems.
- Build support among policymakers, conservation organizations, Tribal governments, and the public.
- Monitor NPCWNF to ensure no losses of identified old-growth forests within priority landscapes

PROJECT STRATEGY

1. Science and Research

The project will compile and communicate the best available science regarding:

- Biodiversity conservation
- Species recovery
- Forest carbon storage
- Climate mitigation
- Watershed protection
- Economic benefits of conservation

Scientific products will inform decision-makers, partners, funders, and the public.

2. Reserve Design and Monitoring

Project partners will:

- Map priority conservation areas.
- Identify and field-verify old-growth forests.
- Inventory mature forests capable of developing into future old growth.
- Create biodiversity and climate monitoring systems.
- Establish measurable ecological indicators for long-term evaluation.

3. Coalition Building

The initiative will strengthen collaboration among Tribal governments, conservation organizations, scientists, businesses, community leaders, and citizens to create broad-based support for permanent conservation.

4. Policy Advocacy

Activities will include:

- Legislative outreach.
- Development of policy-ready materials (maps, analyses, draft language).
- Preparation of scientific analyses.
- Develop support for conservation legislation and administrative protections.
- Engagement with state, federal, Tribal, and local decision-makers.

5. Public Engagement

The campaign will mobilize public support through:

- Workshops and educational programs.
- Field tours and citizen-science events.
- Earned media and digital outreach.
- Community partnerships.
- Storytelling centered on iconic wildlife and old-growth forests as messaging anchors.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES

By the conclusion of the project, we expect to achieve:

- Completion of a scientifically defensible Climate and Biodiversity Reserve design.
- Comprehensive mapping of priority old-growth and mature forest stands.
- Improved protection of ecologically significant forests and wildlife habitats.
- Expanded citizen participation in monitoring and stewardship.

- Increased public understanding of old-growth forests and climate resilience.
- Stronger policy and legislative support for landscape-scale conservation.
- A replicable national model for integrating biodiversity conservation and climate solutions on public lands.

WHY THIS PROJECT WILL SUCCEED (THEORY OF CHANGE)

Several factors position this initiative for success:

- Strong public support for public lands conservation (>90% recent survey).
- Documented support for maintaining Roadless Rule (~ 600,000 comments, 99% support).
- Decades of successful conservation leadership by Friends of the Clearwater.
- An established network of scientific, Tribal, and conservation partners.
- The exceptional ecological integrity and scale of the Big Wild landscape.
- Growing public interest in climate and biodiversity solutions.
- Proven effectiveness of citizen engagement and grassroots conservation campaigns

ACTIVITY AND BUDGET SUMMARY

Activity	Budget
Priority area mapping and reserve design	\$10,000
Old-growth identification and field verification	\$20,000
Reserve establishment and protection	\$40,000
Monitoring on the ground (proposed) actions	\$40,000
Indicator species monitoring	\$40,000

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BIG WILD INITIATIVE

Outreach materials and communications	\$10,000
Partnerships, travel, and citizen engagement	\$20,000
Adopt-an-Old-Growth-Forest program	\$5,000
Total	\$185,000-\$190,000

VISION

The Big Wild represents perhaps the best opportunity in the lower 48 states to demonstrate that biodiversity conservation and climate action can be achieved at a meaningful landscape scale. By protecting old-growth forests, securing wildlife habitat, and creating the nation's first Climate and Biodiversity Reserve, this initiative will leave a lasting legacy for future generations while helping meet the urgent challenges of our time.