Sierra Club, Nation Mark 200 Years Since Lewis & Clark Began Epic Journey Into Wilderness

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San Francisco, CA (PRWEB) May 14, 2004 -- Two hundred years ago this week Lewis and Clark left the map and journeyed into uncharted wilderness in their quest to reach the Pacific Coast. As the nation commemorates the start of this epic journey, there is growing support for protecting what is left of that wilderness for future generations of explorers.

"Exploring the mountains, rivers, forests and prairies gives us a hint of what it must have been like for the Corps of Discovery to venture completely off the beaten path," said author and historian Stephenie Ambrose Tubbs, daughter of renowned historian Stephen E. Ambrose, author of "Undaunted Courage." "Fortunately, we still have a chance to protect pockets of the pristine American West that remain unchanged since Lewis and Clark explored them 200 years ago."

On May 14, 1804, the Corps of Discovery, under the direction of co-captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, left Camp River Dubois in Hartford, Illinois and sailed up the Missouri River to begin their epic voyage. "I set out at 4 o'clock, p.m., in the presence of many of the neighboring inhabitants and proceeded under a gentle breeze up the Missouri to the upper point of the first island," Clark wrote in his journal after leaving camp.

Even before the national bicentennial observance of the Lewis and Clark expedition was officially underway, Sierra Club volunteers and staff were working hard at the local, regional and national level to educate Americans about the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to preserve the natural wonders first experienced by the expedition. The Sierra Club's work with community leaders and organizations to connect Americans with the legacy of these pioneering naturalists and to identify conservation opportunities in the Lewis and Clark region has started to blossom. There is growing support to protect some of the remaining but disappearing wildlands and wildlife witnessed by the Corps of Discovery 200 years ago.

Momentum from community leaders and the public to conserve and restore the lands of Lewis and Clark has been steadily gaining, as evidenced by a recent New York Times editorial that noted, "Along the 8,000-mile route of discovery lie places of staggering beauty, rich in animal life and deserving of protection for future generations...What better way to honor Jefferson's epiphanies than to save what we can?"

In March of this year, Senator Ron Wyden (D-OR) offered a "Lewis and Clark Mount Hood Wilderness" proposal aimed at adding 160,000 acres of wilderness and 36 miles of Wild and Scenic River designation near Oregon's Mount Hood and Columbia River Gorge, the same areas traveled by Lewis and Clark on their famed journey.

The historic route Lewis and Clark explored has changed dramatically from what their detailed journals described 200 years ago. From east of the Mississippi to the California coast, over 100,000 grizzly bears...
roamed American wildlands during the days of Lewis and Clark. Today, oil and gas drilling and a diminishing habitat have lessened that population to fewer than 1,000, a 99% loss of this iconic species. Over 16 million wild salmon once fought their way up the strong currents of the Columbia River. Today, hundreds of federal dams have changed the water makeup so drastically that only 1% of wild salmon return to the river basin to spawn. Ninety percent of Oregon and Washington's old-growth forests are gone.

And to make matters worse, the above examples are not isolated: a recent Sierra Club report (What's Lost, What's Left) determined that at least 40% of the 122 animal species discovered by Lewis and Clark have a form of official designation (federal, state or otherwise) warranting concern and the need for increased protection. Still, more than 40% of remaining U.S. inventoried roadless areas on National Forest lands lie within the country explored by Lewis & Clark. Although the fate of these lands is still uncertain, permanent protection of these roadless lands would go a long way to protect critical remaining habitat for threatened and endangered species, while safeguarding for future generations new and wonderful opportunities to fish, hunt and camp.

"While much has changed along Lewis and Clark's path of discovery, many critical wildlands and wildlife still remain and can be saved for future generations of explorers," explained Mary Kiesau, who manages the Sierra Club's Lewis and Clark Wild America Campaign. For example, grizzly bear and wild salmon populations are lower in numbers but still exist and can be protected with increased efforts. "We can assure that wildlands will stay wild by granting them permanent protection, and the bicentennial is the perfect and perhaps the last chance for such a tribute."

Sierra Club is encouraging people to get out and experience the grasslands, forests, mountains, and waterways that defined Lewis and Clark's epic journey into the American wilderness. Some Sierra Club offerings include organized outings, the "Adventuring Along the Lewis and Clark Trail" travel book, and even a guide to 10 spectacular fishing spots. In addition, the Sierra Club has published a status report on the plants and animals Lewis and Clark detailed in their journals. For more information on these resources, visit http://www.sierraclub.org/lewisandclark

Find out about the plants and animals Lewis and Clark observed -- and what's left today at: http://www.sierraclub.org/lewisandclark/species/

For an angler with a love of America's wild places and a bent for history, there's no better trip than fishing the waters along the Lewis and Clark Trail. Find your way at: http://www.sierraclub.org/lewisandclark/fishing_guide/

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