

A Tribute to Robert Belous

After a 24-year career with the National Park Service beginning in Alaska, where his work strongly contributed to passage of the 1980 Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act, Robert Belous retired to Spokane, Washington. He died at his home on May 19, 2001, at age 66, after an illness.

Born in New York City in 1935, Bob was a multi-faceted man with a multi-faceted career. A 1960 graduate of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, he served as an ensign in the U.S. Navy; sailed to the Far East, Europe, and the Mediterranean as a marine engineer aboard ocean-going merchant ships; and worked as a nuclear engineer on submarine powerplants at Puget Sound Naval Shipyard.

In 1965 Bob left ships and the sea to become a freelance wildlife photographer and writer. Based at Jackson Hole, Wyoming, he spent much time in the field preparing his articles. His annual rambles through Alaska's remote regions included a 2-month trek through the Arctic Wildlife Range. The wonders of Alaska had taken him in tow toward the climactic phase of his career.

The Wyoming interlude had brought Bob and his wife Judy into close friendship with Margaret Murie—Alaskan pioneer, author, and inspiration to wildlands advocates across the country. The cabin that she and Olaus built in the Grand Tetons had become a shrine and a center for the Alaska conservation movement. This association with Mardy and her friends plunged Bob into that movement in the early stages of mobilization for the Alaska lands struggle.

To his Park Service work in Alaska, starting in 1972, Bob brought the precision of mind of an engineer, the artistry of a photographer, the coherence and communication skills of a writer and lecturer, and the drive of a man on a mission. As a plank member of the National Park Service Task Force in Alaska, he began by taking magnificent photographs of the proposed parklands, which the Congress would consider for enactment. These visions of grandeur and beauty, vitalized by wildlife and traditional people living off the land, evolved into traveling exhibits and slide programs that Bob and others presented before the Congress and in major cities across the country. These shows helped sway the nation to support the Alaska park proposals. "This last treasure of wild country," in Mardy Murie's memorable phrase, would more than double the area of the National Park System of the United States.

From the beginning, Bob's many talents and his immense capacity for work led to ever-expanding duties. He became park planner and on-site keyman for the Kobuk Valley and Cape Krusenstern proposals in northwest

Alaska. As chief liaison officer for the task force, he met with and communicated constantly with Native Alaskan organizations, the governor's office, the state legislature, and state agencies and boards of game and fish. And the same with Alaska-based and national conservation organizations. He was a persuasive participant in congressional hearings. He worked with members of Congress and their staffs in Washington, D.C. During their visits to Alaska he took them into the country to show them the resources and values of the proposed parklands throughout Alaska.

This impossible array of jobs and contacts, plus the then 5-hour time difference between Anchorage and Washington, meant that Bob often started his phone calls back East at 3 a.m. and finished his Alaska meetings at 10 p.m. "Nobody can do this," his colleagues used to say. Yet he did. And as those who worked with him still say: "No one will ever be able to measure Bob Belous' contribution to passage of the Alaska Lands Act." That single act of Congress added 41 million acres to the National Park System, and comparable immensities to the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Robert Belous was much more than a trouble shooter and marathon man. He was a thinker, who, with key colleagues in Alaska, fashioned the philosophical and operational base for the ongoing Native Alaskan presence in the new national parklands. This revolution in national-park law and management—prompted by the destructive impacts of industrial civilization on indigenous cultures around the world—changed the frame by including traditional and historical cultures and subsistence activities as nationally significant elements of the new parklands. This switch from the old practice of eviction makes possible the coexistence of ancient homelands and new national parks on the common ground they share. Native Alaskan support for the Alaska Lands Act, because of the subsistence provisions, was critical to its passage. That support is no less critical to continued protection of the parklands and refuges today.

For 3 more years after the lands act was passed, Bob worked as special assistant to John Cook, director of the new Alaska Region. The new parklands' acquisition phase had ended. Now they must be made operational. If anything, Bob's duties increased during this critical period.

Cook's philosophy was to move carefully and deliberately into the vast new land base, where the reigning social climate was strong opposition to the new parks and other national interest lands. After all, Alaska had changed in just 20 years from an "open range" federal territory to a "fenced range" of owned and designated lands divided between the state, the Natives, and the nation. To help Alaskans understand the new facts of life in Alaska wrought by the new laws that had made these changes, Cook needed to get out into the country, to meet and talk to the folks living in and near the new parks. Bob's

continuing liaison and many contacts in the Native community, in state government, and in the field proved instrumental in this effort—whose objective was peaceful coexistence for the present, leading to acceptance, support, and cooperation in the future.

In large measure, despite continuing opposition and inflammatory political rhetoric, the operational frame for the new parklands was set in the 3 years granted Cook's administration of the Alaska Region. Bob, acting as Cook's one-man brain trust, had a hand in every part of this work: federal and state agency coordination, subsistence programs, Native contacts, public involvement, tourism, and park operations and resource issues, to name a few.

In due course John Cook, his deputy Doug Warnock, and Bob Belous ran afoul of the Alaska congressional delegation, which ordered them shipped out to the Lower 48. Doug and Bob landed at Redwood National Park, where Bob served as management assistant and, later, as chief of resource management under Superintendent Warnock. Whatever Bob's title, he donned the usual multitude of hats at Redwood—one of the System's most complex parks—and his hand was in every phase of park operations, public affairs, and inter-agency coordination, including, for example, rehabilitation of watersheds and redwood forests impacted by logging.

Meanwhile, John Cook had served several years as superintendent at Great Smokies before returning for a second stint as Southwest Regional Director. In 1988 Bob Belous became Cook's special assistant, and eventually Associate Regional Director for Administration. Again, titles don't matter. The job sheets, however many responsibilities they list, can only hint at Bob's cohering style of work across the field of National Park Service concerns. And now he had the immense span of the old-line Southwest Region with 40 field units in 5 states and a \$45 million budget.

In 1990 Bob and Judy returned to New Orleans, a home port during his sailing days. Now he came as superintendent of Jean Lafitte National Historical Park and Preserve. This park is in fact a mini-region, with 10 units spread over half the state of Louisiana: from the French Quarter to the bayous of Barataria, from Chalmette Battlefield and National Cemetery to the American Indian site at Chitimacha, from Acadian cultural centers to Italian-American and German-American centers, from visitor centers in Lafayette, Eunice, and Thibodaux to the Environmental Education Center in the delta wetlands, from the Atchafalaya Basin to Jazz in New Orleans.

Given this galactic collection of units and sub-units, this sprawling pot-pourri, John Cook had only one choice for superintendent. It had to be Belous.

Added to the general complexity was a mega-million-dollar construction program, membership on the Delta Region Preservation Commission, and constructive relations maintained with 2 U.S. Senators, 5 members of the House, 9 State Legislators, and the Corps of Engineers. Bob termed this “a highly eclectic management responsibility.” Indeed. And Bob did pull it together, in six years, on the same 16-hours-a-day schedule as always. He got the job done, again, as always.

And then he retired, and he and Judy had some time for birdwatching. But not enough time.



Those of us who knew and worked with Robert Belous will always remember him with awe and affection.

He was so intelligent and vital and competent in everything that he did, so concentrated on getting the job done. He sometimes showed a gruff exterior—that rough edge that protected him from the usual palaver of mere mortals, *because he had so damn much work to do!* But inside lurked a loyal and gentle friend, with a sense of humor that kept us in stitches when he had the time to indulge himself and us with it.

So telling of Bob’s true character is the testimony of those bright and motivated young planners who joined the Alaska Task Force way back when. (Now they are in middle management or on the boards of conservation foundations.) For them he was a fount of knowledge about Alaska, freely given. He inspired them to good work then, and several of them went on to careers in the National Park Service or related conservation fields.

As Bob marked those young recruits, so he marked us all—we lucky ones who knew him and worked in his wide wake.

William E. Brown

Memorial donations may be sent to the Alaska Conservation Foundation, 441 West 5th Ave., Anchorage, Alaska 99501-2340