

35 Years of Desert Care

By Jeremy Austin, Mac Lacy, Gena Goodman-Campbell and Lace Thornberg

An energetic group at a River Rendezvous in 1991. Photo: ONDA archive • In 2012, volunteers declared victory, at last, after pulling the last strand of obsolete barbed wire from the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge. Photo: Jesse Laney • Trygve Steen at the 2004 Desert Conference. Photo: ONDA archive. • The momentous day in 2000 when Steens Mountain became the first designated wilderness in Oregon's high desert. Photo: ONDA archive



This is a story about people who noticed a problem and chose to act.

It starts in 1987, in a tavern in Bend, Oregon, where a hodgepodge collection of 20 or so folks – some students, teachers, doctors, naturalists and others – gathered one Thursday evening. A shared love of wild desert spaces had drawn them together, and the realization that the high desert lands and waters they loved had no group dedicated to their protection was spurring them to action.

They could have ignored the call and hoped that someone else would come to the desert's aid. Instead, these public lands enthusiasts mobilized, brimming with moxie and bravado. As founding ONDA member and current staff member Craig Miller put it: "So what if we were up against some political obstacles, including our President (Regan), our Congressman (Denny Smith), and the Oregon Cattlemen's Association? Who cared if we didn't have money or experience? What was it to us that most people didn't even know Oregon had a desert, and those who did considered it a wasteland?"

Dubbing themselves the "Oregon Natural Desert Association," this group of people – which you are a vital member of today – became the heart and soul of Oregon's desert conservation movement.

As we offer this brief look back at ONDA's origins and ongoing evolution, decorated with stanzas from "The Ballad of ONDA" authored by founding ONDA member Alice Elshoff, we hope you'll be impressed by this small sample of what the organization has undertaken so far and excited as you think about what can be accomplished next.

Late 80s – early 90s

It was back in the winter of 88; when the BLM began to celebrate; they'd finished their study; they'd seen the wild land; all they could see from a government van... and they'd never heard of ON-DA! 🎵

ONDA formed as the Bureau of Land Management undertook a congressionally-directed inventory of wilderness lands in eastern Oregon. Concerned that much of Oregon's high desert had been overlooked by the agency's inventory, the founding members of ONDA set out to conduct one of their own.

This ad-hoc group of desert advocates hit the ground, hiking and mapping their way through eastern Oregon public lands, documenting the wilderness and other values of the high desert. Their "Sage Proposal" recommended five million acres for Wilderness designation in Oregon

– more than double the acres that the bureau identified as having wilderness character. Not bad for a bunch of rookies.

With that effort underway, the group began looking at how to address one of the most widespread impacts to desert habitat: livestock grazing.

They began by urging the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to remove livestock grazing from the Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge, where grazing was endangering sensitive populations of pronghorn antelope and sage-grouse. In 1994, the Service determined that livestock were incompatible with the Refuge's purpose and were removed, initiating one of the most important passive restoration experiments and scientific research initiatives ever conducted in the Great Basin.

As further evidence of a willingness to tackle thorny – or shall we say barbed – issues, ONDA soon launched into another major effort to help desert wildlife: removing all of the now unnecessary barbed wire fence from Hart Mountain National Antelope Refuge. These "barb wire round ups" became a tradition that brought desert-loving people together each year for the next two decades. The end result – one of the largest fence-free landscapes in the American West – was worth every drop of blood and sweat.

The late 90s – 2010

Not a wolffy grass in sight, the streams all dead; wasn't nothing growin' in the watershed; cows in the basins, cows in the streams; there were cows in the uplands, even shittin' in the Steens...looked like a job for ON-DA! 🎵

In this era, ONDA focused on securing Wilderness designation for the most significant public lands within Oregon's high desert and expanding our hands-on habitat restoration work to include stream restoration, trail maintenance, and more.

After years of ground work, ONDA led a historic collaborative effort to establish the Steens Mountain Wilderness, the first wilderness area in Oregon's high desert.

The process of garnering wilderness protection for Steens was, according to ONDA board president Gilly Lyons, "a long one! It took grassroots advocacy, thoughtful policy work, strategic political outreach, and hours and hours spent poring over maps."

After Steens, ONDA led two more successful efforts to establish the Oregon Badlands Wilderness and Spring Basin Wilderness.

Thousands of people and many major Central Oregon employers participated in ONDA's grassroots campaign to protect the Oregon Badlands. *Photo: ONDA archive*



Another major milestone during this era occurred when ONDA overturned a Bush-era "no more wilderness" policy and won a landmark case that required the Bureau of Land Management to acknowledge wilderness values across 7.8 million acres of public lands and to assess future management to protect these areas (see page 5).

ONDA also protected 200 miles of the Wild and Scenic Owyhee River system when successful legal work led to the removal of livestock that were damaging redband trout streams and streamside areas that today are rich with willows and birds.

And, we began to sink our teeth into riparian restoration in the John Day River Basin. We launched into a longterm partnership with the Confederated Tribes of the Warm Springs to complete intensive restoration at Pine Creek, and worked with partners to install beaver dam analogs and restore habitat for salmon and steelhead on Bridge Creek, transforming the stream into resilient habitat with thriving populations of fish and wildlife over the course of just a handful of years.



Asked to create structures that mimic beaver dams, ONDA volunteers Emily Abreu and Elisa Cheng pretend to take us literally. *Photo: ONDA • Julie Weikel, Helen Harbin and Alice Elshoff hiked from Sheldon to Hart to raise awareness of the migration corridor between these refuges, as highlighted in the film "Sagebrush Sisters."* *Photo: Jim Davis*

2011 – 2019

ONDA won't be stopped, we're in it to the end; we've got a great campaign to save our desert friends; and we're working all together with other desert rats; and you will definitely be seeing a Big Protection Act...oh they haven't heard the last from ON-DA! 🎵

In this era, ONDA engaged in numerous creative ventures to raise awareness about the Owyhee Canyonlands, Sutton Mountain, the Greater Hart-Sheldon, and the high desert as a whole. Thanks to this work, Oregonians from across the state and Americans around the country went from saying "the Ah-wah-what?" to "We need to save the Owyhee!"

After thousands of hours devoted to compiling route information, creating maps, gathering GPS tracks and waypoints, the Oregon Desert Trail opened for exploration in 2011. ONDA established this audacious, aspirational 750-mile route to introduce people to the spectacular natural areas of the Oregon's dry side and invite them to take part in its conservation and care.

In 2016, ONDA successfully blocked a proposed industrial energy development atop Steens Mountain in an area crucial to over-wintering sage-grouse, and pulled the last obsolete barbed wire off the mountain in 2017.

ONDA launched the Oregon Desert Land Trust in 2017 to complement our public lands work with private lands conservation. And, in 2019, after a decade-long challenge, ONDA secured a court order barring more than a hundred miles of roads that would have sliced across Steens.

Governor Kitzhaber recognized ONDA's wilderness stewardship program as an Outstanding Volunteer Program in 2011, and the amount of hands-on restoration ONDA completed grew significantly in this era, with the help of as many as 500 volunteers each year who planted thousands of trees and restored dozens of miles of desert streams throughout Central Oregon and the John Day River Basin.



2020 – today, tomorrow, and beyond

There is work ahead, but the stakes are high, the world is gonna hear our battle cry. ON-DA! 🎵

At this moment, over one million acres in the Owyhee Canyonlands and hundreds of miles of waterways across the high desert are set up for enduring protection thanks to active campaigns and introduced legislation (see page 6 for an update).

Across the desert, ONDA volunteers are surveying stream conditions on the Malheur wild and scenic rivers, pushing the Forest Service and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service to maintain grazing restrictions that have been secured, after decades of legal pressure, along nearly 70 miles of bull trout streams.

Looking ahead, we know we will adopt the latest technologies, improve our techniques, involve different constituencies and pursue new avenues to gain desert protection. However our work evolves, one thing will certainly remain true: ONDA will be successful thanks to the generous support of passionate, principled people. Many of the same founding members from 1987 are still with ONDA today (Thank you!!) and, thanks to many initiatives, including our Tribal Stewards project (see page 13) and the Hillis Internship, we are actively engaging the next generation of desert advocates.

Over the past 35 years, this community has met each new challenge with ingenuity and persistence. As an ONDA supporter, you are an integral member of a dedicated community that can be counted on to ask "What's the next challenge?" and then set out to solve it. ♦



ONDA volunteer Craig Terry holding one of the last coils of barbed wire pulled out of the cow-free Steens Mountain Wilderness. *Photo: Sage Brown • ONDA volunteers respond to the new challenge of a proposed large-scale mine while meeting with members of the Fort McDermitt Paiute-Shoshone Tribe at McDermitt Caldera.* *Photo: Gary Calicott*



LOOKING BACK AT 35 YEARS

It wouldn't be possible in a single article to list out every conservation win this community has achieved in the past 35 years, nor begin to account for the many people and countless stories behind the volume of work completed. For more highlights from the past 35 years, see [ONDA.org/accomplishments](https://www.onda.org/accomplishments) and, for more stories and accounts of the work as it was happening, we have posted the past editions of Desert Ramblings at [ONDA.org/desert-ramblings](https://www.onda.org/desert-ramblings).

