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pillar in Montana's environmental movement

'Those things I love': Janet Ellis honored with Women in Conservation award

TOM KUGLIN Independent Record Mar 26, 2016



Thom Bridge, Independent Record

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Janet Ellis

As part of Women's History Month, Helena lawmaker and longtime Montana Audubon staffer Janet Ellis was honored Friday for her work in conservation.

Sponsored by the National Wildlife Federation, Montana Wildlife Federation, Montana Audubon and Montana Conservation Voters, the event recognized Ellis as a leader in conservation during her career that began in the 1980s. Ellis is the second Montana recipient

of the Women in Conservation Award, following former legislator Carol Williams' selection last year.

"You're really honored when you're recognized by your peers, and to be recognized after Carol Williams who is one of my conservation heroes, that is certainly the icing on the cake," she said in an interview.

Born in Ohio, Ellis spent her summer vacations hiking through national parks and grew up with a creek and woods right outside her door. She earned a biology degree from the University of Montana, worked in several national and state parks, and became an Audubon intern for the 1981 Legislature. There she pushed for a nongame checkoff to help fund nonhunting species.

While unsuccessful in its first attempt, when she returned in 1983, the checkoff passed and has raised nearly \$900,000.

By 1989, Audubon hired her full-time for programing and lobbying.

"I think because of my background and growing up treasuring my time outside as a kid, I knew I wanted to go into biology but I didn't know exactly what to do with it," Ellis said. "I think Audubon has been a good fit because it combines science and policy and I've been able to craft my job here to combine those things I love."

Lobbying meant educating lawmakers on environmental issues, and Ellis saw other successes including laws creating setbacks for logging along streams as well as legislation prohibiting commercialization of many nongame wildlife species.

Habitat along streams and rivers and in riparian areas is some of the richest for birds and other wildlife, Ellis said, and grasslands and sagebrush habitat has also become a strong focus of Audubon and her work.

"Habitats, clean water, clean air, climate change -- there's so many issues it's never a dull moment," she said.

Ellis has been a pillar in Montana's environmental movement for more than three decades, said Montana Audubon Executive Director Steve Hoffman.

"She sticks to the science and has always worked very well with both sides of the aisle," he said. "She's patient with people who don't agree with her and does it in a really approachable manner. People trust her because of that kind of integrity and knowledge."

Deputy Director of MEIC Anne Hedges said that Ellis is known for her scientific background and is never satisfied with a superficial analysis. She not only asks what is being done, but how and why, Hedges said.

"Janet has been an advocate for those species most of us take for granted," she said. "She's not only tenacious, but she has mentored so many people over the decades and she's so knowledgeable in the process and getting things done. I love working with her because she's fearless but not threatening."

Hedges and Ellis agreed on the importance of recognizing women in conservation.

"I think particularly in the wildlife realm, it's a little male dominated and I think it is very nice and encouraging to have women acknowledged for the role that they're playing," Ellis said. "I think one of the things I'm good at and I think women in general are good at is networking because on big conservation victories it's never one person that does all the work."

Family is also critical, and Ellis credits her husband Jim of 25 years and son Dan for their support of her work.

Ellis served her first term last session as a representative for House District 81. Democratic leadership suggested she use her conservation background as a citizen legislator, but she landed on the appropriations committee rather than committees considering wildlife and environmental policy. The experience was still eye opening seeing how funding is hashed out for state agencies and the many other issues she learned.

In working with Ellis for more than 20 years, FWP Director Jeff Hagener echoed her success in working across the aisle. He pointed to her initial work with the nongame checkoff and continued advocacy for wildlife habitat as understanding the need for broad support for programming of all species.

“I’d say Janet is one of those people that’s been a tireless advocate and she’s always been very successful both as a lobbyist and setting conservation policy,” he said. “I think she’s persistent and also always has the facts behind her.”

Sen. Christine Kaufmann, D-Helena, looks for other Democrats that she feels will make good legislators and encourages them to run. It takes a leader to build coalitions in conservation where issues such as climate change and social justice intersect, Kaufmann said of encouraging Ellis.

“I think that’s what Janet embodies, that wiliness and passion to try to change things for the better,” she said.

As she runs unopposed for her second term, Ellis is already looking forward to engaging in conservation debates with Democrats and Republicans. Public lands, restrictions on Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks’ land purchases, Colstrip and clean air are going to be front and center, she said.

“One of the things I’ve learned when I wear my new hat as a legislator, since you’ve been a staff person is how to become a leader in conservation issues,” Ellis said. “You’ve been more behind the scenes and now you have to step up into a totally different roll.”

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