



Conservation Poll Reveals Interesting Shifts in Attitudes

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It was interesting to see the results of the poll asking voters in the new 8th Congressional District about their attitudes toward conservation of our natural resources.

The poll was conducted on behalf of the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition, a broad-based group of businesses, nonprofits and community groups that support investing in public lands. The firm that did the polling works primarily with Republican candidates, including Rep. Dave Reichert. That should take the bias issue out of play.

The views of constituents on both sides of the Cascades are remarkably similar in terms of the value people place on the outdoors and the extent to which they believe that public lands are good for the economy and tourism. I'm not sure that results would have been the same had these questions been asked 15 or 20 years ago, when the oft-heard mantra in North Central Washington was that public lands were negatively affecting the local economy — that we would be better off if we had less public land.

There seems to be a far greater awareness and appreciation for the economic value of public lands in our region these days. I found it illuminating that 64 percent of those queried in Chelan County considered themselves to be conservationists. By significant margins, voters in Chelan County believe that public lands improve the quality of life in the state (78 percent), tourism (84 percent), opportunities for recreation (74 percent) and jobs and the economy (59 percent). The percentages for the district as a whole were higher, but not significantly so.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that people who live in Chelan County are enthusiastic about the great outdoors, since we live in proximity to extraordinary hiking, climbing, hunting, fishing, mountain biking and horseback riding, to name just a few of the available outdoor pursuits. Lori Weigel, of Public Opinion Strategies, said it was surprising the high percentage of people in the district who spend time outdoors. In other parts of the country without these resources, the public involvement in the outdoors is substantially less.

The truth is that communities without our amazing natural resources would give anything to have access to what we have out our back door — hiking, fishing, hunting, skiing, kayaking and a host of other activities. It's our environment, combined with our weather, that makes North Central Washington the playground for folks west of the Cascades, and we have barely begun to tap into that potential.

Every economic development study in the past 15 years has highlighted the quality of life issues as a key strength to be leveraged. The quality of life here is a key reason why the highest quality physicians around choose to move to the region to practice medicine, according to the folks at the Wenatchee Valley Medical Center. And I suspect it's a big part of the reason that the vast majority of Alcoa retirees from the Wenatchee plant choose to continue living in the area.

If we are smart, we will aggressively tap into the potential for bringing more tourists to enjoy the benefits of the public lands that provide us with an abundance of recreation opportunities throughout the year.