

Colorado Backcountry Hunters & Anglers Tribute To BHA Founder Mike Beagle

“BHA’s world was rocked ... by the passing of our founder, Mike Beagle,” Backcountry Hunters & Anglers (BHA) President and CEO Ryan “Cal” Callaghan explained in a membership update on Feb. 19, 2026. “Vision, paired with the courage and willpower to bring it to life, is rare. But that’s what Mike did when, more than 20 years ago, he brought together a small group of advocates for wild country to form BHA.”

There are many BHAers who knew Mike for much longer and far better than me (e.g., Ben Long, Tony Heckard, Holly Endersby, Scott Stouder, David “Elkheart” Petersen, to name just a few), but Mike was everybody’s friend and recruited me into the fledgling BHA fold during March 2005, a year after the “Gang of Seven” stood around that prophetic campfire in southern Oregon ushering our [tribe](#) into existence. The “About BHA” [webpage](#) documents that seminal gathering.

“March 21-22, 2004—Campfire at Mike Beagle’s house in the southern Cascade foothills of Eagle Point, OR. Oregon hunters Dick Hentze, Tim Lillebo, James Monteith, Tony Heckard, Michelle Halle, Mike Beagle, and Brian Maguire all met to discuss [forming](#) a new conservation organization built around the public land backcountry hunting and angling experience. Out of this two-day meeting, BHA was formed.”



Mike and the “Gang of Seven” ignited the spark that was our founding campfire. As fires sometimes do, it spread. In this case, all the way across the country and continent. Mike was in awe of how far we’ve come since then, knowing that such ideas require a boots on the ground army to flourish and many selfless leaders to see them through. Ben Long, [author](#) of the *Hunter & Angler Field Guide to Raising Hell*, was one of them.

“I was not at BHA’s founding campfire ... I had a new baby that spring and couldn’t make the road trip,” Ben wrote in the Winter 2024 *Backcountry Journal*. “Mike was a former Army ranger working as a high school teacher in Eagle Point, Oregon. Mike had many leadership attributes, but one that mattered most—fire in the belly. Mike and I were on the phone almost daily in those days, trying to figure out how to bring his idea to life. His enthusiasm was contagious.”

Adding Fuel To The Fire

By the early 2000s many hunter-conservationists were becoming increasingly disillusioned with mainstream hunting groups, as explained in this February 2025 BHA blog post (“Freedom & Fire: A Brief BHA [History](#) II”): “Public lands habitat is the Titanic that keeps hunting afloat, but it’s [sinking](#), which is why BHA was formed around a southern Oregon campfire in March 2004.”

“... too many hunting groups, it seems, are trapped in echo chambers or information feedback loops of our own making. We’ve created alternate-reality bubbles that are collapsing around us,” I wrote in an October 2025 BHA [blog](#) (“Roadless Rule [Rollback](#): Roads to Ruin”). While they’re busy rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, BHA is focused on saving the sinking ship. We formed to [protect](#) public lands, to be “the voice for our wild public lands, waters, and wildlife.”

Chris Wood, Trout Unlimited President and CEO, provides some related insights. “In the late 1990s, I worked for the U.S. Forest Service. We were working to protect the remaining roadless areas on national forest lands across the country,” he explained. “Over two years, the Forest Service held hundreds of public meetings around the country that sparked intense debate.”

“My job at the Forest Service back then was to take all the meetings relevant to the ... Roadless Area Conservation Rule,” Chris said. “The regulated community—timber, oil and gas, mining and other interests—beat down my door. The environmental community beat even harder. The one community I never heard from was the hunting and angling community.”

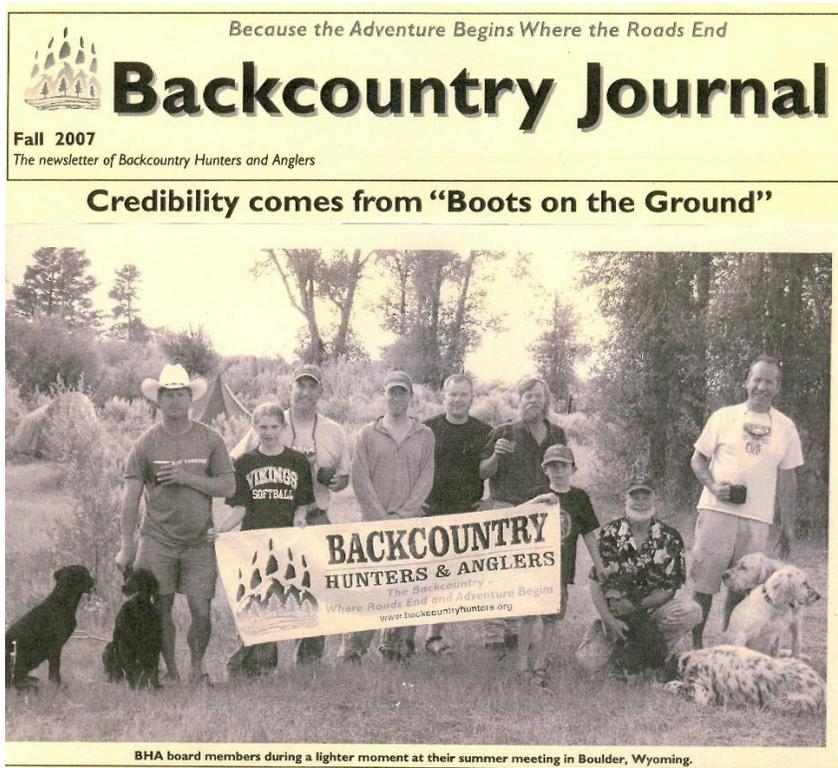
“In 2001, we came out with a policy that protected more than 58 million acres of roadless public lands from development,” he added. “It should have been a huge deal for anglers and hunters, but their voices were largely absent. Anglers and hunters were the nation’s first conservationists more than a century ago. Twenty years ago, however, they were missing.”

That is until Backcountry Hunters & Anglers stepped up to fill the void in lockstep with Trout Unlimited. During March 2005 Mike mailed me a BHA introduction letter referencing my [letter](#) to President George W. Bush printed in the Republicans for Environmental Protection (REP) Winter 2005 newsletter, The Green Elephant, after the 2004 election.

“I read your excellent and articulate letter to President Bush in the REP newsletter. I have a military background as well,” he said. “Consider our organization, there are none like it anywhere.” Mike was right! I joined BHA because Mike and the “Gang of Seven” were “inspired by the political activism of Theodore Roosevelt, the Land Ethic of Aldo Leopold, the hunting ethics of David ‘Elkheart’ Petersen, and (more recently) the fiery oratory of Hal Herring,” I [wrote](#) in “Freedom & Fire: A Brief BHA History II.”

During 2006 David Petersen recruited me to be his Colorado BHA (the first state chapter) co-chair. Then, during January 2007, I [joined](#) the North American Board and immediately focused on rounding up leaders to start a Minnesota BHA chapter. Darrell Spencer and Erik Jensen, a Mike Beagle Chairman’s Award recipient, were prominent among [them](#).

“Mike and the founding seven coalesced around the idea of a big-tent public lands and waters group that wouldn’t be hemmed in by species-specific concerns—focused instead on the wild lands and waters themselves,” Ryan Callaghan emphasized. “One that could elevate hunter-angler pragmatism and passion, serve as a voice for wilderness, and unify public land users. The idea and ethos spread like wildfire.”



Charting A Course

“The first BHA board meeting (July 2005) was held at our home in Pollack, Idaho, next to the huge Rapid River Roadless Area with a Wild and Scenic River coursing through the canyon,” Holly Endersby wrote in the Fall 2024 *Backcountry Journal*. “From day one, Mike Beagle—the Oregonian who hatched the idea with buddies around a campfire—insisted that ‘boots on the ground’ would be our mantra: We would know the land we wanted to protect and use that unique position to make a difference.”

We held the second BHA Board meeting at the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) Ranch near Boulder, Wyoming (July 6-9, 2007). “During the weekend we pondered and planned BHA’s future fueled by equal parts hope, wild game, and whiskey chasers,” I [wrote](#) in November 2020 BHA blog (“Where Hope Lives: A Brief BHA History”).

Board members in attendance included Mike Beagle, David “Elkheart” Petersen, Tim Lillebo, Brian Maguire, Dave Glenn, Tom Reed, and me. In addition, Mike’s son and daughter, Steen and Riley, rounded out the group along with a half-dozen dogs. As Ben Long observed, “I like this ratio: 7 board members, 2 kids, and 6 dogs.”

“We imagined a future BHA with members and chapters across the country and continent,” I [explained](#) in “A Brief BHA History.” The first state chapter was started by David “Elkheart” Petersen in Colorado during 2005. Alaska and Minnesota chapters followed in rapid succession. Today, BHA has [over](#) 40,000 members spread out across all 50 states and 13 Canadian provinces and territories—including chapters in 49 states, two Canadian provinces and one territory, and Washington, D.C.

Our first BHA North American Rendezvous was held in Heritage Hall at Fort Missoula (March 2-4, 2012) with around 130 attendees, including keynote speaker Steven Rinella. Rinella captured the essence of our tribe during a BHA interview. “I’d say that 90% of the truly memorable experiences in my life—I’m talking about experiences where I’ve told and written the story dozens and dozens of times—have occurred in the backcountry,” he emphasized.

Subsequent Rendezvous were held in: Boise (2013); Denver (2014); and Spokane (2015). On March 9, 2015, I stepped down from the North American Board (after 8-plus years) but continued to serve on the Minnesota BHA Board until September 20, 2018 (11-plus years) and am still on the Colorado BHA Board (19-plus years) but preparing to transition off during 2026. Mike and I kept in touch after serving on the North American Board.

While working in Vacaville, California—northeast of San Francisco—during August 2019, a weekend road trip through northern California’s redwood groves facilitated a reunion with Mike at Wild River Brewing in Medford, Oregon. During August 2023 Mike was working in Denver and we met at the towering Teddy Roosevelt mural near the Convention Center. Then, in August 2024, during another California redwood groves tour, we met at Wild River Brewing in Medford again.

Wilderness Warriors

One of the conservation achievements Mike was most proud of included leading the effort to designate the Copper-Salmon Wilderness. He joined the staff of Trout Unlimited in 2005 and went on to help pass the first sportsmen-led wilderness [bill](#) in Oregon history, the Copper-Salmon, in 2009.

“15 years ago today President Barack Obama signed the Omnibus Public Land Management Act of 2009, a bipartisan effort to protect our natural heritage,” Mike [posted](#) on Instagram during March 2024. “Within the bill, the Copper-Salmon Wilderness Area was established, protecting 13,700 acres of the headwaters of SW Oregon’s Elk River. It was an honor to lead and manage this effort for 3 years with @trougunlimited and other partners and all of the amazing grassroots volunteers of Port Orford, who had the foresight to push for protection of this jewel for salmon, steelhead and people.”

Mike joined us for our monthly Colorado BHA chapter leaders conference call on October 6, 2025. The call agenda stated: “We’ll be joined by BHA founder Mike Beagle for a 15–20-minute (or so) discussion on: 1.) What ignited the spark that started Mike down the path to founding BHA. 2.) Mike’s work on the Copper-Salmon Wilderness, the first sportsmen-led wilderness bill in Oregon history.”

After he finished one of our chapter leaders summed up what we were all thinking: “That was cool!” Before I had a chance to thank him, Mike texted (on Oct. 7): “Thanks again for last night’s invite. I enjoyed it brother!” My response: “You received many compliments from our chapter leaders ... A real treat for us all ... thank you brother!”

On Veterans Day (Nov. 11, 2025) I sent Mike a YouTube [short](#) recorded in northern Minnesota’s Chippewa National Forest: “Today is November 11th. Veterans Day ... I’d like to think about our public lands, our democracy, our Constitution. Basically, they’re all intertwined. If we lose democracy, we lose public lands. They’re both interdependent upon each other ... I’d like to thank all the veterans out there for protecting what we have. For democracy and for public lands.”

“Have a good Veterans Day brother,” I said in the text. Mike’s response: “Thanks brother! Mt. Lakes Wilderness hike with Riley.” Mike knew well, as I wrote in a January 2024 BHA blog (“Public Lands (& Freedom) Unite Our Backcountry Hunters & Anglers [Tribe](#)”): “BHA is a tribe of wilderness warriors, fighting for our public lands and freedom. In the [words](#) of our AFI leaders, ‘Public Lands = Freedom.’”



“This is why BHA was built. For this opportunity. For this [fight](#)!”
-A Brief [BHA](#) History III (6/29/25)

Keeping The Fire Burning

During the second week of February 2026 I joined a diverse group of outdoorsmen and -women [visiting](#) congressional offices in Washington, D.C. to [express](#) our support for public lands. Meeting with legislators provides them with important [insights](#) from hunters, anglers, and other constituents who know the value of our public lands from boots on the ground experience.

While in DC we crossed paths with a Save the Boundary Waters [group](#) meeting with legislators about a proposed foreign-owned sulfide-ore [mine](#) in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (BWCAW) watershed. The mine would sit less than one mile from the wilderness boundary near Ely. Theodore Roosevelt IV was [with](#) them. “T4” is a banker, Vietnam War [veteran](#), lifelong Republican, and the great-grandson of the 26th U.S. president.

“What should BHA do about mining near the Boundary Waters?” Backcountry Hunters & Anglers President and CEO Ryan “Cal” Callaghan asked in his membership update on Feb. 19, 2026. “This is exactly the type of fight Mike Beagle envisioned our group taking on,” he emphasized. “BHA has a long history of fighting insurmountable odds, of being the first to stand up, and then hoping others will be brave enough to follow suit.”

“Our job as BHAers is to be the voice for our wild public lands, waters, and wildlife—even when it means betting against the house,” Cal added. “Wild lands and places like the Boundary Waters didn’t stay wild by accident. Every generation has had to stand watch. In doing this, we honor Mike Beagle,” he explained. “I’m proud to stand united with you in this moment.”

Although we are in the midst of some potentially epic, if not desperate, public lands [battles](#), that’s what BHA was built for. We know from hard-earned, boots-on-the-ground experience that our public lands and waters are intertwined with our freedom and democracy. Lose one or the other and we’ll likely lose both. In the words of Hal Herring (host of BHA’s Podcast & Blast), “The future of the American public lands is as important to our nation as the Bill of Rights or the Constitution itself.”

The Best Ideas

Before there were chapters across the country, there was a campfire and a small group of hunters and anglers, men and women, who refused to sit quietly while public lands were threatened. They didn’t just help [start](#) an organization. They sparked a movement. Mike and the “Gang of Seven” proved convincingly that the best ideas do come from around a campfire. Mike’s daughter, Riley, and son, Steen, were integral to BHA’s early work and success.

“Mike’s kids were involved from the beginning. They came to our place in Idaho for the first official board meeting and helped Mike by stapling and addressing the original newsletters written by Mike,” Holly Endersby explained (on Feb. 17). “Riley and Steen understood the passion their dad had for protecting huge swaths of the best of our country’s backcountry. They hiked with their dad through land he would leave them as his legacy.”

“Thank you for continuing my dad’s legacy,” Riley said (on Feb. 17). “When he started BHA we sat on our living room floor addressing newsletters. He was so proud of the growth of BHA. We

visited headquarters in 2015 and it was incredible.” “Mike’s vision was extraordinary. BHA succeeded beyond his dreams, but it all comes down to Mike’s love of the land and dedication to other people,” Ben Long added (on Feb. 17). “He lit that first campfire. But we’ll keep it burning.”

On July 22, 2026, it will be 20 years since I started volunteering as a BHA chapter [leader](#). Mike’s vision and commitment to our great public lands estate and hunting-angling heritage have motivated and guided me during these nearly two decades. As hunters, anglers and conservationists, we [stand](#) on the shoulders of giants from past generations, like Theodore Roosevelt, Aldo Leopold, and many others.

Now Mike Beagle stands among them. On Feb. 12, a few days before he passed (on Feb. 16), I sent Mike a text updating him on our Colorado congressional delegation office [visits](#) in Washington, D.C., advocating for public lands. He responded promptly and positively (as always) saying: “Good work brother. You are a stalwart!”

You are the stalwart who inspired me and thousands of others to join BHA and engage in this good work on behalf of “our wild public lands, waters, and wildlife.” Our good work will continue! Thank you, Mike. Rest in [peace](#), brother.



Additional/Related Information

- Colorado BHA (2/17/26). A [tribute](#) to BHA founder Mike Beagle.
- Aaron Hebeisen, Backcountry Hunters & Anglers [Chapter](#) Coordinator (3/12/26). “It all started around a campfire in 2004. The campfire got bigger. The mission has stayed the same. Join us!”

- “Mike left us while doing what he loved most, exploring the mountains and forests of Southern Oregon. We will carry forward his warmth, his humor, and his unwavering love for SOU.”
- Staff. “Central Point Man Found Dead [Near](#) Wagner Butte Trail Summit.” *Medford Alert News*: 2/18/26.
- “We stand on the shoulders of [giants](#).” *The Aspen Times*: 3/17/26.
- “Colorado Backcountry Hunters & Anglers 2025 [Chapter](#) Accomplishments.” *Backcountry Hunters & Anglers*: 2/19/26.
- “When was the last time 99% of Americans [agreed](#) on anything?” *VailDaily*: 12/12/25.
- “Veterans Day, Whitetails, And Public [Lands](#).” *Save The Boundary Waters*: 11/10/25
- “Veterans [defend](#) 'hallowed ground' of Boundary Waters.” *Backcountry Hunters & Anglers*: 9/5/25.
- Colorado Backcountry Hunters & Anglers (9/3/25). “[Keep](#) Hammering!”
- “Reconciliation Bill ‘[Gutted](#)’ Public Lands Protection.” *Pagosa Daily Post*: 7/24/25.
- “Roadless [Rule](#) Rollback.” *Backcountry Hunters & Anglers*: 7/14/25
- “Colorado BHA Chapter [Rallies](#) Conservationists From Across the State (& Nation) for Flood the Lines Day.” *Backcountry Hunters & Anglers*: 7/10/25.
- “Public lands are not to be gifted to [foreign](#) mining billionaires.” *Backcountry Hunters & Anglers*: 7/7/25.
- “A Brief [BHA](#) History III: Taking The Initiative and Raisin’ Hell.” *Backcountry Hunters & Anglers*: 6/29/25.
- “Giants of Conservation [Rally](#) For Public Lands.” *Backcountry Hunters & Anglers*: 6/18/25.
- “Privatization of [public](#) lands.” *Backcountry Hunters & Anglers*: 6/9/25.
- “Sulfide-Ore [Mining](#) a Lose-Lose for Minnesota.” *Backcountry Hunters & Anglers*: 6/4/25.
- “Public Lands Mountain Merriam’s Hunt: [Access](#) And Opportunity Are On The Chopping Block.” *Backcountry Hunters & Anglers*: 4/25/25.
- “Selling Off Public Lands Is [Not](#) An Affordable Housing Fix.” *Backcountry Hunters & Anglers*: 4/8/25.
- “National Monuments At Risk (Veterans [Defend](#) Camp Hale).” *Backcountry Hunters & Anglers*: 4/8/25.
- Colorado Backcountry Hunters & Anglers (4/2/25). “[Now](#) (or potentially never) is the time to act!”
- “Freedom & Fire: A Brief BHA [History](#) II.” *Backcountry Hunters & Anglers*: 2/24/25.
- “Public [Lands](#) On The Chopping Block: It’s Now Or Never.” *Backcountry Hunters & Anglers*: 1/24/25.
- “Hunting For Experience: Backcountry Hunters & Anglers Oral [History](#) Project.” *Backcountry Hunters & Anglers*: 3/28/24.
- “The Patron [Saints](#) of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers.” *Backcountry Hunters & Anglers*: 3/12/24.
- “Armed Forces Initiative Helps [Veterans](#) Hunt ... And More.” *Backcountry Hunters & Anglers*: 8/17/22.
- “Where Hope Lives: A [Brief](#) BHA History.” *Backcountry Hunters & Anglers*: 11/30/20.
- Northern Minnesota Chippewa National Forest ([video](#)): Veterans Day (11/11/25).
- Meeting with Mike Beagle in Denver ([photos](#)): 5/8/23.
- The February Room Podcast (5/24/22). “[Episode](#) 105 Mike Beagle & The Forgotten Film.”

-First (2012) BHA North American Rendezvous ([photos](#)), at Fort Missoula in Montana: [Day 1](#) (3/3/12).

-First (2012) BHA North American Rendezvous ([photos](#)), at Fort Missoula in Montana: [Day 2](#) (3/4/12).

-Had a good day visiting Colorado congressional delegation offices ([video](#)) advocating for public lands (2/10/26).

-Visiting Colorado delegation U.S. Rep. offices ([video](#)) to advocate for public lands (2/11/26).

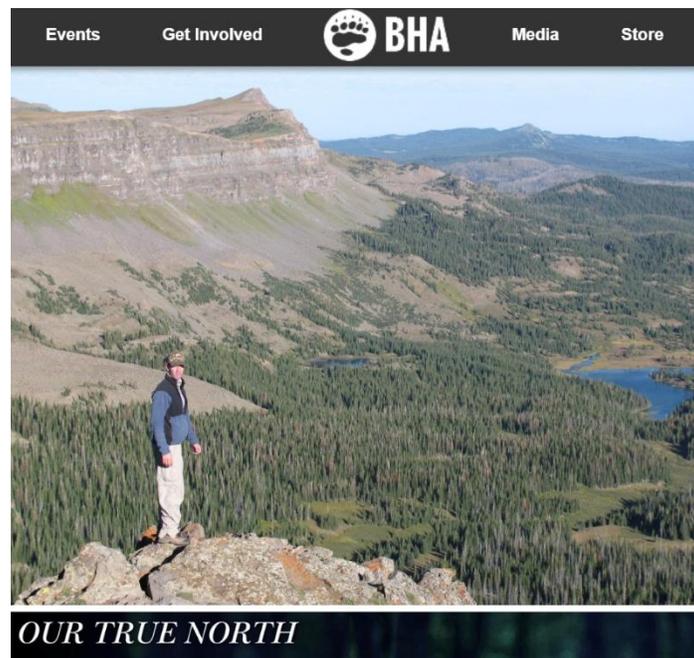
-Day two of visiting Colorado congressional delegation offices in Washington, D.C. ([video](#)) to advocate for public lands (2/11/26).

-Washington, D.C. Colorado Congressional Office Visits ([photos](#)): Feb. 10-11, 2026.

-I joined Steve (“Stru”) Struinski and his crew on Minnesota’s Bob Total Country FM (recorded on 2/15/26) for their “The 4 Outdoorsmen Radio [Show](#): Paul Hartman and David Lien.” “In this episode we speak to Paul Hartman of the Minnesota Muskie Expo. We also meet Backcountry Hunters and Anglers member and Mount Everest climber David Lien.”

-Backcountry Hunters & Anglers (9/22/14). “BHA #1 Founder Mike Beagle: [Bullish](#) for the future.” “The #1 founder of Backcountry Hunters & Anglers reflects on the beginnings and growth of BHA in this special tenth anniversary video.”

-Backcountry Hunters & Anglers (9/11/14). “BHA: Celebrating 50 years of [Wilderness](#).” “Backcountry Hunters & Anglers celebrates the 50th Anniversary of the Wilderness Act and defends the importance of keeping federal public lands in public hands.”



“To those devoid of imagination a blank place on the map is a useless waste; to others, the most valuable part.”

— Aldo Leopold