

# ebase<sup>®</sup> Case Study

## Constituency Organizing on the Net



Imagine having the capacity to engage "consumers" of our natural heritage -- tourists from anywhere in America -- in a campaign to protect roadless lands in the Northern Rockies. Fast, easy, cheap. While it might seem a stretch, here's how we did it using ebase, the interactive database for nonprofit organizations.

### The Context

During the summer of 1997, the Northern Rockies Campaign (NRC), with primary support provided by the Pew Charitable Trusts, initiated an aggressive strategy to influence the outcome of the Interior Columbia Basin Ecosystem Management Project (ICBEMP), an inter-agency federal process that would dictate management of 1/4 of all public lands in the United States for the next several decades. Included in the project's scope were Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management lands that comprise the largest roadless areas in the lower 48 states.

America's natural heritage was at stake. Places like the Glacier Park - Bob Marshall Ecosystem, the Greater Salmon Ecosystem of central Idaho, and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Big, wild places.

Using a variety of innovative and creative public outreach strategies, including canvassing campgrounds in Yellowstone and Glacier National Parks as well as eliciting Working Assets Long Distance (WALD) to include a "Help Protect The Big Wild" appeal in one of its monthly statements, in just 8 months NRC collected 73,000 public comments in favor of protecting wild places in the Northern Rockies.

The name and address of everyone who submitted a public comment -- whether by completing a public comment postcard, calling the ICBEMP office on WALD's dime, writing a long and thoughtful letter to the Forest Service, or by visiting The Big Wild -- was recorded in the NRC database.

Furthermore, and perhaps most important, on all collateral material (except for the WALD appeal), NRC asked for an email address from everyone. As a result, NRC had almost 7,000 email addresses of people from all over the country who support wildland protection in the Northern Rockies.

### The Opportunity

When the Clinton Administration announced on January 22, 1998 its directive to the Forest Service to institute a temporary moratorium on road building in most national forest roadless areas, the Northern Rockies Campaign took it as a sign that our efforts the previous eight months bore fruit.

In many ways, the Northern Rockies gained the most from the temporary moratorium, but we also stood the most to lose. The NRC public comment campaign proved decisive in the new

# **ebase<sup>®</sup> Case Study: Constituency Organizing on the Net**

**Page 2**

policy -- the Administration heard us and set almost all roadless areas in Idaho, Montana and Wyoming temporarily off limits to Forest Service development. We wanted to thank the Administration for their action and to press for permanent protection of the "last best place."

Desktop Assistance, a founding member of NRC (and one of the organizations that merged to form TechRocks), initiated an email campaign to re-engage citizens who had submitted public comments to ICBEMP. On January 27, at the opening of the 30-day public comment period, we sent email to 6,957 people asking them to do two things: thank the Administration for its policy and submit an official public comment on the policy (see Appendix A). This was the first contact that anyone had had with this constituency since they submitted their public comments on ICBEMP. We wanted to find out if these people would be receptive to an email appeal for an additional conservation action.

All of the email messages were sent, via "email merge," and the resulting analysis was conducted using ebase<sup>®</sup>, the interactive database application Desktop Assistance has developed for citizen-based nonprofit organizations interested in building constituencies for civic engagement. (An evaluation copy of ebase is available for download at <http://www.ebase.org>.)

Of the 6,957 messages sent, 2,062 email addresses were returned as undeliverable, and we knew that almost immediately. There were several reasons for the "bounced" messages: many people had changed their email address since last summer, but more had either indicated their address incorrectly on the NRC collateral material or NRC staff had entered the address incorrectly into the database.

Despite, the 29.6% non-delivery rate, 4,895 messages were delivered almost instantly for no direct cost whatsoever. No printing costs, no stuffing costs, and no postage, and delivered in almost no time. Using a medium-powered Macintosh PowerPC computer (donated by Apple Computer, Inc.), we delivered 700 messages per hour, each of which was about two type-written pages. (We could have also done this on a Windows computer.) It took about a day of staff time to set up the mailing and send all the messages.

## **Preliminary Results**

Within 7 days, at least 472 citizens, or 9.6%, had responded positively to our appeal to action. "At least" because we currently have no way of automating the "feedback loop" to notify us when someone actually sends a message to one of our designated targets. (We're working on this, though.) Instead, we relied on the good graces of our email activists to "carbon copy" us a copy of their messages to the Administration or the Forest Service.

When they did cc: their messages to us, they told us amazing things:

Thank you for forwarding the good news. It is always gratifying to hear that one's efforts to persuade government to do something right and good have been rewarded... And thanks to you and all of your co-workers for your efforts and energies in saving our wilderness areas.

Will from Indiana

# ebase<sup>®</sup> Case Study: Constituency Organizing on the Net

Page 3

I am glad I could help out. I've spend many summers out in Wyoming and my uncle that lives there has really showed me why we need to protect these national forests and wildlife areas. If there's at all one thing left pure in this world it's our national forests, and I will help at all lengths to fight for this cause.

Heidi from Oregon

These are people who drove their recreational vehicles through Yellowstone National Park last summer! More than 90% of them do not live in Idaho, Montana or Wyoming. They are also not members of conservation organizations. And they have never before participated in a public decision-making process concerning protection of public lands. They are Americans "at-large."

We also registered on the Wise Use Movement's radar screen. Just after the initial email message was sent, a letter to the editor appeared in the Great Falls (MT) *Tribune* (see Appendix B.)

## Interactivity

Encouraged by this response, we sent out a "reminder" notice on February 5th to those who we could still deliver to and who had not responded (totaling 4,729 citizens). It was a simple reminder (the text inside <<>> was personalized in the body of each email message by ebase, a feature that recipients really appreciated):

SUBJECT: Thank You, Again, From The Big Wild!

Dear <<FIRST NAME>>,

Last week I contacted you about sending email to the White House and to the Forest Service in support of protecting wildlands in the Northern Rockies. (For your convenience, I've included a copy of the message below.)

Already hundreds of citizens from all over the country have sent in their email. Follow the directions below -- BEFORE FEBRUARY 27th -- to encourage our government to do the right thing. Your action NOW can help to protect wilderness in the Northern Rockies.

Thank you, and please feel free to forward this message to anyone you know who loves the wildlands of the Northern Rockies.

For the wild,

Cathy Stuart

bigwild@lists.desktop.org

# ebase<sup>®</sup> Case Study: Constituency Organizing on the Net

Page 4

P.S. Also tell your friends to visit The Big Wild web site at <http://www.bigwild.org/>. They can send a postcard telling our government to protect our public lands.

With this reminder (which we could do because the automated process of recording non-deliverable and positive responses told us very quickly who had not responded), we engaged another 242 citizens (or 5.5%) to participate in our campaign within 7 days. Again with no direct cost, and only about a half day of staff time.

Finally, on February 17, with only 10 days left in the Clinton Administration's public comment period on the road moratorium policy, Desktop Assistance sent a third, more direct and timely email appeal to the 4,436 people from whom we had not heard:

SUBJECT: Last Chance to Save The Big Wild!

Dear <<FIRST NAME 1>>,

The Northern Rockies of Idaho, Montana and Wyoming are "the last best place," with most of the roadless forest lands left in this country. It's a truly wonderful place: The Big Wild.

But the immediate protection of these pristine forests -- threatened by "cut and run" logging corporations -- is in your hands.

On January 22, the Clinton Administration announced an 18-month ban on road-building -- roads used to clearcut forests -- in roadless areas of your national forests. The President invited your comments.

I hope you've sent email to the President and to the Forest Service thanking them for this policy, as my last two email messages to you have asked. If you have, and let us know you did via email, thank you.

But if you haven't, now's your last, best chance. After February 27th, our government will not accept your public comment on the "no-new-roads in roadless areas" policy.

As a result of my email in the past three weeks, hundreds of people have already let their voices be heard. People who may not live in the last best place, but want this place saved for future enjoyment.

Next week, when the public comments are tallied, I hope I can count yours among the overwhelming majority of Americans that want the best of the last best place saved.

With your help in the next few days, the next time you visit your favorite place in The Big Wild -- a campground, a fishing stream, a hiking trail -- there won't be any more clearcuts.

For The Big Wild,

# ebase<sup>®</sup> Case Study: Constituency Organizing on the Net

Page 5

Cathy Stuart

bigwild@lists.desktop.org

P.S. Please respond by February 27th. For instructions about writing to the President and the Forest Service, send a blank email message to bigwild@lists.desktop.org with INSTRUCTIONS as the subject of your message. My computer will send you a copy of my first email to you.

By the time the public comment period closed, on February 27th, another 219 people (or 5.1%) had responded to our appeal.

NRC Staff read all incoming messages (we received only 16 that we categorized as negative responses), and responded to many of the messages. A brief thank you note, updating respondents on the status of the email campaign, was sent to everyone that we know sent email to the Administration or the Forest Service. This is the beginning of a more interactive relationship with this constituency, one that will be invaluable to keep engaged over the years.

## Conclusions

In total, we heard from 933 "netizens," for a response of at least 19.0% (remember, we only know that someone responded when they cc:ed us their email message). To generate this response, a total of more than 16,000 email messages were sent at no direct cost. About 2 staff days were devoted to the project. A record of all contacts and responses is stored for analysis in ebase.

This represents one-on-one relationship-building that scales well. It also represents a middle ground: conservation organizations are pretty good at unmediated one-on-one contact (community meetings, lobbying, etc.) and at large scale one-to-many contact (broadcast media, both in print and electronic). But both are hard (slow, expensive and often not reliable) to maintain.

The challenge now is to get as many legitimate email addresses as possible. Of the 73,000 people that submitted public comment on ICBEMP as a result of NRC activity, we don't have email addresses for 68,000 of them. Yet we know that probably 20,000 do have email, and use it daily. The remainder will probably never be contacted by conservationists because of the time and expense of using traditional media, such as telemarketing and direct mail.

It is estimated that 50% of US adults will be using email daily by the year 2000. In the Information Age, human attention will become the scarcest commodity. There is a lot of evidence, including our experience in The Big Wild, to suggest that citizens are very receptive to email action appeals. We need to engage them.

If there is one lesson one should take away from this case study, it's that *we need to record all email addresses in our databases*. Internet organizing -- relationship building -- is not possible without them.

Groups need to adapt using these tools. The challenge will be to build durable constituencies for change, through interactivity. For example, we intend to survey respondents to determine which areas of the Northern Rockies they most want to see protected. (Desktop Assistance recently conducted an email survey that had a 40% response rate within 10 days, another indication that email is a very responsive medium.) We'll be testing these new tools and methodologies as we keep this constituency engaged in efforts to press our government to adopt public policy to protect wildlands.

## Acknowledgements

This case study was made possible by funding from the Pew Charitable Trusts. Special thanks to Rick Johnson at the Idaho Conservation League for initiating the test and Cathy Steuart (formerly with the Northern Rockies Campaign and now with the Western Ancient Forest Campaign) for being an "Internet Organizer."

## For More Information

- Read the Conservation Database Report, <http://www.techrocks.org/conservationdatabase.html>.
- Read "The Digital Citizen" in *Wired*, December 1997.
- Check out ebase, <http://www.ebase.org>.
- Contact TechRocks, <http://www.techrocks.org>.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: Initial Big Wild Email Message

This is the text of the initial email sent to 6,957 people that had submitted public comment on ICBEMP.

DATE: January 27, 1998

TO: <<EMAIL ADDRESS>>

FROM: Cathy Steuart, bigwild@lists.desktop.org

SUBJECT: Thank You from The Big Wild!

Dear <<FIRST NAME>>,

This past summer you filled out a postcard calling for protection of the "Big Wild," the unprotected wilderness of the Northern Rocky Mountains in Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. Thank you.

This is a quick note to let you know that your help MADE A BIG DIFFERENCE! You're among the 73,000 people that told our government to protect public lands in the Northern Rockies.

# ebase<sup>®</sup> Case Study: Constituency Organizing on the Net

Page 7

On January 22, the Forest Service, under the Clinton Administration, announced a temporary halt to the building of logging roads in much of the remaining unprotected wilderness in the America's National Forests.

This is a very important step towards stopping the destruction of millions of acres of our nation's foremost fish and wildlife habitat, and recreation opportunities. In many ways the Northern Rockies has had the most to lose; in the most recent action, we've gained the most.

Again, thank you for your help. Too often, the actions that go to protecting America's wild places go unacknowledged, so we're pleased that email provides such an efficient path to pass on the good news.

Please take a quick moment to send:

1. an email note to the Clinton Administration thanking them for protecting our forests; and
2. send a comment to the Forest Service to voice your opinion on the proposed policy.

Sample messages, with instructions, follow.

ALSO, IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO STAY "IN THE LOOP" REGARDING OUR EFFORTS TO GAIN PERMANENT PROTECTION OF THE "BIG WILD" OF THE NORTHERN ROCKIES, SIMPLY REPLY TO THIS MESSAGE.

Once again, thank you for your help. Together, we do make a difference!

For the wild,

Cathy Steuart

and your friends in the Northern Rockies

--

## SAMPLE MESSAGES:

1. THANK THE CLINTON ADMINISTRATION

A. Address a "Thank You" email message to:

President Bill Clinton at [president@whitehouse.gov](mailto:president@whitehouse.gov) AND

Vice President Al Gore at [vice.president@whitehouse.gov](mailto:vice.president@whitehouse.gov)

B. "Carbon copy" your email messages to

# ebase<sup>®</sup> Case Study: Constituency Organizing on the Net

Page 8

bigwild@lists.desktop.org.

C. Use the sample message below.

--- clip here ---

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

Thank you for urging the Forest Service to stop to destruction of the last remaining wild places in the national forest of the Northern Rockies states of Idaho, Montana, and Wyoming. These "unroaded" places need permanent protection, and I appreciate the Forest Service step toward a new policy on roads. These are national heritage lands, and it will require national leadership to ensure they last for future generations.

Sincerely,

<<FIRST NAME>> <<LAST NAME>>

[please include your own street address]

--- clip here ---

## 2. COMMENT ON FOREST SERVICE POLICY

To make a comment for the official record on the policy, you can write to: Gerald (Skip) Coglán, Acting Director, Engineering, Forest Service, USDA, PO Box 96090, Washington, DC 20090-6090.

Better yet email your comment to Gerald Coglán at roads/wo@fs.fed.us. Please "carbon copy" your email comment to bigwild@lists.desktop.org.

Three points to make to the Forest Service:

- A. no roads should be built in roadless areas;
- B. the policy should be in effect now; and
- C. planning on new roads should stop until scientists develop the new road management policy.

Thanks. We'll keep you posted with periodic updates about our efforts to gain permanent protection of The Big Wild of the Northern Rockies.

**Appendix B: Letter to the Editor**

The following letter to the editor appeared in the Great Falls Tribune, January 29, 1998, two days after the initial email was sent. Hunter Coleman, who is referenced in the letter, is our System Administrator, and board member of an environmental group actively working against irresponsible mining in Montana. Follow the thread far enough and Hunter is tied to "desktop.org" (the Desktop Assistance domain name) and The Big Wild. We could not find any reference to Nita Periman on the Internet, nor is she listed in directory assistance.

Great Falls *Tribune*, January 29, 1998

WHO'S BOSSING STATE, WHO'S REALLY IN CHARGE

Misplaced Outrage

A letter from Hunter Coleman appeared recently about the Bonnie Raitt concert and miners. His letter described the miners as out-of-state companies trying to tell us what to do.

Mr. Coleman must be absolutely furious at the out-of-state foundations and trusts that have been telling us what to do for decades.

Perhaps we can convince the miners to stick around for the next election and legislative session. They could see how the Commissioner of Political Practices determined that out-of-state financed environmental organizations flooded an initiative and misled voters by funneling a quarter million dollars into an anti-mining campaign disguised as an "education project" to tell us how to vote.

The miners could see environmental lobbyists pinning wild-mannered senators against granite Capitol walls, and fatigue-wearing environmentalist hanging around government office buildings, telling elected officials what is best for us.

Maybe the miners could even spend some time with Mr. Coleman and his compatriots at desktop.org.

They would see how easy it is to promise an ecotopian future when you've routinely got huge checks rolling from the likes of the Brainerd Foundation (Washington State), the Bullitt Foundation (Washington), then Pew Charitable Trusts (Pennsylvania) and the Rockefeller Family Fund (New York).

Watching desktop.org the miners would see how very large sums of money are flowing mightier than the Missouri River, right into the coffers of high-tech businesses like desktop.org, which does the cyberwork on things like the Big Wild, an effort to lock just about everybody (not just miners) off roughly half the public land in Montana, Wyoming and Idaho.

# **ibase<sup>®</sup> Case Study: Constituency Organizing on the Net**

**Page 10**

Until then, the miners are amateurs compared to the conglomerates of the environmental groups, huge tax-free foundations and the tax-free desktop.org at telling us what to do.

Nita Periman  
1610 German Gulch Road  
Anaconda, MT