

# BOZEMAN DAILY CHRONICLE

**Bozeman, Montana**

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## *Predator Alliance founder hangs it up*

When Tom Skeelee founded the Predator Conservation Alliance in 1991, it was an all volunteer, part-time operation with a reputation for scrappiness. It consisted of Skeelee, his wife at the time, and a friend. They paid its bills by painting houses and fixing trails.

Today it's a \$500,000 a year environmental group with 11 paid staffers and a growing reputation around the country for finding practical solutions and providing good information. Now Skeelee, after 13 years at the helm, is leaving the group he founded and taking himself on a long vacation.

"I'm going to get on a big jet airliner and travel around the world," Skeelee, 45, said in an interview earlier this week, in the office he's leaving behind. "Then I'm going to come back and reengage."

PCA's office occupies a big two-story house on East Mendenhall, where the staff works on conservation issues that might have languished without PCA's spotlight.

Like many groups, PCA focuses on wolves and grizzly bears and their needs. But it also places attention on creatures like burrowing owls, prairie dogs, lynx, swift fox and wolverines.

"We've helped a lot of people, at the very least, to know these critters are out there," Skeelee said.

He calls it "thinking beyond the totemic creatures," the charismatic ones that help bigger groups raise money. "That gave us a niche and a name."

And while PCA is no stranger to the courtroom, especially on Endangered Species Act issues, lawsuits are no longer its primary tool.

In recent years the group has focused on ways to help ranchers and other rural residents coexist with predators, acknowledging that carnivore survival depends on human tolerance.

"It's equally as important to figure out how people can live with these animals as it is to protect the animals," he said. "Without the former, we won't have the latter."

One recent example came this spring when PCA found the grant money to hire two range riders to protect cattle in the Madison Valley from wolves.

The group also has a full-time staffer, a woman who grew up on a Montana ranch, devoted to its Coexistence with Predators program.

"I feel that PCA has gone through quite an evolution over the past several years," said Becky Weed, a Belgrade rancher who sits on the group's board.

Ten years ago, she said, Skeele had "a history of very adversarial relationships with the ag community and a lot of others."

Now that's changed, Weed said. PCA staffers have earned a reputation for honest, well-documented information. They don't hide the fact that their primary goal is wildlife conservation, but they also have "a genuine recognition that many people in the ag community have their backs against the wall economically."

"They're pragmatic and they're practical," Ed Lewis said of PCA. He is a consultant to a number of environmental groups and foundations and a former director of the Greater Yellowstone Coalition.

Without good information and practical solutions for people living with predators like wolves and grizzlies, "we're going to be in a constant state of crisis management," Lewis said.

Skeele's replacement is Steve Hoffman, 53, who has spent his adult life studying or working with birds, raptors in particular. He comes to the job from Pennsylvania Audubon. Prior to that, he lived in Western states from Texas to Utah, where he founded a group called HawkWatch after working as a federal biologist for several years.

On the job less than a week, he said he's still contemplating the steep learning curve that lies ahead of him.

Lewis said Skeele will be missed, both because of his accomplishments and because "he's an easy guy to work with."

"He's leaving a legacy," Lewis said.