

## RIDING INTO THE FUTURE

By Mack Long

Take a minute and picture your favorite outdoor experience. Maybe it's a mountain peak or trail you rode, a quiet lake you found, or a trail where the smell of pine is so thick you could taste it. Maybe it's a light fall rain in a remote valley with a bull elk bugling. Now, picture yourself getting there. What made it special? Was it just arriving there or was it the total experience. Driving up to it would not be the same. You would miss the smells, the connection with the land, the "wow" when you cross the ridge. For most of us, we enjoy the added benefit of the connection we have with the horse or mule we are riding.

Riding horseback into the heart of the backcountry is a time-honored partnership that has shaped the history of our public lands. It's a journey taken on horse or mule with a pack animal or pack string. This is not about a motorized shortcut; it's about a symbiotic relationship, a way to tread lightly and go deeper into our wild landscapes than many can on foot.

This is a path that needs your voice.

For generations, horses and mules have been essential to accessing and protecting our most remote public lands. They helped build and maintain the trails we ride and hike today. They are a vital tool for rangers and volunteers who need to pack in supplies for trail work, conservation and public safety. This is the legacy we are fighting to preserve—a heritage of responsible use and access that is being challenged and is at risk of being lost.

Some may see the horse as a relic of the past, but I see it as a key to our future. Here's why you should, too:

1. You are fighting for a living history.

America's public lands are full of human stories. The trails horses travel is a reminder of the explorers, settlers, and Indigenous peoples who first navigated these landscapes. When you support stock use, you aren't just advocating for an activity; you are celebrating a tradition and protecting a skill set—the art of horsemanship and wilderness packing—that connects us to our national heritage.

2. It builds character and a conservation ethic.

Learning to pack with a horse or mule is not a passive activity. It teaches you responsibility and discipline at a level you won't find on a day hike. You learn patience, communication, and empathy for another living creature. It fosters a deep appreciation for the land itself, as you become intimately aware of your footprint and the resources needed to sustain you and your animals. You become not just a visitor, but a true steward.

3. It's an issue of equity and access.

Some landscapes should be maintained in a natural or pristine condition so future generations can experience "true" nature. As more and more land is developed, the need for a place to "get away" will only increase. We owe it to future generations to keep and properly manage our Public Lands.

Our public lands are a birthright, but they are also a responsibility. This is not a passive legacy we've been given; it's an active one that requires our engagement. Let's make sure that for generations to come, the sound of hoofbeats on a backcountry trail is not a sound from history, but a sign of a vibrant, inclusive, and protected wilderness. It's your turn to get in the saddle and ride into the future of public land protection.

So, what can you do?

- Educate yourself. Work to preserve trails and access. Learn about the specific issues in your region.
- Raise your voice. When you see policy decisions affecting public lands, participate in the process. Submit comments, call your elected officials, and make sure they know that horse use matters to current and future generations.
- Get involved. Volunteer for a trail maintenance project with your BCH chapter. You can learn valuable skills and help keep these historic routes open for everyone.
- Share your story. Post your own backcountry photos and stories, showing the responsible, low-impact (Light on the Land) joy of stock-assisted travel. Show the world that this is a relevant, important part of our modern wilderness culture.