

# Central Idaho was on Barack Obama's to-do list

**Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune**

As Barack Obama closes in on the end of his presidency, people are beginning to notice that he is not merely his generation's version of Teddy Roosevelt, the first conservation president.

Obama has eclipsed TR.

Roosevelt is famed for establishing 18 national monuments, five national parks and 150 national forests. He preserved 230 million acres.

As the New Yorker's Elizabeth Kolbert noted this week, Obama already has declared 27 national monuments, including adding almost 300 million acres to the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument northwest of Hawaii.

Obama, presidential historian Douglas Brinkley recently wrote in the New York Times, has "emerged as a 21st-century Theodore Roosevelt for his protection of public lands and marine reserves."

And you can bet Idaho's Boulder-White Cloud range would have been No. 28 on the president's list of national monuments.

It had all the attributes of a preservation project that would appeal to the White House.

People have talked about protecting the range ever since a proposed molybdenum mine at Castle Peak drew a strong public rebuke - and helped elect Cecil Andrus governor in 1970.

At one point, the area was given serious consideration as a national park.

Frustrated with congressional inaction to pass a wilderness bill, Andrus and Idaho conservationists had implored Obama to issue a monument proclamation.

No doubt, the idea tempted Obama - who could cite Boulder-White Clouds as just another high-profile case study of congressional gridlock justifying presidential use of the Antiquities Act of 1908.

But Congressman Mike Simpson had been fighting to pass an Idaho-supported Boulder-White Clouds wilderness bill for 15 years. Stymied by fellow Republicans - notably former House Speaker Dennis Hastert in 2006 and then again in 2010 when Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho, withdrew his support - Simpson asked Obama for enough time for one last try.

Obama complied.

Simpson prevailed - but it was close.

Last summer, as time was running out before the congressional recess, Simpson's bill was hung up in the Senate, where Texas Republican Ted Cruz had put a hold on the measure.

Now supporting the Boulder-White Clouds bill, Risch persuaded Cruz to drop his opposition. Had Risch failed, the measure would have been caught up in the acrimony that enveloped the fall congressional debate about federal funding of Planned Parenthood.

Instead, Simpson and a group of Idaho conservationists joined Obama for an Aug. 7 Oval Office bill-signing ceremony.

The new law placed about 275,000 acres into wilderness protection in the Hemingway-Boulders Wilderness, the White Clouds Wilderness and the Jim McClure-Jerry Peak Wilderness.

That's about half the total area conservationists hoped a national monument would have covered.

But passing an Idaho wilderness bill - something that hadn't happened in six years and in an area that had eluded earlier efforts by Gov. Andrus and Sen. James McClure - put Idahoans in charge. They - conservationists, ranchers and recreationists - not federal land managers, established the boundaries.

An act of Congress creates certainty. A national monument proclamation is subject to new regulations. A Boulder-White Clouds national monument could have been mired in lawsuits - possibly Idaho-based litigation challenging the Antiquities Act itself. And each new presidential administration is free to revise the rules.

But given Obama's penchant for declaring new monuments, that would have been Idaho's fate this summer - had last summer's events turned out differently. - M.T.