

## DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE - A LAST REPORT



*Diana F. Tomback*

*Our work to preserve whitebark pine is based on deep appreciation for this one particular tree that we call a keystone and foundation species. The meaning transcends whitebark pine ecology: the tree is symbolic of the interconnections among all organisms, including us.*

This is likely my last message as Director of the Whitebark Pine Ecosystem Foundation. But I agreed to assume the position of Acting Director for up to 12 months as the Board of Directors searches for a Director who can fully advocate, without conflict of interest, for whitebark pine. I also transition to the new position of Policy and Outreach Coordinator in the WPEF, which allows me to be the liaison with various external constituencies, including NGOs and federal and other government partners. As a reminder, all positions on our Board of Directors are voluntary and not paid.

I was elected by the board as the founding director of the Whitebark Pine Ecosystem Foundation in 2001. When the WPEF board completed by-laws about ten years ago, term limits were instituted. Since then, I have served the maximum allowable three terms, each term three years in length.

Over the years, I have had the satisfaction in seeing a number of individuals and groups, government agencies and non-profit organizations, take up the cause for whitebark pine conservation and restoration. During the last 16 years, the WPEF membership has grown to represent all states and provinces across the range of whitebark

pine, and we have a sister organization WPEF-Canada, with like-minded dedicated individuals. I have seen increasing commitment among agency employees—US Forest Service, National Park Service, and Bureau of Land Management—as they come to value whitebark pine through their experiences in resource management and fieldwork. Many of these folks literally go the extra mile to locate plus trees, place verbenone patches, and advocate for, plan, and implement restoration projects.

My 16 years as Director has truly been a labor of love but also a reflection of the urgency I feel as populations of whitebark pine rapidly decline in many parts of its range. This past July, this was abruptly hit home. I had returned with my doctoral student (and former WPEF intern) Libby Pansing to core a sample of trees within a long-term study area Divide Mountain (AKA Triple Divide Peak) near the western boundary of the Blackfoot Reservation, which is shared with the eastern boundary of Glacier National Park, MT. This iconic mountain,

spiritually significant to the Blackfeet, is known geographically as a hydrological apex, where water flowing down three different slope aspects (west, northeast, and south) journeys to the Pacific, Arctic, and Atlantic oceans. Libby and I had not visited Divide Mountain in three years, and we were stunned to see the increase in blister rust. Ninety percent of the whitebark pine trees we cored that day, which were selected by random points, had blister rust, many with stem cankers. In September, I came back with John Gilham, forester with the Blackfoot Reservation, to show him the extent of infection, and we are now discussing a more detailed survey and future restoration plan.

During my tenure, and thanks to our dedicated and inspired board members, the WPEF has made steady progress with respect to advocating for whitebark pine, raising awareness of its on-going decline, and communicating science and best practices. The list of our accomplishments is posted on the WPEF website at

[http://whitebarkfound.org/?page\\_id=167](http://whitebarkfound.org/?page_id=167)  
2. Our most recent accomplishment was

*TOMBACK continued on page 31*

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the September 17th launch at Whitefish Mountain and Resort, MT, of our Whitebark Pine Friendly Ski Area Certification Program, a project developed over the last few years by former board member Edie Dooley (see Spring/Summer 2016 Nutcracker Notes). The event took place on Saturday following our annual Whitebark Pine Science and Management Workshop, and generated local press coverage. We have several ski areas in the U.S. and Canada also interested in certification and will be working with them to achieve this.

With respect to new endeavors, the WPEF is a member of the Crown of the Continent (CC) High Five Working Group, which crystallized from the “We need the needles” Workshop, organized by Regan Nelson, following the Crown Manager’s Partnership Annual Forum last March in Fernie, BC. This is an important and inclusive effort to organize and implement restoration of both whitebark pine and limber pine across the many different governmental, tribal, and private land holdings in the U.S. and Canada in the Crown region (see Spring/Summer 2016 Nutcracker Notes). We held a very productive CC High Five Working Group meeting the day before the WPEF Science and Management Workshop this past September. Another future endeavor: We are planning the next high elevation five-needle white pine symposium, slated for 2020.

All of us who serve as board members and members of the WPEF can be considered the ultimate “tree-huggers.” Our work to preserve whitebark pine is based on deep appreciation for this one particular tree that we call a keystone and foundation species. The meaning

transcends whitebark pine ecology: the tree is symbolic of the interconnections among all organisms, including us. Ancient, wind-sculpted whitebark pine inspire us and connect us to the past and to the future. The image of whitebark pine with its lyrate branches reaching skyward, offering cones to nutcrackers flying overhead, symbolizes the high elevation forests of the West. It is my hope that over the next decade we can make progress to ensure that whitebark pine has a future in these forests.

#### **Housekeeping and transitions**

Our annual WPEF Science and Management meetings take a lot of organizational effort. Our September Whitefish, MT, meeting was hosted by the Flathead National Forest, and we thank Forest Supervisor Chip Weber for his support for this event. Chief organizer and WPEF Secretary, Melissa Jenkins did a phenomenal job of orchestrating this meeting in a great venue—the O’Shaughnessy Cultural Arts Center in downtown Whitefish – as did the rest of the organizing committee – Val Walker and Rob Sissons.

Corey Gucker and Vita Wright of the Northern Rockies Fire Science Network did an outstanding job assembling the scientific program and communicating with speakers. Karl Anderson and Rebecca Lawrence organized and led field trips. Laura DeNitto did a great job, as always, with our silent auction. Thanks to WPEF staffer Julee Shamhart and former board member Kate Kendall for help at the merchandise table, and



Our Whitebark Pine Friendly Ski Area Certification Program launched at Whitefish Resort on September 17, 2016.

thanks to members of the board and friends who pitched in to help with registration, the social, and clean up.

I would like to express my gratitude to two long-term board members who, like me, have been term-limited this year: Bob Keane and Michael Murray. Bob has taken on the task of editor of Nutcracker Notes, which means he will continue as a non-voting member of the Board of Directors. We owe Bob and Michael a debt of gratitude for their long-term service and work on various projects over the years, including annual Science and Management Workshops and our High Five symposium and proceedings.

We also welcome three new board members: Mike Giesey and Cathy Stewart were elected this spring by the membership to board positions vacated by Bob and Michael, and Scott Smith was elected by the Board of Directors to one of the board-appointed positions. Scott, who comes from the Pacific Northwest, not only diversifies our board geographically but brings an outdoor recreationist perspective. Congratulations also to Melissa Jenkins on her re-election as WPEF secretary. Her energy and can-do attitude is always an inspiration!