

# Swan Valley Conservationist Set Standard For Activism

## Eye on the Environment

By Anne Dahl  
President  
Swan Ecosystem Center



Swan  
Ecosystem  
Center  
*Respecting each other.  
Sustaining the land.*

When family, friends and coworkers got together November 8 to remember Rod Ash, they helped define the qualities of an exceptional community and land conservationist.

Rod, who died November 5 from cancer, had been Swan Ecosystem Center's board chairman since the nonprofit's inception in October 1996. He was also a founding member of the Swan Citizens' Ad Hoc Committee, which got its start in 1990, and he was president of Montana Audubon for five years.

One of Rod's qualities that set him apart from other conservationists was his commitment to both place and people. He was intimate with the land and involved with the people of the Swan Valley. Claudia Kux, Condon, said in her written remembrance: "One cannot think of Rod Ash without thinking of the Swan Valley, and vice-versa."

"Rod's passion for the Swan was readily visible not only in his words but in his actions," Kux said. "He willingly put mind and muscle into any task that could benefit the community and the broader ecosystem around it, right up to the end of his life."

George and Emily Beck, residents of Condon and Anchorage, Alaska, wrote in an e-mail message: "He was one of those anchors for us in the valley whose intelligence and compassion we valued greatly."

George said his father, Ed Beck, "...was a pioneer in the Swan Valley who had made a home out of the wilderness and Rod was a pioneer too. He came to the valley and worked hard to make it a great place to live for himself and others."

Rod spent a lot of time on foot in the mountains of the Mission and Swan Ranges. Before retiring from teaching high school in Redmond, California, Rod, June and their four children would travel to Montana each summer. The family would camp for weeks, often near the trailhead to Glacier Lake in the Mission Mountains. By the time Rod and June moved permanently to the Swan Valley in 1984, Rod was already familiar with its forests, lakes and streams.

He loved to hike and fish. All four children—Gordon, David, Ellen and James—have memories of hiking to favorite high lakes to catch fish. By the time Rod became involved as a Swan Valley conservationist, he had logged many miles on forest roads and trails, and had spent thousands of hours in keen observation.

Rod and wife June were avid bird watchers and participants in the annual Swan Valley bird counts, organized by Jody Wolff of Grounded Eagle Foundation, during which volunteers identify and record birds several times a year.

Rod invested most of his 22 years here as a volunteer working on one project or another and often taking the lead. Once settled in the Swan Valley, the Ashes became involved in the community, getting to know their neighbors and forming friendships with several long-time residents. He and June were active in the local AARP. Rod was also a member of the Swan Valley Historical Society and

took a leading role in the annual history exhibits at the community hall during the July 4 celebration.

Rod was a persistent advocate for cooperation. He made a habit of prodding the Forest Service to work effectively with the community. District Ranger Steve Brady said in an e-mail to Forest Service staff: "Rod was a vibrant leader in the Swan Valley, a strong advocate for balance and perspective in management of natural resources, and fun to be around."

Rod was well-equipped for his role as a community and land conservationist with his fundamental experience as an outdoorsman and his commitment to the people of the Swan Valley. But he had other notable qualities.

Rod was persistent and solution-oriented. Kathy Koors, Condon, said: "Rod was tireless...he would always figure out a way to make sense of difficult issues...and move forward."

"Whenever I left a meeting that included Rod, I would always leave with the feeling that I've got to figure out how to be like Rod," Koors said. "He doesn't give up, he doesn't get mad, he is non-judgmental."

"Passionate" was the most commonly chosen adjective among all those who wrote or told of their memories of Rod. He might start out calmly voicing support for a cause but he always finished, "... with all his passion bubbling to the surface in spite of his best efforts to suppress it," said Larrine Abolt, Condon.

Rod was committed to serving on the Swan Ecosystem Center board; he stayed focused on getting the job done. What the staff will miss most is his follow-through, which often amounted to behind-the-scenes encouragement (prodding)—not just of SEC staff, but of the Forest Service, county commissioners and any others who needed to be put to the task.

Rod took responsibility for his role as a community and land conservationist, unlike some environmentalists today who wield immense power but have limited knowledge of the people and places they affect. Rod immersed himself in the Swan Valley and the community, and he had a firm grasp of the issues before he acted.

George Beck wrote: "We have lost a good neighbor whose intellect ranged from global to local issues and who shared his delight in the natural world of bears and birds."



Understanding the issues required keeping up with the news, reading about the science of ecology and talking with people who had a diversity of values, ideas and experiences to share. Rod read hundreds of scientific reports on research that had been done in the Swan Valley, and he realized conservation work is only effective when most people understand the problem and agree on the paths necessary to reach the desired outcomes. This required focus, humility and hours of conversations with all kinds of people.

It also required confidence and an ability to speak and write enthusiastically in a way that inspired people to work toward goals. Rod was a good communicator. Beck said: “His strong, clear voice still rings in my mind as I recall listening to him at various meetings...”

Rod set the bar high for those who aspire to community and land activism. Being effective calls for in-depth knowledge of the land and its inhabitants, learning the science, listening to the people, focusing attention on outcomes, persistence and passionate enthusiasm. Rod employed all these tactics. He was a good citizen who will be missed.