

Wilderness as therapist

By Ray Wiles, High Country News

One of the environmental movement's most legendary characters was also a traumatized war vet. You might remember George Washington Hayduke for his inventive, destructive antics, but he was also a man who measured road miles by the number of six-packs it took him to drink while driving and whose mind often wandered back to Vietnam. "What's more American," Hayduke wonders in Edward Abbey's novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, "than violence?"

The fictional Hayduke had a real-life model: a former Army medic named Doug Peacock. Peacock served in Vietnam during his 20s, and as he went through the violence of that war, the thing he carried was a map of the Northern Rockies. He brought it out during rare quiet moments and imagined himself in its contours, rolling over the sharp granite creases of the Wind River Mountains or the grassy meadows north of Yellowstone Lake. When he returned from the war, he returned to nature, studying grizzlies for several decades and fighting for their federal protection, as well as for that of other threatened species. These days, the 72-year-old activist and writer has become a new role model, not just for greens, but for a new generation of veterans.

"What they need to do is go out and immerse (themselves) in the wild," he said recently. "Let it wrap around you. See what it does to you."

The idea of wilderness as therapy for veterans is nothing new. In recent years, a growing number of such programs are springing up around it. But in order for it to work on the scale that's needed, its supporters are going to have to get the military behind it. And that's where the difficulty lies.

Read the whole story

