

Arthur Carhart National Wilderness Training Center's  
***Wilderness Investigations***  
High School

**Wilderness Hero #5**  
***Kari Gunderson***



**Kari Gunderson; Mission Mountain Wilderness Ranger**  
(from Wilderness.net; Submitted by Janene Lichtenberg Image #1185)

**Common Core Standard Connections**

Standards addressed will vary depending on how the teacher chooses to approach the lesson and/or activities.

**Instructions for the teacher:**

Wilderness Heroes tackle many different tasks as they go about the work of preserving and protecting our nation's wild places. Some are

visionaries that write and speak out on behalf of wilderness. Some advocate behind-the-scenes and others jump right into the political waters. All have a personal connection to wilderness.

Kari Gunderson, the focus of this segment, spent her early years on a large dryland grain farm in north central Montana. In 2011 she began her 32<sup>nd</sup> year as a wilderness ranger in the Mission Mountain Wilderness. Kari, like so many other wilderness rangers, has accomplished heroic deeds as she hiked and worked her way across roughly 1,500 wilderness miles each year. Choosing to defend wilderness values through education rather than confrontation Kari has helped countless individuals come to know, appreciate, and understand their wilderness heritage and responsibilities. Kari represents the best attributes of a citizen in *a maturing democracy* and gives tirelessly of her time, energy, vision and talents so that wilderness is *unimpaired, preserved, and enjoyed* now and into the future.

To help students get to know this wilderness hero, choose one or more of the following:

- Photocopy and hand out *Wilderness Hero Sheet #5* to each student.
  - Based on the information found there, have them write a short biographical essay about Kari Gunderson.
    - Use the *Writing a Wilderness Hero Biography (Prompt Page)* located in the Appendix if students are just learning to write biographies and need a little assistance.
- Kari's wilderness work has been primarily on the ground in Montana's Mission Mountain Wilderness. Have students research this wilderness so that they can get a feel for her wilderness home.
- Use the handout as the basis of a short mini-lesson about Kari Gunderson.
  - *The Missoulian*, a daily newspaper out of Missoula, Montana, did an interesting article about Kari in their August 19, 2010 edition. You can find that article by going to [missoulian.com](http://missoulian.com) and clicking on *Archives*. The article is entitled *Mission Mountain Ranger Meets Hikers, Rehabs Trails*.
- Have students interview one or more veteran and active wilderness rangers in your area. Using Kari's stories, as well as other stories they collect, have students write, film, edit, and produce a podcast about the important work wilderness rangers do.
  - Have students use information found on *Wilderness Hero Sheet #5*.

- After studying Kari and other wilderness rangers send students to find out whatever they can about wilderness rangers by searching websites that describe their various duties (these will be differ from place to place). Next, have them write a *Wilderness Ranger Job Description* for a wilderness of their choice.
- Several of Kari’s wilderness mentors also wrote about their wilderness experiences. Kari has been profoundly influenced by what her mentors had to say. Have students read excerpts from the writings of Mardy Murie (*Two from the Far North* or *Wapiti Wilderness*) and John Muir (*The Mountains of California* or *The Yosemite* to name two of many).
  - Start a collection of wilderness quotes using the following ideas to get started:
    - As students read, have them find inspirational passages about wilderness that might catch Kari’s attention and inspire her to do her wilderness work.
    - Find quotes that, although written a long time ago, still inspire students to take care of wilderness.
- After learning about Kari Gunderson and other wilderness rangers, have students create a *Day in the Life of a Wilderness Ranger* journal entry, write a story about why they would like to be a wilderness ranger, or draw/paint/illustrate a scene from a wilderness ranger’s day.
- Kari Gunderson is first and foremost a wilderness educator. That is where her most heroic work has taken place. Create scenarios where a wilderness user could use a little educating and write a script of the conversation going back and forth between the two as Kari *educates*.
  - Example: Kari rounds a corner on a wilderness trail and coming towards her, on dirt bike motorcycles, are two happy but noisy riders. Kari needs to teach them that this isn’t the correct way to recreate in the wilderness but she wants to stay positive and respectful.
- Create a *Wilderness Hero* classroom display or post on class website.
  - Have students create illustrations, maps, descriptive words, etc. that tell the story of Kari Gunderson.
- Have students study and then place their copy of *Wilderness Hero #5* in their Wilderness Investigations Folder.

**Wilderness Hero #5**  
***Kari Gunderson***  
**Wilderness Ranger**



***Kari Gunderson***

(Mollman Meadows, Mission Mountain Wilderness, 1986; Photo by Susan Stephens )

**Introduction to a Hero**

As a young girl Kari Gunderson's mind couldn't have been further away from wilderness than it was. Growing up on a dryland farm in north central Montana, Kari's world consisted of crops, family, hard work, school, and all the other things young people think of and do in rural places all over the world. When she finally left it was to go to school to become a teacher.

Sometime after she received her bachelor's degrees in elementary and special education, Kari began teaching. One of her first teaching

assignments was to a small one-room schoolhouse in the Swan Valley. The year was 1978. After a year of being the only teacher in the Montana school, Kari wondered how she might spend her summer. She had spent time with friends being introduced to the magnificent wilderness areas that surrounded her new home. Kari was hooked on the solitude, the scenery, the wildness... Then the opportunity to be a recreational crew leader for the local YCC (Youth Conservation Corp) became available. Her job--to lead these hardworking young people into the Mission Mountain Wilderness on their days off! Kari's professional wilderness life had begun.

In 1980 Kari's YCC position was phased out but she was invited to be a volunteer wilderness ranger instead. After some reflection time Kari accepted the offer. Working with the U.S. Forest Service and helping keep the wilderness wild appealed to this young wilderness hero. The next year Kari moved from volunteer to paid seasonal employee. Her love for wilderness deepened and her educating abilities matured. Rather than confront wilderness users who failed to exercise legal wilderness behaviors, Kari developed an approach that allowed the violator to maintain their dignity, learn appropriate actions, and find out the wilderness options available to them. Her motto might have been to *respectfully disagree, educate and motivate*.

Through the years her job evolved and her bosses changed. What has never changed has been her dedication to supporting wilderness values through education and personal actions. Kari's days might find her clearing trail, offering trail use advice, restoring an impacted campsite, teaching about proper campsite placement, removing restricted campfire rings, or even monitoring human/wildlife interactions. Kari has and continues to do this work tirelessly as do thousands of other wilderness rangers.

In addition to Kari's ranger activities she teaches classes about wilderness at the university level, helped found and has been a long time board member of the Montana Environmental Education Association, co-authored the original *Wilderness Curriculum* for the Arthur Carhart Wilderness Training Center, led teacher workshops on the topic of wilderness and so much more.

Kari's wilderness mentors include Mardy Murie, John Muir, Cal Tassinari (an early wilderness ranger and Kari's first wilderness boss), Howard Zahniser (author of the Wilderness Act), and Sally Blevins (her personal friend and fellow wilderness ranger).

Kari's wilderness work is not something of the past--rather, it continues today. Here's a wilderness math problem for you: If Kari has hiked approximately 1,500 miles each summer as a wilderness ranger, beginning in 1980, how many miles has she hiked up to now? That's a big number but we know that Kari has done super-hero things in order to help keep wilderness wild!

### **Learn more about *Wilderness Hero* Kari Gunderson**

- Kari isn't a schoolteacher anymore but she always makes sure her teaching certificate is current. Why? She wants to continue honing her teaching skills!
- Kari works closely with the Salish and Kootenai Tribes as they work to manage wilderness that connect in the Mission Mountains. She loves the friendships that she has made through this partnership.
- One year there was no money available to fund Kari's wilderness ranger position. The citizens of the Swan Valley banded together to raise money to fund over half of her position and have continued to support wilderness protection.
- Kari has spearheaded efforts to restore "over-loved" wilderness use areas through restoration efforts and by restricting use while areas heal. She makes it clear that she is just one of many people who give their time and energy to these wilderness restoration efforts.
- Kari is humble and balks at the term *wilderness hero* being applied to her. Too bad because she *is* a wilderness hero!