

Julia Ruelle

Testimony for H.R. 2794

Hello, my name is Julia Ruelle and I'm from Minnetonka, MN. I first want to thank you so much for holding this hearing for the permanent protection of the Boundary Waters.

I was 8 years old when I first went to the Boundary Waters. The magic of the inter-connected lakes and towering pines drew me in instantly with the mystery of untrodden woods I simply had to explore.

For the next 8 years, different combinations of my family or friends would join us for trips to the Boundary Waters every summer. I started with the smallest responsibilities, like carrying the paddles and lifejackets across the portages. As I grew up, so did my responsibilities and soon I was carrying the canoe myself and setting up the tent once we made it to camp. My very favorite part of our trips is the quiet. Every sound is natural and soft. Growing up with this opportunity for quiet and reflection has centered and grounded me. In parallel, the challenge of navigating the wilderness has taught me tenacity, perseverance, and strength.

I unexpectedly drew on these lessons from the forests, lakes, and rivers when I was diagnosed with brain cancer four years ago, as a high school sophomore. Suddenly, everything I knew was flipped on its head. During my very first MRI, before we even knew what was causing my debilitating headaches and nausea, I remember painting a picture in my head of the Boundary Waters to channel the serenity of a windless sunrise reflecting across the lake to help me lie completely still. Remembering my strength and patience in the Boundary Waters motivated and inspired me when things felt hopeless. When I felt overwhelmed, I thought of balancing a canoe on my shoulders and stepping gingerly but securely between rocks and roots on a portage. Now,

cured and healthy, I still use these moments and images of the Boundary Waters to center myself in times of doubt.

During my cancer treatment, I wrote a winning essay whose reward was a five day trip in the Boundary Waters with three friends but no guide or parents were allowed. Just a few months out of treatment, I was exuberant to be free of the constant surveillance of my loving parents and doctors and be able to do this independently. I relied on my friends' support during my cancer treatment greatly, so taking the reins and thanking them with this trip was perfect. Being with them in the wilderness, we got to know each other on a distinct, deeper level that never would have been exposed in our reality of social media, deadlines, and stress. We immediately unearthed perseverance as one friend's shoe soles came completely off on the very first portage and required a doozy of duct tape to repair. We came out of the woods closer and stronger, young women who knew their courage and tenacity and weren't afraid to use it.

Since that first independent trip, I have led numerous parent-free trips with other groups of friends and cousins. Most recently, I participated on a Voyageur Outward Bound winter camping trip, with my Notre Dame classmates, many of whom had never even been camping before. Winter camping in the Boundary Waters involves dogsledding and skiing across frozen lakes to sleep under the stars in temperatures of 20 degrees below zero, which was intense even by my standards. I look back at the trip with fondness, because once again the Boundary Waters brought us closer, melding us into a team that looked out for each other and held every one accountable to their individual needs.

I have seen the Boundary Waters transform youth from nervousness to confidence. Witnessing the awe of my classmates, it is clear that moments experienced here are unique. The Boundary Waters is a treasure held in a delicate balance preserved by the purity of the water. Our

generation will have to deal with the ramifications of the choices the people in this room will make. We would like to inherit the pristine and transformative wilderness enjoyed by generations before us - not a toxic superfund site ruined forever and that my generation will have to clean up. Please support Rep. McCollum's bill H.R. 2794 to protect the Boundary Waters from America's most toxic industry so this treasure will remain pristine for all generations to come.