

Murdock leaves legacy of land conservancy

By MATT BALDWIN Whitefish Pilot | Posted: Friday, May 16, 2014 1:00 am

Margaret Murdock never wavered on the decision to permanently protect her family's 250 acres of land on the north side of Whitefish.

Even when real estate developers courted her with grand plans of new roads and golf courses, she always turned them away. The forest and wetlands east of Wisconsin Avenue and south Reservoir Road are ripe with rare plants and wildlife — it meant much more to her than financial gain.

“I've never been ambitious enough as far as money is concerned that I see a dollar sign on things,” Murdock said in an 1988 interview with the Pilot. “The land is just a part of our life and we want to preserve it in its natural state as much as possible.”

Murdock worked with the Nature Conservancy and the open space eventually was placed in the Murdock-Battin conservation easement. Today the protected habitat along Viking Creek stands as a testament to Murdock's unrelenting commitment to land conservation and stewardship. It will be her lasting legacy.

Murdock passed away April 23 at her home in Whitefish. She was 91 years old.

Born in Whitefish in 1922, Murdock worked as a second grade teacher in Columbia Falls for 36 years. She was passionate about teaching the arts and music to her students.

Her interest in conservation was sparked after she took a course on Montana geography that touched on environmental issues. She became familiar with various environmental groups, including the Nature Conservancy, and in the 1980s began discussing options to protect her family's land. Murdock's mother Bertha Steif Reich originally purchased the property in 1930.

“My mother would say, ‘It sure would be nice if we could just leave it this way, because we have moose, we have coyotes, deer and bear on the land, and they have rights, too,’” Murdock said.

It was the discovery of the rare Le Conte's sparrow and sensitive plant species on the property that increased Murdock's interest in protecting the area.

At age 89, she called the conservation project the highlight of her life.

“We have to take care of the earth or there won't be any place for us to be,” Murdock said.

Whitefish Lake Institute director Mike Koopal said Murdock had a cordial “tea and cookies” approach to people, “but never minced words when it came to the handling of environmental issues.”

Koopal noted that she placed her property into conservation easements long before it became a popular land management tool.

“Margaret never viewed her property as a commodity, rather her stewardship demonstrated respect and vision for both nature and people,” Koopal said.

In 2010 the Lake Institute awarded Murdock and her daughter Sharlot Battin with a Lifetime Achievement Stewardship Award. Murdock also was honored last year by the city of Whitefish during their Earth Day celebration.

“Margaret was a leader and pioneer in conserving important lands in Whitefish,” Whitefish Mayor John Muhlfeld said. “Her contributions were significant and will leave a lasting legacy in our community.”