In 2023, Friends of the Boundary Waters brought together a community of paddlers and clean water advocates to achieve five crucial wins for the Boundary Waters.

With your continued support, we'll build on these victories and ensure permanent protection for our beloved wilderness.
The last Wednesday of January has become something of a holiday for many travelers to the Boundary Waters. The reason? This is the day that permit reservations for the summer canoe season open. People who have been dreaming through the wintry weeks about their summer adventures sit eagerly around their computer, ready to select an entry point, click the dates, and secure their plans for the summer.

On 2023, it so happened that permit day fell on the same day that the Biden administration announced the implementation of a 20-year mineral withdrawal, a moratorium on copper-sulfide mining, on some 225,000 acres of federal lands surrounding the Boundary Waters. The moratorium applies to federal land. It’s yours, it’s mine. It is ours. Foreign mining conglomerates don’t have an automatic right to mine here. Decisions on how we use our public lands, especially when it involves operating a notoriously polluting type of mine, ought to be informed by science, not by who has the most influence or friends in Washington.

Along with last year’s cancelation of Twin Metals’ illegally renewed mineral leases, this is a double layer of protection against the dangerous mining project. We are grateful to all the people who used their voice to speak up for these precious waters. Their perseverance gave the Boundary Waters, and Minnesota, the protection it deserves.
Falling in love with the Boundary Waters is easy. And at Friends of the Boundary Waters, we have long believed that the most effective way to convince someone that this place is worth protecting is to simply bring them here.

That’s a big part of our No Boundaries to the Boundary Waters education program, where we provide the support and opportunity for a new generation of wilderness stewards to connect to this special place.

In the past three years, even with the Covid lockdowns, our program has grown to reach thousands of students through school visits, and provided hundreds with the opportunity to explore the Boundary Waters.

In fact, this summer, we doubled the number of participants who went on a life-changing trip into the Boundary Waters. From the Twin Cities metro area to Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, from Mankato to Ely, schools from across Minnesota have participated in our No Boundaries to the Boundary Waters program.

To ensure a positive experience, our education team has developed a process that begins a school visit where the team teaches a range of topics, from animal adaptations to how to use a compass. For students and schools who opt to participate in a trip, we work with partners like Project Success, CLUES, Wilderness Inquiry and more to host workshops where students prepare for a wilderness trip. The focus here is to provide steppingstones that lead to a canoe, to a portage trail, and to an unforgettable experience in the Boundary Waters.

And the program continues to grow!

Funding for this project was provided by the Minnesota Environment and Natural Resources Trust Fund as recommended by the Legislative-Citizen Commission on Minnesota Resources (LCCMR).

2. DOUBLING THE NUMBER OF STUDENTS WE SEND TO THE BWCA
On August 2, 2023, the Minnesota Supreme Court issued a scathing 68-page, unanimous opinion that came down on the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency’s (MPCA’s) attempt to suppress scientific concerns over PolyMet’s wastewater permit, which would allow PolyMet to violate the law and pollute Lake Superior and the downstream communities of Fond du Lac and Duluth.

At the heart of the case was a cover up.

Scientists had found problems with the permit, and concluded that as written, the permit would allow PolyMet to violate the Clean Water Act and the Fond du Lac Band’s water quality standards. The permit would not safeguard water, and could not adequately enforce limits on heavy metal pollutants like mercury. It was a permit to break the law. If PolyMet were to receive a wastewater permit, substantial revisions would need to be made.

However, MPCA attempted to break with procedure and keep this criticism of PolyMet’s wastewater permit out of the public record, thereby doing a huge favor for the mining industry. By trying to get around these procedures, MPCA attempted to force through a flawed permit that would have allowed PolyMet to permanently pollute Lake Superior and harm the downstream communities of Fond du Lac and Duluth.

Thankfully this scandal was uncovered, and over the course of several years, the case made its way through the courts, arriving before the highest court in state. This August, the Minnesota Supreme Court issued a ruling that was a win for transparency and clean water.

This is one more critical blow to PolyMet. Without this permit, PolyMet cannot put a shovel in the ground.

We are grateful for our law partners at Maslon LLP and invaluable partners, MCEA, Fond du Lac Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, WaterLegacy, and the Center for Biological Diversity.
After the 20-year sulfide mining ban on federal land near the Boundary Waters was enacted, the Chilean-owned mining conglomerate Antofagasta, and its subsidiary Twin Metals, threw a fit. With flimsy legal grounding, they sued the federal government in an attempt to reverse these protections. Friends of the Boundary Waters Wilderness, along with other conservation groups, businesses, and organizations, intervened on behalf of the federal government.

Twin Metals was making a Hail Mary pass, and we asked the court to dismiss the case.

In September, a federal judge dealt another blow to this toxic, and dangerous project.

In a 21-page ruling, the judge concluded that Twin Metals’ lawsuit lacked the legal requirements to go forward on two of its claims, and that the court did not have the jurisdiction to hear the other two claims brought by Twin Metals. And so, the court threw out the case.

As far as legal recourse goes, there is little Twin Metals can do.

However, though it may seem like the Boundary Waters is safe, one need only to look at the past eight years to know that nothing is guaranteed. Administrations change, priorities change, and just because the Boundary Waters is protected today, doesn’t mean the danger from the mining industry has passed.

So long as there is copper in the ground, the threat will remain.

But as long as people paddle these waters, there will be people to protect it.
Forty years ago, Friends of the Boundary Waters established the Edge of the Wilderness Fund with the goal of identifying and protecting vital conservation properties near the edge of the Boundary Waters. Last year, we reopened the fund and since then, successfully bought, purchased and protected 80 acres of land on Snowbank Lake with 3,500 feet of lakeshore. By the end of 2023, we have raised about 93% of the funds needed to conserve the second property, consisting of 361 acres of forestland with over two miles of undeveloped shoreline along the South Kawishiwi River.

Both properties are superb forest habitat for moose, gray wolf, Canada lynx, black bear, fisher, marten, bald eagle, ruffed and spruce grouse, northern goshawk, and other species.

Once we close on the South Kawishiwi River Property, we will have protected a total of 441 acres of forest at the edge of the BWCA that were about to be put on the market for development. Through the support of generous donors, we have ensured that this land will be preserved as part of the greater Boundary Waters ecosystem and will remain unfractured, free from development, and open to all.

5. Protecting Threatened Land at the Edge of Wilderness