A Long-Term Vision for a Wild Oregon

Comprehensive and detailed ecological assessments suggest that, if society wants to protect all ecosystem functions and umbrella species like large predators, at least one half of Oregon's forestlands must be protected or restored to wild and natural conditions. Table 5-1 depicts the current protected forest Wilderness in Oregon and those roadless and undeveloped lands that are de facto wilderness worthy of formal protection.

Approximately three-fifths of Oregon is publicly owned. But not all of those public lands are dedicated to conservation (yet) and, in some cases, large blocks of uninhabited, poorly managed private lands impede the migration of species within and between publicly owned ecoregions.

Both our ecological needs and the politics of natural resources are inescapable factors in wildlands protection. However, while ecological realities will never change — people, fish and wildlife need clean air, water and wilderness — political realities can change. We can transform our current leaders and elect new ones that support designating large tracts of wilderness. Ecologists Reed Noss and Michael Soulé note:

> *A cynic might describe rewilding as an atavistic obsession with the resurrection of Eden. A more sympathetic critic might label it romantic. We contend, however, that rewilding is simply scientific realism, assuming that our goal is to ensure the long-term integrity of the land community.*[1]

Inviting Nature Back

> *One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds.... An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise.*
>
> –Aldo Leopold[2]

Most of the timber industry and many federal forest managers argue that — due to fragmentation from clearcuts, roads and other human assaults — the remaining roadless lands in Oregon and across the West are no longer of wilderness quality. Even when forced to concede that such lands are of wilderness quality, industry and the federal forest agencies often still argue that cutting these forests is the best course of action. They cite the benefits of logging to local communities in the form of jobs and government revenue. They even claim — most hypocritically — that the very health of the forest depends upon logging (while omitting how logging will improve the bottom lines for industry, as well as bureaucratic budgets).

Table 5-1. Protected and Protectable Oregon Forest Wilderness

Level III Ecoregion	Currently Protected Forest Wilderness	Currently Unprotected Forest Wilderness	Total Forest Wilderness
Coast Range	0.69%	4.32%	5.01%
Cascades	5.66%	18.22%	23.88%
Klamath Mountains	13.70%	20.35%	38.05%
East Cascades Slopes and Foothills	0.70%	8.77%	9.47%
Blue Mountains	5.32%	12.50%	17.82%

Just because the Venus de Milo lost her arms, it does not follow that the rest of the statue should be discarded. Unlike human art, nature's art can grow whole again, if humans allow it.

Some of Oregon's forests, especially those in the drier southwest and on the eastside of the Cascades, are out of balance. While neither heavily roaded or logged, many of these forest roadless areas have been grazed by livestock and/or had their natural fire regime disrupted by overzealous disciples of Smokey Bear. To restore ecological health and balance to these federal forests, livestock must be removed and fire returned to these ecosystems. Nature's healing begins when livestock are removed and recovery is rapid. The reintroduction of fire is a bit more complex, but not as complicated as many foresters would have us believe.

In most cases, fire can be safely reintroduced to an ecosystem by simply dropping a match at the right time. There is, however, an art — and a science — to prescribed fire that considers topography, the quantity and moisture content of fuel, as well as current and probable future wind, temperature and humidity. Occasionally, despite the best efforts of all involved, prescribed management fires will burn out of control. The public must be willing to tolerate these occasions, forest managers must be willing to accept

the risk of failure – and both must learn from successes and failures. A few out-of-control prescribed management fires in the off-season will result in less out-of-control wildfires during the fire season.

Many industrial and agency foresters contend that logging, or at least the serious use of a chainsaw, is necessary before fire can safely be restored to a forest ecosystem. They argue that the exclusion of fire has caused the forest to grow too thick and that if it burns without prior "treatment" the entire forest stand – not just the small understory trees – will be lost. While there is some legitimacy to this claim, it is often exaggerated to promote commercial logging – not to improve forest health, but to increase timber industry profits and/or agency staffing levels.

In *some* cases, following strict guidelines, the prudent and sparing use of small chainsaws can aid forest restoration – by removing certain understory trees that have grown so big that if they burn they will threaten the old-growth overstory. This rarely occurs in remaining roadless areas that, not having been logged or roaded, are in the most natural and ecologically balanced condition. Other forests that have been high-graded once, twice or three times are more likely to exhibit this problem. In general, newly established *small* young trees are the ones that pose the biggest problem in terms of fire danger – particularly where long-term fire suppression has been practiced. The *big* old trees need to be conserved because they provide shade, retain moisture and actually help reduce overall fire danger. Mostly because the agency has always managed public forests almost solely for, and most often in the context of, timber sales, the Forest Service is now repackaging timber sales as "ecological restoration projects." Ecological restoration costs money, so the agency often tries to raise the money by offering enough big trees to bidding timber companies to cover the cost of "treating" the small trees in the project area. (The industry term for this "treatment" is "punishment acres" where they are required to cut down little trees in order to get at the big ones).

The problem with this strategy is two-fold. First, the big trees should be conserved for ecological purposes (including fire resiliency). Second, there is no money in logging small trees. The Forest Service has offered many restoration sales over the past decade that almost always serve up more trees for logging than conservationists would prefer – only to discover that no timber companies are interested in bidding. The usual practice is to then reconfigure the sale so it includes even more big trees to attract industry bids. Removing the big trees not only degrades the ecosystem but actually increases the risk of future fire. This is because the shade provided by big trees helps maintain cool moist fuel conditions, helps reduce wind speeds during a fire and suppresses the growth of "ladder fuels." Sometimes, even well-intentioned thinning can make things worse instead of better, while careful use of prescribed fire almost always moves things in the right direction. The Forest Service could learn much from the National Park Service, an agency that routinely burns all kinds of forest ecosystems without first resorting to timber sales and chainsaws.

Currently, there is no real money in forest conservation and certainly not the amount available from forest exploitation. (What has posterity ever done for a corporation's bottom line?) Past mismanagement has created an ecological debt that we cannot pay down by going still further into hock.

Unroading the Wild

> *While the TV ads would have us believe that a four-wheel drive can take us to a wild place, it really can't. Wherever the engine takes us, real wildness will be just out of hearing over the next ridge. If we insist on driving into the wilderness, we're likely to destroy what we came to find.*
>
> –Chris Madson[3]

Some federal forest roads should be maintained to provide access to recreation areas and scenic viewpoints. However, scientific studies show most forest roads to be extremely damaging to nature, expensive to maintain and of little public value. These should be abandoned for reclamation by nature. The resulting smaller road system would be better – for public use and to minimize environmental harm – than the current overly large and under-maintained system. Many roads are ticking time bombs waiting for the next torrential rains to set them off – sliding down steep slopes into stream bottoms or human communities. The backlog of minimum road maintenance on the National Forest System is $8 billion.

The Forest Service should proactively close all unneeded roads and not just by constructing gates at the road's entrance. Problem roads should be made "hydrologically invisible" by installing water bars at appropriate intervals to divert surface water back to its natural flow and keep it out of ditches. Roadside ditches tend to collect water and deliver it quickly to streams, so that during a storm the pulse of water causes erosion and scours fish eggs from their nests. Water bars on the other hand tend to dissipate water and redirect it to vegetated surface areas and ultimately to subsurface channels. This helps filter the water and slow the delivery of water to streams.

Located where roads cross streams, culverts are often not big enough to handle large flood flows so they tend to get plugged, back up and cause large landslides. All the fine grained fill material used to bridge the stream then smothers fish nests downstream. In addition, culverts often create barriers for migrating fish and amphibians. Water bar construction and culvert removal work is very cost-effective and can provide transitional jobs in the woods for out-of-work loggers and equipment operators.

The Siuslaw National Forest once produced a lot of salmon. As logging and roads

ELIZABETH FERYL, *ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGES*

increased, salmon numbers decreased. Today, coho salmon is listed as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, and chinook salmon, steelhead and cutthroat trout qualify for protected status. The Forest Service is slowly beginning to realize that the Siuslaw National Forest is more valuable for salmon, water, wildlife and recreation than for logging. The President's Northwest Forest Plan dropped the timber cut on the Siuslaw more than 90 percent. Consequently, two-thirds of the Siuslaw's road system is now being closed and restored. The Siuslaw's example should, and will likely be, followed by other national forests.

The vast majority of Forest Service roads are low-speed roads built for log trucks. As logging decreases, so do the taxpayer dollars that maintain these roads. As Congress reduces the Forest Service budget, many national forests are closing ranger district offices and cutting staff positions. Given these trends, a coalition of environmentalists and fiscal conservatives may finally be able to persuade Congress to cut the Forest Service road-building budget and allocate money to watershed restoration, thus benefiting taxpayers, the environment and local economies.

More Public Forestlands

Only public ownership can reliably, certainly, durably allow certain natural processes the room they need.

–Carl Pope, Executive Director, Sierra Club[4]

In the West, we have extraordinary landscapes but they are not complete. When many of the boundaries of our national parks and forests were established years ago, we didn't have the science to tell us more land was needed. Now we have the science and we need to act on it.

–Bruce Babbitt, former Secretary of Interior[5]

Not long ago, the giant timber company Weyerhaeuser sold its extensive holdings in the Klamath Basin. International Paper has also sold 200,000 acres in Oregon's central Coast Range. Other multinational corporations have sold other forested tracts around Oregon. Still more timber companies will sell and run. In capitalism, making a killing always takes precedence over making a living. In these days of global competition – and especially since trees grow more slowly than money – capital that had been invested in *standing* timber is now moving elsewhere to reap greater returns on investment than are available from *growing* timber. However, if these large private timber holdings remain in corporate ownership, even greater economic pressures will result, causing even more ecological destruction.

Most of Oregon's industrial timberland has now been heavily logged at least twice.

◀ After clearcutting, some forests may recover on their own. However dense artificial plantations can often benefit ecologically from careful thinning to reduce tree density and help restore natural variability.

ELIZABETH FERYL, *ENVIRONMENTAL IMAGES*

Where huge trees once stood are now stunted monoculture plantations more ecologically akin to a cornfield than a forest.

The chainsaw, the bulldozer and the chemical pulping process have allowed efficient mining of forests. However, the era of forest mining is ending and more of our fiber for paper and construction products will come from the nation's expansive farmlands, which are far more productive for growing fiber than forestlands.

History has shown we cannot rely on the private sector to restore Oregon's forests and protect our drinking water. If the public wants to preserve and restore salmon and other forest species, and protect sources of drinking water (and it does), then these conservation responsibilities should be borne mostly by the public, not the private, sector.

There are at least six million acres of private corporate timberland (roughly the size of the Deschutes, Mount Hood, Willamette, Winema, Rogue River and Umpqua National Forests) that could be reconverted to public forestland. The State of Oregon should acquire it from willing sellers and give it to the United States to be managed as national forests. This should be done because it is ecologically necessary, socially desirable, economically rational and fiscally feasible. Oregon must reinvest in and maintain its natural infrastructure just as does its other infrastructure.

If population grows, we will need more real forests. Oregon enjoys many of the state parks it has today because Sam Boardman, Oregon's first superintendent of State Parks, had the vision to convince Oregonians to buy park land when it was cheap, though not yet needed. Today, most politicians cannot even convince Oregonians to pay for what is needed now, let alone in the future. Private timberland is not inexpensive now; it will not get any cheaper.

Among the ecological and recreational achievements that could be realized with the acquisition of more public forestland is a Willamette Valley Greenbelt — equivalent to a band of Silver Falls State Parks surrounding the Willamette Valley in the foothills of the Cascade and Coast ranges — envisioned by former Oregon State Parks Director Dave Talbot to complement the Willamette River Greenway. A protected forest corridor running from Portland's Forest Park to the Pacific Ocean could also become a reality.

In 1977, I visited Klootchie Creek in Clatsop County near where the nation's largest known Sitka spruce now stands and where the largest known Douglas-fir once stood. A Crown Zellerbach executive described what had been a magnificent old-growth Douglas-fir forest of 12-foot diameter trees, where there are now only clearcuts and plantations, by saying, "We knew in the 1950s we had to log it then, or it would be a national park by now."

In the 1920s the Commonwealth of Virginia acquired some cut-over, burned-off, mined-out, grazed-down, plowed-up mountains and gave them to the United States in order to, as the National Park Service said, "invite nature back." It was a radical idea, but the creation of Shenandoah National Park is now considered a very reasonable

◀ Nature reclaiming what was once an all-weather gravel road.

thing to have done. Since it takes several hundred years to regrow 12-foot diameter Douglas-firs, even in the Oregon Coast Range, we must start reconverting private timberland to public forestland immediately.

The state could finance this proposed conservation effort. At $500 per acre of cutover timberland (a fair price for large acreages), the purchase cost of six million acres is $3 billion. Borrowing at 6 percent for 200 years – about the length of time we have been cutting down Oregon's forests and the minimum time required grow a decent old-growth forest – servicing the debt would cost $15 million per month. A 4¢/gallon increase in the state fuels tax and equivalent increases in the weight-mile tax could easily pay the debt. This would be a logical exchange, because Oregonians would mitigate the climate change impacts of burning gasoline, while conserving and restoring the state's forests. The carbon from burning the fossil fuels would be removed from the air and sequestered in what will eventually again become old-growth forests.

Here is another way to look at it. With (at the moment) three million Oregonians, the cost is less than $5/month per Oregonian – or less than the price of a six-pack of decent Oregon microbrew – to acquire six million acres of public forestlands. Here's to restoring Oregon's forests!

Self-Restraint for the Betterment of All

Humans are orders of magnitude more successful than any other species. Humans also now determine whether any species or ecosystem lives or dies. We (currently) have no serious predators, save ourselves. To date we have successfully outmaneuvered all the major environmental checks and balances that keep other species within limits. Our population continues to grow despite diseases like AIDS. Even a loss in our species' fertility hasn't slowed our population growth. Due to environmental stresses, human sperm counts are down 50 percent over the last thirty years. But what do we do about it? Rather than address the underlying causes we learn to make babies in test tubes.

We have – for the short-term at least – transcended any limits. But nature bats last. In the end, humans must learn to live within our means or Earth will no longer support us. Finding another suitable planet is as impractical as it is improbable. The evolutionary challenge is whether humans will acquire the wisdom to do something no other species has ever done or had to do – practice willful self-restraint. We must learn to live within both our economic and environmental means. Will we as a species learn that our long-term survival, as well as our short-term real comfort, depends upon a healthy, clean and biologically diverse planet? Protecting and restoring Oregon's forest wildlands is an important step toward that goal. ◆

GARY BRAASCH

Public forestland in Saddle Mountain State Park surrounded by private timberland.

Notes

[1] Soulé, Michael and Reed F. Noss. 1998. *Rewilding and biodiversity: complementary goals for continental conservation*. Wild Earth 8(3): 26.

[2] Leopold, Aldo. 1970. A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation From Round River. Ballantine Books. New York, NY: 197.

[3] Madson, Chris. 1997. *Dismount*. Wyoming Wildlife 61(10): 4 ("Land Ethic" column).

[4] Pope, Carl. 1998. *Downpayments on the rewilding of America.* Wild Earth 8(4): 37.

[5] Wilkinson, Todd. *To protect land, Uncle Sam buys more.* Christian Science Monitor (Sept. 14, 1999).