

Connecting people to place in Sisters Country

By Craig F. Eisenbeis
Correspondent

Last week in Sisters, Deschutes Land Trust (DLT) Executive Director Brad Chalfant outlined the history of Whychus Creek and what the Land Trust sees as the future for this important stream that flows through Sisters. He also took the time to discuss the role of the Land Trust in the Deschutes River Basin.

Chalfant was introduced by Bjarne Holm, board member for the Sisters Trails Alliance (STA), which hosted the event. Holm praised the work of the Land Trust and Chalfant as "Someone looking out for the ecosystem we live in."

According to Chalfant, the Deschutes River Basin comprises approximately 8.6 million acres of mostly public lands.

"I like to think of the Deschutes Basin as the heart and soul of Central Oregon," Chalfant said.

He was quick to point out that, while the Land Trust partners with public agencies in cooperative efforts, the DLT's primary focus is to promote conservation efforts on privately held lands.

The talk was titled "Connecting People to Place," and focused on DLT's efforts to "protect and restore essential wildlife habitat," as well as touching on the role of the Land Trust and what that means to the community.

"The wildlife depends on these lands as their home," he said.

"While our focus is the protection of high-priority wildlife habitat, we try hard to afford appropriate access for the public," Chalfant said. He also stressed that "projects must be relevant to our communities."

Part of that relevance, he

said, is making the trust's lands available to the public in a way that also serves the land.

"We try to achieve a balance with public impact in a way that is sensitive to the wetlands," he said, in reference to DLT's access policies, which are a mix of open public trails and limited-access guided tours.

Regarding DLT projects in and around Sisters, he discussed preservation work at Indian Ford Meadow, Whychus Canyon and especially Camp Polk Meadow. The recent re-meandering of Whychus Creek at Camp Polk is a model for what DLT hopes to achieve for additional reaches of the creek at Whychus Canyon and elsewhere.

Much of Whychus Creek was channelized after severe flooding in 1964. As a result, important fish and wildlife habitat was lost. He described the result as "putting a straightjacket on the stream." The Land Trust's goal is to return the creek, as much as possible, to its natural floodplain.

Evidence so far indicates that their efforts are being successful. Recent high-water events at Camp Polk showed that the desired results are being achieved. The floodplain in that area was, in fact, flooded. Moreover, he said, the revegetation effort there not only survived the flooding but served its purpose of stabilizing the restored area as intended. As part of the Camp Polk restoration project, more than 200,000 vegetation plantings were made in the project area.

When the creek floods these areas, the underlying soils and aquifer are recharged with water, in a way that stabilizes both future water flow and water temperatures. Water flow and

temperature are important factors in the maintenance of critical fish habitat and will be key to the current efforts to restore salmon and steelhead to this part of the Deschutes Basin.

At present, DLT has been able to preserve more than eight miles of Whychus Creek that is outside the boundaries of public lands. Its current "Campaign for Whychus Creek" seeks to protect the remainder of it. "At this point," Chalfant said, "we can see the finish line."

The campaign seeks to raise \$12-15 million for this purpose. About a third of that amount has already been raised. The goal is to acquire and restore remaining stretches of Whychus Creek. Chalfant envisions the possibility of one day having a trail system reaching all the way from Sisters to Alder Springs and the creek's confluence with the Deschutes River.

Chalfant also addressed DLT's ongoing efforts to protect the 33,000 acre Skyline Forest. He conceded that that goal is a large and complicated project. "We're going to get there with Skyline Forest," he said, "but it's going to take time."

At the conclusion of the presentation, Chalfant fielded questions, and one of those was about the role of beavers in the ecosystem. He described the importance of beavers as "huge" in the establishment and maintenance of the Whychus Creek system. "Beavers created many of these meadows," he said. "We've got active beavers at the lower end of Camp Polk. They are very ambitious beavers, and we expect them to move upstream over time." Then, with a smile, he added, "...and they work very cheaply."

The 20th anniversary



PHOTO BY JIM CORNELIUS

The Camp Polk Preserve was one of DLT's early accomplishments in protecting land and providing access to the public.

of the Land Trust is fast approaching, and Chalfant is pleased with the direction, vision, and potential legacy of the Deschutes Land Trust. "If we can protect these lands and resources," he said, "we can ensure that our work is permanent and will continue to strengthen the community for generations to come."

The presentation was part of STA's continuing series designed to promote outdoor public recreation and education in Sisters Country with quarterly programs on subjects of outdoor interest.

Future planned quarterly events will include presentations on mountain biking, Oregon Wild's mission to protect wildlands, and fisheries biology in Whychus Creek and Central Oregon.

For more information about DLT and its projects, visit www.deschuteslandtrust.org. For more information about the STA, contact Ann Marland, STA's community outreach director, at 541-549-7006. Additional information about STA can also be found on their website at www.sisterstrails.com.

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