

OPINIONS

River Right | Good government, good parks

BY TOM CARSTENS

This summer I visited Alaska's Gates of the Arctic National Park. While there, I took an exciting ten-day canoe trip paddling a wild John River through the Brooks Mountain Range. This is not a park in the traditional sense. For one thing, it's huge—about the size of Switzerland. For another, it's not very accessible—you can reach it only by bush plane. There are no roads, no trails, no infrastructure, and no human settlements. The grizzlies and the wolves are in charge.

Parks have always been a big part of my family's life. Over six decades, we've visited most of the national parks and many state parks throughout the nation. As much as Americans debate the proper role of government, I think most will agree that parks administration is justified. Our National Park Service issues a variety of inexpensive passes. Some are free—to disabled Americans, military personnel and their families, certain volunteers, and fourth graders. (Fourth graders? Who knew?) Check it out at nps.gov/planyourvisit/passes.htm.

We are fortunate here in Oregon to enjoy one of the nation's finest state park systems. It's easily accessible, well kept, and affordable. Did you know that Oregon's state parks and campgrounds are free for our disabled vets? What a thoughtful gesture! You can find out more about our state parks at oregonstateparks.org.

Parks are one of the most beneficial services a government can offer to its citizens. They entice us to get active and outdoors. They provide a refreshing break



Sunday swimmers enjoy the Applegate River at Cantrall Buckley Park. (Photo: Tom Carstens.)

from our hectic, self-absorbed lives. They're family-friendly and hassle-free—just pack a lunch or a fishing pole and you're ready to go. Egalitarian by design, parks welcome citizens from all walks of life and different cultures. And far from being government giveaways, parks are generally financed by their own patrons. They form a model for the libertarian philosophy.

Here in the Applegate Valley, Jackson and Josephine County Parks fit this model: both are largely off-budget, funded almost entirely by park fees. Several of these lovely parks are located on the banks of the Rogue River. Paddlers use them to put in, take out, camp, or just have lunch. They're a delight: well-tended, user-friendly, and respectful of their natural environment.

And both counties offer inexpensive annual passes to the public.

In the past few years, Jackson County Parks has really stepped up to the plate. They've expanded the park system and run it like a business. Off the tax rolls for the past nine years, Jackson County parks are popular and self-sufficient. Have you visited any of these parks lately? They're top of the line.

This was not the case in 1996, when Jackson County's dependence on dwindling timber revenues forced the shutdown of several parks. This included our own Cantrall Buckley Park, one of the few public access points to the Applegate River—enjoyed by recreational paddlers for generations. Not surprisingly, the



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Applegate Valley community rallied. For the last two decades, literally hundreds of volunteers have joined with the Park Committee to keep Cantrall Buckley open and vibrant. That they were successful was due in no small part to the hard work and skill of superintendent Rick Barclay, who somehow managed to keep things rolling on a shoestring budget.

Jackson County Parks, now robust and solvent, has come full circle and offered to resume its rightful role as park manager. Facing higher costs, an aging staff, and inefficiencies of scale, A Greater Applegate (formerly GACDC) accepted the offer. The Cantrall Buckley Park Committee will continue to support community projects in the park while the county promises a first-class enterprise. This is a new and exciting chapter in an already great story.

We'll paddle on.

Tom Carstens • 541-846-1025

Note: Almost five years ago, J.D. Rogers, then editor of the Applegater, approached me about writing a conservative column to give some balance to the opinion section. I readily agreed—as long I had something to contribute. It's been a lot of fun and I've learned a lot. And I'm grateful that no one has toilet papered my house yet! I'm feeling less of a firebrand lately, so maybe it's time to deep-six this column to the bottom of the river. I hope to continue reporting for this wonderful paper in ways more suited to my newfound tranquility. Maybe another skeptical conservative will pick up the torch.

A summer of beneficial wildfire in the Applegate Valley

BY LUKE RUEDIGER

On August 14, 2017, a spectacular lightning storm lit 25 small fires in the Applegate watershed. Within days most of those fires had either burned themselves out or were contained by fire-suppression crews. Of the original 25 fires, four smoldered and crept through fuels in the steep rugged terrain of the Upper Applegate. They grew slowly on the densely wooded slopes near Grayback Mountain, above Palmer Creek Road, and in the Middle Fork of the Applegate River. These fires, the Creedence, Burnt Peak, Seattle and Abney Fires, eventually became the Miller Complex. Over the course of 70 days, the Miller Complex burned nearly 40,000 acres in some of the Applegate's most remote backcountry, including the Kangaroo, Condrey Mountain and Collings-Kinney roadless areas, and the Red Buttes Wilderness.

Fire-suppression crews tried in vain to extinguish these stubborn blazes, but the terrain was just too steep, rocky,

and dangerous. Crews dealt with rolling boulders, logs, and both falling green trees and snags throughout the fire area. They built handline and prepared logging roads, but on numerous occasions, roll-out (burning material falling downhill) continued to fall across containment lines and the fires continued to grow.

Fire crews were spread thin across the west when the Miller Complex began, and our local fires, at that time far from homes, were some of the lowest priorities in the region. Fire managers worked to protect local communities and keep fire crews safe while steering the fires away from private timberland and protecting important habitats and natural values. They simply did not have the crews and resources available to contain the fires.

Thankfully, the fires were burning at low severity, maintaining healthy forest conditions and reintroducing fire into areas where it has long been suppressed. Burning predominantly in healthy, old

forest, the fire burned mostly in the understory, aided by a dense inversion layer. The inversion trapped smoke in the canyon bottoms, holding moisture, cooling the ambient air temperature, and reducing air movement, which all worked to limit fire severity. Despite the impact to local communities, which was significant, the smoke helped moderate fire intensity and maintain the beautiful forested habitat we enjoy in the Applegate Valley. The smoke was both a blessing and a curse, although most have only cursed it.

After enduring the long, smoke-filled summer of 2017, we have received the blessing of natural, characteristic fire. Our forests have been fertilized with rich mineral ash and armored with nature's fuel reduction. Our wildlife will feast on the new grass and fresh woody shoots sprouting from burned-off hardwoods and chaparral. Hollows burned in large, old-growth trees will become protection for winter's slumbering bears or natal dens for the Pacific fisher. Fire-scorched snags will both feed and house generations of woodpeckers and songbirds. Rich fields of flowering plants will carpet the burned soil, providing better habitat for many pollinators such as hummingbirds, butterflies, and native bees next spring.

Fire is a natural process, as much a part of the Applegate Valley as acorns on the oak trees, salmon in our streams, and towering pine trees. The return of fire brings renewal and life to a landscape intentionally starved of fire for decades. In fact, many plants have already sprouted back, transforming the white ash into green, verdant regrowth.



Low-severity understory fire on Kinney Creek in the Burnt Peak Fire. (Photo: Luke Ruediger.)

The Miller Complex Fire allowed the long-suppressed natural process of fire to once again create a multitude of ecological benefits. The forests of the Siskiyou Mountains are well adapted to wildfire, and the fire effects in the Miller Complex have been both characteristic and beneficial. Properly managed wildfire and intentionally lit prescribed fires are the most effective tools for maintaining healthy, fire-adapted plant communities and protecting nearby human communities from the threat of uncharacteristic wildfire.

The Miller Complex demonstrates that forests across the Applegate watershed can sustain healthy, mixed-severity fire, despite decades of fire suppression. The current rhetoric of catastrophic fire is a false narrative based more on fear than reality. When you actually walk and explore contemporary wildfires in the Klamath-Siskiyou Mountains, you will find more renewal than destruction and more life than death. These fires are not destroying our forests; they are making them healthy and whole again.

Luke Ruediger • 541-890-8974
Applegate Neighborhood Network

HIGH SCHOOL REPORTER WANTED

Great experience and volunteer opportunity!

The *Applegater* wants to include information on Hidden Valley High School (HVHS) activities, events, sports, news, clubs, etc., in our quarterly newsmagazine. Any budding journalists, English majors, club members, parents, or staff members interested in representing HVHS for your local paper? The next deadline for articles is February 1.

**If you're willing and able,
email gater@applegater.org.**