

WE'RE ALL OUT ON A



NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION

LONG LIVE TREEHUGGING DIRTLOVERS

BY DEBORA SEYMOUR

I dedicate this story to Matthew "Ridge" Hill and Cedar St. Onge. To all the elder Big Trees in the forest, I ask for guidance, that any words I use may enliven any and all to work for you and your survival.

It seems so very appropriate that the forest on line here is named *God's Valley*. I really appreciate the resonance in speaking about this one part of the last 1% of Oregon coastal rainforest. I am very grateful to live not far inland from the north Oregon coastline and to experience the hard rains from the Pacific Ocean caught by the forests, in an ongoing cycle of Earth's reparation. Sitting by the warmth of a wood fire on this blustery October day, I want so to bring another light to my community and share my experience over the past few months in the God's Valley Forest. If we could only speak to the one-leggeds, their wise perspective might possibly lead all down a clearer trail.

Sometime back in August I was working the a.m. shift at the Community Store in Astoria. A woman from South County called the store to share the news of a 'Big Tree' cut in a place called God's Valley, just south of the Clatsop/Tillamook County line. "The ODF (Oregon Department of Forestry) went back on their word and started cutting this forest behind our backs!"

How could we let people know in a hurry, as the chainsaws of modern technology can clearcut an ancient forest in a blink of an eye?

I had not been in the God's Valley Forest myself but in my heart and mind all Big Trees are in danger and any cry for them strikes at my cords of direct action. "I'm not quite sure how to approach this, but McCusker will be at KMUN at 9 a.m. Call the station, he'll tell everybody what's coming down!" He always does and we can count on Michael to tell the truth. God's Valley rang out over the North Pacific Coast Radio Waves.

"*The Big Trees are fallin'*," this was my song as I met with customers at the register that day. Throughout the day I pondered heavily the importance for us to gather, witness and put a stop to more forest injustice. I called around trying to arrange a way to head down to South County at the end of my obligated day of work. My forest friend Sonya offered up her pickup and wished me well in facing the possibility of arrest.

The day was sunny and heading down 101 to 26 and onto Highway 53 South gave me time to ponder the falling of more Big Trees; I couldn't help but think of my young daughter's future

Driving up God's Valley Road I was met by a large gathering of ODF officials and armed Tillamook Sheriffs who kindly told me the road was closed to all through traffic. I was handed a three page outline with the Whys, Whats & Wheres of God's Valley, a map of restricted zones and the ABCs of violating those zones. Feeling sort of out-numbered I backpacked and headed into the forest to hopefully meet up with other like-minded 'Tree Hugging Dirt Worshipers'. I smiled as one of the sheriffs took my picture.

I wouldn't exactly call their map user-friendly as I walked about enjoying the forest wondering if I was in a restricted zone or not. The sheriffs drove by me several times and I kind of got the feeling they thought I was up to mischief as I explored different roads on the map. Eventually I came upon 'The Line'. No one else was there, just a pink plastic ribbon strung across

the road and a big medal sign, *Do Not Enter!* I took down the pink plastic and turned the sign around. It was getting close to dark as I contemplated going farther and risking arrest. Feeling the task of camaraderie and realizing the prospects of Tillamook County jail, I decided it was time to head back out. Curious as I was, something didn't feel quite right. Coming to my place of entry all the officials were gone. Two Tillamook sheriffs were putting up a big chain across the road with one heavily armed deputy left on the inside with his three-wheeler, obviously planning to spend the night. I sincerely felt the strangest bad vibe from this officer staying behind, and was extremely glad that I came out when I did. As it looked, it would have been just him and me alone in the forest.

My next trip to God's Valley came a few weeks later. Hard Rain Alliance from South County called for help and formed alliance with Cascadia Forest Alliance. Cascadia brought expertise and forest knowledge from their ongoing work to save old trees in the federal forest lands of Oregon. I highly praise Cascadia Forest Alliance for coming over the coast range; without their wisdom, commitment and expertise we here on the Oregon north coast wouldn't have a clue as to how to stop the ODF from taking every last Big Tree down!

Cascade Forest Alliance began setting up a long term 'Tree Sit', hoping to bring to light what was at stake in this north coast valley of State Forest lands. Very few in the county were familiar with the words *Tree Sitter* until these folks came to our aid. We were all invited to visit this precious old forest and align with the elder trees before it was too late. Interesting to know that the biggest and oldest trees were the first to fall! Area 1, a one acre parcel, out of four sites, was just about all thinned. 'Thinning' is the word used to describe the ODF's agenda to take the last of Oregon's coastal Big Trees that belong to each and every taxpayer in the state. I for one have no respect for the ODF's management plan to increase habitat in the forest by taking out anymore Big Trees. I see these trees as elders who carry the wisdom of the forest and to imagine a world without the wisdom of elders is not a choice I wish to walk.

It was the weekend of the Mount Hood to Coast run. Pack and blanket on my back, I set out on foot once again to

meet the God's Valley Big Trees. Oddly enough I caught rides with three different truckin' loggers. (I really do believe in angels.) Expressing that I was "off to meet with friends, hoping to sleep on the forest floor and avoid the 'Hood to Coast' chaos," they could appreciate that for sure.

Walking up a logging road in God's Valley there were not any signs that expressed "Tree Sitters Here." There are some who appreciate my experience of "Where the hell am I, and where the hell are they?" Being Saturday it was quiet, but low and behold a sound in the woods and a very vague trail to my left. I followed quietly and then stopped only to meet eyes off in the distance; a man sitting on a platform high in a tree. This man has since turned out to be one of my heroes. His name is 'Ridge'. "Howdy," I hollered. "Howdy," another voice hollered back, a woman farther up the trail. These folks were all from Cascadia Forest Alliance.

We shared stories of community --- myself, the man named 'Ridge', a woman, her husband and their young son named Leo. Farther up the trail was the main Tree Sitter platform, about 75 feet up a big grandmother hemlock. I was awestruck by high that platform seemed, thinking of the Tree Sitter, code named *Tree*, who occupied the platform and the coastal storm that blew over two days earlier. Laying my blanket under that hemlock, looking up as the forest canopy fell into darkness, watching the faint flicker of soft light coming from the platform above, I experienced a quiet only the old forest knows. I was very grateful and felt very at home on the sweet forest floor.

The next morning a few folk from South County showed up to learn how to harness up and pull themselves up a tree. It was this man named 'Ridge', strong, healthful, clear, patient and humble who along with David Fontenot (Cascadia Alliance Coastal Tree Sit organizer) taught our small group how to pull ourselves up into a big tree. At age 49 and in fairly good shape, I can say it took all that I had to get myself up 45 feet onto a small learner's platform. (I'm determined to get strong enough to make the 75 feet climb someday.) I left the forest once again feeling awestruck and knowing how important it is to 'Save God's Valley Trees' from being cut.

TREES ARE US

Forest Gump:
"A forest is like a box of chocolates... You eat it all up."
~JACK OHMAN

Less than 10% of old growth trees remain in the Pacific Northwest, which includes northern California as well as Oregon and Washington in the USA and British Columbia in Canada. Although the forests in BC are intensely logged they are not within U.S. jurisdiction even though an integral part of the regional ecosystem.

The economy of the Northwest is largely based on timber products and has been assailed with court injunctions against clearcutting public forests despite a badly compromised and unpopular forest plan put into effect during the Clinton administration. The problems and complexity pertaining to forest use focus on employment, endangered species, shrinking habitat, land erosion and water pollution, disastrous fires that consume hundreds of thousands of acres each season and kill animals and firefighters, climate change, methods and extent of logging (especially clearcutting of old growth forests), access and use of public forestlands.

We read and hear about the massive destruction of the rainforests of Asia and South America, yet somehow find it difficult to equate with our own clearcutting of forests in this country. The great North American forest has virtually vanished in little more than two centuries, from the East Coast to the Pacific Ocean; from the great conifer forests of the North to the hardwoods of the South, in particular a huge swath across the top of the nation from Maine to Oregon.

Little is left of Oregon's old forests and the forests of northern California and Washington, and what little remains is incessantly under threat. The never quenched hunger of the timber industry has butchered its own lands, replacing them (when they do) with inferior and less profitable monocultural tree farms.

Incredibly, the timber companies demand as their divine right the public forests, and as they log off more and more public timber they demand more of what is left. The city of Astoria is a microcosm of the situation. Trees vs money. The likely longrange loss of a local ecosystem in exchange for short-term profit. Astoria is unusual in that it has a large city forest which most cities lack and many wish to have. This small remnant of a much larger forest on the hills above the Columbia River is

vital to the quality of life many wish for themselves and their successors. Others do not share sympathy with that vision. Trees are economical units to them, to be harvested to meet market demands without consideration for esthetic or ecological value.

The Pacific Northwest is in the same shape as Astoria. Its resources have been ravaged and the greed for what remains will not end until all of it is gone --- trees, fish, and everything else despoiled for single generation profit, one generation displacing another in its desire to exploit whatever left that is yet available for sale.

Yet the glory days of logging are at an end, which leaves a simple dramatic choice --- to either allow loggers to keep their jobs until they have cut down the remaining old growth forests, or save what is left at the cost of jobs they will lose anyway when the last trees are down. Automation and export of raw trees have accounted for the loss of most timber jobs, contrary to claims by the timber industry.

Timber companies and environmentalists push at each other with little inclination to compromise their positions. Stubborn environmentalists make good ancestors. Loggers do not. They have denuded the forests and showed little inclination to replace what was lost on their own lands, instead demanding a mandate of public forests for their chainsaws. And here is a paradox, not among managers who see trees as only ciphers on ledgers but in the attitude of proud roughneck loggers who consider themselves woodsmen and profess love for the forests they destroy and refuse to quit cutting until nothing is left.

When the last of the big trees are gone and the poor grade second and third growth timber reduces profits, the managers will diversify their portfolios and dismiss the woodsmen who created their wealth: Let them be dishwashers.

Without the forests of Asia and the Americas we bequeath our descendants an arid world, a hot greenhouse. No shade to shield us from the sun's ultraviolet rays (we've virtually ruined the upper atmosphere ozone). Water systems dry up without the cooler moist climates of forests. Biological diversity disappears. Marine life vanishes. Maybe only hallucinogenic drugs will recall the ancient symbiosis with Earth before our species moved out alone to dominate our home planet through obliteration of all that makes it home.

~MICHAEL MCCUSKER



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