



Off and on, through the mist and between the trees, I detect a dusting of snow on the high peaks south and east of town. A hint of white outlines black tree silhouettes and the beige, patchy tangle of alpine, winter-dormant salmonberry thickets. Stand there and look at them: Onion Peak sits south of town, a massive pillar of rock, skirted by long, adjoining high ridges - those that we know from the standard-issue postcards, framing Ecola Park scenery. Looking like a reclining profile of a bearded face, some call these ridges "Old Man Mountain" or simply "the Old Man." Sugarloaf Mountain looms black and conical, southeast of town. To the northeast, not visible from town, but seen clearly from Highway 26, sit dual-peaked mountains - Saddle and Humbug Mountains - hummocks pointing skyward, defying physical laws it seems, improbable topography, characteristic more of Dr. Seuss illustrations than of the world as we know it.

Saddle Mountain is the tallest of our north coast mountains, but in my memories the Onion Peak chain looms largest. On recent rainy nights I dig out pictures: of myself as a small child perched on the Old Man's north cliff face, examining rocks, plants, and bugs, tethered with 20-foot long towing rope, in naive umbilical security, to my mother (lest I plummet). I find a photo of my father and an elder cousin on the day they climbed to the tops of these peaks and announced their arrival at the summit back to Cannon Beach with signal mirrors. And another: a photo from one of the trips in which they repelled down cliff faces. Biographical twists and turns have changed everything; it would be easier to bring these mountains to the people in these pictures than to bring these people back to the mountains' tops by their own, free will. But still, the mountains, tinged with snow, haven't changed much.

Ancient history clings to these peaks.

Well before my time, during the Miocene, lava met water. In and around the ancestral Columbia River mouth, hardening amidst hiss and explosive steam, this lava coagulated into brittle breccias and pillow basalts. (One can trace the outlines of the ancient Columbia, in the line of rugged peaks meandering from Nicolai and Wickiup Mountains in northeastern Clatsop County to Neakahnie Mountain and Angora Peak in northwestern Tillamook County.) Over the next 15 million years, tectonic forces have pushed lava flow rocks up while streams have cut down, carving jagged high peaks, over 3000 feet high, some with 2000 foot cliffs, others with pillars and columns of ridgeback rock. Even longtime locals seem shocked when they have the chance to see the ruggedness of these high mountain rock formations, usually concealed by trees, lower peaks, haze, and distance.

The flora of these peaks is distinctive. Bear with me: as weather is generally colder as one goes north, it is also colder as one goes skyward. Organisms on high mountains often resemble those closer to the poles. During climate changes (particularly when the climate grows warmer) plants and animals can persist by moving up or down the sides of mountains, while they become extinct in the valleys below, crowded out by organisms more suited to the new conditions. Isolated mountains become "islands" of distinctive plants and animals, holdovers from earlier times, altered somewhat by prolonged genetic isolation. Since the most recent Ice Age our own local peaks have become impressive biotic islands. They contain plants and animals which are rare or absent this far south, or which can only be found in the Cascade and Olympic Mountain alpine highlands, hundreds of miles away. Wet coastal forests of spruce and hemlock give way to alpine forests on our local peaks, containing patches of the shiny green, crisply symmetrical Pacific silver fir (*Abies amabilis*), the squat and contorted Sitka alder (*Alnus sinuata*), and an occasional remnant patch of Noble fir (*Abies procera*). Tundra-like grassy slopes and rocky peak tops contain a profusion of rare plants, such as isolated varieties of *Lewisia*, with white flowers marked with pink petal stripes, or rare *Penstemons* with showy snapdragon-like flowers of pink, purple, and white. Owing to longtime genetic isolation, there are species and varieties of wildflowers here - including a bittercress (*Cardamine patersonii*) and a species of Indian Paintbrush (*Castilleja* spp.) - which are found nowhere else on earth. The list of distinctive plants goes on and on.

These visually prominent peaks became focal points of native myth and life. Thunderbird sat atop Saddle Mountain when he created lightning, the Clatsop Chinooks said. In his massive talons, Thunderbird would carry whales to the top of this mountain pillar and devour them on the spot. (Recapitulating mythological events, helicopters have recently carried massive Oregon State Parks trash dumpsters to the top of this mountain pillar; they house tools used in the repair of trails overrun and eroded by the professed nature enthusiasts of greater Portland.) Young people would go to the high peaks to find their spirit power, being careful to avoid the sasquatch-like beings which dwell in the remote backcountry. The Tillamooks would scale the sides of Onion Peak and its adjoining slopes to obtain the onions for which it was named. The nodding onion (*Allium cernuum*), with its showy, dangling puffs of pink flowerets, fills the films of soil that form in rock face crevices, coloring slopes which look bare from far below - they taste like domesticated green onions (and I find they thrive under cultivation too). Native hunters would

startle and charge elk herds, buffalo-like, over cliff faces, tumbling - snap, crackle, pop - to be butchered by hunters below. These peoples knew those spots on the mountain where the snow melted slow, in protected, shady pockets - without streams on these bare, high mountain rocks, snow was an invaluable water source on high elevation treks. And, while there, they saw places they had never been. Mt. Rainier, Mt. St. Helens, Mt. Hood, Mt. Jefferson, and many other, distant landmarks can all be seen from these peaks on clear days. (The view is particularly good on the coldest, most crisp winter days, when there is little evaporation or transpiration. Watch your footing - the ground can be steep and icy.)

While pockets of old growth persist, most of the high mountain forests around Cannon Beach were logged mid-century. The material wealth these mountain forests produced is long gone, spent on living expenses of times long gone, and sundry landfill widgets. On such steep and unstable terrain, logging has left a landscape with the look and charm of a bombing range: landslides and gullies still streak downslope, muddying Ecola Creek headwaters, forming awesome logjams and silt bars downstream. In places, thin mountain soils eroded from beneath logged forests, leaving fields of grey stumps with exposed root systems scrawled across bare rock faces. Might we still term these high mountain forests 'renewable resources' if reforestation requires not years or decades, but centuries or millennia? (Willamette Industries, much to their credit, has turned their tentative attention to environmental questions on lands - such as our local forests - which were purchased from other logging companies, and they now pursue a program to stabilize the soils of their highland holdings.) Remnant old growth trees stand in places too isolated by cliffs to be logged. Particularly on Sugarloaf Mountain, massive old growth trees - accessible enough to be reached on foot, chainsaws in hand, but not so accessible as to be removed from the site - were cut and left to rot on the ground.

The Nature Conservancy holds a long-term lease on a small parcel on the top of Onion Peak, and the State of Oregon controls Saddle Mountain and a smattering of small highland parcels - most of our local alpine lands, however, are owned by private timber companies. Fearing legal liabilities, most companies have closed their roads. It is a mighty hike from sea level highways to high peak tops. In the warmer days of 1998, if I can muster the ambition, I will return to the high mountains. For now, in the January chill, I will remember: sitting, eating lunch with my cousin on a cliff-edge stump the diameter of my kitchen table, where no new trees grew to interrupt the view; seeing elk grazing on slopes so steep that you cannot imagine how they stay standing; trekking through the high country during a hunting season snowstorm, and having my species repeatedly determined through the scope of a rifle; watching the leading, dark grey edge of a rainstorm crash over Angora Peak in the last sunny moments of the afternoon, like the world's biggest ocean wave, causing the rain to fall straight up as fierce winds rushed up the south-facing cliff face on which I stood; sitting atop a high cliff face, looking at a hovering raven in the eye, listening to the eerie metallic hum that ravens' feathers make in the stiff mountain updraft.

For more information on things botanical in the mountains lining the northern Oregon coast, contact the North Coast Chapter of the Native Plant Society of Oregon at P.O. Box 201 Cannon Beach Or. 97110.

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I want to consider two things this month as the old year closes: trees and personal responsibility. The Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) has posited a proposal request with the City of Cannon Beach to remove a virtual forest of trees abutting the portion of Highway 101 that passes through the eastern limits of our city. ODOT apparently feels mildly obligated to acknowledge our city's concern regarding wanton tree removal. The state agency's recent fit of tree carnage on Highway 26 and the public outcry may have played some small part in their token concession to our local tree policy. In the sad little document for removal that a "Mr. Jerry Leavitt, for ODOT" presented to the City of Cannon Beach, he comments that "It is my opinion that ODOT does not need City approval for this request since we are responsible for motorist safety on State Hwy. 101." ODOT gives as its reason for removing several hundred trees, the reduction of "potential for icy conditions on roadway and tree or branches falling on roadway in storm conditions." It is my strong belief that if ODOT were genuinely concerned with public safety on the highway adjacent to Cannon Beach, it would reduce the speed limit at the north entrance of town, a proposal consistently rejected by that state agency, despite evidence that excessive speed kills and injures motorists, not fallen tree limbs.

If you are a resident of Cannon Beach, a citizen of this state, or a visitor to our area, please visit the stretch of highway between mileposts 27 and 32 and see the trees marked for removal. Trees are tagged with red flags or marked with red paint. If your property abuts the highway, removal of these trees will increase road noise and disturbance. If you drive this stretch of highway, the elimination of these trees will significantly diminish your aesthetic pleasure in travelling through a natural green belt. Even Willamette Industries has made some concessions to aesthetics in their local cutting plans. Our state's agencies have developed increasing deafness in the past two decades.

"Why do people hate trees?", my friend Vi Thompson frequently asks me. I'm unable to answer her, but it seems true.

"What would you do if you had only one day left to live?", she sometimes asks. "Plant a tree, of course!" she tells me.

Cannon Beach has been designated "Tree City, U.S.A." We need to live up to our title or relinquish the claim.

The State of Oregon has been singularly remiss in husbanding its tree resources. The cavalier butchery of trees in Ecola State Park last winter was a public disgrace and exemplifies the on-going process in the degradation of natural values in that state treasure. If past history can be trusted, the state will hire a private logging contractor to remove trees. Wood and pulp prices make trees a valuable commodity. Deals are cut. How much revenue did past logging operations realize from the cutting done in Ecola State Park, in Oswald West State Park, on Neakahnie Mountain, along Highway 26 west of Wolf Creek Wayside? The state, and not private concerns, may log Highway 101. Time will tell. If the cutting is done, it will be ugly and unnecessary, that much is certain.

If you are concerned, I urge you to exercise your responsibilities and rights as constituents and citizens and express your concern. In the current matter, correspondence should be addressed to the City of Cannon Beach, Attn: Barbara McClure, P.O. Box 368, Cannon Beach, Or. 97110 or call Cannon Beach City Hall at 503-436-2045.

I would like now to consider one of my pet grumbles, personal responsibility. In the late part of the twentieth century here in America, people seem keen on placing the responsibility for their actions on someone else, and the ramifications for all of us are nothing short of astounding. If someone trips on a walkway, he sues. If a drunken driver hurtles across a highway and is killed, his family sues a tavern owner. If an obese woman falls over a cliff in a state park, she sues. Life is not, nor has it ever been, easy. As Job discovers in the Bible, "Man that is born of woman is of few days, and full of trouble." Attorneys have grown fat on liability. When are we going to take responsibility for our own actions? The state asks to remove trees adjacent to a state highway because they pose a hazard. Do we then remove all trees that might pose a potential hazard? Rocks occasionally roll down hillsides onto roadways. Do we then remove all the rocks and steep grades next to highways? A wandering cougar disturbs shoppers in a mall in Vancouver. Police remove the offending animal. Herds of elk graze on agricultural land. Do we kill them to placate an irritated farmer?

The natural world harbors pitfalls, mire, thorns, and danger. To leave the womb means birth unto danger. We cannot construct a Disneyland or highways that pass through the Big Rock Candy Mountain. We had better listen to the natural world, not bulldoze it into submission. Life is not easy. Gird up your loins.



Every small, positive change we make in ourselves repays us in confidence in the future.
Alice Walker