

Choking on 5

Eugene resists adopting key land use plan.



This week I remembered how, as a child, I had tried to "stay within the lines" when I colored with crayons. I was particularly proud of myself one afternoon: I was supposed to be taking a nap, but instead, I was coloring in a drawing of a monkey, on the sly. (My childhood rebellions were not spectacular.) Even though the room's shades had been pulled down to dim the room, I was staying within the lines. However, in post-"nap" bright light, I found to my horror that I had colored the monkey purple, instead of brown.

That memory returned last week as I was coloring within lines traced from three maps of Eugene – one 25 years old; the second 11 years old; the third 2003. The first map was fragile: It had been painstakingly hand-drawn in color on parchment. It was Eugene's first survey of its areas that still contained remnants of native plant communities, such as oak savannah, cedar stands, or wetland prairie; and still could support native salmon, butterflies, frogs, or other Oregon originals.

I traced these lines onto mylar placed over the 2003 map of such sites. Then I copied lines of such sites that been considered for conservation practices under Oregon's "Goal 5" in 1992.

Goal 5 requires each Oregon city and county to identify areas of natural heritage within its boundaries, and to develop measures that will insure their continuance. Other goals include regularly designating 20 years' worth of land on which to construct new houses and industrial facilities. Eugene has readily complied with these goals. We have choked, however, on meeting Goal 5: It means sharing with other species.

Back at the map, I colored red the natural areas that were lost in Eugene between 1978 and 1992 to human commerce and developments; and orange the areas that were lost between 1992 and 2003. There was lots of coloring to do, because during Eugene's 25-year process of not deciding on any form of care for most of the identified sites, they have shrunk to 9 percent of Eugene. I longed for the simpler horror of coloring a monkey purple.

Later in the week, on another matter of losing ground, I wrote e-mails to each Oregon senator. I was asking them to oppose HB 3013, a gravel mining industry bill that would grease the skids for more destruction of our best, remaining farm soil for gravel. The average piece of food on a U.S. plate travels 1,200 miles. Cannibalizing the last of our local, sediment-rich farm soil for river-side gravel to build more roads seems particularly insane, given that more than enough gravel can be gotten from plentiful upland basalt sites.

Then there was the matter of writing comments to Lane Council of Governments, opposing some of their proposed amendments to the Metro Plan. For instance, one would drop current language about caring for multiple forest values (e.g., wildlife habitat, clean water, open space) for those forests immediately outside Eugene's urban growth boundary. The proposed new language would state that the highest value of these boundary forests is "harvest" – i.e., logging. Another would drop all time requirements for considering conservation practices on sites identified within Eugene or Springfield as containing wildlife habitat.

Sometimes despair waits close by for me: We humans seem so unwilling to be plain citizens, rather than relentless liquidators, of Earth's communities.

But then this morning, I walked on the newly completed portion of the Amazon bike trail that passes through the West Eugene Wetlands. The wetlands, still free of a roaring, elevated, five-lane West Eugene Highway, spread out in the distance for what is surely the most open, expansive landscape in all of Eugene. Red-winged blackbirds were singing; turkey vultures were strutting around an inviting breakfast of smelly, dead fish; and native flowers and grasses were blooming in bands, each species thriving in a differently colored level above receded wetlands water.

How can I despair when a red-winged blackbird sings, all purpose and will, in lands that others before me conserved for the benefit of all? I can only be grateful that there are birds and citizens who know that much depends on standing up publicly for more than one's own "rights" to destroy.

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