



Dee Tvedt admires an ancient western red cedar

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Welcome to the Jungle

A new wilderness bill would protect an ancient forest

BY JESSICA HIRST

The trees in the Oregon Coast Range's Devil's Staircase area have never been logged. Many grow irregularly, shaped by time and circumstance. They straddle boulders seductively, intertwine like Siamese twins, and display giant warty burls. Others

have impossibly large trunks, towering above us like bark skyscrapers.

I am bushwhacking through the forest's dense understory, trying to keep up with local hikers Dave and Dee Tvedt. All morning, we have been tearing through prickly

salmonberry thickets, hefting ourselves over enormous downed logs, and sidestepping across steep, crumbling ridges. I consider myself in pretty good shape, but my leg muscles are beginning to burn. To do this sort of thing for days on end, I think, Lewis and Clark must have had quads of steel.

For more than 100 years, Oregon's Coast Range has been farmed for timber, transformed from a vast, misty rainforest to a patchwork of clearcuts and homogenous tree plantations. Only several stretches of native rainforest still exist here, and the 30,000-acre Devil's Staircase area is by far the largest. It is rarely traveled, and so rugged that some parts of it cannot be mapped, except from the air.

Located between the Smith and Umpqua rivers, the area is jointly owned by the BLM and the Siuslaw National Forest. The old-growth forest is home to endangered species like the Northern spotted owl and the marbled murrelet (a Pacific seabird), as well as salmon, elk, black bear, mountain lion, otter and mink. Enclosed deep within the forest's vine maple and sword ferns is a multitiered waterfall, which lends its name to the area. For years, the hidden waterfall, the Devil's Staircase, existed only as rumor until it was finally seen in the 1980s.

Despite the untouched, timeless quality of this forest, it is not protected from logging. For the past two years, the Tvedts have led groups into the Devil's Staircase area as part of an effort to build support for preserving the forest permanently as wilderness. Now, after more than 20 years of legal battles and a recent campaign by local groups like Cascadia Wildlands and Oregon Wild, it looks like these efforts might be about to pay off.

On June 15, U.S. Rep. Peter Defazio and Sen. Ron Wyden introduced a bill in Congress that would permanently designate the area as wilderness. The bill would also protect 14.4 miles of Wassen and Franklin creeks, which run through the area. Two companion bills would also protect the Oregon Caves National Monument and the Lower Rogue river. Because the Devil's Staircase bill doesn't take timber out of production, supporters say that it has a good chance of passing.

Today, we are heading not to the waterfall itself, but into an area that contains some of the oldest trees in the forest. Most of the trees in the Devil's Staircase area are about 150 years old, the last time a wildfire — rare in these parts — swept through. But not all trees burned in that fire. Some of the most majestic ones were spared, and Dave estimates that a few might be as old as 600 years.

Hit by a Whopper

Only a few years ago, the fate of the Devil's Staircase area was up in the air. In 2007, the BLM released the first draft of the Western Oregon Plan Revisions (WOPR, pronounced "whopper"). By removing BLM forests from the scientific framework of the Northwest Forest Plan, the WOPR opens up more than 74,000 acres of old-growth and streamside forest in western Oregon to clearcut logging. Under the first draft of the WOPR, the BLM portion of the Devil's Staircase area would have been sold to timber companies.

The BLM created the WOPR in response to an out-of-court settlement agreement between the Bush administration and the timber industry. In the early 2000s, the timber industry filed a lawsuit against Clinton's Northwest Forest Plan, which reduces timber yields in National Forests. With the industry suit on appeal, the Bush administration chose

to settle out of court. In the settlement, the administration agreed to go along with the terms of the timber industry.

But environmental groups contend that the WOPR is a handout to the timber industry. "It was a sweetheart deal," says Andy Stahl, executive director of the Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics (FSEEE).

In response to public opposition, the BLM made some changes to the first draft of the WOPR, including removing any risk of logging from the Devil's Staircase area. The future of the WOPR is uncertain, due to a number of lawsuits filed by environmental groups. But until the outcome is settled, other old-growth forests in western Oregon will be at risk. Currently, the BLM has its eye on 400 acres of older forest in the Fall Creek area southeast of Eugene.

Why this Wilderness?

In 1964 Congress passed the Wilderness Act, which established a process for permanently protecting land from development, roads and resource extraction. The Wilderness Act more poetically than scientifically defines wilderness:

"A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."

It goes on to further define wilderness as "area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence."

Once an area has been designated as wilderness, it has received the country's highest level of protection. Logging and oil and gas drilling are prohibited. The "wilderness character of the area" is preserved through watershed, habitat and endangered species protection. Ecosystems are left to change over time, unaltered as much as possible by human influence. The wording of the Wilderness Act also encourages non-motorized recreational activities in wilderness areas, though in some areas motorboats and aircraft have been grandfathered in.

Because forests — especially old-growth forests — provide valuable timber revenue, it's often difficult to get them protected as wilderness. However, once that designation is in place, it's difficult to undo. Once Congress votes to protect an area as wilderness, only another act of Congress can reverse that decision. The chances of this happening are slim.

Even if the WOPR is thrown out, a future political climate that doesn't favor preserving old growth could theoretically put the Devil's Staircase area at risk once again. But if the area is designated as wilderness, it will enjoy permanent and unfaltering protection from chainsaws.

The area was initially included in a 1984 wilderness bill, but was stripped off at the last moment during negotiations in Congress.

Currently, only 4 percent of Oregon's land is designated as wilderness, compared to 11 percent in Washington, 8 percent in Idaho, and 15 percent in California. Congress passes Oregon wilderness bills about every five to 10 years, says Chandra LeGue of Oregon Wild. "It doesn't happen that often," she says.

While many Oregon forests deserve wilderness protection, the Devil's Staircase area is special for several reasons, says Kate Ritley, executive director of Cascadia Wildlands.

Not only is the area one of the wildest places left in Oregon, it provides crucial