

Mount St. Helens survivor describes making it out alive

By **JADE MCDOWELL**
East Oregonian

As millions of people recover from hurricanes, earthquakes and other natural disasters, Venus Dergan has a good idea of what they are going through.

Dergan is a survivor herself — on May 8, 1980 she was swept more than a mile downstream by a mudslide caused by the eruption of Mount St. Helens. She is featured in the first installment of a new Smithsonian Channel series called “Make it out Alive” detailing survival stories of people caught in natural and man-made disasters.

Dergan said it has been “kind of an emotional rollercoaster” watching news coverage of recent hurricanes. It takes her back to 1980, when she and her then-boyfriend Roald Reitan decided to go camping along the south fork of the Toutle River. Dergan was 20 and Reitan was 19.

In hindsight, everyone always asks why they were camping so close to an active volcano, but the “red zone” the government had set up only stretched five miles. They were more than 30 miles away from the mountain.

“We couldn’t even see it,” Dergan said.

She and Reitan could tell something was wrong, however, when they woke up Sunday morning to the distant sound of evacuation sirens in the tiny town of Toutle, and the much closer sound of the river rising up to meet their tent. They looked outside to see an entire train trestle moving slowly toward them, pushed by a massive

wall of mud building up behind it.

“We thought, ‘We’d better get out of here,’” Dergan said.

They hopped out of the tent barefoot, pulled it up by its stakes, threw the whole mess in the back of the pickup truck and jumped in.

The truck wouldn’t start.

There was no time to fix it. Water started flooding into the cab almost immediately, and Dergan and Reitan scrambled back out and onto the roof of the cab, hoping against hope that the truck would be tall enough to save them. Instead, they were thrown from their perch as the roiling mudslide slammed into them, tumbling the truck in with the trees and other wreckage being carried downstream.

“I was struggling to keep my head above the mud and debris and he was on top, screaming at me to hold on,” Dergan said. “I couldn’t see him but he grabbed my hand and pulled me up on a log.”

The couple were swept more than a mile before they were able to work their way out of the mudstream and onto solid land. Dergan had a broken wrist, injured leg and severe lacerations, and Reitan was injured too. They limped together through the woods until they came to a bridge blocked by law enforcement and department of transportation workers. They shouted up for help and then waited for a helicopter to airlift them up and out of the disaster zone.

Dergan’s physical injuries healed — slowly, with the help of surgeries and physical therapy and recuperation at her parents’ house. But the mental effects have lingered.



Contributed by Smithsonian Channel
Venus Dergan talks about her experience surviving the eruption of Mount St. Helens during a new Smithsonian Channel show called “Make it out Alive.”

Those effects aren’t all bad. Dergan said she does not take her life for granted, and wakes up each day grateful she wasn’t one of the 58 people who did lose their lives to the volcano.

“It changes your life,” she said. “When you’re 20 you think you’re immortal, but I got my mortality slapped in my face that day.”

She will forever be grateful to Reitan, whom she credits with saving her life. She said she has a

much greater respect for the power of nature after seeing the way it snapped man-made structures like twigs that day.

Dergan, who still lives in her hometown of Tacoma, said her friends and family helped greatly with her recovery in the aftermath of the volcano. Some helped take care of things for her while she was laid up, while others provided a shoulder to cry on when needed.

She said if people have loved

“I was struggling to keep my head above the mud and debris.”

— **Venus Dergan,**
Survivor of Mount St. Helens eruption

ones who have survived a natural disaster or other death-defying experience it’s important to realize that they might feel fine one day but be struggling the next. Or they may say they’re fine but really need some reassurance.

“Don’t hold anything back,” she said. “Let them know you’re glad they’re there and that you’re there if they need anything. At times they will need someone to lean on as they have a reflective moment or a flashback.”

Talking with other survivors helps too, she said. People affected by disasters this year can find strength in each other and in those who have gone through similar experiences in years past.

“Survivors are strong people,” she said. “The message I would give survivors is this will pass and they will get through it and will be stronger because of it. Life goes on. It may change directions a little but it will go on.”

Dergan’s interview and other Mount St. Helens survivors’ stories will air on the series premiere of “Make it out Alive” on Sunday, Oct. 15 at 9 p.m. on the Smithsonian Channel.

Snake River steelhead returns better than expected

Rebound has agencies considering harvest, but others worry runs too fragile

By **ERIC BARKER**
of the (Lewiston, Id.) Tribune

HELLER BAR — Adam Hocking stands on the bow of his 24-foot jet sled and shakes his head.

His clients had a good day fishing for steelhead on the Snake River, but catch-and-release regulations prevented the outfitter from sending them home with any fish.

“We released 13 steelhead, all but two of them were hatchery fish,” he said. “It’s a bummer.”

About 65 miles away, Mike “Poppy” Cummins and Tracy Allen are also bummed. Cummins, owner of the Red Shed Fly Shop at Peck, and Allen, a fly fishing guide on the Clearwater River, are worried about the state of the steelhead run and fear Idaho and Washington will open a harvest season on the sea-run rainbow trout. The two men say the run, particularly the wild B-run fish protected by the Endangered Species Act, can’t withstand the number of anglers a harvest season will attract.

“We were told they were going to keep it catch-and-release to the end of the year and then they change their mind midstream,” Cummins said. “I just think the run is so depressed they don’t need to harvest any fish. There was a lot of people who said we should close the season altogether.”

There is no doubt steelhead numbers are down. They were so low in mid-August that the Idaho Department of Fish and Game pre-emptively closed catch-and-keep seasons, but allowed anglers to fish for steelhead as long as they released them unharmed.

At the time, only about 3,300 Idaho-bound hatchery A-run steelhead had been counted passing Bonneville Dam on the Columbia River. With the run historically at its midway point there, biologists calculated as few as 6,600 might return to Idaho — by far the lowest ever recorded.

Within days of the closure, the steelhead run gained steam. More than six weeks later, in excess of 35,000 steelhead have been counted climbing the fish ladder at Lower Granite Dam on their way to Idaho, Washington and Oregon. Joe DuPont, regional fisheries manager for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game at Lewiston, said he expects about 18,000 hatchery A-run steelhead and about 7,400 hatchery B-run steelhead to return to Idaho rivers. The forecast also calls for about 15,000 wild fish, made up of about 13,200 wild A run and 1,800 wild B run.

Fishery managers: catch-and-keep won’t harm hatchery production

If the hatchery forecast holds, it will amount to a tripling of the run expectations calculated in the dark days of August. While it is still far below the 10-year average and ranks among some of the poorest runs in the last 25 years, DuPont and other fisheries managers in the region say catch-and-keep fishing can be allowed without jeopardizing hatchery production or threatening protected wild fish.

“There are a fair number of fish out there to be harvested,” he said.

Idaho hatcheries need about 2,700 A-run steelhead for spawning and 1,800 B-run fish. That leaves a harvestable surplus of roughly 15,000 A-run



Devin Olsen caught this steelhead on the Imnaha River.

steelhead and about 5,600 B-run fish, including 3,282 that are returning after only one year in the ocean.

Organized effort opposes opening harvest season

The proposal, combined with downturns in steelhead runs over the past two years, is inflaming long-simmering tensions between different fishing groups. Many fly anglers rarely if ever keep steelhead and some are even opposed to the hatchery programs that produce steelhead that compete with wild fish. When news of the harvest proposal surfaced Sept. 29, they quickly organized and let Idaho Fish and Game Commissioner Dan Blanco of Moscow know of their opposition.

By happenstance, Blanco and some other former commissioners attended a gathering of steelhead fly fishermen hosted by Cummins the next day. There, he was presented a petition with more than 50 signatures advocating against a harvest season.

Blanco was impressed and on Monday, he convinced his fellow commissioners to put off a decision on the harvest proposal for two weeks. Doing so would give biologists more time to monitor the run and give anglers a chance to comment on the proposal. Since then he has heard from anglers both for and against opening harvest but said those who want to keep catch-and-release rules have out numbered those who want to harvest fish.

People like outfitter Hocking expected the proposal to pass easily and were caught off guard when it did not. He still has clients but his bookings are way off. If a harvest season opens, he said his phone will start ringing.

“You would think it would take more signatures to shut down a fishery,” he said. “It’s so frustrating why such a minority can shutdown a fishery.”

Washington fisheries officials also expected Idaho’s proposal to pass and had pledged to match its rules designed to protect B-run fish. After the delayed vote, Washington is considering moving forward with a catch-and-keep season and may do so early this week.

“We are appreciative of where Idaho is but we don’t think there is a conservation reason to hold off,” said Chris Donley, manager for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife at Spokane.

Some depend on economic benefit

Steelhead fishing is woven in the fabric of life for many people who live near or along the Snake River and its tributaries. It’s a cherished pastime for tens of thousands and an important driver of local economies.

For some of the smaller towns in the region like Riggins it’s an economic underpinning. Kerry Brennan is a steelhead guide there who also operates a small tackle shop. He said uncertainty over the season is having a “big-time” effect on the economy.

He’d like to see the decision on a harvest season decided river by river.

“There is a lot more people out there than just fly fishermen on the Clearwater and it’s a separate fishery. Those fish that go up the Clearwater are not the fish we are fishing on in the Little Salmon and Lower Salmon.”

Outfitter: Support of catch-and-release dependent on all states agreeing

Some outfitters on the Clearwater — Jeff Jarrett of Jarrett’s Guide Service and Evelyn Kaide — say they could support catch-and-release rules even if it means a downturn in business. But Kaide doesn’t want Idaho to go it alone.

“If we can get all the states to agree, that is OK,” she said of sticking with catch-and-release rules. “We don’t like to sit up here and not be able to fish (when Washington anglers are). That is not fair.”

Cummins and Allen also count on steelhead to pay the bills. That is why they say it’s so import to be conservative in the face of such a small run. While DuPont calculates a return of 1,800 wild B-run fish, another forecast calls for as few as 1,200.

Allen said none of his clients want to keep fish. Even so, he’s lost 18 fishing trips this fall. He chalks that up to news about how low the run is. He thinks anglers will adjust to catch-and-release rules and that outfitters can help them do it.

“You got to change what you are selling,” he said.

They also want to ensure the wild fish they cherish will survive well into the future. If a season is approved, they said bait shouldn’t be allowed and the state should require anglers to leave wild fish in the water.

Idaho differs from Washington and Oregon in that it allows anglers to lift wild fish out of the water so people can take pictures before releasing them. DuPont said he is confident that fishing won’t have a negative effect on wild fish and rules that allow bait and out-of-water picture taking can be retained.

Blanco said despite his push to delay he doesn’t know how he will vote on Friday when the commission reconvenes to take action on the proposal.

“No decision has been made. My mind is open. I’m not captive to any particular group.”

BRIEFLY

Sturgeon retention opened below Bonneville for first time in years

East Oregonian

For the first time since 2013, anglers will have the chance to keep sturgeon on the Columbia River below Bonneville Dam.

Oregon and Washington fishery managers have approved two days for sturgeon retention — Saturday, Oct. 21 and Thursday, Oct. 26. The open area is the main stem of the Columbia River from the Wauna power lines, 40 miles from the river mouth, upstream to the fishing boundary near Bonneville Dam.

Harvest is limited to 1,245 fish, with a legal retention size of 44-50 inches from snout to the fork of the tail. The bag limit is one legal-size sturgeon per day, and no more than two for the year. If anglers have already retained two white sturgeon in 2017, they may not retain any more during these days.

By regulation, all sturgeon fishing is restricted to one single point, barbless hook.

Sturgeon retention was closed between 2014-2016 on the lower Columbia and Willamette rivers due to concerns about abundance, though the number of legal-size fish has improved since then, according to the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife. However, the Willamette River from the falls to the river mouth remains closed to sturgeon retention, including Multnomah Channel. The Gilbert River also remains closed to all fishing.

Collared wolf OR-33 shot dead northwest of Klamath Falls

MEDFORD (AP) — A collared gray wolf known as OR-33 was illegally killed in southern Oregon, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is asking the public to help solve the crime.

The agency announced the death Wednesday, saying DNA from a heavily decomposed carcass found this spring was matched to DNA from when OR-33 was collared by wildlife biologists two years ago.

The carcass was found northwest of Klamath Falls on the Fremont-Winema National Forest.

The *Mail Tribune* reports the wolf had been blamed for a three-day livestock killing spree east of Ashland in June 2016. OR-33 was blamed for killing two goats, one sheep and injuring a third sheep.

“We just recently confirmed it was a wolf, and it was that wolf,” Fish and Wildlife spokesman Brent Lawrence said Wednesday. “We had to know if it was a wolf and a wild wolf, not a captive wolf or a hybrid, before we opened our investigation.”

The necropsy determined it died from gunshot wounds, but Lawrence declined to be more specific because the case remains unsolved.

It is a violation of the federal Endangered Species Act to kill a gray wolf, which is listed as endangered in the western two-thirds of Oregon.

The shooting is also a violation of Oregon wildlife laws. Oregon State Police and the federal service are working together on the investigation, and investigators have offered a \$5,000 reward for information leading to a conviction.

OR-33, a cousin of the famous wolf OR-7, dispersed from northeastern Oregon’s Imnaha Pack in 2015, venturing through the Columbia Basin and southern Blue Mountains before heading south and popping up in Klamath and Jackson counties in February 2016.

House GOP moves to revamp law on national monuments

WASHINGTON (AP) — House Republicans are moving to restrict the president’s ability to protect millions of acres of federal land considered historic, geographically significant or culturally important.

Rep. Rob Bishop, R-Utah, said presidents of both parties have misused the 1906 Antiquities Act to create oversized monuments that hinder energy development, grazing and other uses. Bishop introduced a bill that would prevent presidents from designating monuments larger than 85,000 acres and grant veto power to states and local officials for monuments larger than 10,000.

The GOP-controlled resources panel approved the bill Wednesday, 23-17, sending it to the House floor. The bill comes as Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke has recommended that four large national monuments in the West be reduced in size.