

# Taking the next right steps in the new year



LINDSAY MURDOCK

FROM SUNUP TO SUNDOWN

Light and warmth filtered through the trees as the road wound its way through the winter wonderland. Occasional patches of ice had turned into groomed snow as my sister and I headed west, seeking opportunities to breathe in fresh air and reflect on the year we had proven could be lived well, regardless of circumstances.

We hadn't been together for months, each navigating our respective careers as a teacher and a nurse, staying as healthy as possible through the ups and downs of the worldwide pandemic, living a year that I'm certain neither of us, nor the rest of the world, truly saw coming. A year filled with death and life, fires and floods, gains as well as losses. It was month after month of opportunities to watch the world we live in come undone, but at the same time, be put back together again. Essentially, it was a year filled with time and space that begged for solace.

The road narrowed, the snow deepened, and a path found alongside crystal clear water seemed to call out our names with each ripple and splash. Within minutes, we were parked alongside a road, strapping on snow-

shoes, and grabbing for sunglasses and stocking caps. My sister led the way as we crossed the tapered, yet far from precarious, bridge. My eyes moved from the left to the right, as well as up and down, finding everything about this winter trek strikingly impressive. It was a paradise of sorts. Snow instead of sand, pines instead of palms, and boots instead of sandals. The beauty of the glittering snow was breathtaking, sunlight bouncing in every direction, making way for our souls to draw in, and exhale out.

About 1 mile in, we stopped to catch our breath, and readjust our boots. The trail had been packed down by hikers who had gone before us, and the snowshoes were not necessary. We laughed out loud, poking fun about the half hour we had spent waiting at the ski shop for the shoes we were now carrying instead of wearing. Just like most everything in 2020, our best-laid plans had changed direction right in front of us, and the best option, the only option, was to keep pressing forward. Not five minutes had passed, and again, we stopped, searching the pack we'd carried in for a bandaid or gauze. The boots that hadn't been worn in months were now rubbing their way through my sister's heels, making each step tender and raw.

I looked forward, and then back down the trail, scanning for a marker to let us know how far we'd come, or even how far we still had to go, as Kirsten continued rummaging

through the pack, looking for anything that would ease the pain. Nothing. Chapstick, granola bars, and bottles of water littered the ground, along with an extra pair of gloves, and two pairs of snow pants that we hadn't needed either. We had thought of almost everything before we left, and the months we had just lived seemed to be playing out right in front of us yet again — prepared for so much, but not really prepared at all.

"Should we switch boots?" I quietly asked, hoping for a way to continue to the falls that we had every good intention of reaching.

"It's worth a try," she replied, as I reached down to untie the laces.

Instant relief spread across her face as she slipped on the boots that had carried me all afternoon. With our snowshoes in hand and new boots on our feet, we continued on, talking about the things we had experienced over the past several months. The top five things we'd read, listened to, watched, and made provoked reflection more so than goals as we talked about our hopes and dreams for the year to come. There'd been games we'd played, food we'd cooked, projects we'd tackled, and shows we'd watched with our families that had allowed us to connect in ways we didn't know were even possible, and the intentionality of slowing down, rather than speeding up had allowed both of us to experience the solace we knew we needed all along. Had it been detrimental to find new ways

to live? No.

Was it painful to continue pressing on when it might have been easier to quit? Absolutely.

Had we been on both the giving and receiving end of solace in the form of cheer, comfort, and even peace? Certainly.

In the end, did the good outweigh the bad? Without a doubt.

Pressing toward the gentle roar of the cascading water, our feet continued to carry us as we shared the highs and lows of our days. Single steps moving in a forward direction was all 2020 had asked of us, and now, at the top of the falls, we stood in awe of one of the most glorious sights on that beautiful December day, high above everything that seemed to matter.

A new year is here, and with that, opportunities to take the next right steps — wherever and whatever they may look like — knowing that the future always comes. It may not look like the future we were expecting, but I believe that if 2020 taught us anything, it's that one step at a time is all we have to take.

I also know that when given the opportunity to walk a mile in another person's shoes, one should take it. It may just save both of you.

*Lindsay Murdock lives and teaches in Echo.*

## Cattle as fire retardant works best in small, controlled plots



GEORGE WUERTHNER

OTHER VIEWS

When I worked for the BLM, us "ologists" (hydrologist, ecologists, biologists, archaeologists, geologists and botanists) used to refer to range conservationists as range "cons" because they conned the public into believing many myths about livestock grazing.

It is essential to keep in mind that range cons have a financial conflict of interest. If there are no cows, there is no reason to have a range conservationist on the payroll.

One of the "cons" heard continuously from range conservationists and repeated by ranchers that grazing can help preclude large "mega" fires by "reducing" fuels. This is one of those many assertions that have a grain of truth, but is nevertheless misleading.

Whenever you read such pronouncements, be skeptical. Almost all the "evidence" for the value of grazing to reduce wildfires comes from government apologists with connections to the livestock industry.

Many of the studies purporting to demonstrate the influence of livestock

grazing on fire spread were done on small experimental plots of land. The transfer of these findings to the larger landscape scale is questionable.

In a widely cited Arizona study, the researchers had several small plots (several acres in size). They grazed some of the plots and kept others ungrazed as controls. They concluded (with modeling) that light utilization in treated sites, reduced fire rate of spread by more than 60% in grass communities and by more than 50% in grass/shrub communities.

A real-life problem their study ignores is that keeping cattle on the desired target area is exceedingly difficult. Typically, this is done by transporting cattle by truck to the target site, then herding or using moveable fences to keep cattle grazing focused.

All of this adds immensely to the cost of any livestock grazing operation. Most ranchers are simply not interested in spending that kind of money to get a bit of cheap forage.

But the real problem with this and many other studies that presume to show a livestock grazing-induced reduction in fire spread is they do not work under extreme fire weather.

The researchers in the Arizona study admit as much in their next to the last paragraph: "Although it is a promising tool for altering fire behavior, targeted grazing will be most effective in grass communities

under moderate weather conditions."

The weather factors are significant because nearly all massive wildfires burn under "extreme fire weather conditions." Under such conditions, targeted grazing, prescribed burning, thinning of forests, and fuel breaks fail to contain or stop fires. In attempting to reduce fuels, such prescriptions often lead to more fire-prone species like cheatgrass.

In an overview of various fuel reductions, Fire ecologists at the Missoula Fire Lab concluded that: "Extreme environmental conditions ... overwhelmed most fuel treatment effects. ... This included almost all treatment methods including prescribed burning and thinning. ... Suppression efforts had little benefit from fuel modifications."

Although they primarily examined forest management options, the same necessary conclusions apply to reducing fuels on rangelands.

Other evidence supporting grazing as a fire reduction strategy is simply anecdotal. Cattle graze a strip of cheatgrass. A fire arrives, and the fire slows or is easily suppressed by firefighters.

Without knowing the circumstances at the time of the fire, such as topography, vegetation, or weather conditions, one can't assume that grazing had anything to do with the fire's behavior.

Did the wind shift directions or sim-

ply stop? Was the fire even burning under "extreme conditions," which are the only times you have large fires — the very fires that cattle grazing advocates are suggesting grazing is effective in halting or slowing?

Typically, under extreme weather conditions, which always includes high winds, any wind-blown fire spews embers up to 1 mile or more beyond the burning front. Such a blaze will easily skip over a strip of grazed land, making such fuel breaks or targeted grazing ineffective.

Furthermore, the process of getting cattle to remove such a high percentage of cheatgrass or other vegetation results in collateral damage.

This includes soil compaction, which reduces water infiltration; social displacement of native herbivores like elk and deer, which avoid areas of active cattle grazing; water pollution of streams; destruction of riparian areas (the green line of vegetation influenced by water); and reduction in grass stubble needed as hiding cover by wildlife like sage grouse.

Finally, since one cannot predict where a fire would occur, so most of these treatments only provide the livestock impacts to our public lands, without any potential "benefit" of halting a blaze.

*George Wuerthner is an ecologist who has published many books on environmental and natural history topics.*

## Looking beyond the pinstripes



KEVIN FRAZIER

OTHER VIEWS

One of my favorite movies is "Catch Me If You Can." At one point, Tom Hanks, who plays FBI agent Carl Hanratty, encounters the target of his investigation, Frank Abagnale, portrayed by Leonardo DiCaprio. After Abagnale deceived Agent Hanratty by hiding some documents in his wallet, Hanratty asks why he should have known to look there.

Abagnale answers, "The same reason the Yankees always win. Nobody can keep their eyes off the pinstripes." To which Hanratty responds, "The Yankees win because they have Mickey Mantle."

For too long, people have been distracted by the political equivalent of pinstripes — partisanship and flashy policy ideas — to notice what's actually going on in state government. The headlines out of Salem are dominated by walkouts, stand-offs and stare downs. What often goes unreported are the actual gears of government that are increasingly grinding to a halt after decades of use.

That's why a recent story by Peter Wong of the Oregon Capital Bureau, "Employment Department computer project back on track," was so important. Wong dove into the details of what happens when actual governing is neglected.

The Oregon Employment Department "operates on a mainframe computer system that dates back to 1993," according to Wong. It also "relies on a programming language that goes back to 1959." That should strike you as problematic. Even more troubling, the federal government awarded the state funds to remedy this outdated and inadequate system back in 2009. The worrisome facts don't end there. The vendor that's likely to win the contract to upgrade the system — FAST Enterprises — has a record of installing inaccurate systems that have led to legal issues in other states.

As if this all weren't enough, this overdue upgrade is meant to improve the state's

ability to disperse employment benefits — which thousands of Oregonians are relying on during these tough times. The department is also considering incorporating new computer systems to run the paid family medical leave program that the Oregon Legislature recently approved.

Notably, this new program was heralded by many (and, rightfully so) as a big step in ensuring Oregonians have the support they need to thrive. But sadly, headlines about transformative policies are just another form of pinstripes — things that distract us from the far more pressing and important questions such as do we have the players in place to implement those big ideas?

Wong's dive into a computer system that's literally older than me shows that Oregon doesn't have Mickey Mantle; instead, we have Michael Jordan (baseball MJ, not basketball MJ). In another time and context, the state's computer systems were likely state of the art or at least not decades old, but that time has long since passed.

There's few political points to be scored by being the legislator focused on the state's programming language, but it's that kind of attention to detail that has to be prioritized. Big ideas are nice. Absent a government that's designed to function, though, those big ideas are bound to fail, waste money, and disappoint Oregonians that were counting on their promised support.

Sadly, the state's inadequate infrastructure isn't confined to the Employment Department. Steve Trout, who until recently played a major role in running Oregon's elections, outlined a dozen needed upgrades to the state's election systems, including security upgrades and efforts to improve the cybersecurity of the system.

This all goes to show that as exciting as it is to look at the pinstripes — to talk about partisan battles and big policy ideas, Oregon needs to think more about the systems and players responsible for realizing those ideas.

*Kevin Frazier was raised in Washington County, Oregon. He is pursuing a law degree at the University of California, Berkeley School of Law.*

## Removal of dams best for salmon



KURT MILLER

OTHER VIEWS

I'm incredibly honored to work as a hydropower advocate. My organization champions clean energy, works to fight climate change and campaigns for fair and equitable electricity access for communities across the Pacific Northwest. It's a mission we proudly embrace.

That said, I've learned some issues are incredibly complex. Perhaps the most frequent question I hear regards the effect of dams on salmon and the implications of struggling salmon populations for Indigenous peoples.

I've had many conversations with Native American tribal members, and I'm deeply moved by the central role salmon play in their respective religions, economies, cultures and matters of food security. My organization embraces the critical goal of restoring healthy salmon populations, and we continue to partner on efforts to achieve that goal.

As a result, when we advocate for hydropower, we encourage people to try to think differently if they equate being a hydropower advocate with being a salmon adversary.

A multitude of studies released this year prove you don't have to "pick a side" when it comes to hydropower and salmon. This research demonstrates that climate change — especially the effect of warming, acidifying oceans — is the greatest threat to salmon survival up and down the Pacific Coast of North America.

Scientists have found that pristine rivers without dams have seen very similar declines in survival compared to rivers with dams over the past 50 years. This finding points to the salmon's shared environment — the ocean — as the main culprit. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Fisheries even came to the shocking conclusion that Chinook salmon may only have 20 to 30 years left if ocean temperatures continue to warm at the current rate.

If these studies are correct, then hydropower is a critical salmon recovery tool. Hydropower represents 90% of our region's renewable energy, which makes it our strongest climate change-fighting resource.

Also, as recently acknowledged by the Union of Concerned Scientists, hydropower is especially valuable in its ability to help us add intermittent renewable energy to the grid. Hydroelectric dams act like giant, clean energy batteries that can store water, and then release it past turbines to produce electricity when needed.

That said, not all dams are created equal, which is why my organization only advocates for hydropower dams that provide meaningful societal and environmental benefits. A good example is the lower Snake River dams, which produce enough carbon-free electricity to power a city the size of Seattle.

These Eastern Washington dams have some of the most advanced fish passage systems in the world.

Based upon this organizational philosophy, we applaud the decisions that led to the removal of the Elwha River dams, Condit Dam, and the recent agreement to remove the Klamath River dams.

None of the aforementioned dams produced large amounts of electricity, and they were constructed without fish passage capabilities.

As our name indicates, Northwest RiverPartners stands ready to partner with organizations on solutions that help remove unproductive dams from service, especially if those removals can benefit salmon.

It is an approach that recognizes the value of productive hydroelectric resources to communities, to the environment, to salmon, and to the people who depend on them.

*Kurt Miller is the executive director of Northwest RiverPartners — a not-for-profit organization that advocates hydropower for a better Northwest. Miller joined NWRP in March 2019 and has made it a priority to find collaborative, science-driven solutions to energy and environmental challenges. He has spent almost 30 years in the Northwest energy and utilities industry.*