

## Musings on a Trip to Mt. Adams

*By Jurgen Hess, September 2021. August 25, 2015*, hot embers and ash falling on me. Covering cameras hanging from my neck, I keep backing away from the 200' tall flames at 2,000 degrees F roaring like a jet plane at take-off. Glad I had on fire retardant clothes. I was in the heart of the Cougar Creek Fire. Part of the media covering the drama—while trying not to get too hot.



Later that day I wanted to get to Bird Creek Meadows to see what had burned up. No way! Blocked by too many fire killed black trees on or adjacent to the road. My official fire officer guide turned us around concerned we might have gotten trapped or worse hit by dead trees.

**Fast** forward...since fall 2015 access to BCM has been generally denied, but now the Yakama Nation road is open for a short time. Thinking about the devastation I'd see, I cranked up my resolve last Friday, and spent the day on YN lands and at BCM. Here are my thoughts on what I saw and felt.

Driving on FS road 82 was like old times, not much had changed. But that roadside, while well thinned needs a prescribed underburn to reduce fuels.

Then at the FS/YN boundary it hit me. This was an area the 2008 Cold Springs Fire burned and then was reburned in the 2015 Cougar Creek Fire. As I viewed the trees planted in 2009 now 6-8' tall, I remembered the debate with YN forester Steve Andringa about how much salvage to do after the Cold Springs Fire. He won, they hit it pretty hard. A few more miles along I came to the heart of the Cougar Creek Fire. I was overwhelmed by the sea of silver dead trees that went on for thousands of acres.

*Cougar Creek Fire, 2015*

I was worried that the YN had fixed up the road to BCM too much; a nice smooth road would invite too many people to the sensitive/fragile meadows. But I was pleasantly surprised that the road while fixed up was perfect—not too good, yet much better than the previous bone jarring condition.

At the road turnout pay station, I asked YN member and staffer Todd about the area. He said everything we could see had been planted. Trees were about 2-3' tall with a good species mix including larch. That was a sign of hope.



*BCM pay station, YN staff*



*Planted trees growing to become a new forest*

I paid my \$20 fee and drove northeast. On the way I had to see the cattle exclusion fence I'd heard about. Made of stacked logs, it was sturdy and strong tying in to the cattle guard. Wow, I thought, good for them, the YN followed through on what they said they'd do to keep cows out of the meadows. While there were a few cows along the road they were on the right side of the fence.



*YN log cattle exclusion fence keeping cows out of BCM. Thank you*

On to Mirror Lake the former entrance pay station that Richard Canapo (Todd said he retired) lived in an RV each summer selling \$5.00 permits. Burned trees surrounded the small lake. I had to erase the beautiful scene in my mind from before the fire. Not easy.

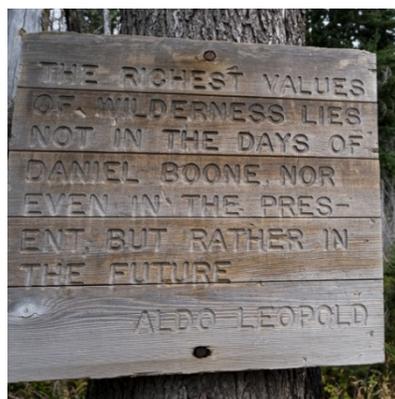


*Mirror Lake, my eyes welled up*

BCM large parking lot nearly empty—four cars. Fingers of the fire had danced about here and there. Burned areas along the BCM trail to the picnic area with lots of new Pacific silver fir coming in. Aldo Leopold sign still there.



*Pacific silver fir new growth responding to sunlight*



*A wise person, that Aldo*

Hiked on the Trail of Flowers with streams almost dry, to Hell Roaring Viewpoint. Adams was sleeping in the clouds. No visible Mountain goats across Hell Roaring canyon where I'd often seen them browsing. Strong gusts of wind blew grit in my eyes as I ate my lunch. No other people, true solitude.



*BCM picnic area, little fire damage*



*Hell Roaring Viewpoint, Mt Adams in the clouds, Hellroaring Creek quiet*



*Gentian*



*Huckleberry fall color was everywhere*

Came back down to the RTM trail and hiked west to the flat above Crooked Creek. People had been using this flat for camping which is illegal there. Working with the YN, I put up signs there prior to the Cougar Creek Fire letting people know of the no camping regulation. There was no evidence of camping at this flat since the fire. And where Crooked Creek had been dammed with rocks to make a swimming hole, it was running free with no damming. Ahhhhh.

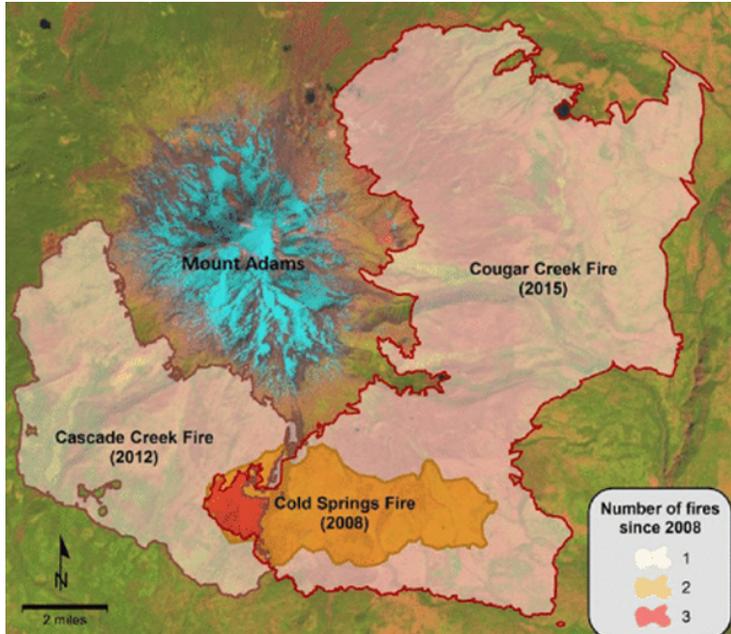
On the way back, I was on the lookout for cows illegally grazing the meadows. On past monitoring trips cows were frequently seen eating lush grasses in the Frog Pond area closed to grazing. Now there were no cows, no fresh cow pies or cow tracks anywhere in this closed area. I was excited that the meadow protection the Lloyd brothers had worked on for 30 years was coming to fruition with the new YN fence. I read Susan Saul's report that Gotchen Meadow #1 (GPNF land) also had no trespass cattle grazing this season. Next time I'm up I'll check all of Gotchen Meadows. But from what I'm hearing the FS is doing a good job with their cattle exclusion fence too.



*Frog Pond meadow with no cows, yaaaa!*

A not so nice find was several full dog poop bags near the parking lot. What is it with some people, do they think the poop fairies will come by at night picking up the bags? Please remember: Carry it in, carry it out or bury it....sans bag.

As I returned to my truck, I thought about the 3 fires that had changed Mt. Adams' forests in a very short time period. Why this convergence? Those fires are shown in this map:



*Cold Springs Fire, 2008-7,729 acres  
 Cascade Creek Fire, 2012-20,296 acres  
 Cougar Creek Fire, 2015-53,500 acres*

*The map's red color indicates the overlap area burned by the 3 fires. When driving to BCM one traverses areas where both the Cold Springs Fire and the Cougar Creek Fire burned.*

While shocking to remember the landscape as a vibrant green forest that is now a sea of silver/gray dead trees, I had to remind myself that fires have been around for thousands of years. With a warming planet we have to get used to seeing the new norm—more frequent and larger fires. But it's not easy, I'd gotten used to the beautiful green forests. People are relative newcomers to these areas and we think about forest changes such as happens with fire from the time perspective of our short life spans.

The National Forests and Yakama Nation forests that burned were managed wisely. However, 100 years of agency policy of putting out all fires set up conditions for these 3 fires. Climate change, warming weather and lack of fires created a situation where insects increased dramatically; vast areas of trees were killed. Dead trees ripe for big fires.

As we head into an uncertain future we will need to use an adaptive approach to manage forests and fire. Listen to and learn from forestry experts like Dr. Jerry Franklin who has figured this stuff out.

**In leaving** this special place I reflected on thoughts that the dense thick forests will return, providing wildlife habitat for creatures like wolverines, plant diversity, stream shading for fish and yes, beauty for humans. My patience has to be on a tree growth timeframe. And Mirror Lake will be a scenic gem again.

PS...on the trip home driving from BCM parking lot to Mirror Lake I got blocked by fire burned trees blown over onto the road with the strong winds while I was hiking. Another stranded person and I were able to muscle the trees a bit, moving them enough to drive by with 2 wheels in the ditch. Neither of us had a saw. Moral: if driving in burned areas, carry a saw or ax in your vehicle. Or be prepared for a sleep-over.

*Jurgen Hess is an award winning photo-journalist. His photography specializes in wildfire. He gives talks to help people understand fire and how society can live with it. After a 34 year US Forest Service career, he now works as a consulting environmental planner to protect and restore the earth. On the board of Friends of Mt. Adams and Columbia Insight an on-line environmental news publication, he is a member of the Society for Ecological Restoration. With his wife, he lives in Hood River, Oregon and looks at Mt. Adams every day.*