

Jarbidge Notes – Travesty at Elk Mountain

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These notes are from a September 27 tour of the Elk Mountain area of the Jarbidge Ranger District with the Forest Service, Jon Marvel, Katie Fite, Julie Randall of the Audubon Society and myself. See video at:

<http://www.youtube.com/user/silverbadger1?feature=mhee>

At some point yesterday standing in the middle of an acre of trampled manure in what was once a spring Jon asked me how anyone could let something like this happen. I never have a good answer to that question other than the obvious observation that whoever is responsible just doesn't care.

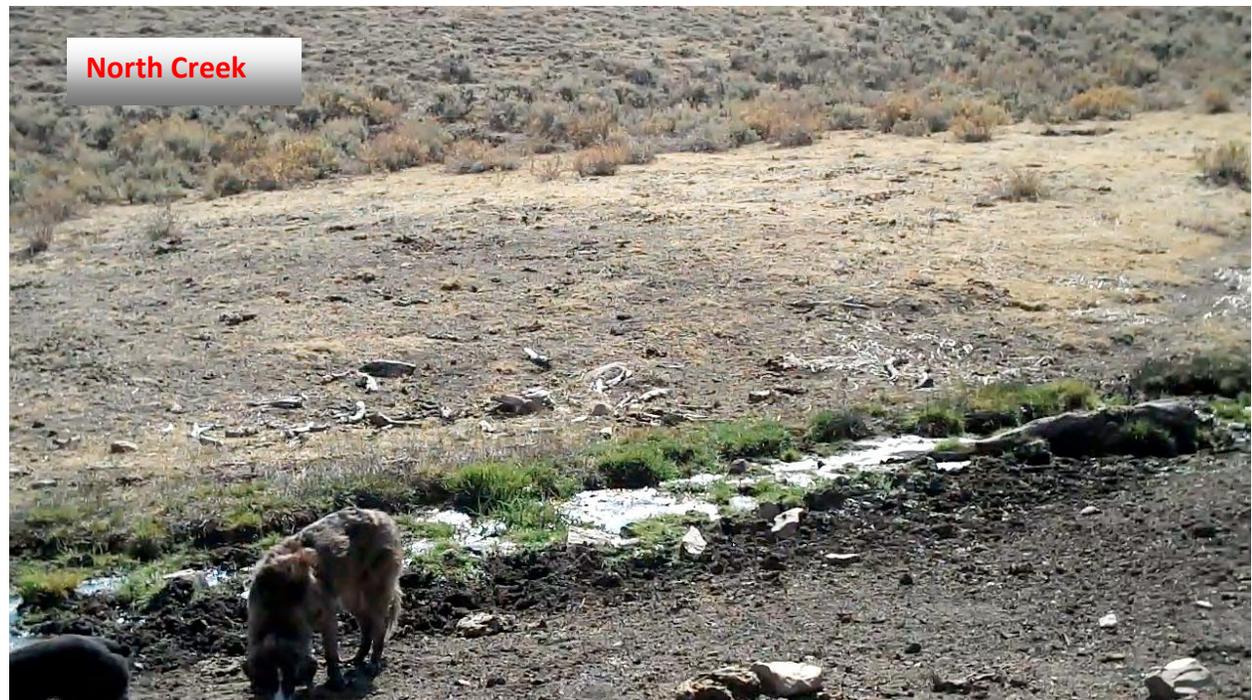
The landscape of Southern Idaho and Northern Nevada, like most of the western landscapes we visit on tours like this one is sublime. Wilson Creek, Lime Creek Basin, and the ridges and canyons that

surround them because they are remote, lack valuable mineral resources and are dry and rugged are, with the exception of severe livestock damage, still relatively intact. I observed little cheatgrass and few noxious weeds. In what is an exceedingly dry environment in a very dry year, there are perennial streams, a wealth of springs and the largest groves of Aspen and Ceanothus I have ever seen locally. Umbel shaped Mountain Mahogany trees hundreds of years old twist out of eroded cliffs of rhyolite and striking groves of



dark green Sub Alpine Fir cover protected North and East facing slopes. At every spring or creek we visited yesterday I found pieces of obsidian left by the original human inhabitants of the area, a testament to the rich animal life that once existed in and around these precious water sources and the importance they represented to native peoples and the animals they depended on.

These same streams and springs are now trampled muddy strips of manure infused warm water. There are few perennial grasses, sedges or rushes. Riparian shrubs like rose, and currant are largely absent. There are no young willow, no dogwood or alder, and in the aspen groves virtually no young seedlings survive to replace older trees. Instead of sheltering and feeding trout, deer, elk, antelope, bear, sage grouse, blue birds, raptors, beaver, wolves, cats and the hundreds of other species that once lived in this landscape and still could we have sacrificed streams, springs and the uplands around them to support cattle and a



small handful of ranching families that own them. We were accompanied on our tour by the district ranger and three other forest service line officers. They were, by their own admission, disturbed by the destruction of the landscape they are charged with protecting. They agreed to issue letters of non-compliance to the permittees and I hope they do. In all honesty however, even if they do, I have little expectation that things will change. For while they have the authority to make significant changes, the political will and backup from their superiors necessary to counteract the political backlash that always follows is rarely present.

Even if they were to exercise their full authority, the truth of the matter is that places like Wilson Creek and the Lime Creek basin, like most of the arid west is unsuitable for livestock production. No amount of management, adaptive or otherwise, can change this biological fact. The idea imbedded in Agency

policy that incremental change will lead to wide spread improvement in the condition of western lands and waters has been proved a failure. This is also true of the long-standing policy of multiple use that underlies the management of public lands. Recreational activities like fishing, hunting, camping, wildlife and bird watching, hiking, and managed ORV use do impact the environment but the presence of livestock here and elsewhere actually destroys the possibility of other uses. No one can fish in trampled streams. Families cannot camp next to manure pits without risking the health of their families. Wildlife necessarily struggles to find adequate food and shelter after the cows have had their fill and so hunting and the potential to see wildlife inevitably declines. Birds cannot rear their young when the thickets of willow and rose are gone and the grasses and sedges on which they feed and shelter are trampled into muddy puddles. The list goes on and on. We have to choose. Which do we want cows or wildlife, cows or fish, cows or clean water, cows or recreational opportunities? You can't have both.

The doctrine of multiple use of public resources that was implemented to appease extractive industries used to exploiting public lands for their own benefit needs to be replaced with a doctrine that puts the biological integrity of the landscape first and human utility second. The argument that this type of policy would curtail opportunities to enjoy public lands or lead to cultural and economic

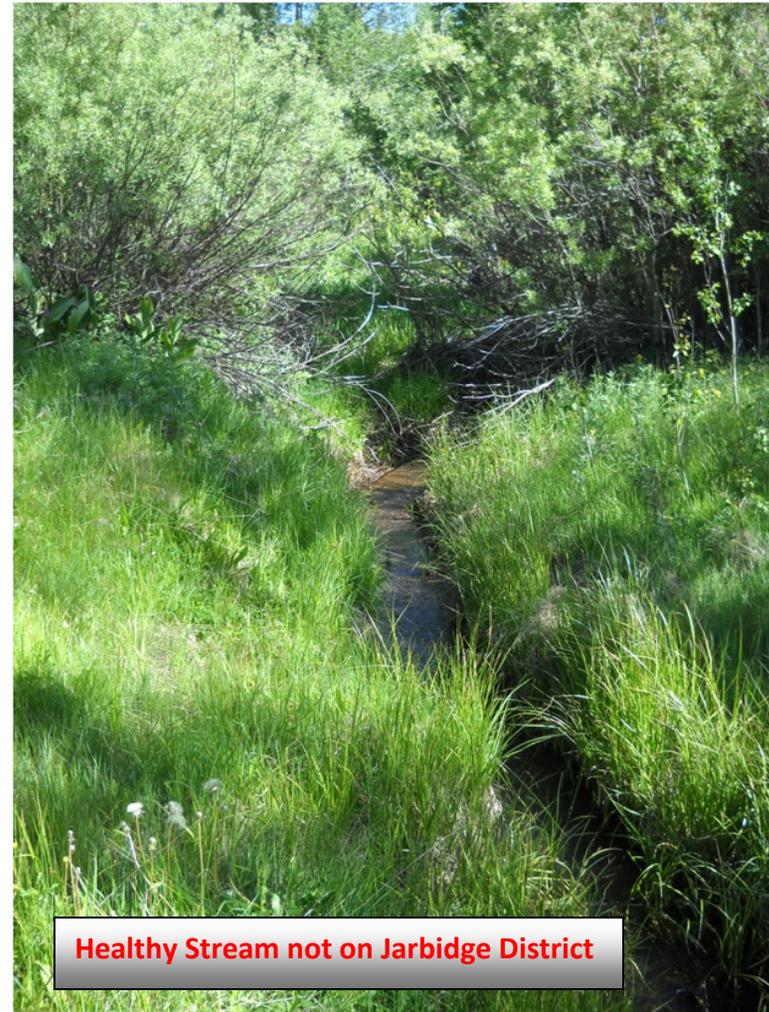


collapse in the West is exactly backwards. Humans are in a dependent relationship with the natural world not the other way around. Until we recognize and act on this fact and make the health of natural systems a priority the environment will continue to disintegrate.

To make the biological integrity of a landscape the most important consideration in the management of all public lands does not, as many would claim, preclude the enjoyment of those lands by others. I would suggest that in fact the opposite is true. The removal of livestock from public lands will enhance recreational opportunities like fishing, hunting and camping. Healthy watersheds retain more water and increase its quantity and quality a boon for farmers and city dwellers alike. Economically recreation on public lands far outweighs the value of ranching and is of benefit to millions of people.

Tours like the one I was on yesterday make it abundantly clear that the belief that “working landscapes” are the best way to preserve lands, private or public is patently untrue. What is true is that Western North America represents the largest temperate expanse of publicly owned land on the planet and that given an opportunity it could recover some of its original diversity and abundance. This was clearly evident to me yesterday as we circumnavigated Elk Mountain and toured through Lime Basin. The first step in this recovery is remove livestock from public land.

Kelley Weston



Healthy Stream not on Jarbidge District