

Outline of Friends of the Clearwater's Citizen Conservation Biology Alternative for the Nez Perce - Clearwater National Forests Plan Revision

The Northern Rocky Mountains bioregion of the U.S. encompasses one of America's last strongholds of native biodiversity. As far as we know, it contains virtually all the species present at the time of the Lewis & Clark Expedition over two hundred years ago, including grizzly bear, wolverine, lynx, and fisher. At nearly 5 million acres, the public lands of the Clearwater River drainage and other surrounding wildlands are the northern half of the Big Wild, the largest intact ecosystem in the continental United States. This ecosystem lies within the larger Northern Rockies bioregion and has the most tremendous diversity, from low-elevation habitat with coastal disjunct species in wet cedar forests to wind swept ridges with whitebark pines on mountain peaks.

According to two World Wildlife Fund studies done in 2001 by Carlos Carroll, et. al., the Clearwater River drainage is the most important area in the U.S. Northern-Canadian Southern Rockies for large forest carnivores, even more important than iconic places such as Yellowstone and Jasper National Parks. These include the federally protected lynx, grizzly bear (very rare), fisher, and wolverine. These public wildlands contain some of the highest priority intact ecosystems in the lower 48 states. In addition, this region is home to endangered salmon, steelhead, bull trout, endemic Coeur d'Alene salamanders, rare plants, and unique invertebrates. Woodpeckers, goshawks, resident and migratory songbirds find shelter in both lush forests and those burned by wildfire. The Clearwater and Nez Perce National Forests contain eighty percent of the public lands in the Clearwater region and are at the crossroads of the Northern Rockies bioregion; terrestrial wildlife such as wolverines use the area to travel north and south and the east/west migration of anadromous fish. In the past, Congress made great strides in protecting key portions of this region, designating the Selway-Bitterroot, Gospel -Hump and the Frank Church-River of No Return Wildernesses and Wild and Scenic rivers such as the Lochsa, Selway, Middle Fork Clearwater, and Salmon. However, approximately 1.5 million acres of unspoiled roadless lands remain unprotected and are increasingly vulnerable to being lost forever through road building, logging, mining, uncontrolled recreation and other developments which mar the beauty of the landscape and degrade wildlife habitat. Even the controversial Idaho Roadless Rule offers inadequate protection. For example, the Forest Service is planning to log the Eldorado Roadless Area in its proposed Lolo Insects and Disease timber sale.

At the same time, the front country has been roaded, logged and scarred so it needs to be allowed to recover, not logging disguised as restoration. The agency has worked to decommission some unnecessary roads with partners like the Nez Perce Tribe and the Bonneville Power Administration. However, any such a program should never be used as justification to further damage watersheds by enabling massive timber sales and more road building because the watershed would never recover under that kind of management program.

This citizen proposal is informed by sound scientific principles and sets a positive future for the Nez Perce and Clearwater National Forests that emphasize the outstanding wild, natural and appropriate recreational values for this remarkable place. It also takes advantage of the opportunity to create economic benefits through genuine restoration work such as road decommissioning.

Core components of the Citizen Alternative:

Address Climate Change

Reduces carbon emissions and promotes climate stability by emphasizing carbon-storage in trees, down wood, and soils in the forest. Reduces the use of motorized vehicles and fossil fuels.

Protect Wildlands

Administers Wilderness as per the Wilderness Act, both the spirit and intent. Current administration too often leads toward commercialization, administrative motorization, development, and ecological manipulation of Wilderness.

Protects all roadless areas so they maintain the characteristics necessary to be designated as wilderness by Congress in the future. Roadless areas would be recommended for wilderness or protected by administrative non-motorized and non-mechanized backcountry designations. Limits mechanized access to provide secure areas for sensitive wildlife (wolverine, grizzly bear and even elk), and reduces erosion to streams, compaction of fragile soils, and the spread of invasive weeds.

Adds new Research Natural Areas (RNAs) in key places including Hemlock Creek and Bimerick Creek.

Proposes new Wild and Scenic rivers and improves protection of existing Wild and Scenic rivers.

Excludes roadless areas, existing and potential Wild and Scenic river corridors and proposed and existing RNAs from the suitable timber base and makes them off limits to logging. This alternative also proposes that the Interior Department initiate mineral withdrawals or segregation for roadless areas, existing and potential Wild and Scenic river corridors and existing and proposed RNAs.

Protect Water, Soil and Aquatic Resources

Maintains and/or restores the elements which characterize good native fish habitat and high water quality by including enforceable standards that protect clean and cold water and complex, connected and comprehensive habitats. Existing wetland and

stream buffers and other protection measures, known as PACFISH and INFISH, would be maintained and improved.

Protects and restores soils, the building blocks for healthy tree and vegetation growth so vital for wildlife food and shelter by including meaningful and enforceable standards to protect soils as required by law.

Curtails domestic livestock grazing so it does not negatively affect watersheds and fish habitat. This may mean elimination of grazing from riparian areas or other sensitive wetlands

Allow Natural Processes to Occur

Allows fire to perform its necessary ecosystem rejuvenating function and does not damage important burned habitat by “salvage” logging.

Allows insects and disease to play their ecological functions. This is especially true for roadless areas and other natural areas.

Allows natural recovery and restoration in areas damaged by past development practices.

Terrestrial and Vegetative Diversity

Protects old-growth forest habitat and allows mature forests to develop old-growth characteristics such as large snags, down woody material and other habitat components so vital for many wildlife and bird species. Similarly, protects and allow multi-story forests to evolve, providing essential habitat for lynx and their prey snowshoe hares, as well as other diverse forest features (snags, down logs, etc.) essential for the survival of wolverine, fisher, pine marten, other forest carnivores, and a host of bird species. The percentage of old growth to be retained in the landscape should be determined by the best available scientific information and utilize appropriate landscape stratification techniques such forest habitat types or landform descriptions (landtypes). Such designations should consider historical levels old growth and stand characteristics that would have been common in each of the appropriate stratifications. For example, old surface landtypes that are composed of stands in cedar and hemlock habitat series would likely support different amounts and characteristics of old growth than drier habitat types that are commonly found on steep south facing breaklands. Target amounts for the retention of old growth and mature forest structure should reflect historical habitat conditions under which most fish and wildlife species of concern evolved and likely will be much higher than the current 10% old growth standard. For, example stand replacement fire intervals in moist cedar hemlock habitat types had fire return intervals over 250-300 years and such areas would have supported high percentages of mature and old growth forest.

Curtails clearcutting and other silvicultural prescriptions that leave large openings, which cause edge effects that fragment the landscape. These openings adversely affect habitats for numerous species.

Curtails domestic livestock grazing so that it does not negatively affect wildlife and other public values. Permanently closes vacant allotments and permanently retires abandoned allotments for conservation purposes. Ends domestic sheep grazing in the one sheep allotment because of serious threats of disease spread to wild bighorn sheep.

Emphasize Public Ownership and Agency Accountability

Adopts enforceable standards that are informed by monitoring. Management activities which risk water and soil resources, wildlife habit or other ecological components would only be allowed if monitoring determines that current conditions are meeting standards and the activity won't degrade natural resources.

Avoids industrialization and commercialization of the National Forests. National Forest stewardship and management must remain in the hands of the publicly controlled agency. Excludes privatizing the management of public resources or giving the National Forests to the State of Idaho to own or manage. Commercial and industrial interests rank secondary to the public interest. Public use shall take precedence over commercial use. In situations where access is restricted or allocated, the needs of the self-guided public shall take precedence over the wants of commercial service providers. The potential for revenue generation or other commercial outputs does not unduly influence management decisions. While volunteers can provide important benefits, volunteers don't have privileges over the general public and are not allowed to dictate management priorities.

Prioritizes public purchase of key inholdings, such as the upper Lochsa Basin, rather than exchanges, which are controversial and usually not in the public interest.

Emphasize Landscape Connectivity

Provides wildlife linkage corridors so that animals can move unimpeded across the landscape, facilitating migration and genetic interchange. Emphasizes connecting old-growth forest habitat.

Reduces the miles of roads to improve wildlife security and watershed integrity, while also providing good paying restoration jobs. Reduces road maintenance costs to an affordable level by calibrating the road system to anticipated future budgets. The Forest Service and Nez Perce Tribe have already taken strides to this effect, but more needs to be done. Sets maximum road density standards to minimize the backlog in road maintenance and protect terrestrial and aquatic species. Converts roads closed to

motorized use to non-motorized travel to provide a diversity of recreational and access opportunities.

Literature Cited

Carroll, Carlos, Reed F. Noss, and Paul C. Paquet. 2001a. Carnivores as focal species for conservation planning in the Rocky Mountain region. World Wildlife Fund. Toronto.

Carroll, Carlos, Reed F. Noss, and Paul C. Paquet. 2001 b. Modeling carnivore habitat in the Rocky Mountain region: a literature review and suggested strategy. World Wildlife Fund. Toronto.