

Chapter VI. Conclusions

I think the largest single need in American forest biology is the study of man's relation to forest land. Our foresters need to understand much more than most of them do about purely human motives and aspirations with respect to the land. They ought to become genuinely knowledgeable and respectful of people's economic, social, and aesthetic institutions.

—Hugh Raup (Stout 1981)

This thesis has used oral histories to document the causes and extent of change to forest cover patterns in Soap Creek Valley, Oregon, over the past 500 years. Findings can be placed into three categories: 1) the value of using oral history research methods to perform this study (see Chapter II), 2) documented conditions of Soap Creek Valley forests over time (see Chapters III and V), and 3) theoretical test results (see Chapter IV). This chapter contains brief summaries and conclusions for each type of finding.

RELEVANCE OF ORAL HISTORIES TO DOCUMENTING AND UNDERSTANDING FOREST COVER PATTERNS, 1999.

The use of oral history research methods for interdisciplinary scientific research proved both efficient and productive. The Soap Creek Valley Oral History Series added significant information and documented several informed perspectives regarding the changing forest cover patterns of Soap Creek Valley. Established qualitative research methods for a number of disciplines proved useful for this study, including the fields of archival and historical research, anthropology, feminist studies, information sciences, and the general field of oral history. In particular:

1) Useful oral history research data were credibly gathered and documented using standard qualitative research methods;

2) Oral history subjects often provided significant new details and insights, thus augmenting scientific information from other sources;

3) Data documented by this research provides better understandings of the natural and cultural histories of Soap Creek Valley;

4) Most observations of oral history subjects are consistent with most scientific findings of a similar focus; and

5) Oral history research data is useful for testing theories related to forest history and forest ecology.

SUMMARY OF SOAP CREEK VALLEY FOREST COVER CONDITIONS AND TRENDS, 1500-1999

Soap Creek Valley data show that forest cover patterns have changed constantly and dynamically throughout historical time, and probably throughout prehistoric time as well. Documented history is shown to be useful for describing forest conditions (points in time) and conditional trends (directional changes over periods of time) for Soap Creek Valley. These data indicate that:

1) Current forest cover patterns are primarily a result of prairie and savannah afforestation by Douglas-fir since 1826, and residential and industrial development since 1846;

2) Initial conditions for Soap Creek Valley forests in 1826 included even-aged stands and groves of forest trees less than 230 years of age, with a few individual specimens or groves (most likely oak, possibly Douglas-fir or redcedar) that may have exceeded that age by a few years or decades. Most trees were less than 50 years of age, and most land was bunchgrass and white oak savannah. Headwater conifer stands were likely sources of cedar and hemlock products, yew bows, arrowwood, firewood, game, water, berries, and roots. The general forest cover pattern for 1500 was likely similar to 1826 and may have contained fewer or younger trees, but with a species' distribution similar to early historical time;

3) Current conditions for Soap Creek Valley forests include a blanket of even-aged stands of conifer trees, mostly Douglas-fir—mostly the result of plantation, and/or pre-commercial thinning, and/or commercial thinning

projects—in areas that existed as scattered stands and groves at time of settlement. Most trees are still less than 50 years of age, and there are more trees in excess of three hundred and (possibly) four hundred years of age than in the 1820s, but fewer total trees exist in excess of one and two hundred years of age;

4) Biodiversity “richness” increased dramatically in Soap Creek Valley during early historical and post-settlement periods, particularly for wild vascular understory plants, herbs, and grasses. Large, wild carnivores were mostly exterminated during the same time and have not been reintroduced. There has been a simultaneous and persistent major shift in species “importance” for thousands of acres of forestland—from oak and bunchgrass savannah to Douglas-fir forests and introduced trees, shrubs, herbs, and grasses;

5) Humans have been primary shapers of Soap Creek Valley forest cover patterns for the past 500 years, and likely the past 10,000 years (or more), as well;

6) Documented trends in forest cover pattern changes include decreased numbers and varieties of large wild carnivores and commercial fur-bearing mammals (since 1811), increased variety of introduced wild plant and animal species (since 1826), increased human population (since 1832), larger numbers and areas of Douglas-fir trees, human residences, road surfaces, ornamental shrubs and grasses, and pet enclosures (since 1845), and decreased agricultural uses (since 1941).

TESTS OF EXISTING THEORIES OF FOREST HISTORY AND ECOLOGY

The principal theoretical tests undertaken with this research are: 1) What were the initial conditions of Soap Creek Valley forests in 1500 and in 1826?; 2) Were prehistoric Soap Creek forests a product of succession or of disturbance?; and 3) Do symbiotic relationships exist between human actions and wildlife populations? Based on the weight of the evidence presented in Chapters III and V, the following conclusions can be made:

1) Botkin's fourth possible condition of western Oregon prehistoric forests (see Chapter IV), that they were "very much the product of intentional actions by the Indians, and that their character was primarily the result of Indian management, and that this management led to more open conditions than would have otherwise occurred" (Botkin 1996), was shown to be true for 1826 and presumed likely to be true for 1500. By substituting the word "people" for "Indians," this condition can also be shown to be true for the 1853, 1929, and 1945 study dates (see Map 25) as well.

2) Climax forests are described as having very old, very large trees of a number of different species and ages. Succession theory holds that different communities of plants and animals occupy the same piece of ground over time, progressing through identifiable stages toward a climax forest condition. There is no evidence that climax forest conditions have existed in Soap Creek Valley during the past 500 years. Rather, forest trees exist in stands of similar ages ("even-aged"), having been established typically within a few months or years of a major site disturbance. There is no evidence of preliminary "seral stage" plant community development prior to tree establishment for Soap Creek forests.

3) A symbiotic interrelationship can be shown to exist on many levels between human actions and wildlife populations over time (see Fig. 35). Identifiable systematic relationships can be shown to exist between available information and local action; cultural values and visual landscapes; forest product harvesting and wildlife habitat conditions, etc., that affect Soap Creek Valley forest cover patterns. These interrelationships are based on local human values that change unpredictably from time to time. As a result of changing values, Soap Creek forest conditions also change from time to time, also in unpredictable ways.

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