

Sierra Summit Conference Takes Region's Pulse

The environmental woes of the Sierra Nevada were laid out like entrails for the uncensored inspection of 200 scientists and natural resource managers last November at Lake Tahoe. The "physical exam," organized by California Secretary of Resources Doug Wheeler, marked the first time in history that a panel of experts convened to discuss the health of the entire mountain range – all 430 miles and 15.5 million acres. The prognosis was a solemn question mark. The exercise touched sensitive nerve endings up and down the entire spectrum of "multiple users."

A firsthand account from Dave Parsons, NPS Research Scientist at Sequoia and Kings Canyon NPs, (a Natural Environment panelist on opening day of the 3-day conference), and supplemented by accounts in the **Sacramento Bee**, concluded that the patient is sick, its vital signs – soil, water, air, forests, and wildlife – assailed by a formidable array of threats. Ozone pollution and acid rain, mercury contamination, harmful logging and grazing practices, overdevelopment, and bureaucratic and scientific neglect were identified by the conferees as major players.

Panel findings:

- Soil is eroding from parts of the Sierra at catastrophic rates, filling water reservoirs with mud and silt. Road building, livestock grazing, logging – all contribute to the problem.

- 24-hour average ozone levels in summer at Sequoia NP exceed those in Los Angeles – home of the worst air in America.

- 8 of the Sierra's 22 amphibian species are threatened with extinction; populations of many other creatures, including songbirds, are declining.

- Fire suppression, logging, and air pollution are changing the very fabric of the Sierra forest – long regarded as one of the world's grandest assemblages of trees.

Dave Graber, Sequoia NP Research Biologist, described the threats to wildlife resulting from damage to wetland systems, emphasizing the need for more knowledge about wildlife, without which "we won't have information to manage – we won't even know when we lose them."

Parsons listed major management issues – fire suppression, timber harvest (revegetation and old-growth), grazing, air pollution, drought/pests, urban and residential sprawl, plant species and community issues, genetic and biological diversity, and future global climate change – all areas of great concern for land use management planning.

Secretary Wheeler opened the summit with a strong pitch for a coordinated, bioregional approach to conservation of the Sierran forests, lakes, rivers and wildlife. Most conferees seemed willing to follow his lead.

The region's chief federal forester, Ronald Stewart, told conferees that management of the Sierra's 20 million acres of federal forest no longer will be driven by timber targets or volumes of wood from trees sold to loggers. He predicted that wildlife and recreation interests will edge out logging as the chief objectives on California's national forests. Logging, he indicated, will be allowed where it enhances recreation or wildlife.

As **Sacramento Bee** reporter Tom Knudson put it, "Not since naturalist John Muir preached his mountain gospel a century ago has the Sierra Nevada seen such an outpouring of interest, concern and controversy." The crowd of "movers and shakers from all walks of mountain life: national park superintendents, university scientists, state policy-makers, timber company officials, conservationists," saw hope in the snowstorm of information, the avalanche of reports, and the willingness of those present to listen and make note of one another's viewpoints and agendas.