

When Scientific and Cultural Values Meet

Editor's Note: This note on a trail ride accompanied Alan Watson's article on the Wilderness Research Institute; it deserves sharing.

It was early September, along the North Fork of the Sun River in western Montana. Daytime temperatures in the 60s contrasted wonderfully with the cold nights and early morning frost as we drew near the Continental Divide. Our group of six scientists and wilderness managers was on a 3-day, 75-mile packtrip into the Sun River Game Preserve portion of the 1.5 million acre Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex. Our purpose was to examine the effects of the 52,000 acre Gates Park Fire, on one of the less well-known, though substantial, wildland fires of 1988.

While our intent was to discuss vegetative changes and visitor reactions to the vast burned landscape, what remains in my memory is a strong symbolic image of wilderness. The skeletal remains of the forest presented a black and white landscape, punctuated by bursts of color from vigorous clumps of young aspen, from brilliant patches of crimson fireweed, from scattered lodgepole pine seedlings, and from the occasional bunch grasses of luminescent green. As we rode, Kelly, who grew up in nearby Choteau, mentioned he didn't see much of his young wife during the summer and fall months when he was a wilderness ranger in the highcountry of "the Bob." He said his other love, however, was always with him in this wilderness, especially in the burned over Gates Park area.

When we jokingly inquired as to this other love, Kelly dismounted, cut a thimbleberry stalk low to the ground, and went to work

with his knife. As we watched, he hollowed out the pithy stem and made expert cuts at both ends of what looked like a green flute. He worked only a few minutes, then pressed the thimbleberry stalk to his lips and blew hard. The loose, stringy fibers vibrated in the tube as the air rushed through, creating a high pitched "bugle." An immediate bugle response came from a bull elk on high ground above the river bottom. It left no doubt in our minds that the identity of Kelly's "other love" was the feeling of belonging to this place.

With his demonstration of primitive skill in the middle of this vast burned laboratory, this young man reminded us of the many values wildlands offer. What I learned about human resourcefulness, the kinship between people and elk, and the symbolic interaction between humans and the land provided me with a lasting impression of wilderness that evades precise scientific description.