

## **Weeds Within** **Traveling in the weed frontier**

An essay on the Changing Western Landscape. Copyright Noah Jackson / Hope in Light Imagery 2005-2008. Images to accompany text are available.

---

Driving throughout the rural west is a standard mode of travel, down to my two-day beard and packed-to-the-gills SUV and cracked windshield. But the circumstances and details of this particular trip are different. From the view from behind my 289,000 mile odometer, though there is an added sense of mortality. The entire landscape rumbles and shakes when I turn and downshift to pass.

There is a certain kin-ness to abandoned roadside artifacts that are a testament for both population and landscape change. For sale signs on late-model windshields fade to older jeeps and abandoned Ferguson tractors. The patterns ebb and fade as you move in and out of the small towns of Victor, Darby, Hamilton and approach the first of several passes. At least one wilderness area can be seen in the rear view mirror; National Forest land and the occasional homestead mark the journey west.

If you drive through these places, and you drive the jeep I do, and you leave late, you need a good mechanic. My mechanic is gruff by appearance. His name is Kelly and at any given time a pit bull or Routweiler or both patrol the shop with him. One the shop to his door, there is a simple, pen scrawled sign. Dogs here. They will approach.

I've come to his shop with my backpack ready. I'm leaving for a trip from Missoula to another valley in Idaho to meet with a group of landowners concerned with weeds invading their open spaces and recreation lands.

I enter Kelly's shop and the dogs growl and sniff. They recognize the scent of my own dog, which they have come to know, and they relax. The hood to my jeep is propped open with a bar and Kelly is pouring cleaner down my intake and simultaneously looking at the digital pictures he took of the inside of my engine. There is improvement, he says. He shows me the condition of the various parts he replaced on this go-round and finishes his lecture with a mantra on how to bypass my heater if a particular hose bursts. He gesticulates to various parts of the engine while holding his camera and pouring fluids; with another hand he tightens a few bolts. I pay, which is always less than I expect, and he ends with telling me that if I break down before the pass he'll run on up in his Honda and do a repair job.

Later in the day I coast along the Salmon River in Idaho. This time of year, the Salmon is a particularly special place. Cottonwood buds are in various stages of opening as you rumble and twist along the banks. At each twist and bend the

microclimate shifts enough to see a visible change in bud growth. The jeep swerves and sways as I try to stay on the road. Hands from the steering wheels of trucks heading east flag up to greet me. My hand subconsciously raises a response.

Every river valley in the west is a little unique and different. Riverine ecosystems are less than one percent of the western landscape but they also correspond to important social fabrics. They are the basis of hand-waving networks all over the west. I know, when my radiator starts smoking, as it has, someone with extra coolant will always stop. They are places where agriculture happens; where water is discussed; they are places where just a few landowners can make a conscious choice about the health of wildlife and human populations.

River valleys and river ecosystems have always been under attack in the west. Indeed, they have always been attractive places to live. Anywhere you have agriculture and recreation and travel, there are stories of conflict and innovative solutions. Here in the American west, though, we have a new threat that travels across river valleys.

Like a river melt under a lower than average snowpack, there is the quiet murmur of citizen groups talking about weeds. Some of this, what we might call data, is difficult to ignore. In Missoula, high school students and green-stained volunteers pull knapweed and non-native bunch grasses. In the river valley of Hailey, Idaho homeowners, ranchers, and farmers are frustrated by this same problem. Over a crackling phone line, one landowner ticks off names of exotic invasives like the price of cattle: black henbane, dalmation (pronounced *damn-ation* I'm told by both farmers and homeowners) toadflax, knapweed, hoary cress, thistle.

One the first morning of my trip I sit in one of the homes adjacent to area common space and BLM lands. You can see some of these weeds through the wall of glass and skylights facing a steep hillside. Around me are half a dozen women. To the meeting they have come armed with maps and pictures of various weeds. They are asking me questions about species identification and how to monitor and effectively restore their land.

In the west, weeds are slowly becoming a new language. Like any learning a new language, however, those who are trying to speak find contradiction among new understanding. In our meetings, we discuss goats, the use of bugs, hand pulling activities, and miscommunication between different organizations.

"We just had to do something," the general manager of the homeowners association tells me. "The county was spraying parcels of land that we had put bugs on. Bugs that were supposed to be killing weeds were dying. We had to find a voice and find a voice about this common land."

In our meeting, we begin by discussing monitoring protocols and education, maybe by developing a survey that will investigate resident's knowledge level and ideas about involvement. Results could be used to hone education efforts and build networks.

"We are already talking in small groups," one woman pipes in. "If we just knew what to look for and how to handle it we could be so much more effective."

This is talk of war and a story of hope. A group of homeowners is talking about their stake in the land and wanting to be better educated is an important part of understanding challenges associated with weeds. Concerns galvanizing around the use of pesticides on the land and lack of knowledge are ways these conversations begin. These stories and individual actions are important-- in working with weeds and chemicals we all have our own stories of action and resistance.

One woman in this group is using a home-remedy for weeds on her property; there is another individual who combats turf restoration projects by moving flagging. There is a sense of hope, self-empowerment, and engagement.

Later that day, one woman and I take this energy and momentum to the local Soil and Conservation Board. In addition to explaining the importance of managing and monitoring invasive weeds, we explain the efforts of homeowners throughout the spring and summer of 2004. This adds up to a lot: just under \$25,000 with half of the total project cost as donated, in-kind work. A note here: this meeting is crucial. Funds for this year haven't yet come through. There is some money for work on the ground, but there is no money for education, monitoring with a local volunteer network, or to give counterpart payments to high school weed crews. This is money for one of the last areas of undeveloped common space within the community.

In the meeting, we carefully make our pitch and go over the numbers. I smooth down my hair from car camping the night before and swallow in the silence when we finish speaking. Outside, tricked out Humvees and jeeps cruise by; people on the street wear all varieties of Gortex with built-in cell phone holsters.

The head of the board, who is gruff and wears a button up shirt makes a mental nod to this.

"We can't pay rich folks to take care of land," he nodded. From these board members, none of who live in either Hailey or the nearby ski town of Sun Valley, there was clear resentment.

Another board member pipes in. "There are rich people and then there are people just trying to hold on. Imagine what it would be like if every sub-division came asking for help...."

Board members stared at us. My friend and I swallowed. We tried to explain the riverine value, the sense of this place as special ecological zone, the wonder of self-managed land, the power of community initiative and desire, the importance of the last open space in the area. We walked out of the meeting with an offer for less than five percent of what we had asked for and went to the local brewery.

The next day, I woke up in an abandoned campground in the nearby Sawtooth National Forest. I fired up the jeep and let the forest air funnel from the engine into heating vents. I met my friend, a local graphic designer, and we skied up the local mountain. Trees thinned out and the mountain range extended into others. Don picked up a hunk of snow and munched thoughtfully.

"Chemicals," he chewed. "Definitely man-made snow chemicals. And maybe weeds below the chemicals."

Suspect patches of brown and green hemmed the snowline. Don ticked off the scientific names like an ornithologist or taxidermist. To most people, weeds are not that exciting. However, they are markers of change, landscape use, and misuse. Some believe weeds are the harbingers of climate change; others think they are a sign of land mismanagement; still others will not purchase plants from nurseries adjacent to land with invasive weeds.

And then there is another metaphor. If you ascend to the top of any mountain valley in the west, the immediate bioregion can be seen as a giant ocean. Mountains and forests are merely islands submerged by air; out of place roads run below like deep trawl-line scars on the seabed; working landscapes and communities sit on the floor delicately balanced; rivers cut to something deeper: they make wave lines along the landscape and weave around floodplains of time. Power or paddle up any river canyon in the west and you will know this. Nez Pierce stories and legends speak of river canyons with deep reference.

As I come to learn about weeds and see them as a metaphor for land change and citizen engagement, I search for this reverence. Some landowners in mountain valleys of the west want this engagement. With knowledge and education, they seek it out. On parcels of land, right now, in both Idaho and Montana, people are running their own trials, doing their own kind of science, and gleaming data to share with their neighbors. Goat and bug biocontrol businesses are beginning to thrive. There isn't much monitoring being done, but action is a start of all social change and movements.

Back on the road to Montana, I fill up the jeep. One trucker is busy negotiating with another. One of the old farm trucks doesn't have a reverse gear, so the driver is negotiating with the owner of a diesel V12. An migrant worker is speaking with someone in micro-fleece and sunglasses. The contradictions and social problems of this ski town could not be greater but there are examples like this all over the weedy valleys of the west.

But these people are talking. Both sets of tires on the trucks have thick coats of mud and mulch. There could be a space to begin a dialog about weeds. It's an acquired language, like community forestry, ecosystem management, and wildfires, those of us who care about the landscape look at the information and make our own conclusions. It's a slow process. Somehow, though, we've got to learn new map making skills—we've got to probe down deep into rivers which help spread the seeds of weeds.

The scares and wounds within us are weeds. The silence and resentment that went down in one meeting about weeds was deep and important. This discussion is an attempt to reckon different views of a common landscape. Like other debates, this could be an issue that once again pits farmers against ranchers, businessmen, and gets tied up in politics.

But perhaps we can work around our own scares and somehow learn to see a greater landscape.

On my last morning in Idaho, I met a fly fishermen who was toting butterfly catcher gear. I camped one night along the bank of a river, in the mountains out of town just below in the snowline. In the morning I was greeted with a man with fly gear and river waders walking up the river. He stopped along one of the banks below my campsite and opened his butterfly net to let some out. Other butterflies fluttered around him. He carried a black plastic sack over one of his shoulders. He saw me looking at it. He held up the bag as he passed. "Weeds," he said.

I have never seen anything like this. He was part fisherman, but he seemed part animal and part land manager. By the time I thought to chase him down, up river, it was too late.

Back home, in Montana, I speak again to the manager of the homeowners association. Her voice is shrill and spry and there is also some wildness. She's talking about their plans to self-manage the surrounding open space in Idaho, and on the phone she's naming and claiming areas, sticking mental thumbtacks into her own map. This is a war cry and I know she's getting ready to act by organizing another handpull activity or perhaps marching down to the Soil and Conservation folks at town hall.

Among this landscape, there are already a good number of mechanics. People among us will reach out, call others, stand as examples, and learn, albeit slowly to speak a common language of place and weeds. The land continues to speak and ripple, how we respond collectively to this new language, how we cultivate this collective healing is up to us.