

Walking the Lost Highway | The Siskiyou Wilderness' GO Road

July 19, 2010 by Michael Kauffmann

I did not embark on a typical backpacking trip in late June—but it wasn't a typical spring. Snow lingered in the high country and the big miles and long trails I had come to expect in June did not present those hiking opportunities. The landscape was set short and deep for foot travel as snow pack nourished the aquifers of the Klamath Mountains. I knew I needed to start my summer in the Siskiyou because—besides that fact that they are becoming my sacred place—the range is both lower elevation and more temperate than other ranges in the Klamath Mountains to the east. This would surely allow the high country access I was yearning for.



Siskiyou Wilderness

After a short trek into the northern part of the wilderness I found the deep snow I thought I might avoid. Here dramatic peaks held lingering snow in deep shade. I headed to the southern part of the Siskiyou Wilderness. Here I found a seldom visited land of rolling mountain tops. In addition to mild topography, in the summer of 2008 extensive fires ravaged the region—these factors melted snow and opened up the forests making travel manageable. Visitation was once more frequent here and a story is told by ancient history in these peaks and valleys. The scars on the landscape of the Earth also paint a painful picture, one that I needed to understand and relate to the ancient history. With that, my road walk began on asphalt and continued that way for many miles—with a 10 mile dirt jeep road between segments of hard-packed pavement.

The southern Siskiyou have been visited for millennia by the Tolowa, Karuk, and Yurok. The Karuk believed that the peaks here were guardians for the headwaters of the Klamath River and that Blue Creek provided protective powers which assured a good life(1). The Yurok believed that the Wogé, or before time people, became afraid of human contamination and retreated to this high country where they took the form of Earthly ob-

jects. Peaks like Doctor Rock, Turtle Rock, Chimney Rock and Peak 8 were the Wogé's last refuge¹. This was a region at the high elevation crossroads of three tribes which was held sacred by all three. I stood on a serpentine ridgeline, at the headwaters of Blue Creek, and entered the Siskiyou Wilderness as the concrete ended but the scars of an old jeep road remained.



A lone Jeffrey pine (Pinus jeffreyi) stands above Elk Valley and the Headwaters of Blue Creek. Notice Turtle Rock to the right and the Trinity Alps in the distance.

The major river valleys of the area held a wealth of natural resources and thus allowed for densely populated Native American settlements before the arrival of Europeans. Ceremonies for 'World Renewal' developed out of respect for these abundant resources. It was believed that these reflective actions would preserve a natural balance—to prevent catastrophe and to cure disease. To initiate these ceremonies the Indian Doctor or Medicine Maker would travel into the high country for extended prayer, often for periods of 10 days or more. On mountain tops or other sacred rocks they would establish tseksels, or elegant chairs, on peaks or other prominent landmarks. From the tseksels prayer, fasting, and dancing would continue until he or she obtained the necessary power to descend to the river country and initiate World Renewal ceremonies with others(1). Tseksels can still be found throughout the southern Siskiyou and, in fact, I have come across one myself but have decided to not return to, nor reveal, that spot.

After World War II a burgeoning interest was found for

the resources within the western forests, and extraction became the talk of the New Deal economic recovery. This is when a road into the southern Siskiyou was first proposed but whose manifestation came to fruition with the establishment of Redwood National Park in January of 1968. There was big timber in the Siskiyou and the Forest Service was ready to access it when the big redwoods became 'locked up' in the park. Construction began on a highway that would cut through and across the range from Gasquet to Orleans—it was thus named the GO Road. It was believed this route would be a boon for lumbermen and the economies of the sleepy towns it connected. By the early 1970's all but 13 miles of the 55 mile highway had been cut, paved, and built.

“Over the years, the GO Road became much more than a conflict over natural resources. In large measure, it was a clash of two cultures—one driven by economic imperatives that demanded the landscape be altered and put to use to satisfy human material needs; the other asking that the landscape be left intact for the spiritual renewal and well-being of its inhabitants. Widely differing value systems held by Indians, environmentalists, and Forest Service personnel, more than anything else, fueled the fires of the GO Road dispute.” -Robert Dale



The Lost Highway (or the GO Road) winds its way into the high Siskiyou—here near Peak 8 and Doctor Rock.

As the road was cut deeper and deeper into the wilds, environmentalist's wilderness hackles became erect. This was a botanically diverse landscape and it needed protection from a scaring that was encroaching on not only sacred land but wild land. But the plight of the environmentalists was not going well against that of big business...

As it turned out there was a quiet faction waiting to join the fight which had been lingering in the background. The Native Americans of the area were concerned about the road but had remained quiet because

in Indian circles it was unacceptable to speak directly about sacred matters. In 1974 a leading anthropologist on Yurok culture, Arnold Pilling, raised the issue of a potential violation of religious freedom guaranteed under the First Amendment of the Constitution(1). He argued that the religious sites in the mountains constituted the people's churches and asserted that "there is no question...that for any federal agency to act in such a way as to interfere with any Indian religion site is clearly unconstitutional." This argument caught on quickly with the Indian community and more or less shut down the construction of the road.

Battles raged in the courts and throughout communities in northwest California about the construction of the GO Road for the next 16 years. A brief summary follows:

- 1983—Judge rules Forest Service violated First Amendment
- 1984—Siskiyou Wilderness Established with provision for the road through the Chimney Rock Section where future GO Road construction would separate Blue Creek from the rest of the wilderness
- 1985-86—Court, court, and more court
- 1988—Forest Service appeals to U.S. Supreme Court. This was unprecedented because the court had never reviewed a public lands dispute concerning Indian religious freedom. The court overturned the lower court ruling in a split 5-3 decision—Indians and environmentalists were stunned. The majority opinion found "the Constitution does not provide a principle that could justify upholding [Indians] legal claim." Justice O'Connor said "The building of a road or the harvesting of timber on publicly owned land cannot meaningfully be distinguished from the use of a Social Security number." Justice Brennan disagreed by saying the ruling reduced the Indian's religious freedom "to nothing more than the right to believe that their religion will be destroyed."
- Native Americans across the country realized the decision was a major blow to their religious rights. Lawrence O'Rourke said "They might as well rewrite the Constitution. They teach us we have freedom of religion and freedom of speech, but it is not true. This was our first place, our first home. It is still our home but we do not have the same rights as other Americans."
- Forest Service still had to address watershed impact on Blue Creek, which was a difficult hurdle.

- 1990–President Bush signs bill creating Smith River Wild and Scenic National Recreation Area into law with a provision for protecting and incorporating the uncompleted segment of the GO Road into the Siskiyou Wilderness and with that halcyon swipe of that pen the long fight was over! Ironically, this act was attached as a rider to an other wise inconsequential bill(1).

Father time had taken his toll on the Forest Service’s directive to get the road built and thankfully it was never finished—but the scars will remain for hundreds of years...



Guard rails and road-cuts were made to crumble in the wind, rain, and snow.



Below Chimney Rock the abrogated–now-wilderness–section of the GO Road served as a fire break during the 2008 fires.



A road cut frames the Pacific Ocean.

Robert Dale’s thesis provides incredible incites into the history of the region and the controversy of the GO Road’s construction. His thorough documentation explores details about the haunting history of the road—details that I pondered while walking the length of the road from above Orleans to the Smith River near Gasquet. My report here is based on that thesis which, to my knowledge, is only available at the Humboldt State Library.

Sources:

Dale, Robert. 1992. The Gasquet to Orleans Road. Humboldt State University Masters Thesis. Arcata, California.



Pseudotsuga menzeisii proves that asphalt is not eternal.

