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Guest column: Roadless areas are key to love of outdoors

By Jim Martin  
For The Daily Astorian

What do a salmon fisherman off the Mouth of the Columbia River near Astoria, another angler fishing in Southeast Alaska, and a third fishing in Northern California all have in common? Roadless areas on national forests in Oregon and central Idaho.

Recently, the conservation group Trout Unlimited released two reports illustrating how important pristine areas on public land in Oregon and Idaho are for hunters and anglers.

The reports encapsulated what many of my fellow hunters and anglers understand intuitively. Namely, our best habitat, our cleanest water, and therefore our best opportunities for hunting and fishing exist because of our roadless areas on our National Forests and Bureau of Land Management-controlled lands.

Our roadless areas, such as those in the mountains of Oregon and Central Idaho, are the best, most productive spawning and rearing streams we have left. They provide fish for anglers who may never visit those headwaters.

For example, roadless lands are present in 54 percent of the watersheds that support strong populations of Columbia Basin redband trout often referred to as the famous Oregon "redsidings."

Additionally, the free-flowing rivers and large complexes of roadless lands in headwater habitat of Southern Oregon's Siskiyou Mountain region provide the quality spawning habitat and cold, clean water that support the famous salmon and steelhead fisheries downstream. Without this quality habitat upstream, the renowned salmon and steelhead fisheries such as those of the Rogue, Chetco and Illinois rivers would not exist. Standing in any of my favorite fishing holes on the lower Rogue, I am always aware that the cold, clean water tumbling by my feet starts flowing from the intact, less-developed habitat that lies well upstream.

The benefits

Benefits of those roadless areas are clear as a mountain stream. Their values flow downstream in the form of beautiful fish and clean water. They are also critical in recovering the species that have suffered the most over the years. Once a common sight here, 81 percent of Oregon's bull trout population has either disappeared or is at risk of disappearing. And, 83 percent of the remaining spawning and rearing habitat is found in watersheds containing roadless lands. Protecting those irreplaceable resources is crucial if we want bull trout to thrive here.

As a hunter, I know that roadless areas provide important benefits for big game as well. Popular game animals like elk, mule deer and bighorn

sheep benefit from having expansive areas where they can escape some of the pressure of hunting season. As a result, roadless areas provide hunters with bigger bull elk and buck mule deer and longer hunting seasons and more liberal hunting regulations.

But hunting is about more than just bagging a large buck deer or bull elk. And fishing is about more than simply catching fish. These treasured activities are about enjoying the solitude, the peace and quiet and the sense of freedom that comes from being immersed in nature. In our ever more crowded world, this perhaps is the greatest resource that roadless areas can provide for all outdoors people.

For years, the fates of our last roadless areas have been in a tug of war between environmentalists and industry. But anglers and hunters, who often know the land and water better than anyone, have been largely ignored. There's an old saying that politics is too important to leave to politicians. Well, the environment is too important to leave to environmentalists. Protecting our roadless areas isn't just an environmentalists' issue. It's an issue for anyone who cares about America's hunting and fishing heritage.

It's time to put this debate behind us and for politicians and land managers to protect our priceless roadless areas for generations to come.

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