

## Conservation: From Loss to Dedication

Wildfires are not a new phenomena along the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT), but the first time one of the areas I knew well burnt, I felt a tremendous sense of loss. Loss doesn't always shape us. It may be a sporadic inward pressure or an unyielding tug backwards in time, but it does not always dictate the trajectory of our lives. The River Complex Fire, though, took something from me in a manner that molded my perspective and changed my goals.

One summer, the PCT wound through lush meadows and mossy, leaning pines. The next summer, the greens were replaced by the all consuming blacks of charcoal snags. One summer, I was nearly trampled by a bear cub. The next, there was no life but the microorganisms slowly reinstating the nutrients necessary for complex life. It's a natural process, I suppose: the destruction and reinstitution of life. As with human mortality, it's something we expect and would never hope to prevent entirely. But it didn't make it any easier to lose the space that existed in my memories, pure and safe. It was devastating while backpacking that summer, to wake up each morning in this forest expecting the sound of birds and the familiar sight of intense green hills, and see only ash. Climbing over the fallen trees would leave thick residue coating your legs, and the red sap oozing from the dead snags looked uncannily like blood. We couldn't decide if it smelled of vinegar or olives.

The hardest part – the part that changed the course of my life – was knowing that the prevalence and intensity of the fires was not natural, even if the fires themselves were. I hiked for miles, caught in limbo between screaming and crying because this was a human-caused problem with viable solutions that we were unwilling to implement. Until this point, I had been willing to do my best to be a decent person and keep my head down. I biked to school and work every day, with soaked papers from the rain or backpacks stacked one atop the other for athletic events after school. I was willing to leave well enough alone. We all have a cause or passion that dictates our every choice and conversation: something our lives orbit around. After hiking in, living in, the remnants of a forest I had loved with my whole heart, my life began to orbit around a new center: the active preservation of natural spaces.

I have since taken highschool and college classes on environmental science and biology. I've joined a council on Central Oregon green spaces in underserved communities. I've volunteered planting native species and weeding local ecosystems. Even more important to me is the time I've spent volunteering with outdoor youth programs. And this summer I will volunteer at a camp, taking students backpacking in the very area that changed my trajectory. These kids, from my community and others, matter so much to me because allowing them the opportunities to find passion for the wilderness is how we will build a future in which our populations are willing to implement the changes we need in order to protect the biosphere.

I always placed intrinsic value on the wilderness and wildlife. This belief – the belief that value and importance come not only from relevance to humanity – became passion and dedication to

conservation as I hiked through dead trees along the PCT. The intersection of loss from the fire and the knowledge I've gained from education and experience in the time since is what will continue to motivate my quest to learn and engage in college. It has shifted and reinforced my consideration of fields of study, piquing my interest in botany and geology. The enduring commitment to the wilderness has also given me an interesting perspective to consider as I study mathematics and anthropology. Remembering the intense emotion from that summer, shins and palms smeared with ash, has reinforced my curiosity in all subjects and inspired my dedication to providing outdoor education to younger generations.