

ON THE VALUE OF RETAINING CHAMBERLAIN BASIN AS WILDERNESS

The Idaho Primitive Area as presently constituted contains a nearly intact, predominantly undisturbed ecosystem. The Chamberlain Basin is a very important key, integral to this whole system. There are very few regions left in the United States where such intact systems occur, and this area represents a unique complex of geology, land form, flora and fauna. One could focus on a variety of resources, such as the fisheries, the watershed, even the timber, but the example of the elk population is fairly well documented and understood and can suffice to illustrate the implications of the exclusion of Chamberlain Basin.

Currently, one of the truly premium elk populations in the northern Rocky Mountain region grazes this basin in a pattern relatively uninfluenced by humans. The elk have developed a pattern of use of the unique mountain meadow system and the timber during spring, summer, and fall which is not causing range deterioration. The wintering areas along the four drainages surrounding the Plateau likewise are being used in a manner which is not causing damage. The exact mechanisms involved which serve to prevent overuse are not clear, but they do exist. In essence the complex of canyons and plateau are an integral unit wherein the elk, a major influent of the ecosystem, are existing in a dynamic but relatively undisturbed state which does not seem to be deteriorating as is the case in all too many areas elsewhere in this region.

What can happen if the area is logged? Documented evidence that such human activity, including road construction, actual logging and associated activities, will disrupt traditions of use by elk is abundant. One may expect that, as the meadows become subject to more human activity, elk activity will decrease. These meadows produce phenomenal amounts of forage, but dislocations in activity patterns of elk may well alter the natural pattern of use and change the balance which now prevents the overuse of the meadows. Ultimately, one relies upon the elk themselves to indicate the most desirable habitats, and if disruptions occur, these populations will change in behavior and eventually in size. We are becoming more and more aware that summer and fall forages are important in maintaining healthy big game populations, even as we have been aware that winter forage supplies are also critical.

The elk also need the timber. Timber serves as escape cover from storms, hunters, and natural predators. Timber stands provide understories of succulent forage in late summer and fall when the meadows are desiccate. Snow depths underneath timber are less than in openings, providing easier travel to winter ranges and easier access to late fall forages. The Chamberlain Basin with its multiplicity of habitats is obviously a prime elk range.

But the Chamberlain Basin is only a part of the range of these elk populations. We should be aware of the fallacy of protecting only a portion of the annual ranges of large ungulates, as has been done in the Yellowstone and many other areas. Incomplete protection can lead to disruption of traditional migration patterns and result in excessive use of

some areas associated with the winter ranges as well. It is not at all difficult to see that disruption of a part of this system will cause disruption of other parts as well, even though the other parts are far removed from the area of concern.

If the system is an interwoven complex, and disruption of the elk-vegetation interaction can occur, one should also suspect that disruption of the other end of the system, the predator-prey complex, can also occur. Such alterations may have ramifications far beyond the boundaries of the wilderness, since cougar populations are known to contain dispersing individuals, floaters which move at random beyond the bounds of the established populations from which they come.

Wilderness is pretty much a unique American idea, stemming in part as an attempt to preserve a portion of our natural heritage intact. Other nations, including those to which we export timber products, are looking to us for ways of restoring original natural areas, which, through hindsight, are recognized to have high value to their societies. A major problem with many of our present wilderness areas is that complete ecosystems have not been preserved. Fortunately, we know enough about Chamberlain Basin to realize that it is indeed an integral part of the wilderness in the Idaho Primitive Area, as the example of the elk populations indicates. There is no doubt that the real, long-term value of this intact system far outweighs the individual parts of it, some of which can be identified to have economic value. We have much to learn about the natural dynamic processes within our forests. Those trees in Chamberlain should serve as objects for investigation by silviculturists; the watersheds are worth intense investigation by hydrologists; the soils need the scrutiny of soil scientists. The lessons this area, if left intact, can teach us can help our management of resources outside the wilderness.

Finally, it is well to consider the quality of life that we find in Idaho. How many of us in this state find a large measure of satisfaction and security in knowing that there are large blocks of land where man's influence is fleeting, not permanently impressed into the landscape? Aren't we indeed richer in knowing that some of our timber is going to be left, that we aren't so pressed for our resources that we have to put every piece of merchantable timberland into production? Or are we too close to the issue, too bound up in our own immediate needs to recognize the broader values of our wilderness resources? In Chamberlain, we indeed have the chance to demonstrate to our successors that we were capable of preserving an example of our original American heritage, even at a time when stresses and pressures to exploit them were great. How we decide this issue will tell us something about ourselves.