

# The Dream

## The Mission:

Fire has been a part of the Western landscape since the “beginning of time.” It has been, and still is, just as much a part of the environment as the trees, shrubs, rocks, rivers, and animals are. Indeed, in many areas low intensity fires are a necessary component in maintaining the vitality and health of the ecosystem. In most areas of the forested West, fires burned every 9 to 20 years, as evidenced by fire scars left on old growth ponderosa pine. The ponderosa-dominated forests on the east slope of the Cascades and Sierras looked like wide, open parks.

Wildland fires always will be a part of our experience. What has changed is how humans have regarded fire. The original inhabitants let it burn uncontrolled. There is evidence that some groups purposefully ignited fires in order to keep the forests open; so that the animals they hunted would have more ground vegetation to browse. As settlers moved into the western frontier and established communities, fire became an enemy. It destroyed homes and life and consumed valuable timber. For over a hundred years, fires were aggressively, and for the most part, successfully attacked. As a result, the forests became crowded with growth. The grasses and shrubs on the forest floors could not compete with the overwhelming proliferation of shade-tolerant trees. The trees could not compete with each other, resulting in a diseased and weakened habitat that easily fall victim to destructive high-intensity fires – fires that cost millions of dollars to suppress and result in an ecosystem that takes a lifetime to recover. Compounding the problem is the urban encroachment of housing developments into this volatile landscape. Today, we are pondering solutions to a problem that we helped to create with our management...and lack of management... of our forests and shrublands. What can be done to alleviate this explosive fire situation and help restore the forests to their natural cycle of low intensity burns and rejuvenation?

The mission of Columbia Breaks Fire Interpretive Center is to inform people of all ages of the historic impact and ecological role of wildland fire; the interaction of fire with human culture; the role of wildland agencies in fire management; and how the public can prevent / reduce the impact of wildfires. We want to preserve the history of the management, detection, and suppression of wildland fires. We want to offer education about wildfire ecology. And we want to provide opportunities to examine the numerous solutions to restoring and maintaining our forests; understanding that there is no one single solution to every problem, and that no solution may work in every place or work forever.

## What We Have:

What Columbia Breaks has thus far is the result of a lot volunteer time, small donations, and larger grants. As we find the funding, we add another interpretive piece to our site. Much of our small budget goes to maintaining what we have. Any amount that we have left over goes to making small improvements. Thus far, most of our interpretive mediums are self-guiding, requiring little on-site staffing.

**\*The Trail of Forest and Fire:** This trail, two thirds of which is handicapped accessible and  $\frac{3}{4}$  of mile long, has 18 interpretive signs dealing with forest and fire ecology and history. The signs are designed so that they can be changed as interpretive information changes.

**\*3 Fire Lookouts:** Two of the lookouts are furnished. One is at ground level so that visitors can go inside. Visitors can climb two levels to another fully furnished lookout with the guidance of an interpreter. There is a vintage telephone line connecting two of the lookouts.

**\*Amphitheater:** The amphitheater sits in a natural bowl and can seat about 300+ people. There is electricity to the site and a portable stage that is stored in a storage shed in front of the spectator area.

**\*Business Building:** The 900 sq. ft. building is used for meetings and to house some historical artifacts and interpretive materials. It functions as an Entiat area visitor center in the summertime. And part of it is rented out as a living quarters for a renter who pays the utilities and provides some security to the site.

**\*Covered Shelter:** The 30' X 60' pole barn structure presently is used as a picnic area and as a site where groups, such as school groups, can meet before touring the trail. Expanding the use of this structure is the next priority for completing

interpretive venues that are self-guiding/instructional. A professional site plan has been developed to complete this structure. Water and electricity will also be extended to the shelter. A security system needs to be installed at this location to protect whatever artifacts might be housed there in the future.

**\*School Curriculum:** A hands-on curriculum kit has been developed for upper elementary and middle school level students. The teachers of nearby school districts use the materials in their classrooms and then take the students to Columbia Breaks to hike the trail and see examples of what they have studied in the classroom.

**\*Videos:** We have produced two videos. One is an introductory/promotional video that discusses the mission of CB and the origins of its inception. The second video, *Fire Lookouts: A National Treasure*, introduces the visitor to the life and responsibilities of a North Cascades fire lookout named Lightning Bill. It was nominated for a Telly Award in 2011.

**\*Website:** [columbiabreakswildfire.com](http://columbiabreakswildfire.com). This site will soon have panoramic views of Columbia Breaks and have the promotional video when it is updated.

## Our Vision

Our grand vision is to build an interactive interpretive venue that would tell the story of forest and fire. It would provide a visual, audio (oral histories, animal sounds, fire traffic), and tactile experience to visitors seeking to understand the history and issues involved in wildland fire management. It would include all the modern technological options available such as QRL codes to direct the visitor to interactive web sites. It would encompass the transition of an old-growth, eastside forest... to the forests we have today ...to the forests that we wish to have. It will tell a story...it would involve a walk through the forest....The journey will be a time-lapse adventure with each phase being contained in its own gallery and each gallery connected to the next with a tunnel.

Entrance & Gallery #1: The welcoming area will be a plaza area with picnic tables, live trees, and drought resistant garden plants that are native to the site (60+ have been identified). As the visitors entered the building they would be greeted by a bronze memorial statue honoring all wildland fire firefighters. They would also be greeted by bird songs ( Over 100 species of birds have been identified on the CB site) and more potted trees. The entry portal will open into a room that displays the names of the major donors to CB and space for historical photographs, forest murals, and art shows on loan.

Gallery #2 will display a primitive old growth eastside ponderosa-dominated forest. The trees would have life-size trunks, some of which might have bark panels that open to display flora/fauna facts about the forest and unique features of tree growth. It will help the visitor experience what a healthy forest looks like and demonstrate a healthy burn cycle. It may also show how Native Americans interacted with the forest.

Gallery#3 will move the visitor into the time of western European settlement: clearing the land for crops and homes; logging; getting the logs to the mill via the river; not worrying about fire unless it threatened their homes and livelihood. The story in this section might end with the Big Burn of 1910 where both lives and property were lost on a terrifying scale and the US Government, by means of the US Forest Service, instituted a policy of aggressive suppression of all fires.

Gallery #4 will take the visitor into the history of fire suppression activities. They could walk through a fire lookout and experience a lightning storm and be involved in spotting and reporting a fire...followed by the experience of all the mechanics of suppressing a wildfire...the experiences of smokejumpers and rappellers and ground crews and retardant bombers....with displays of all their equipment and tools. The display could end with the rehabilitation/erosion control following a fire. It may also include answers to, "What happens to animals in a fire?"

Gallery #5 will transition the visitor into a forest today...overgrown, unhealthy and not managed for a variety of political and economic reasons, along with a 100 year history of over-suppression. It could show the specific results of over growth (Bug infestation, lack of forbs and shrubs, intense fires, ladder fuels). The room will also show the growth of urban areas into forest boundaries, changing the focus of fire-fighting efforts. The displays will offer partial solutions to the problems; thus demonstrating the complexity of choices that managers have today.

Gallery #6 will take the visitor back to the registration area where there might be a gift shop.

Library: A library that could house archival material might be needed. Both individuals and agencies have documents and photographs that could document the history of fire management/suppression. That library could be housed in the business building or the interpretive building.

Trail Extension: The CB interpretive trail will eventually be connected to the riverfront trail envisioned by the City of Entiat and hopefully extended to the top of the bluffs behind CB.

Lookouts: The possibility exists that CB could upgrade one of its lookouts or bring in another lookout in which visitors could stay overnight.

The board and supporters of Columbia Breaks realize the immensity of the costs and work involved in producing such an ambitious project. It will require the help of professionals and knowledge/skills of local citizens to make it happen. It will include a partnership with the Entiat Historical Society who will pursue their dream on the CB site. It will take the commitment of not just the Entiat community but of the entire Columbia Breaks region that encompasses the eastside forests of Eastern Washington. It will require looking to both old and new partners for financial support. Hopefully, the experience will be a unique, one-of-its-kind destination for visitors from all over the country.