

Ignorance, Knowledge, and Wisdom

Ignorance is the absence of knowledge (sometimes willfully) but not the lack of intelligence. One can be very intelligent and also very ignorant of many areas of knowledge. Knowledge is the accumulation of information surrounding a subject (sometimes it is confusing). And wisdom is what we chose to do with that knowledge for admirable purposes. Presently in 2022 we are looking into the face of an ecological catastrophe on Earth, the roots of which rest in past ignorance of how our behavior at that time would affect the future. This essay is about mistakes we made in the 50's and 60's that degraded air, water, and land resources in Wallowa County and of which I am personally familiar.

When we made these mistakes no one thought much about it, everyone was just making a living and most folks were not greedy. At that time there were few people of knowledge that could guide us. Now the County has a wealth of individuals with extensive environmental knowledge to help avoid such mistakes. Still, understanding the history of our mistakes is a good way to knead knowledge into the bread of wisdom.

At our ranch on Tenderfoot Valley Lane we spent a lot of effort to rid our fields of pests and weeds. It being post-WWII one of the new approaches was application of chemicals. Dad had fixed up our WWII Willys Jeep with a spray boom across the front. The top was removed, windshield laid down, and the Jeep was filled with barrels of chemicals. As a youngster we happily went around the fields spraying DDT and 2-4-D, the spray wafting up over the open Jeep and down into our lungs. The national application of pesticides went from 100 million pounds in 1945 to 600 million pounds by 1960. DDT is now known to be a lethal chemical (banned in 1972) and 2-4-D is still being evaluated. We were totally ignorant of the ultimate effects of DDT. Broadleaf trees along our river banks, cooled the water during the hot summer and provided relief to the fish and roosting for the hawks. Eventually these trees all died from aerial spraying of chemicals. Those fields are now mostly barren of trees. Also gone now are the natural borders between fields and along creeks which were home to abundant pheasants and other wildlife. The mistake of tilling carried too far.

Another mistake was our treatment of a small creek that ran through the barnyard, from a spring and ditch runoff. During the mid 50's the stream was healthy with many frogs and other small aquatic animals, willows, and wet land plants, a great place for a small child at play. The creek ran along the bottom of a raised bank with a slope down to the water. This was an area 75 yards long by 50 yards deep. Dad decided to put his feedlot here. We fed over a hundred yearlings in the lot all winter. We also put the 15 pigs we kept in a fenced enclosure over the lower part of the stream so they could wallow in the water and mud in the summer. After many years of urine and manure running off into the stream it became mostly sterile by the mid 60's. The canaries (frogs) in the coal mine were dead. We were ignorant of the pollution effects of the manure and urine on the small stream. However, several decades later Dad scooped out a pond near the spring which filled in with marshy aquatic plants which wildlife frequented. Ignorance to knowledge to wisdom.

In the early 1960's Dad decided to log off the big Ponderosa Pines in Devils Gulch out on The Divide. These giants had never been cut before. There were just a few in each ravine, impressively standing above their surroundings. Dad paid Max Gorsline to take out the old trees. Looking back on that decision the little money made probably wasn't worth the loss of the old trees. A couple of decades later he paid forester Leo Goebel and horse team logger Bill Graning to identify and selectively thin the trees on our lands near the ski run on McCully Creek. I suspect Dad had learned a lesson from arbitrarily taking the big old pines. He traveled from ignorance toward knowledge and had the wisdom to change his approach to forests.

Regarding trees, when I was in high school several of us signed on to plant trees for the Joseph Ranger Station in the early spring. We piled into the old green International Travelall and spent 40 minutes banging down the pothole road out to Lick Creek. We were tasked with replanting logged over clear cuts. With our aluminum trays filled with new fir and pine seedlings (covered with some snow) the six of us would spend the day planting 2,400-4,800 trees, each 6 feet apart. That is a lot of trees. The survival rate for those trees was less than 10%. Since we were only planting a single species we were replacing a complex ancient forest with a monoculture. The point is that a complex forest culture that took many hundreds of years to develop cannot be put back in a couple of weeks by some teenage boys. Ignorance.

There are other stories but these are the ones that have bothered me over the years. In 1951 there were 2.5 billion humans on Earth; today there are 8 billion. There are simply too many humans that want more and more resources that the Earth cannot give. Business as Usual is no longer an acceptable attitude going forward, our civilization is at stake. Guilt about our past behavior is irrelevant, the important action is to use the knowledge from our mistakes to change the immediate future. Each of us needs to be accountable for changing how we treat the land, water, and air. We need to convert our knowledge into wisdom and take care of the Earth.

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