



January 27, 2011

Eye on the Environment

## **Winter, Firewood, and an Old Lodgepole Pine Tree**

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As the snow keeps piling up and the cold temperatures of winter set in, I look gratefully at our woodshed with its ample supply of firewood. The rows of split and stacked firewood give me a sense of satisfaction, a sense of independence that we can at least stay warm regardless of what the weather, economics, or global oil prices might throw our way. And after spending time outdoors, it is hard to beat sitting next to the wood stove and soaking up the warm, dry heat that radiates outward. A simple but treasured pleasure.

Our woodshed is full of lodgepole pine firewood with a bit of western larch and Douglas fir mixed in. Almost all the firewood came from our twenty acres of land and is a mixture of mountain pine beetle killed trees and trees that have fallen over in the wind storms that occasionally blow through our valley.

Even though our woodshed holds enough firewood to get us through a couple of mild winters, we try to fill the woodshed each year as a safeguard. Just in case we get a

cold, snowy winter like we used to get. And the way things have been shaping up, who knows but this winter just might be one to fall in that category.

I enjoy cutting firewood. I like the good, honest physical labor involved. I like the thought of gathering our fuel needs from a renewable energy supply. I enjoy the aroma from the turpenes in the resins that are released from a freshly cut piece of firewood.

And part of the enjoyment from gathering firewood comes from occasionally stopping to count the tree rings from the stump to see how old the tree was when it germinated and grew from a seed to a seedling to a mature tree so many years ago.

A few years ago on the north edge of our place a large lodgepole pine blew over in a wind storm. It was 202 years old. That particular tree was an elder even among its own species as most lodgepole pine trees are generally considered short lived in this area.

It had started its life just prior to the time that the Lewis and Clark Expedition came through the Blackfoot Valley in 1806. It was close to 100 years old when the first homesteaders in the upper Swan Valley, Charlie and Ben Holland, patented their land claims in 1904 and 1905.

That tree escaped the historic forest fires of 1910 that burned across large swaths of Idaho and Montana. It was left untouched

when Peter and Bertha Smith homesteaded this parcel of land beginning in 1916. It went unscathed from the wind storm of 1949 that downed thousands of trees across Swan Valley.

It was 164 years old when the first man walked on the moon in 1969. It even fought off the mountain pine beetles that hit adjacent trees in 2005. But during a wind storm in 2007 the tree was uprooted. It had been part of over two centuries worth of history. Its tree rings and lack of fire scars told part of its personal story but much passed on when it did. Still, having lived near this tree for almost thirty years I knew there was a lot more to its story.

This tree was anchored on part of the subtle ridge system that snakes between a number of wet areas and provides a travel corridor for many wildlife species. Through the years, from various tracks in the mud and snow as well as direct observations, I know that a multitude of wildlife species had traveled by and sometimes lived in close proximity to this tree. Plenty of deer, coyotes, and squirrels had traipsed by but also a few grizzly and black bears.

Occasionally, a mountain lion hunted through the area. Elk and moose came through from time to time. Ermine, darting about in their frenzied state, had hunted through the area on a fairly regular basis. In the warm summer days, painted turtles traveled by in their determined persistence to get from one wet pothole to the neighboring pothole. A family of ravens had built a nest and raised their young in an adjacent tree.

At various times throughout any given year, a minimum of fifty species of birds would visit, with some to nest, in the area where the old lodgepole pine stood.

Another part of the tree's story is more speculative but probable. Native Americans may have passed by this tree while hunting or traveling as there is nearby evidence of a native peeled tree. And from all the old beaver sign in this area it is reasonable to surmise that a number of early-day trappers worked this area through the many years of this tree's existence.

Even though the tree blew over in the storm, in a sense its existence didn't end there. Part of its branches were left scattered on the ground to decompose and help feed the next generation of trees and plants. Part of the tree went to a local sawmill to be cut into boards while the rest became firewood. It had been a slow growing tree with tight growth rings and the dense wood made good firewood as it burned long and hot.

And as a keepsake, from its stump I cut off and kept a slice of the tree, called a tree cookie that through its annual tree rings recorded its time here in Swan Valley. All 202 years.