Historic Human Processes
Influencing the Current Condition
of the
Squaw-Elliott-Lake Watershed

(C.R. Job RR-1073)

Report for: Rogue River National Forest

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II. HISTORIC AND CURRENT WATERSHED CONDITIONS, PROCESSES, FUNCTIONS, AND TRENDS

1. HUMAN PROCESSES

A. HISTORIC HUMAN PROCESSES INFLUENCING CURRENT WATERSHED CONDITIONS

1. Prehistory (Ca. 10,000 years before present to A.D. 1775)

Throughout the prehistoric period, as during the subsequent historic period, the diverse terrain characteristics and other geographic factors of the Squaw/Elliott/Lakes Watershed Analysis Area influenced the location and the kinds of human activities that occurred. Ranging from broad alluvial terraces along the Applegate River and lower Squaw Creek at the lowest elevations to the rugged Siskiyou Crest that forms the southern headwaters of Elliott Creek at the highest elevations—and with much of the intervening area composed of very steep slopes, topography has been a major determinant in where prehistoric people lived and traveled. Geological and hydrological factors (massive landslides, presence of "soapstone" talc deposits, gold and copper ores, flood-prone alluvial terraces) have had a major influence in the patterns of human occupation from prehistory through the present.

Based on information from the wider Pacific Northwest/California area, as well as archaeological evidence excavated from sites within the Applegate Lake project area during the 1970s-1980s, people have probably lived in and used the Squaw/Elliott/Lakes Watershed for the past 10,000 years. Two archaeological sites, 35JA52 and 35JA53, located at or near the mouth of Squaw Creek yielded artifacts that probably document native habitation from at least 8,000 to 3,000 years ago. Other nearby sites along the main river, also excavated by Oregon State University under contract to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (A.C.E.), provide evidence of succeeding human habitation, on through the early historic period (e.g., the presence of glass trade-beads and metal among the artifacts at a small pithouse village near the mouth of Brushy Gulch).

Because of numerous surveys and excavations generated by the A.C.E.'s Applegate Lake project, the portion of the Applegate River between the mouths of Kinney Creek and Elliott Creek is probably by far the best-documented area in the eastern Siskiyou Mountains in terms of archaeological resources. Intensive surveys indicate that village/base-camp sites are found almost solely along extensive alluvial terraces adjacent to the main river, often near the mouths of major tributaries such as Squaw Creek, French Gulch, and Kinney Creek. Above Squaw Creek, river-edge sites become much smaller in size (e.g., a sparse lithic scatter near the mouth of Elliott Creek). The adjacent low-elevation oak- and brush-covered slopes, although they doubtless were important resource-gathering areas, contain few archaeological sites except at major ridge-top saddles and springs. In higher elevations of the Watershed Analysis Area, which includes the vast majority of its acreage, over fifteen years of archaeological survey of proposed timber sales, etc. by the Forest Service has...
given a solid understanding of the site-location pattern in the remaining portions of the W.A.A. Aside from two "upland base-camp" sites (at a major ridge-saddle between Mule Creek and Beaver Creek and near Big Squaw Lake), most of the prehistoric sites in this area are very small, sparse lithic scatters (places where stone tools were made or re-sharpened during hunting forays). These are typically situated at ridge-top saddles, springs, and at or very close to meadows and other major openings.

Human populations in the Squaw/Elliott/Lakes W.A.A. probably remained quite small throughout prehistory, but with some growth in numbers occurring over the Early Archaic and Middle Archaic periods (ca. 8,000-2,000 year B.P.) and a possible "spike" in growth during the Late Archaic (after 2,000 years ago). It is likely that, as in other areas of southwestern Oregon/northern California, anthropogenic fire increased during the Middle Archaic, in an attempt to maintain the more drought-tolerant (and food-rich) vegetation that had characterized the dry climatic era between 8,000 and 4,000 years ago. Use of fire to maintain and create favored food-gathering areas continued into the early historic period, until the natives were forcefully removed from the region by Euro-American settlers.

Three major native groups that inhabited or used the general area during the Late Archaic period would have been the Takelma, Dakubetede, and Shasta peoples. Their major enduring legacy to the land was the extensive acreage kept "cleared" of dense vegetation through repeated burning, particularly at low elevations and at the highest meadows; this legacy has only begun to fade during the past eighty years of fire suppression in the area.

2. Early Euro-American Exploration (ca. 1775-1850)

Although Euro-American explorers sailed along the southern Oregon coast by the 1770s, the first penetration of the interior came in the late 1820s, with the arrival of Hudson's Bay Company fur-trapping brigades. Although H.B.C. and others attempted to "trap out" the streams of the region during the 1820s-40s, it seems doubtful that beaver trappers had much if any environmental impact within the Applegate River drainage south of the Little Applegate/Beaver Creek areas. The Squaw/Elliott/Lakes area was simply too remote for most of these fast-moving groups, which passed through the Rogue River Valley region annually and pursued only a few weeks' worth of trapping while travelling on to the the north or south.

3. Mining and Initial Settlement (ca. 1850-1900)

The first recorded prospecting in the uppermost Applegate River drainage occurred in 1852-53. Small placer-gold operations proliferated along the main river and Elliott Creek during the 1850s and continued through the 1860s. (Squaw Creek seems to have been somewhat less affected by placer gold mining than other areas within the W.A.A.) During the 1870s, relatively large-scale hydraulic mining of "high terrace" placer deposits began. Major hydraulic operations occurred along the main river near Water Gulch, Kanaka Gulch, Brushy Gulch, French Gulch, and Grouse Creek. Later in the nineteenth century, extensive hydraulic mining began at a number of locations along lower Elliott Creek, particularly near the mouths of Joe Creek and Dutch Creek (e.g., the "Boggs Mine"). Hydraulic mining entailed the construction of lengthy, large-capacity ditches, diverting water from the Applegate River and its
tributaries to the mines. Turbidity caused by hydraulic mining, depending on the amount and timing of the resulting debris, may have had significant effects on the local fishery. In the 1870s-80s, Squaw Creek (although very little hydraulic mining actually occurred within its drainage) supplied the bulk of the water used to mine the Squaw Lakes Mining Company's property between French Gulch and Brushy Gulch; impacts to the creek's anadromous fishery habitat may have been significant. Hard-rock, or lode, mining within the W.A.A. was extremely limited during the nineteenth century and was confined almost exclusively to a few small-producing gold deposits.

Areas with agricultural potential were restricted largely to the broader alluvial terraces along the main river; Elliott Creek's steep terrain discouraged any would-be farmers. Therefore, what little farming settlement that occurred during the nineteenth century (and subsequently) took place along the river (from French Gulch downstream) and lowermost Squaw Creek. These small operations focussed on raising livestock, growing hay or other forage, and tending small vegetable gardens and fruit orchards; open range on federal lands in the higher elevations of the Siskiyou Mountains supplied summer grazing. The average agricultural population living within the W.A.A. at any one time probably never exceeded 50-100 people.

Miners and settlers "high-graded" the forests of the W.A.A. of good-quality, accessible sugar pine and ponderosa pine for cabins, barns, flume boards, mine timbers, and so on. They also continued (and perhaps intensified) the aboriginal pattern of "light burning."

4. Intensive Resource Use and the Early Forest Service Period (ca. 1900-1930)

The three decades following the turn of the century witnessed steadily increasing resource extraction within the Squaw/Elliott/Lakes W.A.A. Simultaneously, the Forest Service began to administer the federal lands within the area; it embarked on initial infrastructure development (trails, roads, telephone lines) that allowed some resource uses, such as grazing, to expand.

Hydraulic mining continued after 1900, albeit on a reduced scale and largely at the more remote, higher elevation placer deposits that had not been mined previously (i.e., at Elliott Creek's Daffodil Mine, Pennsylvania Mine, etc.) Some hard-rock gold mining persisted as well. The most dramatic lode mining activity involved the low-grade copper ores of the middle sections of Elliott Creek (Blue Ledge Mine, New Bloomfield Mine) and Squaw Creek ("Great Eastern" claims). Of these, the Blue Ledge operation on Joe Creek involved by far the most extensive development (including several miles of adits and a sizeable mining camp complete with electricity and indoor plumbing). Although the copper mines of southwestern Oregon never even began to rival the contemporary copper operations of the American southwest (e.g., Bisbee, Arizona), they encouraged a flurry of economic investment and created hopes (unfulfilled) for a railroad from Medford into the headwaters of the Applegate River drainage. By 1920, the area's brief and comparatively minor copper boom was over.

Local livestock ranchers expanded their operations during the second decade of the twentieth century, particularly with the high prices of World War I. Heavy grazing pressure, including what Forest Service range examiners described as "overgrazing," resulted during the 1910s-1920s, particularly in the higher elevation meadows of Silver Fork Basin, Donomore Meadows, and other places
alcoig the Siskiyou Crest. Flood irrigation of pasture at the "home ranches" within the W.A.A. (i.e., along the main river) typically did not use fish screens at ditch intakes; over the course of several decades, this probably contributed to a significant decline in the fish population.

Forest Service management during this period concentrated on initial infrastructure development and fire suppression, particularly after the severe 1910 fire season (the "Windy Peak Fire" at one time allegedly threatened the copper mining "town" of Joe Bar, on Elliott Creek). Local fire-setting practises probably continued well into the new century. Whether human-caused or not, at least three large fires (in excess of 1,000 acres each) burned the steep, south-aspect slopes of Elliott Creek Ridge during the 1920s. However, the government's fire-suppression campaign took hold by about 1930, ending the centuries-long pattern of human-set, human-aided, or human-permitted light ground fires that had kept much of the low- and mid-elevation forests relatively open. Brush species encroached on meadows and grassy savanna. Within the forest, conifer cover gradually became more dense and composed of far more Douglas-fir and white fir than the previously dominant pine.

5. The Depression, World War II, and After (1930-1970)

The Great Depression saw a reduction in livestock numbers within the W.A.A. In addition, the previously small acreage of timber harvest (for the most part associated with local ranchers' needs and development of the Blue Ledge Mine) became even smaller.

However, the higher price of gold after 1932 stimulated another round of small-scale placer and lode mining; placering undoubtedly created turbidity in the main river and tributary streams, but winter remained the main mining season, and conflicts with fish habitat quality were therefore less than if miners had muddied the streams during low-flow, warmer periods of the year. Depression-era mining included not only a number of small gold mines (for example, the Grubstake Mine in the upper Elliott Creek drainage), but several cinnabar (mercury ore) operations as well (i.e., along Squaw Creek and at Maple Dell Gap). (Although some retorting of the cinnabar apparently occurred, there is no indication of adverse effects on streams; these operations were brief-lived and miniscule in the amount of ore recovered.)

With an increased labor force provided by the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Forest Service built more trails, roads, and administrative structures (e.g., Hutton Guard Station, Squaw Peak Lookout, Perks Pasture Guard Station) during the 1930s and early 1940s. Construction of the "Applegate/Mt. Ashland Loop Road" (current FS Road 20) in 1936-37 opened up the highest elevations of the W.A.A. to motorized access. It resulted in more recreational use and, with the high lumber demand of World War II and the post-war boom, dramatically increased harvest of mid-to-high-elevation timber stands on federal and private lands.

Access to the lower-elevation timber of Elliott Creek canyon was provided by a road and bridges built during training exercises by Camp White detachments of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in 1942-44. (During the Blue Ledge Mine period, a road had penetrated up to the mouth of Joe Creek, but commercial timber harvest was not viable in the area until after 1940.) Additional roading, both Forest Service and private, proliferated during the 1950-60s.
These roads permitted logging in some the heretofore most remote and
topographically rugged portions of the Applegate River drainage.

6. Recent Trends and Events

The 1970s and 1980s witnessed intensive logging (much of it using skyline cable
systems and other technologies adapted to steep terrain) throughout the
mixed-conifer and true fir forests of the W.A.A.; clearcutting and shelterwood
harvest systems dominated, whereas earlier logging had relied largely on
selective cutting. The Squaw Creek Road, a challenging engineering project
built across steep terrain in the 1970s, replaced a crude low-water route along
the creek bottom and was one of the last major additions to the W.A.A.'s
transportation system.

During the 1970s, the land around Squaw Lakes, formerly privately owned, became
part of the National Forest, leading to small-scale recreational development at
the site. Development by the Army Corps of Engineers of Applegate Lake
Reservoir, which covered the former pasturelands along the main river, was by
far the most dramatic and environmentally important change of this period. In
addition to the impoundment of a sizable portion of the W.A.A., new roads and
recreational sites were built and new public use patterns evolved. Because of
Applegate Lake, recreational use of the lower elevations of the
Squaw/Elliott/Lake Watershed Analysis Area has (a) increased substantially and
(b) changed in character from pre-1980 use.