

Disjunct

Coastal Forest Thriving in Idaho

STORY AND PHOTOS BY DENNIS PENCE

Bob, a forester for one of what I call the alphabet agencies, sat in the passenger seat of the pickup as we drove to the Grandad area on Dworshak Reservoir. I had accepted a summer job operating a road grader, blading logging roads in Grandad, and he was the forester in charge.

“Is that red alder?” I asked, somewhat incredulous.

Bob glanced at me wonderingly. “Yeah. Why is that strange?”

“I haven’t seen red alder since I left the coast of Washington a few years ago.”

“This is the coastal disjunct,” he intoned, as if it were common knowledge.

“Coastal what?” I vaguely recalled the usage of “disjunct” as an adjective, meaning disjointed or separated. It’s not a word used in everyday conversation, and I’d never heard the term “coastal disjunct” before. Bob used it as if “disjunct” were a noun.

“Plants that are native west of the Cascade Mountains grow here also,” he explained. “That’s why it’s the coastal disjunct.”

My interest was piqued. Had I been somehow magically transported back in time, I would have thought I was somewhere along the coast of Washington. The vegetation was lush, rainforest lush. Less than thirty miles away is dry country and rattlesnakes. Quite the contrast.

Of course, in my travels on the highways of northern Idaho, I had noticed the more lush vegetation and resemblance to the coast, but fifty-five miles per hour on a paved highway doesn’t allow for close observation. A person doesn’t get a real feel for the coastal disjunct until in the backcountry, whether it be driving slowly on a logging road or



ABOVE: Glade Creek in the Lochsa Research Natural Area is a good place to observe Idaho’s coastal disjunct forest.



ABOVE: Lush growth quickly reclaims an abandoned logging road.

hiking in the woods.

I was camping out while operating the grader, so I spent evenings after work driving the roads and hiking through the woods observing the growth. Western red cedar dominates much of the forest canopy. One evening while hiking, I found a Western hemlock, which I previously thought grew only along the coast. This rather nondescript species took on a whole new meaning for me, as did red alder, along with ground cover growth such as maidenhair fern. I was delighted to find the tasty Pacific trailing blackberry.

At first, I thought climate must have caused the coastal disjunct to occur, because the area is traditionally the wettest part of Idaho. But Bob informed me it was more about geology. He said that millions of years ago, when the ocean penetrated farther inland, coastal plants thrived here. As the Cascade Mountain Range formed and the sea receded to its present location, the coastal seeds remained. I decided I had to know more about this phenomenon. My finite human mind couldn't grasp the idea that the ocean had come this far inland.

I contacted a professional geologist in the Kooskia area, Bart Stryhas. Certainly, Bart would know about the ocean once reaching what is now Lewiston.

When he heard that I was interested in writing about the topic, his first remark was, "Don't quote me as believing anything." Followed by a laugh.

I asked if the seeds could have been left over from when the ocean was farther inland. Bart was skeptical. "That was two hundred million years ago,

during the Early Jurassic Period. That's a long time for seeds to survive and thrive."

Considering that during the last hundred million-plus years, drastic changes created havoc in the region—including the cataclysmic upheavals of volcanic activity—I could understand Bart's skepticism. That is a long time for seeds to survive.

"We know from fossils that a much wetter climate prevailed in the coastal disjunct area not that long ago," he said. "As recently as only six million years ago."

I guess to a geologist, six million years isn't much time. He explained that as basalt formed from volcanic activity, it dammed up stream beds as much as several hundred feet deep. Over time, sediment filled behind these basalt dams, burying plant growth such as leaves. Thus, the fossils.

"Six million years is a much more reasonable time for the seeds to survive," he added.

I asked where the seeds came from before then. He didn't know and expressed doubt that anyone knows for sure. Theories exist, but there are no hard facts concerning the origin of the coastal disjunct species.

I bade Bart farewell and decided to examine the role climate plays in all this. No matter how long the seeds have thrived, I reasoned, the wet climate must have assured their survival. The west slope of the Bitterroot Mountains from the Lochsa drainage north is maritime in nature. Annual precipitation in most areas of the coastal disjunct approaches coast totals. The communities of Pierce and Headquarters in Clearwater County, which lie in the heart of the coastal



disjunct forest, average more than forty-two inches of annual precipitation. This is comparable to Seattle which is at thirty-eight inches, or Olympia at forty-seven.

Large areas in the Clearwater River Basin receive upwards of fifty inches a year, with some parts going sixty to ninety inches. No wonder the coastal disjunct species survived for the last six million years.

The Nez Perce–Clearwater National Forests have set aside two areas for the study of the coastal disjunct growth. The largest, at 3,900 acres, is the Aquarius Research Natural Area (RNA), which I think provides the best opportunity to observe coastal disjunct forest. It straddles the North Fork of the Clearwater River. Take Highway

11 from its junction with Highway 12 at Greer. When you reach Headquarters, turn left onto forest service road number 247, which is normally closed in the winter. The Aquarius RNA is some twenty-five miles northeast of Headquarters.

But by far the easiest place to observe the coastal disjunct is the Lochsa RNA. From Kooskia, I traveled Highway 12 east for approximately thirty-three miles to Apgar Campground. The RNA is accessible all year, although throughout much of the winter it's covered in snow. You can hike up either the Apgar or Glade Creek Trail a short distance, less than a half-mile. Coastal disjunct growth dominates the landscape.

The first time I drove to the

Lochsa RNA was in mid-February and the snow was so deep, I couldn't find a place to park along Highway 12, so I canned the hike. In early March, I again made the trip. This time, most of the snow was gone. I spent a delightful afternoon hiking both Glade and Apgar Creeks, observing the growth. It took me back to my youth along the coast.

I came away thinking, "Does it really matter if the seeds reach all the way back two hundred million years to the Early Jurassic Period or only six million years to the basalts?"

For me, the role the maritime climate plays is more important. But mostly, I'm just glad that I can enjoy the coastal disjunct forest in the present. ■

ABOVE: Upper Dworshak Reservoir is cloaked in coastal disjunct growth.