This Land is Your Land, This Land is My Land

A Conversation with Jim Hammett
Former John Day Fossil Beds
National Monument Superintendent
John Day, Oregon

by
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Driving from Bend to John Day, Oregon travelers pass the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument, officially established by Congress in 1975. Spanning nearly 20,000 acres in Wheeler and Grant counties, the park features such dazzlers as the Painted Hills—each red, orange and black stripe demarcating a new chapter in climate transformation starting 40 million years ago, from lush tropics to the high desert of today; exotic leaf and pre-historic animal fossils providing a window into their continual evolution; and Northern Paiute and Sahaptin anthropological sites and pictographs dating back (a mere) 10,000 years. And there's more. At the Thomas Condon Visitor Center, exhibits and a working lab team up to offer an even deeper dive into the prehistoric past of the high desert. Contemplating the arc of time documented in the rainbow-festooned side-slopes, the skulls of elephant, beardog, and saber tooth cat, and the native dress and primitive shelters of the nomadic Northern Paiute, puts a fine point on how transient our time is on this planet.

Jim Hammett knows this. With the National Park Service (NPS) for 40 years, he spent the final two decades as superintendent of the John Day Fossil Beds National Monument. Every day he was reminded of his transience by the stories the land that surrounded him told.

Hammett's father was a physician in a small town in the Smoky Mountains of western North Carolina. His parents (his mother, also a physician) often took their young children on hikes into the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, as well as to nearby national forests, and later, as teens, hiking and camping for six weeks each summer to national parks throughout Canada and the United States. "I simply fell in love with the West and its national parks as a result of this exposure," says Hammett. A program launched by the then director of the NPS enabled each member of Congress to appoint young men and women to work summer jobs in the national parks. Selected by his North Carolina Congressman, in 1972 Hammett landed his first seasonal Parks Service job at age 18 in Washington's North Cascades. "My most memorable year remains 1972…for many reasons associated with being 18, away from home, and turned loose in paradise." The rest, as they say, is history.

Hammett started cleaning bathrooms and emptying trash but was quickly moved to the trail crew by the end of that first auspicious summer. Over the next 15 years, in between getting his bachelor's (Forestry) and master's (Vegetation Ecology) degrees at the University of Montana, his seasonal responsibilities ranged widely from horse and mule packer to backcountry law enforcement ranger. Once he secured permanent status as a natural resource specialist, he was off to the Denver Service Center of NPS serving as an outdoor recreation planner. In 1994, he got notice of his selection as superintendent at John Day Fossil Beds National Monument. And he stayed. "I never applied for another job. Never wanted to," he says. This despite the lure of special park projects he was dispatched to work on in Tanzania, Uganda, Slovakia, and as acting deputy superintendent in Yosemite. The John Day Fossil Beds and the high desert had become home.

Retiring in 2012, Jim and his wife, Pattie, now live on acreage outside of John Day. Family, causes, civic commitments and time permitting, there's nothing this avid horseman, hunter and outdoorsman enjoys more than loading up his award-winning Brittanys (he serves on the board of directors of the American Brittany Club) and heading south of Burns Junction and into

Oregon's most remote and wild public lands. Jim reinforces what's often said about hunting—it's as much about camaraderie with your bird dog, getting out into the wilderness, and self-sufficiency under extreme conditions as it is about bagging your elk or chukar. The barren expanses south of Burns Junction can be miserable and cold during bird season. "It's big, harsh, and scary," says Jim enthusiastically. "The dirt roads are rough. There are no trees in sight. If your rig gets stuck in mud or snow, there's nothing to winch to." He cautions that if you get injured but are lucky enough to be within reach of your phone, "…even with satellite technology, it can take five minutes for a one sentence text to get through."

The Owyhee Canyonlands induce awe from above and below. — Mark Darnell

Jim favors the deepest part of the Owyhee River canyon, 1,000 feet down. "It teaches humility," he says wryly. He hunts many different spots in that area, rarely hunting the same place twice in a season. "Few hunt it. It's too far from everything. Over 18 years I have encountered another hunter once and only once found a spent shotgun shell. For me, it's not the birds. There aren't lots of birds. Solitude is the thing for me. I love the solitude."

Remember, this is a man currently serving on the Oregon Conservation and Recreation Advisory Committee and who, for forty years, represented and advocated for the NPS mission

to preserve “unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations” so, when he’s out hunting with his dogs, it’s no surprise he pays attention to the condition of the high desert’s public rangelands. He’s concerned by what he sees as the impact of mismanaged cattle grazing in southeastern Oregon and why that is.

Jim notes that the Taylor Grazing Act, the precursor to the formation of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in the high desert, “was to solve sheep and cattle wars. The initial charge for what became the BLM was not to solve an ecological problem but a social one.” As an example, he cites ranchers who run cow/calf pairs in southeastern Oregon on public land. Their cattle are increasingly in competition with a growing wild horse population and the range is taking the brunt of it. These ranchers “…are entirely dependent on public lands. The feral horses are often their biggest problem.” As another, he points to proposed Owyhee Canyonlands legislation that allows “adaptive management of rangeland.” He worries that, without sufficient oversight, that could result in negative impacts to the range. The onus of enforcement would fall to the BLM and, Hammett feels, they just don’t have the manpower. “It’s

not just the number of cows," he says in consideration of the many creeks and small and ephemeral streams in and around the Owyhee Canyonlands. "Streams get hit by cows, they just do. If you're a cow and have the opportunity to eat green grass versus dried up blue bunch wheat grass, guess what you'll do. I don't hate cows. I just hate what they do to a water-restricted ecosystem." He adds, "I think this isn't good country for cows." But Hammett is the first to recognize the cultural, social and environmental dichotomies contained within these complex problems. "I would be on the other side of the fence if my livelihood was threatened," he concedes.

Jim is still plugged in to land management concerns, along with solar powered energy. But a bigger threat, Hammett feels, is "the American public taking the public lands for granted, not realizing they own them and that they must help support, defend, and protect them. Public lands make the West what it is." Now retired, Hammett continues to practice the National Park Service mission everyday, doing all he can to minimize his impact, striving not to add any greenhouse gases, living net zero. That's a tall order when living in an isolated community and frequenting even more far-flung locations. But where there's a Hammett will, there's a Hammett way. His John Day house operates on solar energy and he recently installed a small, grid-tied solar array at High Lonesome, as he calls his remote Owyhee hunting cabin. He may be Grant County's sole owner of a fully electric pick-up, and one of the few who can claim a charging station at his rural home, never mind at his High Lonesome outpost. For Jim Hammett, transience translates to action, to preserving natural and cultural resources in every way he can while he can.