

Summer in Waldo: While Studying Ecological Regeneration, I Found Evidence of my Own

Pikes Peak from Waldo Canyon | Photo by Mary Cate Kiser, '27

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“Working in Waldo, it’s pretty... bleak”. Silence followed as I waited for Cyndy Hines’ next words, eager to know what I was in for if I chose to accept the job. I can handle a few months, I thought to myself. Over the summer I came to understand that although the landscape is indeed bleak, every moment spent working in Waldo teemed with life. In studying ponderosa pine regrowth, I found evidence of regeneration within my own ecology: an awakening of the connection between human and land that too often lies dormant within us.

Imagine a desert in the middle of a forest. Imagine walking through a graveyard or old war zone, something abandoned and jarringly silent. Birdsong is scarce and there are hardly any tree branches for the wind to sift through. The bones of animals and trees lay together in dirt— legs, ribs, skulls, trunks and branches, all bleached white and brittle. On these daily walks through eerie emptiness, I found myself wondering what this place must have looked like before the flames swept through and took so much life with them.

We traveled through this land every day, and each site resembled a uniquely absurd obstacle course. We trudged through swampy valleys, balanced on logs

“ suspended precariously over groves of thorn bushes, and fought our way through hordes of young aspen trees with branches the perfect height for gouging out eyeballs.

In our hands we carried measuring tapes bigger than our heads, rolls of flagging tape, and compasses. Each day, someone was lucky enough to find themselves carrying a temperature probe, essentially a bayonet, as they stumbled and slid down slopes. These hikes were a balancing act that promised a variety of new scrapes and bruises each day. “I was at the grocery store,” Cyndy told us one day, laughing, “when this lady saw my legs and asked me if I was okay”.

Our summer task was seemingly simple. First, we would select and flag ten 200-by-300 meter grids of land in the burn areas by following a bearing and tying neon flagging tape onto trees to mark the line. Next, we would sample every quadrant of each of our ten sites to monitor ponderosa pine regeneration following fire. To do this, we used a variety of measurements including slope, tree diameter, tree height, soil moisture, soil temperature, ground coverage, burn severity, and number of saplings.



The Waldo team climbs over downed Aspens.
Photo by Cyndy Hines

The group meshed together seamlessly, but we weren’t immune to occasional mistakes. Minor miscommunications could render an entire day’s work useless and more than once, we had to flag, un-flag, and re-flag entire sites. We miscounted saplings and had dead walkie-talkies. We dealt with broken tapes, faulty moisture meters, and once, spent hours untangling a knotted transect tape.

Each problem, however, came with a creative and group-crafted solution. Our communication became thorough and

precise as we checked and double-checked bearings and measurements. On flags, we included extensive information, including a diagram of where it lay on the transect. We developed a method for a solo person to lay a transect line in case we were short on people, and an effective system for sapling counts emerged. Everyone collaborated to create a streamlined system for data collection and eventually, we fell into the satisfying rhythm of counting, coring, measuring, and writing.

A job that requires you to spend at least 8 hours every day with the same four or five people is a recipe for turning strangers into some sort of family.

For efficiency's sake, we would spend some nights camping near our sites. Though any of us could have retreated into our tents after an exhausting day of field work, we didn't. We stayed up long after sunset simply because we enjoyed each other's company. As the summer drew on and afternoon storms became routine, we spent hours hunkering under a tarp while the sky cracked and roared. On these days, fear and laughter wove us together.

In Waldo, simple things brought enormous excitement. Occasionally, someone would find a rack of antlers or pile of animal bones, and the group would erupt with childlike glee as a full-on scavenger hunt broke out to find more. Whether it be a vibrant wildflower, a moose bounding up a distant slope, or a freakishly gorgeous flash of lightning, I let myself give in to a sense of shameless wonder that I often resist in other spaces.

With time and quiet observation, I learned to read the land. It happened largely without my knowing, but I began to speak a new language. I called plants and pollinators by name. I could tell the difference between a ponderosa pine and a Douglas fir as effortlessly and subconsciously as one might tell left from right. And I knew where to find them: just inches downslope from charred trees and stumps, a fascinating and beautifully symbolic place for a young tree to find refuge. I could glance at the sky and know whether rain would hit us or pass. I could tell North from South without a compass. I even found myself apologizing to wildflowers I'd stepped on. You might call this a wild descent into madness. I'll call it the development of empathy and



A flag record of bearing, distance, and a site diagram. Photo by Mary Cate Kiser, '27.

awareness.

This job gave me much more than work. First and foremost, It gave me a sense of agency to combat the despair that once dominated my outlook on environmental topics. I learned to lead, follow, and



Cyndy Hines, Tyler Mielke, '26, and Ben Curry, '25 untangle a transect tape. Photo by Mary Cate Kiser, '27.

communicate with the utmost compassion and clarity. I began to listen for sounds we rarely hear and to look for things we don't often see. I found a sense of empathy, softness, and wonder, and I nurtured crucial relationships with both the land and the people around me. Most remarkably, I found a sense of fulfillment that I didn't expect to find until much, much later in life: the knowledge that I'm working toward something far greater than myself. ▲



In Fire's Shadow

A ponderosa pine sapling grows beneath a tree killed in the fire. Photo by Mary Cate Kiser, '27.



Ben Curry, '25 finds a moose antler in site S4. Photo by Tyler Mielke, '26.



Rachel Phillips, '25, Ben Curry, '25 and Tyler Mielke, '26 wait out a thunderstorm. Photo by Mary Cate Kiser, '27.



Tyler Mielke, '26 walks through burn area before a storm. Photo by Mary Cate Kiser, '27.