

Putting the wild in Idaho wilderness

Kathy Hedberg/Lewiston Tribune

My father and uncles were big on making sure our wilderness experiences when I was young were truly wild.

Maybe it was because they were (and I still am) proud of having been descended from Idaho pioneers who moved from the South after the Civil War to put down roots in this state that wasn't even a state at the time. If their grandparents lived that way for months on the trail, Dad thought, surely we soft city kids could live without amenities for a week.

Amenities such as a camp stove, tent and toilet paper. They took the "primitive" in primitive areas literally.

It wasn't hard to pack for those camping trips, because there was hardly anything you could bring other than a pocket knife, a sleeping bag and matches.

Even matches, Dad thought, were a luxury. If we were real wilderness people we would have learned to start fires with a flint and dry grass. I spent many a day rubbing sticks together trying to get a spark, but never managed to get anything but blisters.

I wasn't as appreciative as I could have been doing without some of the things I thought were not unreasonable to have. I would have been more comfortable, for instance, with at least a tent over my head at night, especially when I'd hear weird noises out in the dark woods. My Uncle David pointed out that a flimsy tent would be scant protection if an angry grizzly bear decided he wanted to get me and slashed through the canvas with his huge claws. But sometimes even false assurance can give a person peace of mind if that's all you've got.

Before the environmentalists articulated all the values for setting aside wilderness in the state and codified it into law in the Wilderness Act of 1964, my dad and uncles had a deep appreciation for places on this Earth that human beings did not have dominance over. They were ordinary working men who believed in cutting trees and letting cattle graze in the mountains and keeping lumber mills stoked with resources.

They also understood that human beings aren't the only creatures on this planet and that when creatures and human beings clash, creatures are usually the losers. (Hence my uncle's willingness to sacrifice me to the grizzly bears.)

Idaho had far fewer people back then and nobody could imagine that we might experience the population problems common in metropolitan areas. But it wasn't long before the Californians - and then, God forbid, the Minnesotans - started moving in, and there went the neighborhood.

Whether Dad and his brothers envisioned the controversies that would erupt as more people began sharing the same space, vying for their particular agendas and threatening the existence of certain animals and fish, I never knew.

But they did know that even if they didn't have all the answers at the time, all things have a right to be and it's just better to leave some things the way God created them.

Hedberg may be contacted at kathyhedberg@gmail.com or (208) 983-2326.