

November 6, 2003

The Ring of Wealth

By Douglas Hackney

Solitaire, Namibia consists of a gas station, a campground and a small café that is famous for its apple pie. As my wife and I sat down for lunch we wondered if Solitaire's apple pie would be as good as Julian's, a small mountain town near our home in Carlsbad, California. She then noticed something about California on the chalkboard in the parking lot that functions as the news ticker in this part of the world. She walked over and read "Brush fires in California, arson suspected, 2,000 homeless, 1,000 homes destroyed." Even in this remote and barren corner in the hinterlands of Africa the terrible news had reached us. We were both aghast with fear for our family and friends as there were no further details available there.



Wildfire news reaches remote Solitaire, Namibia
Photo: Stephanie Hackney

A few minutes in an internet café in the next sizable town told the tragic tale. A fire that was no bigger than a basketball court when the first fire crews arrived was left to burn because there were no passable roads available to access the area to extinguish it. It became the largest fire in San Diego County. This and other fires, fueled by forests overgrown with brush, undergrowth, excess trees and dead trees killed by bark beetles quickly became roaring crown fires, burning every tree and sterilizing the ground with their heat. The firestorms jumped fire lines, consumed entire towns, burned more than 2,500 homes and businesses, and killed more than a dozen people in San Diego County alone. Julian, our source of famous apple pies, was fighting for its life after the surrounding communities had been wiped out. People killed, homes and businesses burned, towns incinerated, lives destroyed, the devastation was beyond our comprehension.

What could have prevented or limited this tragedy? Perhaps a concept we learned while on our tour of Africa. A conservation biologist I met here introduced me to the concept that has saved the mountain gorilla and stabilized the populations of other endangered African animals: The Ring of Wealth.

The Ring of Wealth grew from the tragic death of Dianne Fossey, the gorilla researcher made famous by the movie "Gorillas in the Mist." The untold part of the story is that Fossey's many years invested in preserving the mountain gorilla population were largely a failure. Although she dedicated her life to these animals, her steadfast policy of denying human access to them and their environs led to a decreasing gorilla population and ultimately, to her tragic death.

Her successors took a more enlightened and pragmatic approach. Whereas Fossey's "no human access" policy had alienated the local communities, the new management team invited and encouraged balanced, managed and sustainable human access to the mountain gorillas and their forests. Visitors came, jobs were created, local crafts flourished, standards of living were raised, former poachers became park rangers and most remarkably, the gorilla population increased.



Recreation and tourism empowers local communities.
Photo: Douglas Hackney

The key factor is that a "Ring of Wealth" fueled by tourism was created around the mountain gorillas, thus the local population became stakeholders in the gorilla's health and welfare. The same approach has been used at other game preserves and national parks around Africa with similar success.

The answer is clear. In the face of growing local and world human populations, a policy of no human access to natural resources simply does not work. The answer is enlightened, managed and sustainable human access to natural resources with corresponding positive financial impacts on local communities.

There are striking similarities between Fossey's failed "no human access" mountain gorilla policy and the current state of the national forests and public lands of California and the Western United States. American environmental groups, heavily influenced by an idealist agenda, led the way in closing roads and outlawing human access to public lands throughout the region. They stonewalled efforts to thin the forests choked with growth due to the "zero fire tolerance" policies that resulted from the great fires of 1911. Instead, these groups promoted forest thinning limited to narrow bands around populated areas. Across the West the needs and desires of local communities were ignored as heavy handed environmental policies were imposed from above. Recreational opportunities were banned, tourism tapered off, jobs disappeared and local communities withered. The result was inevitable: closed and non-maintained roads, tinderbox forests and alienated, economically dying communities.

The tragedy of the firestorms cannot be denied, but at least they may serve to awaken the community as a whole to the fallacy of the policies promoted by the environmental movement. Arguably, the largest fire in San Diego Country could have been prevented if the once excellent system of California "fire roads" used to access remote areas had not been largely abandoned and human access denied. Undeniably, the firestorms that resulted from fuel choked forests could never be stopped by narrow bands of thinning around populated areas. How many of the firestorm deaths can be laid at the feet of the environmental idealists? Not all, but surely some.

Just as Fossey's misguided "no human access" policy nearly led to the extinction of the mountain gorilla, the environmentalists, with their misguided passion for "saving" the environment from the public, created deadly tinderboxes and are killing our national forests, public lands and rural communities. Instead of an environmentally and economically sustainable Ring of Wealth, their misguided idealism has created a Ring of Death.

How can we prevent another firestorm tragedy? We need forest thinning now, and not just in narrow bands around populated areas. We need to reopen and restore the network of fire roads in our forests and public lands. We need to create a "Ring of Wealth" around our forests and public lands by promoting managed and sustainable human access and recreation for all Americans, including the disabled, disadvantaged and elderly who are physically or financially unable to hike for long distances.

We need to hear voices other than the polished press releases and smooth spokespeople that the \$6 billion dollar annual budgets of the environmental groups produce. We need the media to tell the stories of the grandparents who can't take their grandchildren fishing in a remote mountain stream because roads have been closed. We need to hear the stories of the people who have lost their homes, business and towns because forest thinning programs were held up by environmental idealists' lawsuits.

Most of all, we need a pragmatic, balanced approach to access, utilization and preserving our natural resources for the people, not from the people.

I am hoping that the next story we see chalked on the board of some tiny African hamlet such as Solitaire, Namibia does not tell of further disasters in the United States that could have been prevented by the adoption of lessons already learned by environmental pragmatists here in Africa.

•••

Douglas and Stephanie Hackney of Carlsbad, California are currently touring Southern Africa by motorcycle. Douglas Hackney can be contacted at: dhackney@egtld.com.