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By Tim Shisler

I'm at a dead stop in the middle of nowhere, and my guide, Laurel Sutherlin from KS Wild, an Ashland-based environmental group, is pounding the steering wheel with excitement.

"Oh my God, did you see that?" he shouts. "That was my first mountain lion."

We were somewhere inside the [Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest](#), exploring the Cascade Siskiyou Crest, a dramatic east-to-west ridgeline that straddles the California and Oregon border. The region, no stranger to environmentalists and Oregon outdoors enthusiasts, is still relatively unknown to the majority of the country.

But that all changed early in 2010 when a leaked memo from the Department of the Interior highlighted the crest region, along with 13 other potential sites, as possible new national monuments. Though nothing appears to have been decided, some local tension already has arisen over the checkerboard of private and public land -- particularly in Happy Camp, where some residents aren't happy at all.

In the meantime, the Interior Department refuses to take any formal position

regarding if and when the monument would be created.

"I don't know anything about the leaked list or what the boundaries might be," said Tom Lavagnino, public affairs officer for the Klamath National Forest, a day before my trip with Sutherlin. "I've been doing this a long time and have seen maps making the entire state of Oregon a national park, so at this point it's just circles on a map."

The leaked document did mention that the region most likely would be an expansion of the already designated Cascade-Siskiyou National Monument, signed into protection by President Bill Clinton in 2000.

### **A lot of footwork**

Leaving Lavagnino's office with a handful of maps, I realized that exploring the area would take some energy. Because of limited access points, a lot of walking would be required.

The crest is a popular summer recreation spot for Ashland's 20,000-plus residents and surrounding communities. Several trails and easy-to-reach summits provide hikers of all abilities a chance to escape the valley's daytime heat and explore old-growth forests speckled with wildflowers.

Visitors to the area also include hikers on the Pacific Crest Trail, a 2,650-mile trail from Mexico to Canada.

I spent the first night on the crest camping near Mount Ashland Ski Resort along Road 20, a seasonal dirt access road flanked by campsites. In the cool evening, thunderstorms played across the sky. Campers in a nearby site started a fire and one pulled out a guitar. Rough country music filled the air as they laughed loudly.

The next day, after waking up and running a few miles along the Pacific Crest Trail, I met up with Sutherlin to explore the steep ridgelines and dense forest.

The geography is brutal. Relief maps look as if the Earth's been pinched, creating steep ridgelines and deep valleys.

Approaching the crest from California means hikers must start at the banks of the Klamath River before climbing several thousand feet with relentless gradients and minimal views. The trail is used mostly by through-hikers heading to town to resupply rather than day hikers out for an adventure.

### **Unreliable roads**

Instead, most approach the crest from the Oregon side either by driving up to the Mount Ashland Ski Resort or along dirt roads crisscrossing the northwestern edge. But dirt roads aren't always reliable and can come to an abrupt halt once they reach a plot of private land.

Inside the roughly 600,000-acre area KS Wild identifies as the potential monument, two large wilderness areas -- Red Buttes Wilderness and Siskiyou Wilderness -- offer remote backpacking and camping without roads or access besides feet and horses.

"There are a lot of places to explore," Sutherlin said as we picked our way through an old-growth forest. "You can come up here and be all alone in just a short time from Ashland."

During a low-key, five-mile hike along the Pacific Crest Trail to the summit of Red Mountain, a serpentine formation locked between two granite peaks less than five miles away, Sutherlin made sure to showcase the region's rich biodiversity.

Dropping to one knee, he started quickly naming off flowers in a 3-by-3-foot square. "You've got larkspur here and buttercups here and yellow violets down on the ground here," he said, continuing to name a few more. Minutes later he had me smell a ponderosa pine tree. "It smells like caramel," he said.

Atop the red-rock summit, the 360-degree view is spectacular. Mount Shasta hangs to the east, and the dramatic, folded geography of the [Klamath National Forest](#) stretches south.

### **Not-so-Happy Camp**

Still, a short distance across the Oregon border in California on the banks of the Klamath River, the small town of Happy Camp is banding together to fight the monument's creation. Some residents resent what they see as government interference, particularly when it would lead to restrictions on land use, including potentially reduced mining opportunities.

They also are working with local politicians to try to change current legislation enabling presidents to sign monuments into law without public review -- a task that appears next to impossible.

Driving through Happy Camp, it's not uncommon to see "no monument" signs and bumper stickers proclaiming the driver's disdain for the potential designation.

Stopping at the local grocery store, I learned residents will eagerly engage curious visitors with spirited opinions about conservation, the Antiquities Act of

1906 and the environmental group Sutherlin works for.

On my third and final day in the area, I explored the gateway town of Ashland and drove back up to the crest to watch the sunset.

As I sat watching the night sky envelop the last rays of light I could hear excited campers' voices from the site next to me talking about their day. I didn't catch their whole conversation, but it appeared they had fun exploring a place they'd never stopped at before.

So maybe that's why it was included in the list, I thought. As a country we're no longer weighing protection of grandiose landscapes such as Grand Canyon or Yellowstone, but more subtle swaths of forested land -- places we often blow by at 80 mph on Interstate 5, yet home to important flowers the size of a fingernail.

-- Tim Shisler

Crest access

**Getting there:** Ashland, about 285 miles south of Portland, is the gateway to the area.

**Where to stay:** Ashland Springs Hotel, 212 E. Main St.; 888-795-4545, [ashlandsspringshotel.com](http://ashlandsspringshotel.com). Originally built in 1925, this 70-room hotel is in downtown Ashland and includes complimentary parking and Internet. Rates begin at \$129 in high season (May 29 to Oct. 10), \$79 in off-season. Free camping is about one mile from the Mount Ashland parking lot on Access Road 20. If campsites are full, continue along Road 20 to several dispersed campsites found intermittently along the roadway.

**Where to eat:** Standing Stone Brewing Co., 101 Oak St., Ashland; 541-482-2448, [standingstonebrewing.com](http://standingstonebrewing.com). This low-key brewery has indoor and shaded outdoor seating and is known for its reasonably priced food and limited-edition specialty beers brewed throughout the year.

**More info:** Ashland Chamber of Commerce, [ashlandchamber.com](http://ashlandchamber.com); Rogue River-Siskiyou National Forest, [www.fs.fed.us/r6/rogue-siskiyou](http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/rogue-siskiyou)

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