



Autumn Color And Dead Trees

by Marilyn Loser

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We had a wonderful 48-hour getaway last weekend to Lake City for the Uncorked Wine & Music Festival. North Clear Creek falls above Creede were cascading beautifully -- not just a mere trickle as I've seen sometimes in the fall. While some aspens were still summer green, others were ablaze in gold and orange. Fall is here! Sadly, there are only a few green spruce trees amid mountainsides of tall, dead grey corpses.

There is a lot of tree removal activity near the top of Slumgullion Pass (11,529 ft.) along Highway 149 east of Lake City. The goal of the removal is to provide a fire break in the case of a catastrophic fire, according to the Durango Herald. The newspaper also states in a 2015 July article that "The number of dead trees on Slumgullion Pass equal numbers on Wolf Creek Pass."

Most of us are aware of the spruce beetle, but I'm still amazed at how rapidly it has decimated southern Colorado forests since the turn of the century. As reported by KVNF community radio for western Colorado based in Paonia, Roy Mask, an entomologist for the U.S. Forest Service says, "Spruce beetle populations are flourishing in Colorado because of warming temperatures and drought conditions."

The spruce beetle is native and historically attacks weaker trees. According to Drew Stroberg, timber management assistant, "beetles act as a beneficial agent of change by attacking the weakest trees and allowing more room for the healthier trees to thrive. However, because of the prolonged drought, and warmer temperatures, beetle populations have greatly increased and are attacking even the healthiest trees in the forest."

Mask also said, they can "destroy a healthy forest within three years. They can fly and also travel on windstorms where they rain down onto new trees."

Once we dropped down into Lake City, the only town in Hinsdale County, the forest was still lush and hillsides of dark green spruce mixed with patches of green, gold, and orange aspens. Colorado fall in all its glory!

In recent years, forestry practices have changed. The 20th century idea of not letting forest fires burn resulted in dense forests with lots of deadfall leading to hot, devastating fires rather than smaller, cleansing fires. Did you know Native Americans often set fires when migrating to reduce undergrowth and deadwood to provide for more food plants? It also made moving through the land and hunting easier.

So what to do? If I lived in Lake City, I would want to have a safe corridor out of town if a major fire struck the area. But some environmentalists don't agree with the large scale of the forest Service's plan.

Hillary Cooper, Sheep Mountain Alliance, says, "Our concern is that the recent science that's coming out is saying that the more human management and human disturbance that is created in forests actually hurts the efforts of forests to regenerate themselves," Cooper says. "So we are trying to find a balance between the economic need to do some of these salvage projects to address public health and safety which we feel is very important and then backing them off some of the areas that we feel should be left to natural regeneration."

Other endeavors focus on planting new trees. In June, the Gunnison Ranger District hosted a "Plant a Tree Day" on Slumgullion Pass. The public was invited to help the Forest Service plant tree seedlings in an area severely impacted by the spruce beetle epidemic, according to the Mineral County Miner.

We were happy to see that some hillsides burned during the 2013 fires had some red- and orange-colored fall shrubs amongst the burnt trunks.

"Our grandchildren will never know our national forests as we have known them. The trees are dead or dying. Nature will take its course, and in 200 to 300 years, there will again be a forest as we know it today. The damage has been done, and we cannot go back in time. We must learn from our past mistakes as we manage for the future." J. Paul Brown, Colorado General Assembly district 59