

Hike On!

An escape from crAZy politics on a sky island

RLMiller's Diary

You're a resident of a certain landlocked state in the news, needing a bit of escapism from crAZy politics. Where do you go? Why, to a sky island!

Welcome to the Coronado National Forest, southeast of Tucson.

But can you ever truly escape politics? If the Coronado is a microcosm of the biodiversity of the United States, its new management plan -- comments taken through April 30 -- is an ominous harbinger for national forests throughout the Southwest and the country as a whole.

Sky islands, mountain ranges separated by flat seas of grass, comprise the archipelago Coronado National Forest in southeastern Arizona. In one ambitious day, a hiker can ascend from desert and scrub characteristic of central Mexico at 3,000 feet, up to spruce-fir forests characteristic of Canada at 10,000 feet. Dense vertical stacking of multiple life-zones supports an exceptionally high level of biodiversity in a small land area. You might spot one of the last 42 Mexican gray wolves, a parrot, one of the 18 varieties of hummingbirds, or perhaps even an ocelot slipping over the border. Some of the more than 576 species of mammals, birds, reptiles, and

amphibians that call the forest home are found in no other national forest.

Each national forest is supposed to operate under a land and resource management plan, or Forest Plan. Coronado's was last issued in 1986. In March 2010, the Forest Service held hearings before issuing a draft management plan (113 pg pdf). The plan has been watched closely, because it's the first revised plan in the entire Southwest since environmental litigation invalidated most Bush administration plans. A couple of weeks ago, I wrote about the Forest Service's slow shift away from the idea that forests are board feet of lumber to be harvested.

That's why the draft plan is such a disappointment.

The Center for Biological Diversity considers the draft plan a sweeping rollback of existing protection for wildlife. Among its other flaws, the plan:

- eliminates the longstanding requirement to maintain viable populations of wildlife species;
- eliminates forest-wide logging restrictions for old-growth trees and forests;
- eliminates forest-wide logging restrictions for tree-canopy retention;
- proposes no forest-wide enforceable standards relating to commercial logging;
- proposes no forest-wide enforceable standards relating to mining or mine exploration
- proposes no forest-wide enforceable standards relating to livestock grazing;
- proposes no forest-wide enforceable standards relating to exotic and invasive plants;
- mentions "climate change" only once and excludes climate adaptation strategies;
- consists of aspirational guidance and includes no contingency for failures thereof.



All photos credit Tierra Curry, Center for Biological Diversity

The CBD has done a great job picking apart the details of the draft plan. Now, step back and look at the big picture, or, if you prefer, see the forest for the trees.

A study published at the PNAS, quantifies global forest cover loss to find that the United States loses the greatest percentage of its forests (among countries studied), more than poster children Brazil and Indonesia. Mongabay has the layperson's version: "But the United States had the greatest percentage loss of the seven nations—even more than Brazil and Canada—losing 6 percent of its forest cover in just five years time, a total of 120,000 square kilometers (46,332 square miles). While fire and beetle infestation played a role in Alaska and the western US, large-scale logging in the southeast, along the western coast, and in the Midwest play a big role in the nation's continuing forest decline."

And the Forest Service still sees the trees of Coronado National Forest as board-feet of lumber to be harvested?

It's not clear why the Coronado forest plan needs to be put before the larger plan for the Forest Service as a whole. It's not clear why any timber at all needs to be harvested from these unique sky islands.



Comments are being taken through April 30 beginning at this website (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r3/coronado/plan-revision/plan-revision-contactus.shtml>). Tell the Forest Service that you'd like it to consider the impacts of climate change, and to address ecological stressors likely to compound those impacts. And, because you don't want the sky islands to be barren of life, tell the Forest Service to protect the old growth forests, homes of the northern goshawk and Mexican spotted owl, and bird-attracting riparian areas.