

Wolverine Spring in California's Central Sierra Trumps Punxsutawney Phil

Punxsutawney Phil endured his annual day of fame February 2 on Gobbler's Knob in Pennsylvania, and issued the not too surprising edict of six more weeks of winter. He looked pretty manageable, even cuddly in his early morning photo-op, but his predictions didn't get much attention out here on the West Coast, our weather having a mind of its own.

What has caught our attention is our own 'March Madness', or 'Springtime for Wolverines' in the Sierra. Just this month it was announced that a wolverine, a much fiercer, definitely less cuddly animal, a species last seen (dead) in the central Sierra 75 years ago, was photographed scrounging for chicken placed as a lure by a graduate student studying the almost equally elusive marten. This confirmed sighting has caused an effervescence of emails through the environmental community. Irrational exuberance, even!

Heck, our economy is in the tank, developers are trying to cover every acre of Sierra land they can before the reality of global warming sets in- so what's not to love about the sighting of one tough hombre of an animal in an area where it was thought to be long gone? Those of us who fight for preservation of habitat, and wildlife corridors, and who tilt at the many windmills rapidly undergoing conversion to condos and fractional ownerships could use some encouragement, and this unlikely animal may become the mascot of all who battle the destruction of wild and near-wild lands in the Sierra; coming to a t-shirt and bumper sticker near you- the little Sierra wolverine who could.

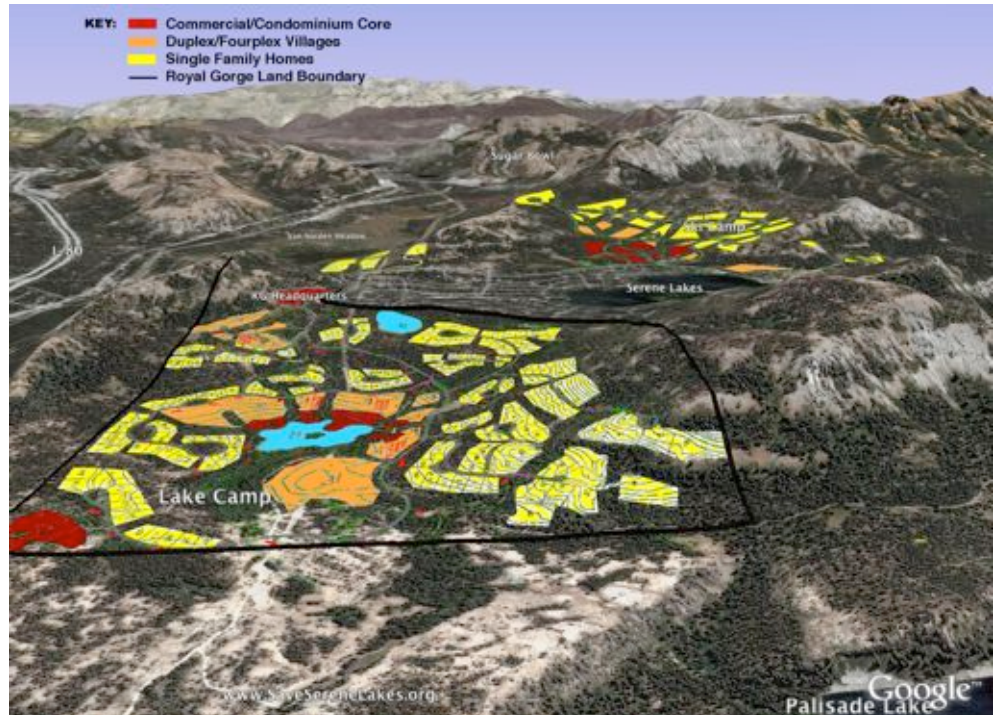
For me, in my anthropomorphic mood, the likable thing about the wolverine is that it isn't particularly likable. It may be the largest and possibly smelliest land dweller of the weasel clan, but it thinks much

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MONEY DOWN THE DRAIN ON DONNER SUMMIT?

If I had a nickel for every time T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" was pilfered for its opening line, "April is the cruellest month", to describe paying taxes, well, I'd have a nice bit of change to put towards paying mine. Forget about April's bad rep, though, as this year in California started off pretty cruel. Our state budget is in such a shambles that Governor Schwarzenegger is dictating brutal across the board budgetary cuts. From school districts, down through all levels of government, even to the smaller local agencies that deliver basic services such as water and sewage removal- all may be impacted by statewide belt tightening.

That's why Royal Gorge LLC's actions of this past month leave me so frustrated. Their multiple- lawyered assault on what



PLANNED SUBDIVISIONS- Two major subdivisions are planned for the Royal Gorge Lands. The "Lake Camp" subdivision is in the foreground, and the "Ski Camp" subdivision is in the background. The blue areas are two new artificial lakes, the yellow areas are single family homes, the orange areas are duplex/fourplex villages and the red areas are commercial core buildings including condominiums, private lodges, restaurants and retail space. The black line shows the boundary of the Royal Gorge lands. Every inch of flat land seems covered. Ski trails, starting from the Royal Gorge headquarters (Summit Station) shown in the middle-left, will meander through a housing tract, not forests and open space.

What Open Space?

A look at the subdivision picture above raises questions about Royal Gorge's claim of 80% open space. Lake Camp appears to fill their property from cliff to cliff. The answer is that Royal Gorge's open space claim includes unrelated land outside the development in Van Norden Meadow, undevelopable land overlooking the North Fork of the American River, the two new artificial lakes, and even the private space between houses. Royal Gorge even claims the bottom of Serene Lakes as open space for Ski Camp!

The actual open space is what is left over when, according to their own plans, they have built on 380 acres in Lake Camp and 213 acres in Ski Camp. That is 86% of the buildable acres in Lake Camp and Ski Camp. In reality, they are only preserving 14% as open space.

appear to be drafts of simple "housekeeping" ordinances under consideration by Sierra Lakes County Water District (SLCWD) seems calculated to do nothing more than waste SLCWD's time and money-- our money, which we pay in fees and taxes.

SLCWD is considering two ordinances, one of which sets up a rational scheme for delivery of services to customers, in light of the realities of water/sewage availability in the district, and in consideration of past payment of stand-by fees by subdivided but as yet undeveloped parcels. The second ordinance sets a target water level for Serene Lakes that, barring emergencies, the district will not go below- a basement, so to speak of 3 feet below the dam level. As the district has, at least since the 70's, not drawn the lakes down below 3 feet, and in fact as a condition

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The Royal Gorge Proposal: Neither Green, nor Sustainable

Trees lost forever:

- Over 400 acres of trees will be destroyed for the development,
- Another 100 acres of trees will be cleared for downhill ski runs in Ski Camp
- Each acre is estimated to contain 200 trees, that means around 100,000 trees will be destroyed
- Each acre of mature trees absorbs between 3 and 6 tons of carbon each year. Losing 500 acres of forest will result in between 1,500 and 3,000 more tons of carbon into the atmosphere each year.
- The lost trees would absorb the CO2 from over 14,000 round trips each year between Donner Summit and San Francisco

Not enough water:

- Water is scarce, with the only reliable supply captured in lakes
- Royal Gorge needs to either drain Serene Lakes, or build new dams threatening the headwaters of the South Yuba River, or the North Fork American River
- The South Yuba dam would flood Van Norden meadow, destroying one of the largest alpine meadows in the Sierra
- The North Fork dam would be a 65 feet high, quarter mile wide, monstrosity on Serena Creek canyon, flooding what is now untouched wilderness

Nowhere for the sewage to go:

- The current sewage plant is already at capacity
- Additional treated sewage effluent will overwhelm the headwaters of the South Yuba River

Wolverine From Front

'bigger', having been known to take on bears for tasty bits of carrion. The bear often carries the day, but you certainly have to look up to an animal the size of a medium dog that tries to stand down a bear. For those of us who go up against well monied and well connected developers, a wolverine is a real role model!

Wolverines are also determined travelers, ranging over hundreds of miles of land. The latest Patagonia catalog (not a plug, honest), has an account, 'The Wolverine Way', by Douglas H. Chadwick which chronicles the GPS tracked peregrinations of a wolverine, accompanied briefly by one of his sons in Montana's Glacier National Park. What I took away from this excellent piece was this: wolverines need a lot of land to survive, land that is connected, not bits and pieces of "wolverine mitigation open space", or whatever developers might offer up as their version of a purchased environmental plenary indulgence.

Many other animals, particularly large carnivores need adequate room to roam, or they'll end up on the endangered species list: 1) if they're not already there, and 2) for what that's worth. Here, at Donner Summit, in the central Sierra, the particular status of a species may be worth very little in the face of Royal Gorge LLC's proposed 1000 plus units, as the development, if built, will slam the door on crucial migratory corridors.

Royal Gorge LLC's planned development sits between the Granite Chief Wilderness Area and the headwaters of the Wild and Scenic North Fork American River, and the proposed Castle Peak Wilderness Area. Also betwixt Granite Chief, and the proposed Castle Peak Wilderness Area lie, as well as Interstate 80, and the intercontinental railroad tracks, a 60's suburban development, 4 downhill ski resorts, and, the saving grace, Van Norden Meadow, a large Alpine Meadow that, besides providing a much needed migratory corridor, is also the headwaters of the South Yuba River. The developer, Royal Gorge LLC has most recently suggested damming a canyon and stream feeding the North Fork, and has a potential dam on Van Norden Meadow on the back burner; either could prove a death knell for the animals that traverse those routes.

Royal Gorge LLC has told Placer County they'll count private land between houses and duplexes as open space, because it will have easements that 'read' as open space. Wild animals don't do a lot of 'reading', last time I looked, and a tangle of roads and houses, even though it might satisfy a county's lenient standards for open space, certainly won't provide the habitat and passage areas necessary for the survival of many species.

It is likely that martens, and badgers inhabit this area, but no one dreamed a wolverine was even a remote possibility. The wolverine having his or her 15 minutes of fame (and hopefully many years of many happy returns) over at Sagehen Creek Field Station between Truckee and Sierraville, a few basins over from Donner Summit, could be a remnant, or perchance a lone wanderer, traveling far afield from the green fields of home, figuratively speaking. Then again, perhaps wolverines have been particularly good at laying low in the central Sierra, and this wolverine has significant others dotted about the mountains. Cousins by the dozens, we can hope.

California is pretty well known for

DO DEVELOPERS DREAM OF ELECTRIC WOLVERINES?*

*When the trees are gone
rocks scraped aside like so much kipple
what does the developer see as he surveys
the landscape
of emotions does he show a ripple?*

*Looking out at earthmovers shoving dirt
shrubs and plants in one big crush
for the many deaths of birds, of animals
does the developer even blush?*

*At night when silence reigns
a brief lull in the onslaught of machines
does the developer in his bed
dream of electric wolverines?*

*And when the rain falls like tears
for those moments lost in time
when radiant life once garbed the mountains
does the developer know his crime?*

* Philip K Dick's Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep

seismic events, but who would have guessed the discovery of a lone animal could have such reverberations? The wolverine, if indeed still present in the Central Sierra in numbers, could definitely upset the apple cart in terms of how any proposed development's impacts on wildlife should be assessed for compliance with federal and state law. As reported in the Sacramento Bee, it is uncertain how Federal Forest Service managers will respond to this news, "According to Tahoe National Forest public affairs officer Ann Westling, officials in the agency's Washington, D.C., headquarters told her not to comment about the wolverine." Indeed. The wolverine isn't commenting, either.

I'm taking suggestions for designs of T-shirts. Any suggestions?

Money From Front

of its state water right must bypass water in the summer to Serena Creek, this ordinance seems like a simple codification of the status quo--common sense, so to speak, and a step toward preserving our lakes as lakes, instead of treating them like reservoirs to be recklessly drained.

Royal Gorge LLC, however, believes that SLCWD needs to go through the entire CEQA process to establish that the district, by maintaining the lakes exactly as they have always done won't now cause environmental harm by codifying the "same-old same-old." Compounding this inanity, Royal Gorge LLC inconsistently claims that SLCWD isn't even allowed to consider aesthetics, and recreation, and other CEQA elements in decisions concerning the lakes, because the statute under which SLCWD was formed precludes them from building recreational facilities. If you're not following this, please don't blame my muddled prose (much). It's hard to make sense out of nonsense, and nonsense is exactly what Royal Gorge LLC is dishing out, with legal assistance, by the truckload.

If Kirk Syme, and what now looks like the entire Foster family tree, Mark, Todd, and Jack plan a huge development at Donner Summit, they know they're going to have to go through the CEQA process- as there are serious ramifications in building a subdivision in wilderness and near-wilderness areas. But tell me, Mr. Syme and multiple Mr. Fosters, how is it anything but a waste of taxpayers money to try to force SLCWD to prove the obvious, that doing what they've always done won't have any environmental impact? In order to build your "Wasteland" at Donner Summit, are you also going to ensure you waste as much of our resources, time and money as possible?



Photo courtesy Katie Moriarty, Oregon State University and US Forest Service



Visit www.SaveOurSummit.org (SOS) for more information on the proposed Royal Gorge development. At SOS you can find:

- A list of organizations concerned about the development
- Descriptions of Donner Summit and the proposed development
- Flyers, buttons and bumper stickers
- Links to YouTube videos