

Can Oregon's Hells Canyon get any hotter?

Editor's note: Fifteen years ago, the East Oregonian and its sister publications at EO Media Group published a landmark series of stories on climate change. This month we begin a new series, Climate Changed, that will revisit many of the sources we talked with then and look at what has happened in the intervening time.

By STEVE TOOL
EO Media Group

ENTERPRISE — Hells Canyon, North America's deepest gorge, may have Oregon's most diverse climate. In just a few miles the elevation can change by 7,000 feet, morphing from dry, rocky desert along the Snake River to snow-laden alpine

peaks in the Wallowa Mountains.

Pat Matthews, current ODFW district wildlife biologist overseeing the region, is skeptical that climactic changes are having a significant effect on the specialized ecosystem. He has decades of experience in the region, and he's not seeing big changes in the canyon.

"You hear a lot about climate change in the news, but as far as what we're seeing on the ground right here in Hells Canyon ... we're just not seeing any kind of changes yet," he said.

Matthews said he "provided quite a few comments for our draft man-



agement plan that probably are contrary to a lot of the other biologists' opinions," noting that he agreed behind the science of climate change modeling, but noted "you have to be able to verify that model on the

ground and see if what the model tells you is really happening."

"We haven't been able to see any difference," he said. "I mean the last three winters have been terribly hard. ... To think that things are warming up or changing that way — it's just not happening here."

But Jim and Holly Akenson, wildlife biologists who worked for ODFW in Hells Canyon for years, see the beginning of significant

change. That is especially significant in the canyon's higher elevations, where small climactic variations can have major effects.

Holly Akenson, who currently serves on the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife Commission, said it's hard to notice climate change effects on animals day-by-day and year-by-year. She said that in the higher elevations on both sides of the canyon, increasing temperatures have led to a reduction in the alpine biome. That affects animals specialized for that ecosystem.

"Species like pikas are affected because they could get isolated on a smaller area," she said. "They need deep snow cover in the win-

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EO Media Group Photo/Ellen Morris Bishop

The bottom of Hells Canyon along the Snake River is steep and rocky, without a lot of vegetation.

Canyon: Natural barometer

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ter to keep them warm, and in the summer they don't tolerate warm temperatures very well."

She said that if the habitat can't keep the pikas happy, they move elsewhere. Akenson said she'd like to do a study of the animal's current habitat, compared to decades prior.

Jim Akenson, who is conservation director for the Oregon Hunters Association, thinks that ungulate migration in the canyon has also been modified by climate change.

"There's a distribution of seasonal range use, especially with elk, that is different than 20 or 30 years ago," he said. "They're spending more time at high elevation and less time at low — the nature of the warmer winters."

Akenson said that on jet boat trips up the Snake River in February a decade ago,

he would see plenty of elk at lower elevations. Recently, flying to check elk distribution for the OHA, Akenson noted that elk were much higher in February than years before.

"They couldn't get to mid-high elevation (in the past) in the canyon because of snow depth, but now they bounce around with a three- or four-thousand-foot elevation change," he said. "I don't know if that affects their survival, but it could affect range utilization and hit those higher elevation rangelands a bit harder than before. It could be a factor if you've got 4,000 head of elk."

Evidence of climate change can be hard to find in this rugged and remote landscape. But Akenson noted the canyon could serve as a harbinger of things to come.

"If there's a piece of landscape in our region that's going to be a barometer for change it would be Hells Canyon," he said.