

On the Path

A Barrel Half-Full at New Years

By Keith Hammer

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A couple experiences during the holidays left me all the more resolved to see our glass as half-full, rather than half-empty, in the coming year. First came a quarter-page ad in a local newspaper that read "all I want for Christmas" beside a photo of a locally manufactured assault rifle. That evening I overheard a conversation about assault rifles between two guys seated at the next table in a local restaurant. It was as though the Grinch had come to steal Christmas.

As somewhat of a sidebar to their discussion of the technical pros and cons of various assault rifles, including the AK-47 and AR-15, one of the guys at the next table told of a conversation he'd had with a friend who had the forethought to set aside several barrels of potable water in the event of a prolonged power outage. "You know," the story teller claimed he told his naive friend, "your neighbors are going to be there wanting your water too." To which the friend reportedly replied, "Well then, I'll set aside a couple more barrels of water."

"The guy totally missed my point," concluded the storyteller, with nodding approval from his dinner companion. The obvious and condescending message was that the do-gooder should keep an assault rifle handy to protect himself and his water from his neighbors. Apparently I was seated beside a couple guys that would needlessly turn a natural disaster or power outage into a social disaster. They chose to see the guy's barrels as half-empty, rather than half-full, and chose to assume conflict rather than cooperation in times of need.

Times of economic recession are reminders that it is always a good idea to have a backup plan for meeting life's essential needs. Perhaps a vegetable garden to supplement or replace what is offered at the grocery store. Perhaps an electric generator to power deep well pumps or a backup hand pump for shallower water wells. Perhaps an old pickup or cart to haul water from the nearest stream. Perhaps a good big game hunting rifle to supplement or replace meat taken for granted at the local butcher shop. Perhaps informal community plans for sharing such resources in times of dire need. Or, should we instead spend our scarce cash on assault rifles and sort it out later?

When we are reminded that clean water has to come from somewhere before our kitchen faucet and that food comes from somewhere before the local grocery store, we are also reminded of why we need to take care of our environment. We'll have clean water only if we keep sediments and chemicals out of our streams and aquifers – and that's also what's needed to have plenty of fish. We'll have healthy big game populations to hunt only if we provide them with plenty of secure habitat in which to thrive. We'll have clean air to breath and healthy foods to eat only if we keep pollutants out of our air and soil.

Those of us that live in Montana, even in urban areas, are blessedly surrounded by large expanses of public lands that provide an abundance of clean water, clean air, and

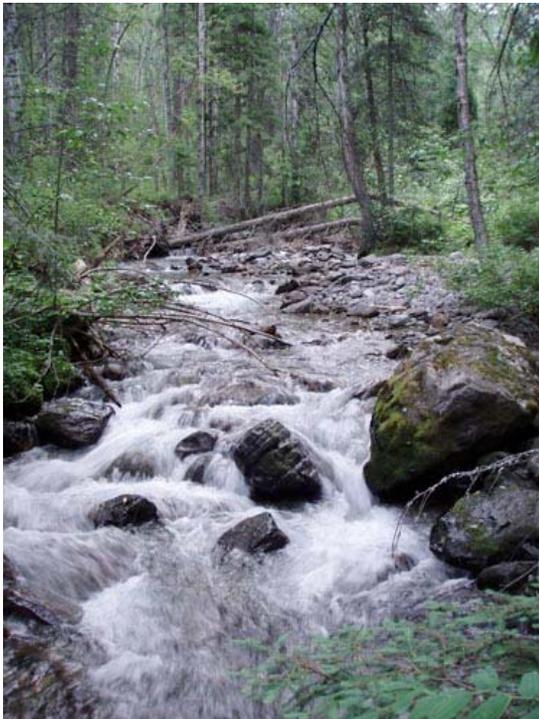
prime fish and wildlife habitat. Not all of us were lucky enough to grow up learning the skills of growing or procuring our own food from our yards or surrounding wildlands, but it's never too late to learn. It can begin with the simple act of learning to carefully collect a few tasty teas or medicinal plants from the woods and taking the time to walk in search of them.

Presents beneath our Christmas tree this year included an herbal adventure game called "Wildcraft," which bills itself as "a cooperative board game that teaches edible and medicinal plants." Indeed, players are sent by Grandma to pick two pails of huckleberries each from the top of a nearby mountain and the game is not over until everyone has safely returned with berries-in-bucket! Players help each other advance along the trail and a deck of instructional medicinal plant cards are at hand to deal with small mishaps along the way.

We found no assault rifle beneath our Christmas tree, but neither have we lost any sleep over such a glaring omission. Our cup is more than half full and at times runs over with the kindness of our friends and neighbors. In spite of the challenges that our economic recession continues to present, we Americans are blessed with limitless opportunities to help one another get through it.

It is my hope that 2010 brings us all closer together in our common desire to live our lives healthy, free, in good spirits, and in good companionship.

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column appears regularly in this paper and is archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.



Wolf Creek runs free from the Swan Crest to the valley floor. Keith Hammer photo.