



Lewis and Clark in the Lab

Journals from the Corps of Discovery aid wildlife scientists

Notable notes in forest research at Oregon State University College of Forestry

Lewis and Clark are remembered as important 19th century scientists and explorers. But can their journals be useful in new scientific research today? To scientists Andrea Laliberte (recent PhD) and Professor William Ripple in the Forest Resources Department at OSU, the answer is yes.

In 1804 the Lewis and Clark expedition, called the “Corps of Discovery,” set out on a two-year journey to map out territory that had not yet been explored by the U.S. government. President Thomas Jefferson hoped the Corps would not only help the U.S. lay claim to the newly acquired lands of the Louisiana Purchase but also exert more influence in the desirable territory known today as the Pacific Northwest.

Lewis and Clark described and catalogued many dozens of species of plants and animals in the West, depicting a time before white settlement. The journals have long been of interest to historians, but scientists are now turning to historical documents like these as sources of valuable data for new scientific research. For wildlife scientists Laliberte and Ripple, the importance of the journals lies not only in *what* the explorers saw but *where* they saw it. They looked at nine of the larger mammals described in the journals to see what effect the proximity of Native American communities had on the animals. They compared the number of animals noted at 506 different Corps campsites with the number of settlements nearby and their distance from the campsites. They found that in areas with fewer people, such as on the Plains, wildlife was more abundant. In the Pacific Northwest near large, established human communities, game animals were scarce. Rather than rely on salmon, the Corps even resorted to eating horses and dogs for a time. In places where different tribes were at war, there was more wildlife—perhaps because less hunting took place on lands where hunters might run into their enemies.

These findings are relevant to scientists today because they may explain why Lewis and Clark did not see animals such as bison, which archeologists believe lived in the Pacific Northwest in the past. They also show how even small groups of humans can affect wildlife. For more info: www.cof.orst.edu/lewis&clark

