

# THE SOURCE WEEKLY

## Running the Table With Bend's New H.S. Pool League

By Eric Flowers

## Getting a Rise Out of the Gluten-Free Crowd

By Sara Roth

## Nicky Paycheck

What the hell happened  
to Nick Cage?

By Morgan P. Salvo

**PUBLIC FOREST**

**PRIVATE  
PIGGY BANK**

**HOW PRIVATIZATION  
IS CHANGING THE  
WAY YOUR FOREST  
DOES BUSINESS**

By Mike Bookey

**ATM**



# Snow Man Meets Snow Shelter

A Cascades Winter Expedition by the Numbers

## Forests For Sale: As more campgrounds come under private management, what does this mean for campers?



Wednesday, 02 March 2011 Mike Bookey

If you've camped in any of our nearby national forests in the past few years, you probably paid for the right to do so. And when you wrote a check for your campsite, you almost certainly didn't make it out to the National Forest Service. You probably made it out to Hoodoo, Chuck Shepard's recreation and resort management company, or one of the other companies contracted to take care of campgrounds in the forests.

One of the most prominent concessionaires in the entire Northwest, Shepard owns Hoodoo ski resort and its accompanying campground management division. Hoodoo is the only private concessionaire in the Deschutes National Forest, managing all of the forest's 81 privately run campgrounds. In all, Shepard's company manages about 150 campgrounds in Oregon and Washington. That number was once larger, but his company recently lost a bid to continue managing almost 50 other locations in the Willamette National Forest to another Utah-based company, American Lands & Leisure.

Shepherd is part of a fast-growing group of entrepreneurs who are moving into the public lands management game as the Forest Service and other public agencies back out. While, it was once common for the forest service to manage its own campgrounds, the past 30-plus years have seen the federal agency continue to pass on campground and recreational site management to private companies. Currently, more than half of the campgrounds – and 80 percent of all campsites – in our national forests are managed by private concessionaires. Contracts, typically lasting between five and ten years, are awarded to these companies and in return, the company manages and maintains the campgrounds, collects fees, keeps an eye on campers and cleans toilets, among other responsibilities. Supporters, including public agencies like the BLM and Forest Service, say the concessionaire model is more fiscally efficient, but as more of the once publicly managed campgrounds and day-use areas move into private control, some users say that the private sector is operating with their bottom line in mind, marginalizing less-profitable spots and bumping up site fees, rather than looking after the interests of campers.

That's a problem, critics say, especially considering that 81 of the 93 campgrounds in the Deschutes National Forest and more than 100 of the 169 locations in the Mount Hood National Forest are currently operated by concessionaires. The campgrounds in the Willamette National Forest are also largely managed by private companies and just last year the Ochoco forest awarded contracts to a Utah-based company to manage several of the spots their agency had previously maintained.

One of those sites is the Skull Hollow campground just east of Smith Rock State Park, a popular site among rock climbers from throughout the region. Skull Hollow, which *the Source* covered in April of 2009 when the Forest Service

decided to implement a \$5-per-night fee at the once-free location, has been closed all winter by way of a decision by Aud & Di Campground Services, the company that now manages the campsite.

Ian Caldwell and other members of the volunteer Smith Rock Group, say that this seasonal closure is a disservice to the campers, many of whom had previously used Skull Hollow throughout the year.

“One of the problems with the whole issue with Skull Hollow is that the Forest Service wrote a contract with the private concessionaire that says they only need to keep it open for seven months,” says Caldwell, a longtime rock climber who now lives in Redmond, but used to camp at Skull Hollow when he lived in the valley. The Smith Rock Group used to pump the toilets and provide other maintenance at Skull Hollow, but discontinued those volunteer services when the campground began charging the \$5 fee. In a letter to Caldwell, Slater Turner, the District Ranger for the Ochoco National Forest and the Crooked River Grasslands, stated that the contract with Aud & Di requires the campground to remain open between May 1 and October 31. Any operation outside of that time frame is up to the company. Also in the letter, Turner said that the decision to turn Skull Hollow’s management over to a concessionaire was a result of “declining budgets and staff limitations,” which made it difficult to keep the campground open during the winter months when many forest service employees are laid off.

This fall, Aud & Di closed Skull Hollow at the end of October, then soon reopened it until the end of November. But to keep the campground open, it must remain profitable for Aud & Di, says company owner, Steve Hunn.

“We look to see that we can make enough off it to at least cover the cost of [operating] the campground,” says Hunn, whose company has been managing campgrounds since 1996 and is now overseeing some 60 spots in Oregon, Idaho and Wyoming. Hunn says that given the previous vandalism at Skull Hollow, his company decided, like at many of its campgrounds, to have a camp host on site whenever it’s open, which creates an additional operating cost. The Forest Service never had a host at Skull Hollow when it was under their management, but said in a letter to Caldwell that vandalism, theft and other problems were part of the reason they chose to turn Skull Hollow over to a concessionaire. The Forest Service also stated that Aud & Di were using this year to assess the occupancy at the campground to determine the cost of maintaining the site against the revenue it generated. Also, the letter points to other nearby campgrounds that could be used as an alternative to Skull Hollow.

Hunn says that Skull Hollow saw very few campers in November, which proved to be not enough to justify keeping it open. But Caldwell points out that while November and December were cold, temperatures remained in the 50s at Smith Rock in January, attracting plenty of climbers from all over the region, but none of these people were able to camp at Skull Hollow.

Caldwell and others have met with Jeff Walter, the forest supervisor for the Ochoco forest and the Crooked River Grasslands to work on some of his group’s concerns, but an easy solution is unlikely given that the ink on the contract with Aud & Di has long been dry.

“I wish there could be a win-win outcome here, but the only thing we could do is renegotiate with [the concessionaire]. That’s pretty tough to do,” says Walter, adding that his forest has very few concessionaires managing campgrounds.

At the end of the day, Skull Hollow is just a microcosm when it comes to the larger picture of concessionaires in Oregon. There’s another case study in the Mt. Hood National Forest where the Forest Service is proposing that the management of Bagby Hot Springs, a somewhat remote but nonetheless popular spot east of Estacada, be turned over to a private contractor.

The Northwest Forest Conservancy, an Oregon-based nonprofit that advocates for responsible management and usage, released a long list of concerns last month in response to the proposal for Bagby and several other sites on the Mt. Hood forest to be turned over to concessionaires. Included in that list was an assertion that concessionaires don’t hire the sort of well-trained and thoroughly vetted employees that the Forest Service employs. Perhaps most importantly, NWFC also stated in the document that volunteer maintenance efforts by groups such as theirs may not continue after the site is turned over to a private company.

Rick Acosta, the spokesman for the Mt. Hood National Forest, says that the interaction between the Forest Service and concessionaires is often misconstrued and that private companies are integral to providing recreation in our forests.

“Some people characterize it as privatizing it, we see it as a partnership. We have a lot of success serving the public this way,” says Acosta, “We’ve had diminishing capacity and the number of [employees] we have is diminishing. Meanwhile, the cost of services continues to go up.”

During the 2000s, the Forest Service saw widespread cuts in funding and staffing. Some programs, like fire suppression, remained amply funded, but recreation budgets took several hits, including an 11 percent decrease in 2007 alone.

This is the sentiment echoed by national forest managers across the country and one of the reasons that an increasing amount of campgrounds and recreation sites are being turned over to concessionaires nationwide.

Hoodoo’s Shepard sees the concessionaire program as the most efficient and logical way to manage national forest campgrounds.

“[Critics] would rather have the tax payer foot part of the bill, but that’s not the reality anymore,” says Shepard, “The forest service was never meant to be in the recreation business. They were meant to manage the trees, but not get into the private practice that goes into using the trees. I mean, you don’t see any government-run ski resorts, do you?”

Not everyone agrees with Shepard’s assertion and one of the most outspoken critics of privatization is Scott Silver of Wild Wilderness, a Bend-based nonprofit that advocates against forest access fees and commercialization of national forests.

“The forest service is moving toward being a manager of partnerships and contracts,” says Silver. “I see no reason in the world that a campground built on public lands with public funds be operated by the private sector.”

But even Silver, one of the harshest critics of forest privatization you’re likely to find, doesn’t see the concessionaire program disappearing anytime soon, even if he disagrees with the program’s underlying principle.

“The commercialization of our forests is straight forward and obvious. Unfortunately, it’s probably going to stay that way,” says Silver.