Reading the Trees

The stories that trees can tell

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A picture of the Telephone Tree, deep in the Fish Lake basin of the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness. The Forest Service wired or nailed the telephone to the tree at a trail junction, for calling in emergencies.



Scarred Spruce trees in the Selway Lochsa Crags area of the Selway Bitterroot Wilderness. This website also includes an audio clip of Forest Service ranger and conservationist, Bud Moore, who describes the martin trap set in the trees and talks about the old trappers and trap lines of the Lochsa.

Contextual Paragraph

Humans have left stories in trees for many ages. During Spring, when sap was running, indigenous people cut into the inner cambium layer of Ponderosa Pine trees, right under the outer bark to get nutrients and medicine. These strips could be eaten fresh or dried and stored for later in the year. Later on, trappers found ways to set up pine martin traps within a tree, by cutting an opening on one side and setting bait. More recently, Forest Service rangers set emergency telephone boxes into backcountry trees, using wiring and nails to set the phone into an existing tree cavity. As long as a tree remains ungirdled (not cut all the way around the circumference), it continues to grow tissue that wraps around the wound. Today, we can see these historic and cultural modifications of trees along popular trails as well as deep in the wilderness, if one only looks closely enough.

Key Questions

1. Looking at the first picture, why would the Forest Service want to build an emergency phone into a tree?
2. How has the tree grown around the historic telephone booth in the picture?
3. What is a trapline and how would the trees in the second picture be useful for trapping pine martins?
4. After listening to Bud Moore's audio clip, how difficult would it be to run a trapline in the Selway-Bitterroot Wilderness?

Assessment

1. Trees usually live much longer than humans. How does that make trees good story-tellers?
2. Think of a tree you have observed in your neighborhood. What kind of story can it tell about *your* community and the events that have taken place in its lifetime?