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Environmental Writing

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Learning to Observe

While flying into Taylor Ranch, what struck me first was the miles upon miles of rigid mountain peaks that extended in every direction. My eyes followed rivers that meandered through the terrain and found the distinctive lines between burned and unburned areas. I marveled at stands of towering tree forests, short shrub meadows, and steep scree walls. I started to realize how beautiful, remote, diverse, and wild of a place the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness Area is.

My goal while at Taylor Ranch was to have new experiences because I wanted to learn. I learned so much. I excelled at living with eleven other people, which isn't always the easiest. I mastered hiking poles and gained the knowledge that I can easily handle long backpacking trips. I figured out how to write essays in one day, properly summarize others writing, and tie several different knots. However, I believe the most important thing I learned is to observe.

I started to notice the small things. I watched the leaves of the Arrowleaf Balsamroot plants turn from their delicate pastel fall colors to their muddy brown colors of winter. I sat near a creek on a warm day and felt the cool air rushing down the drainage. I paused on a walk and stood still long enough to listen to the faint peeping of a song bird far in the distance. I learned to notice all of these small things, but also how they are all connected. The leaves change color at different rates when near a drainage and when far away from one. There are different birds

singing in areas with herbaceous plants and areas with woody ones. The wind can completely drown out any faint whisper of a bird's call.

Everything is connected. Sometimes these interactions happen in subtle ways. Like in the microclimates formed under a certain tree, in a specific drainage, or on a particular mountain side. But also, *everything* is connected: the air, the rivers, the soils, the microbes, the plants, and the animals. It all interacts in one big ecosystem that encompasses the Frank Church Wilderness Area and much further beyond the human drawn boundaries. It's possible, like Aldo Leopold asks, I'm starting to think a little bit more like a mountain.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 created the foundation for wilderness areas, and in 1980 the one I lived in was established. These lands were set aside with the intention of being "untrammeled," unchanged by humans. In many ways, I believe this is the reasons I learned to observe the complexity of the area and fully comprehend the interactions that occur. This is an area with so few human impacts the only thing to see is the land. When standing on top of a ridgeline and facing nothing but miles and miles of mountains, you realize how fully connected everything is, it's impossible not too. Now, I want to extend these ideas to the ecosystems everywhere else, not just in a wilderness area.

One thing that I struggled to observe, at first, was how humans play a role in a place like the Frank Church Wilderness Area. The easiest to learn about was the historical role. The Dukudeka tribe lived and thrived in this area until forced out. They worked as part of the ecosystem, and the impacts they made were in harmony with everything here. But with places like Taylor Ranch, it took me longer to discover. There are structures, machines, irrigated fields, and planes disrupting the natural hum and flow of the surrounding landscape. But, it is just a little microclimate. Deer take advantage of the green grass, and bears eat the apples off the

planted trees. The shrubs grow just as happily and the trees just as tall. The air still moves though the two drainages, and rain and snow lands the same as anywhere else. It is part of the ecosystem.

I can find an even stronger connection off of Taylor Ranch. The wilderness can seem a place of solitude, and it is generally void of other humans, but instead all interact is with the surrounding environment. I saw the way other animals scamper out of sight as I approach. I felt freezing snow beating down, sharp and harsh, as I impede its route to the ground. I heard rocks sliding down a slope as my foot dislodged it. I tasted the crisp water of a creek which I scooped water directly out of. I smelled the delicate scent of the big sage brush after I brushed across it. I interacted with everything here.

I learned so much from my experience and it all stems back to me beginning to observe. It started with the simple observations I made the first day when I flew into Taylor Ranch on a tiny plane and discovered where I was living. I observed the completeness of the ecosystem here. I learned I am a small part of the ecosystem.