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Star-News

Conserving Cougar Island critical to character of Payette Lake

Sitting just north of the Ponderosa State Park peninsula that extends into Payette Lake lies 14-acre Cougar Island, a tree-covered haven surrounded by deep blue waters.

But the island we now know as Cougar wasn't always called that. In fact, for a period of about 20 years, beginning in the early 1960s, this island was called Channel Island and Payette Lake's other large island (Shellworth Island), located on the southeast side of the lake, was referred to as Cougar.

How did Shellworth become Cougar, and Cougar become Channel? According to the Aug. 22, 1984 edition of The Star-News, the snafu began when an Idaho Department of Lands forester used a mislabeled map, which became accepted as accurate and true.

The confusion only deepened when the Forest Service published its 1966 map of the Payette National Forest using the mislabeled name places, followed by the 1973 Valley County General Highway Map and the 1973 U.S. Geological Survey map. All this confusion with no Google map in sight!

Order was finally restored in December 1980, and the islands were immortalized as we know them now: Cougar Island on the west side of the lake and north of Ponderosa State Park and Shellworth Island on the southeast side of the lake.

Like the majority of state endowment land surrounding the Payette lakes, the State of Idaho owns Cougar Island with the IDL managing the land. When Idaho became a state, Congress granted Idaho endowment trust lands for the sole purpose of funding specified beneficiaries, primarily public schools.

Currently, a single home sits on one Cougar Island's five platted parcels. However, this could change soon as IDL looks to dispose of some McCall area endowment lands, including Cougar island.

Last year, IDL reviewed its management of the area's endowment lands, identified parcels that are currently yielding low or no financial returns, and developed a plan for managing parcels around the lake, including disposing of some parcels (the [Payette Endowment Lands Strategy](#)).

IDL ranked Cougar Island as a Tier 1 priority for disposition, and the department will likely hold a public auction during the summer of 2022, first for individual parcels and possibly for the whole island.

Cougar Island is highly visible from the north end of Ponderosa State Park and from several vantage points along Warren Wagon Road to the island's west. Due to this high visibility, the potential development, or conservation of Cougar Island will permanently affect the area's setting and character.

In Valley County, people are engaging in crucial conversations about development and growth vs. conservation, community character, and land access for traditional recreation, agriculture, and timber management uses.

In the coming weeks, United Payette and its supporters will be sharing why we believe conserving Cougar Island is critical to the character of Payette Lake and McCall.

We will also discuss the ecology, economics, human health and safety, and water quality issues, and the threats posed by additional development in the middle of the lake.

Join us at unitedpayette.org/blog to follow the Cougar Island conversation. We also invite you to share your own stories and memories of Cougar Island on United Payette's Facebook page.

Randy Fox, Idaho Conservation League

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