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Walking the coast, from border to border Al LePage is hiking the Oregon Coast Trail to explore what's changed

ROY GUALT Statesman Journal
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LePage is four days into his second pilgrimage, destined to be in Cannon Beach by nightfall, where he'll meet with anyone who's interested in the first of seven public meetings during the next four weeks.

"I want to explore how the Oregon Coast Trail has changed in one generation, to share with people how it was when I first hiked it, to tell them how it is now, to see how it's changed," he said.

LePage is the director of the National Coast Trail Association, which is based in Portland, and his plan is to hike during the same 30 calendar days that he did in 1988, when he walked the coastline north to south July 14 through Aug. 12.

To his knowledge, he's the first person to walk the entire length of the West Coast Trail. He hiked the 200-mile Washington Coast Trail in two weeks in 1992 and the 1,200-mile California Coastal Trail in 31/2 months in 1996.

He plans evening presentations in Cannon Beach, Lincoln City, Newport, Florence, Coos Bay, Gold Beach and Brookings to tell stories, sing trail songs and to listen comments from people who attend.

"I need to ask some questions," LePage said. "What will the Oregon Coast look like in another generation if we don't do anything? What will it look like if special landscapes that give specific areas a unique sense of place are lost for the rest of eternity? What special places do all of us want to keep for future generations?"

The thrust of his coastal journey is conservation: to share his visions and to learn the visions of others in order to promote the preservation of wild areas.

"So why's a group like the National Coast Trail Association sharing a bold conservation vision like this?" LePage asked. "One primary idea behind our focus on conservation is based on the fact that a trail is really only a way through a landscape, and it's what's next to the trail, what you see and experience from the trail,



that makes any trail the special place that it is. In other words, 'What good is the Oregon Coast Trail without the Oregon Coast?'"

Part of his purpose is to discover ways to fill in the missing links in the trail, the places where hikers must venture off the trail and walk along Highway 101 to get to the next section of trail. About 350 of the 400 miles are established trail, including miles of sandy beach.

LePage emphasizes that every walk along the coast, even though it might be the same stretch multiple times, is a new experience.

"If one really thinks about it, no particular trail is ever the same," he said. "It's always different and new, every moment of every day. It could be rainy and cool, or sunny and warm. A certain flower may be in bloom or a particular berry ripe and ready to eat. A whale's spout may be spotted on the horizon. A tree may have fallen across the trail.

"Something as simple as which direction you've chosen to hike can really make it a different experience as well."

He said enjoyment isn't necessarily in what you see, but in how you see it.

"Hiking the Oregon Coast Trail can be a real odyssey, even a pilgrimage, if you're willing to receive that kind of gift from the trail," he said. "The beauty, the awe and wonder of eternal landscapes along the Oregon Coast can transform you, not only psychologically and emotionally, but spiritually, too."

The goal of the National Trail Association is to develop and construct a connected National Coast Trail around the entire coastline of the United States, including sections of hiking trail and sections of water trail.

"The first step is for us to listen to each other, then work together to figure out what to do, and then do it," LePage said. "It's really that simple to me. If we treat each other with kindness and patience in finding a way to preserve the Coast, then there's a very good chance we'll not only find a greater sense of community, but compassion and perhaps even communion in preserving the Oregon Coast for generations to come."

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