

CHAPTER 5

Lizard Hill

I had just finished a two-year stint as lead design engineer for the shear-tied wing ribs and engine nacelle support structure on Boeing's new 777 airliner. This was the first airliner in history to be engineered entirely on computers and without a physical mock-up to verify that all of the parts would fit. Every part was modeled as a Boolean solid in three dimensions and moved into place with other solid models to insure everything interfaced properly before the engineering was released. The young engineers responsible for pulling this off gave it everything they had. We worked seven days a week, 10 or 12 hours a day, and sometimes all night to make our release schedules. We were hell-bent to prove what we could do. It was an unparalleled success, but some of us paid a price.

A few weeks after our last engineering release, I visited my dentist for the first time in two years. He found an abscess on my gum that had resulted from a botched root canal a few years earlier. I was scheduled for surgery. The next day I saw my dermatologist. He found a large skin cancer on my back. I was scheduled for surgery again. A few days later, I saw an internist for my stomach pains. Apparently, two years of washing aspirin down with coffee had taken a toll on my stomach lining, allowing the *H. pylori* stomach ulcer bacteria to take hold.

I needed a break. My wife and I started looking for vacation property. Waterfront sounded appealing, so we started there. We

also wanted this property to be reasonably close by, so we limited our search to two nearby counties. We had embarked on a steep learning curve. We looked at property on one lake after another. Some of the lakes turned out to be seasonal, drying up in late summer. We learned to ask about that little detail because the real estate agents didn't usually volunteer the information. As I stood at the end of one small lake, listening to the chainsaws and dogs, watching smoke waft up from the burning piles of brush, I realized that this lake, like most of the others, had been ruined by development. It was completely ringed with houses, each with a septic system and well, a lawn, cats, and dogs. It was a small lake—longer than it was wide. Instead of looking across the street at your neighbor, you looked across a narrow body of water. What was the point? We looked at one last lake. As I stood in the wooded lot, thinking that this one might be acceptable, a neighbor's dog sauntered up, sniffed my shoe and proceeded to deposit a steaming pile of shit on the path I had just walked down. No, what I needed was solitude. To hell with waterfront property, I did not want to participate in the rape of another lake anyway.

The criteria had suddenly changed. Now we asked our real estate agent to find a large piece of remote and isolated property within hiking distance to an undeveloped lake.

Our agent called us a few weeks later. She had found fifty acres of undeveloped land that was being sold in five-acre parcels. The property was bordered on one side by state forest and on the other two sides by forest owned by a Boy Scout troop. Access was along a rough logging road, and there were five small, totally undeveloped lakes within hiking distance. It sounded too good to be true. I followed my agent to the property on the following day. There was only one parcel left in the far corner of the fifty acres. It was just what I was looking for. Even if the other lots were eventually developed, we would at least have forest to our back.

I learned that this land had been used as an ad-hoc Christmas tree farm since the 1940's. Most of the big trees had been harvested before putting the property up for sale. This is standard operating procedure—take your lumber profit and turn the clear cut over to developers. Fortunately, the landowner had left

enough large trees behind to make it marketable. You can get more money for land if there are some big trees on it. This was also being touted as view property. By clearing most of the big trees, beautiful views of the mountains had temporarily opened. The acreage had been surveyed, complete with cul-de-sac turn-arounds. Everything was poised to convert it into a subdivision.

In Mason County you need three things before you can build on land without a community water or sewer system. First you must pay to have a well dug. This can be an expensive and risky adventure. The well has to be able to produce a minimum amount of clear drinking water per hour. If your property passes that hurdle, you now have to do a perc-test. For this, you must hire someone with a backhoe to dig a ditch to see if the soil will allow sewage water to percolate adequately. The last rule is that your house must be connected to the county electrical grid. You can't build a house or cabin and expect to power it with wind, solar, or propane. This is a good way to slow the proliferation of cabins and shacks in forests. It was interesting to note that the real estate agent made no mention of these minor details. Fortunately, I did not intend to develop this land. In fact, the building code stipulations only reinforced my decision to buy. I knew that the nearest power line was four miles away down a logging road. The cost of bringing it to our land would be prohibitive. None of this property was going to be developed anytime soon.

One day, while standing on a knoll above our property, my young daughter caught a western fence lizard. Later in the day, she saw an alligator lizard. When my wife asked her what we should call our property, she had replied "Lizard Hill."

All was not well in paradise. A guy named George had purchased the first lot. He had placed a hand carved totem pole at the corner of his lot that read, "George's Coner." He had left the letter "r" out of the word "corner" by accident. This was a sign of more to come. The next thing he did was park a trailer on his property, then another, and another. Before long, car hulks and old tires began to pile up. He stole his water from the Boy Scout's water tap and God only knew what he was doing with his sewage. Outhouses are illegal nowadays. Finally, the board of health forced him to put a Porta-Potty on his property. Within a year there were four or five dilapidated trailers and several junk

cars along with a continuous entourage of drunken losers hanging around. The cake was iced with a breeding population of pit bulls that threatened and bit passers-by—one of them being my wife. As they would chase my car, I took great pleasure in opening my door and hearing a "thunk" as I nailed the dogs that hadn't learned better. On a positive note, George provided further insurance that no one would invest a lot of money developing the area.

I put a small RV camper on our property. Fully self-contained, these campers come complete with a bathroom, a kitchen, and comfortable beds. We would bring fresh water to add to the storage tank with every trip out. We also hauled our sewage away to the nearest trailer sewer hookup using containers designed just for that purpose. These campers are a big improvement over the old camp stove, outhouse, sleeping bag, and tent arrangement. They're also very eco-friendly when compared to the alternatives I just mentioned. Once the trailer is hauled away, it leaves no footprint, no foundation, and no septic system behind. I hired a guy with a pickup truck to haul it out to the property for me, but he could only take it as far as the logging road. To get the trailer up the hill and deeper into the woods I hired someone with a bulldozer. I was to meet him at the property a week later.

As I approached Lizard Hill to meet the dozer operator, the first hint that something was wrong came to me as the powerful smell of pinesap. The next hint was smoke. Finally, as I rounded the last turn, I found to my horror that the forest south of me had been clear-cut. The death of thousands of fir trees creates a smell that is inappropriately pleasant. The smoke was from the piles of slash being burned. We dragged the trailer to the secluded spot I had chosen which was now completely exposed. I paid the operator and thanked him. He left me standing there gazing over the smoldering landscape. It was later explained to me that the Boy Scouts had needed some cash, and although most of the trees were not big enough for lumber, they were just the right size to be used for paper pulp. I may be writing on paper made from those trees at this moment.

This was the first of many lessons Lizard Hill would teach me. Although my intent was to preserve this piece of property,

my urges to improve it were difficult to resist. I brought in a picnic table and benches. I made two platforms out of cedar, one for a tent and the other for a portable hot tub. The lumber, of course, had all come from clear cuts somewhere.

I knew from the start that anything not nailed down would be stolen. I had a security system in place within days of parking the trailer. I started with a simple alarm hooked to the door. Someone dismantled that one fine day and cleaned out all of our canned goods.

Next, using a car cell phone, an intermittent windshield wiper switch, and a small electric motor, I built a system that would call me at home whenever the trailer door was opened. It had a speakerphone so I could hear and talk with anyone in the trailer. This was a novel idea, but the cell signal was unreliable way out in the boonies.

My third system proved to be the best. I decided that it would be smarter to keep trespassers from entering the trailer in the first place. I bought a 12-volt motion sensor rated for outdoor use and hid it about a hundred yards down the logging road. I attached it to a car tape deck hidden in the trailer. I made a recording of televangelists spouting fire and brimstone and put that into the tape deck. As you approached the trailer you could just make out the sound of angry voices. As you got closer, you would hear a deranged man shouting about God and hell. It worked flawlessly for many years. I added to this defense "no trespassing" signs, which claimed that digital motion sensors and surveillance cameras connected to cellular transmitters monitored the property. Although it wasn't true, the signs made potential trespassers nervous.

Over time we learned what kind of animal life we could commonly expect to see. The lakes are full of newts. These newts are aquatic except for a few months in the winter when many of them take on a terrestrial form and go marching off to find new ponds. They can sometimes be seen walking across snow. This is the safest time for a migration because few predators are active in the cold wet winter. My daughters fear that one-day they will come back to these lakes and find no newts. It would break their hearts if I told them that it is almost inevitable, so I don't.

Red-legged frogs can be found on rare occasions. These large frogs are not usually found near water except during mating season. They used to be so common that logging camps would sometimes supplement their meals with frog legs. No one knows why their numbers have declined so drastically. Puget Sound garter snakes are quite common. We once found a skeleton of a garter snake with the skeleton of a newt in its mouth. The newts secrete a poison from their skin. I don't know if the snake was poisoned by the newt or run over by my car while in the act of eating it.

In late winter the ponds fill with the tadpoles of the emerald tree frog. These ponds dry up in the summer, but not until the tadpoles have turned into frogs. Wetlands that dry up are important for many species of frog. Large predators like fish are absent which dramatically decreases predation. Missing from this property was a pond large enough to avoid drying up every summer. Some species of frogs and salamanders require more than one summer to mature and need ponds that can last through the dry season most of the time. I decided to make one. I picked a ravine that could be dammed at one end, and hired an excavator. I then laid a rubber pond liner in the bottom and hired the bulldozer guy to bury the liner. The finished dimensions were ninety feet by forty feet and about ten feet deep at one end. As I was paying the bulldozer operator, I noticed a fatally injured rubber boa lying at my feet. The weight of the dozer had crushed it as it lay in its shallow burrow.

Coyote and deer were once quite common. One night I left the alarm system activated and was awakened on two occasions—once by a deer and once by a coyote. Their numbers have dwindled in proportion to the army of brush pickers that now comb the area on a daily basis.

Western fence lizards can be found as well as western alligator lizards. The former lays eggs and the latter bears live young. We found this out while keeping some as temporary pets.

The large pond nearby always has beavers and occasionally otters. As the years went by, the lots adjacent to me were put back on the market. I purchased five more acres.

One weekend while camping with my family and enjoying the solitude, a group of Spanish-speaking brush pickers swept

through the adjacent forest talking and whistling as they went. The next day a group of Vietnamese-speaking pickers did the same.

Brush picking is a relatively new occupation. People who pick brush for a living are looking for parts of wild plants that are used by floral companies to accent their flower arrangements. Using wild greens is the latest fad. Whenever you buy a bouquet keep in mind that those greens were all picked by hand in north-west forests. The pickers bring their bags full of greens to large warehouses where they are sorted and shipped out to the florist shops. It is a growing industry. I have watched the construction of a dozen such warehouses in the past ten years. Much of the greenery is shipped to other parts of the world. Brush pickers stomp back and forth, bushwhacking through forestland over and over again, gleaning specific greens from it—salal, moss, bear-grass, evergreen boughs, ferns, wildflowers, herbs, huckleberries, nuts, and mushrooms. The harvest in Washington State alone will exceed \$236 million in 2003.¹

I constantly find evidence on our land that brush pickers have trimmed the lower branches off the young western pine trees. Each year they trim a little higher on the tree until there are almost no branches left. The boughs are made into Christmas wreaths. I once caught a picker pulling the bark off a young cedar tree in long strips to be used for weaving. Authorities recently found over 600 bags of illegally picked moss in Kitsap County in Washington. About three-quarters of the picking is done illegally and paid for with cash. Few taxes are paid.

One of the worst things about brush pickers is that they don't follow trails. In reality, they are on the lookout for anything of value, not just the greens used by florists. Forest Service enforcement officers spend about half of their time on thefts of non-timber products. As they bushwhack, brush pickers litter, urinate, defecate, and make lots of noise. An enhancement to the ecosystem, they are not.

A couple of professors have been studying the environmental impact of brush picking. They haven't come up with anything conclusive yet, but it doesn't take a rocket scientist to know that brush picking isn't good for the environment. As the

¹ http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/local/58249_greens14.shtml

numbers of brush pickers continually grow and as time marches on, our forestlands are beginning to look like trodden city parks. The privacy needed by wildlife to give birth and raise their offspring is being violated 365 days a year. The cedar tree with the stripped bark is dead, my pine trees look sickly, and my picnic table and benches along with anything else that wasn't bolted to the Earth have been stolen. My property is never without the litter and toilet paper left behind by roving bands of brush pickers.

Everybody is making money—the landowners that lease their land for brush picking, the brush warehouse owners, the brush pickers, and the florists. Once a new industry that relies upon natural resources gets entrenched, it becomes harder to remove it. Many people now depend on the industry for their livelihood and florists are accustomed to working the greens into their arrangements. What we need is a federal law making it illegal to use wild picked greens in floral arrangements. It would do no good for a single state to make it illegal, because the demand would still exist and the supply would still meet demand, one way or another. Florists would lose no profit under a federal law because it would be a level playing field. Since no florist would be using wild greens, one could not gain an advantage over the other by having greens to enhance their bouquets. If prices for floral arrangements remained unchanged, the florists' profit margins would actually increase because they would not be paying for the extra greens.

There's the problem of all the people who make a living from the industry. If you simply pull the plug on their livelihood, it will create hardship and resentment. We should all pay with our taxes to reimburse those who were legally making a living in this industry for a transitional period of time giving them a chance to find employment through other means. Buy out the brush shed owners, give the workers a significant severance pay, and lease the forests for a decade. Everybody would be happy and the industry would be gone. It costs to protect the environment. The environment continues to be chewed up by people looking to improve their lives. It is only natural.

Deer mice will completely overrun any cabin, trailer, or house that sits in a rich ecosystem. Deer mice can carry the

dangerous Hanta virus, and this was a concern to me. There is no way to keep them out. This explains why people have always kept cats around. I would set five traps every week, and still I couldn't keep up with them. One day I entered the trailer and found that my burgeoning mouse population had attracted two weasels. I never could find out how all these animals were gaining access to our trailer. A mouse can fit through a hole no larger than a dime. All it takes is for one mouse to find such a hole. It will then remember that location. Its mate and any offspring will also learn of the hole. A heavily used scent trail will then attract other mice to the same hole. That is when the flood-gates open.

Next came the insects. The carpenter ants and termites waged open warfare for the last remnants of the wooden structure. The yellow jackets and hornets also vied for real estate. Out of desperation, I finally resorted to using poison to control these pests.

Finally, there were the human pests. Nothing of value could ever be left behind, or it was stolen. Who were these people and where did they come from? Drifters, hunters, brush pickers, who knows?

This is why I choose to live in a city. I love nature and I love to visit nature, but I do not want to live as one with nature. What is the point of living in the woods? You need to maintain roads to get your car there, keep guard dogs to protect you from human predators, and cats to protect you from rodents. In addition, you must spray insect poison everywhere to protect your property from wood ants, termites and hornets. Your property quickly becomes a blight on the skin of the Earth. It is wiser to live in town and visit the woods.

I have watched the construction of two homes within a ten-mile radius of this property in the few years that I have owned it. The trees are cut down, the bulldozers come in, and a septic system and well are installed. After the house is built, the cats and dogs arrive. These homes, almost without exception, are on the market a few years later to begin an endless procession of turnovers. The dream of living in the woods usually fails to meet expectations. It just isn't worth the hassle. It's kind of like owning a boat. We have all heard the cliché "The two happiest days

of boat ownership are the day you buy the boat and the day you sell it." This is also often true of vacation property and homes built in the middle of nowhere. Even George of "George's Coner" finally disappeared ten years after his arrival—leaving behind one hell of a mess. If our population were not constantly expanding, these homes would never have been built.

One of the lakes in the area was purchased by a guy named Larry for about half a million dollars. He immediately built a large brick bed-and-breakfast mansion on the edge of it.² This was a serious case of urban sprawl. He is, however, a good steward of his land and continues to allow public access to one part of the lake—catch and release fly-fishing only. He keeps this lake well stocked and otters sometimes take up residence there. They cost him money because they eat the stocked trout. This is an example of the price of protecting the environment. The government will issue him a permit to shoot the otters because they are damaging him financially. I would rather see the government reimburse him for his losses with the tax dollars we all pay rather than issue a permit to kill the otters.

Lizard Hill taught me a lot about conservation and most importantly, a lot about human nature. If a person like me, who loves nature as much as I do, has a hard time controlling his urge to improve his property (wreck it), how can we expect the rest of humanity to resist the urge to control their own environment?

It also taught me that I am mortal. There is a limit on how much time and energy an individual can invest in vacation property. A trip to Lizard Hill required that I bring out the tub heater, two freshly charged car batteries, and twenty gallons of fresh water. That was on top of everything else such as food and tools. Occasionally the septic holding tank needed to be emptied into a portable tank so I could transport it to a trailer dump station. The propane tanks often had to be taken off and refilled. One day I went to Lizard Hill to prepare it for a weekend of camping with my family. I found that the hot tub had a small leak. The tub heater was also malfunctioning. The alarm was on the blink, and consequently someone had stolen one of my batteries. The trailer was infested with mice, termites, yellow jackets, and wood ants. When I tried to start the furnace a mouse

²<http://www.cadylake.com/>

nest caught fire. As the trailer filled with smoke, I feared starting a forest fire because the summer had been very hot and dry. I managed to put the fire out and stood there in silence. I heard a strange clicking sound coming from the trailer walls—the sound made by warrior termites when their nest is disturbed. They gnash their mandibles together as a warning to intruders. The smoke had upset them. It had been a good ride. I gave the trailer away a few weeks later to someone who planned to live in it until he finished building his home. Wisely, he was going to fumigate it first.

I have to put in a plug here for my 1989 Jeep Cherokee. Feel free to skip this part if you aren't a guy. The recipient of my moth eaten trailer had come to retrieve it with a full-size pickup truck—the kind with four wheels in the back. He couldn't get the trailer up the steep logging roads. As you may recall, I had hired a bulldozer to get it where it was. He finally suggested that we hook my Cherokee to it. I was skeptical. He told me that he had seen Cherokees move mountains. Unfortunately, my Jeep was trapped behind the trailer on the only logging road out. About this time, it started to pour. I knew of another trail, but it crossed very close to my pond on a steep incline. I opened my windows in case the Jeep rolled into the pond and then gunned it through the narrow passage, two wheels in the water—no problem. I put the Jeep in four-wheel granny gear and backed it to the trailer. We hitched it up and I tentatively put the Jeep in forward. The Jeep didn't seem to notice that a 30-foot long trailer was behind it. I pulled it for three miles to the paved road. I guess I hadn't needed the bulldozer to move the trailer when I first brought it to Lizard Hill.

I might as well take this opportunity to tell my other Jeep story, again, feel free to skip it also. It was January, and I had just taken the ferry from Seattle to the Kitsap peninsula to start my 45-minute drive to Lizard Hill. As I rolled off the ferry, two feet of freshly fallen snow greeted me. I decided to see how close I could get to Lizard Hill. I stopped at an auto parts store for some tire chains. The man at the counter told me that a Jeep with chains is unstoppable. I thought that unlikely. Some of the main roads had been plowed. I reached the turnoff for the last five miles of pavement before the logging road that led to Lizard

Hill. I stopped and looked at the snowfield where the road should have been, bordered on both sides by forest. I slowly drove the Jeep onto the snow ready to back out at the first sign of trouble. Snow piled up on the front bumper and onto the hood. I kept an eye on the temperature gauge because the radiator was also covered with snow. As the engine temperature climbed, I would stop to clear the snow away. I had to drive around a few abandoned four-wheel-drive vehicles that had tried to enter this road from side-roads. So far I was the only vehicle to successfully navigate it. Finally, I came to my turnoff. I stopped and looked back at my lone tracks winding off into the distance. I turned up the logging road and immediately got stuck. Cherokees do have their limits. I put some branches under my tires and managed to turn the Jeep around, pointing it back the way I had just come, just off the main road. I hadn't gotten into trouble yet so I decided to hike in to the trailer, which was three miles down the logging road. About three-quarters of the way there I realized I was finally in trouble. Hiking in thigh-deep snow was proving to be more difficult than I realized. I decided that the safest thing to do was continue on to the trailer where I could rest and get warm. Once I reached it, I wasn't sure I had the strength to walk back out. I didn't like the idea of spending the night or of leaving my Jeep in the middle of nowhere. I felt better after an hour of rest. I assumed it would be easier on the way out because I could walk in the tracks I made coming in. I was approaching the limit of my endurance by the time I made it back. The sun was just setting. I looked up the paved road and saw a snow plow coming.

When it reached me the driver stopped and rolled his window down, "I've been following your tracks for five miles," he yelled. "My next car is gonna be a Cherokee."

Too exhausted to do anything else, I gave him a thumbs-up. There is an old saying, "Four-wheel drive should only be used to stay out of trouble; it should never be used to go looking for it."

It wouldn't surprise me if some of you are appalled that I drive an SUV. I bought it many years ago to get to Lizard hill via rough logging roads. I also use it extensively for my business, which involves hauling heavy tools and pulling a trailer. It may be the only Jeep in Seattle actually used for what it was designed to do. I have recently looked into replacing it and have con-

cluded that it is by far the most efficient vehicle available for the task. There is no question that it also brought me a measure of status when it was new and shiny. Give me a break, I owned a series of four Ford Pintos prior to buying this used Jeep. When I was eighteen I did a painting titled "My rotary engined, hydrogen burning, Pinto car" that won a gold medal in a citywide art contest. The painting was done at the height of the gasoline shortage caused by the OPEC embargo. The idea of using hydrogen to fuel our cars has been around for a long time.

It has been a full decade since we bought that property. The trees in the clear cut are ten feet tall now. We had many wonderful times there. Some day, somebody will bring a power line in and that will be the end of Lizard Hill.

Before I finished this essay someone had replaced George and his dogs, and I found yet another abandoned pick-up truck on my property just today. As I rode back on the ferry, the headlines in the local paper read "New zoning laws allow more homes to be built in rural forests." A battle is looming to prevent a local lumber family from building a 700 home subdivision in the middle of their forest holdings, just a few miles from Lizard hill. It will never end until our population stops growing and even then it will not end if our personal wealth continues to grow such that we will desire vacation property. The forests need to be roped off by using free market methods similar to those discussed in other parts of the book and protected from development and fragmentation. Zoning laws and government ownership do not present a long-term solution.

