

Our I-go wildlife overpasses and underpasses

By JIM HUCKABAY Contributing Columnist

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The conversation on the floor was the upcoming video and discussion of our Snoqualmie Pass I-go wildlife crossings. This is co-sponsored by the 99-plus year-old Kittitas County Field and Stream Club and the Ellensburg Public Library, and happens Monday evening, Sept. 10 at Hal Holmes. The presentation will be made by folks from the I-go Wildlife Bridges Coalition.

At any rate, homey just looked at me. Finally, he shook his head and asked the most common question I hear about these crossings, "Do critters actually use those overpasses and those places where they go under highways?"

"Yes. And yes," I replied. "There are hundreds of wildlife crossings around the world, and they are credited with saving thousands of two-legged and four-legged lives. One or two of them have been developed for animals you probably never even considered..."

Probably the most widely-known and photographed crossings in North America are those around Canada's Banff National Park in Alberta. Our Snoqualmie Pass crossings are the largest wildlife crossings project in North America. They will, I think, be as celebrated and discussed — and as popular to tourists — as those around Banff.

Wildlife crossings — overpasses and underpasses — have been built all across the world. In the U.S. you will find them in Montana, Colorado, California, Florida, New Jersey, Nevada and several other states. In Sublette County, Wyoming built the first overpass designed specifically for pronghorns — to protect a couple thousand

antelope which migrate 160 miles each way — with special vegetation and a very unique design. Across the globe, wildlife crossings are found in (among many others) The Netherlands, Germany, Belgium, South India and Australia. Google “wildlife overpasses” and you will find photos and videos of worldwide animal bridges, and links to an amazing variety of studies which support the value of these crossings. While we think mostly about preventing human-animal collisions, a primary motivation for finding crossing solutions has been the fragmenting of wildlife habitat — the division of contiguous wildlife ground — by ever-increasing numbers and sizes of highways, and the traffic they carry. Crossings allow animals of all sizes and species to move more freely — and safely — through historic range.

Of course, the cost of vehicle-animal collisions is significant both in terms of property damage and deaths/injuries to human drivers and passengers. Wikipedia (under that “wildlife overpasses” Google) cites dozens of studies, with some mind-boggling numbers. In 1996,

Bruinderink & Hazebroek estimated annual European human/ungulate collisions at more than half a million, with 300 human deaths and 30,000 injuries. In the U.S., Donaldson's 2005 study cited one and a half million traffic accidents involving deer, annually, causing more than one billion dollars in vehicle damage. Other studies cite up to 30,000 injuries, with more than 200 fatalities, each year in the U.S.

Wildlife crossings are not cheap, but arguments are made that planning and construction costs are trumped (word used in its traditional meaning) by wildlife population and habitat protection, reduced vehicle and property damage, and lives saved by fewer collisions. (A Virginia Department of Transportation study estimated that underpasses for wildlife become cost effective if they prevent between three and nine car-deer collisions annually — depending on the cost of building the crossing.)

Add all those costs to concerns about wildlife mortality and habitat fragmentation, and it is easy to see why biologists, engineers, and transportation pros have been looking at mitigation tools to reduce conflicts between roads and wildlife. It appears

that, while proper siting and proper design for species, habitat and so forth is critical, wildlife crossings have been most successful at meeting those concerns.

On Sept. 10, you will have a chance to see where our I-90 corridor fits in this worldwide work. Cascade Crossroads is a 30-minute documentary film chronicling the work over and under Interstate 90 just east of Snoqualmie Pass over the Cascade Mountains. These crossings grew from the work of the I-90 Wildlife Bridges Coalition, formed in 2004 by more than two dozen organizations and businesses. The Coalition's mission was "to advocate for high quality wildlife connectivity measures in the I-90 Snoqualmie Pass East Project, while ensuring the habitat adjacent to these structures contributes to their success."

Find out more about the I-90 project at

www.wsdot.wa.gov/projects/ig90/snoqualmiepasseast. And find more about the film at ig90wildlifebridges.org/cascade-crossroads.

Washington is now fully in the wildlife crossing game. Our overpass and underpass crossings will be as successful as they are striking. Join the I-90 Wildlife Bridges folks for a beautiful video and fascinating discussion. The event is 7 p.m. Sept. 10 at Hal Holmes. Come learn the things you will use to impress friends when they visit Paradise.

Jim Huckabay is retired from the Department of Geography at Central. His "WILD WINDS and Other Tales of Growing Up in the Outdoor West," is available online and at bookstores. Contact Jim and join in discussions at www.insidetheoutdoors.com.