

Editorial: Museum exhibit

Artist offers novel perspective on familiar timber debate

We've all heard many times how a new set of eyes can provide a fresh perspective on a thorny problem. And it certainly can be true.

Yet even a newcomer can arrive with a set of biases resulting in the same old taking of sides. When that happens, the shouting may start up all over again, and the name-calling can be even more strident.

It appears that an exhibit at the Douglas County Museum of Natural and Cultural History has avoided that unfortunate outcome. That's some accomplishment, given that its topic is the federal timber safety net.

"Shadow Effects," which continues through March 31 at the Roseburg museum, is the product of one woman's perplexity about the long-standing county debate.



MICHAEL SULLIVAN/The News-Review

Glide artist Renee Couture discusses her exhibit, "Shadow Effects," now on display at the Douglas County Museum.

Because that woman is also an artist, her mind approached the conflict differently than if she were a politician, an economist, a scientist or someone running a small business.

Midwestern transplant Renee

Couture of Glide decided that she needed to find out more about various aspects of the federal payments designed to make up for lost timber revenue.

She admitted that prior to moving here in 2004, she regarded a forest as a wild rather than a managed place, and wouldn't have regarded timber as an agricultural product.

Through research, she learned the safety net was set up for certain counties after the spotted owl was listed as a threatened species in 1990, placing restrictions on federal lands.

Through interviews, she delved into the complexities of a topic that's often presented as a simple but titanic struggle between jobs and the environment.

Through artistic interpretation, she set about creating a multime-

dia presentation she says she hopes will illuminate the subject in a constructive way.

Museum Director Gardner Chappell listened to Couture describe her concept and decided it was a perfect fit for the museum's goal to present exhibits representing life in the Umpqua Valley. As he told News-Review reporter Ryan Imondi, the power of "Shadow Effects" lies in the fact it is information-based. "She didn't come here with an agenda," he said of Couture.

What Couture did bring to the museum was an assortment of photographs, sculpture, videos, maps, graphs, text and artifacts meant to illustrate the connection between the safety net and the county's overall condition.

Avoiding black and white, Couture nevertheless included other

hues that may be educational to museum visitors. There are orange pine cones and blue pieces of lumber. Orange is used by the timber industry to denote a tree to be left by loggers. Blue is a sign it should be cut.

There are charts tracking employment and library index cards serving as a reminder of what may be lost — countywide library branches — as safety net reductions continue.

Couture has said she wanted to reduce the large, complex issue to "an image that is easy to understand." Whether "Shadow Effects" succeeds is up to the beholder. We find Couture's efforts commendable, and we also credit the museum with hosting an exhibit that seeks to explore an often fractious subject that could have valuable lessons for us all.