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## Book, calendar exposes Columbia's beauty

By Franny White, Herald staff writer

WALLULA -- Take Highway 12 east past Burbank and you'll see a spectacular break in the Horse Heaven Hills' ridgeline.

Cutting through the landscape is the Columbia River, which flows past a vertical notch in the hills known as the Wallula Gap.

Marked by steep basalt cliffs, wild shrub-steppe and remarkable vistas, Wallula Gap long has been loved by geologists, biologists and outdoors admirers.

And now the gap's fans are hoping the coincidental dual release of a book about the area's history and a national natural landscape calendar featuring a cover photo of Wallula Gap will make it even more prominent in people's minds.

"There are some really, really special places in Eastern Washington and Oregon that are particularly beautiful and wonderful," said Bob Carson, who routinely takes his geology and environmental studies students from Whitman College on field trips to the gap. "I'm trying to call attention to one such special place. It's an oasis in the desert."

Carson is the editor and one of five authors of *Where the Great River Bends: A natural and human history of the Columbia at Wallula*, which was released earlier this month by Keokee Books. The well-illustrated book discusses the geology, biology, history and archeology of Wallula Gap.

The area also has offered many treasured shots to renowned Mid-Columbia photographer John Clement. One such photo, in which an electric pink sunset is reflected in the Columbia River as it eases past the gap, is the cover shot for both Carson's book and a 2009 calendar.

Clement won a national photo contest to earn a spot in the calendar, produced by the National Park Service's National Natural Landmarks program. In addition to his first place award, he won second place with a photo of the Grande Ronde Goosenecks canyon. The natural landmarks program recognizes geographic or biological examples of America's natural history, and Wallula Gap is one of Washington's 17 national natural landmarks.

"It's truly spectacular," said Steve Gibbons, the national program's regional coordinator. "John Clement's photo in the calendar kind of says it all, I think. It's just awe-inspiring."

Clement said he was honored to have his photo chosen, partly because it could bring attention to the area. He said the following scenario often happens when people see his Wallula Gap pictures.

"I get people asking me 'Where's that?' and I say 'Wallula,' and they ask 'Where's Wallula?' " he said. "That's my ... mission with photography, just to open people's minds to an area they may not be aware of."

Though breathtaking, views aren't all Wallula Gap offers. It's also home to some amazing history and enthusiasts like Carson and Clement want the public to know more about it.

Millions of years ago, the area was covered in thick basalt rock left by many volcanic flows. A small river carved a relatively small path through the rock, creating the gap.

But it wasn't until the great Ice Age floods, when the area was inundated with 17 million cubic meters of water per second from a lake that covered what is now Montana, that the modest gap was widened.

That broader cut has served as the gateway for many traveling through the Mid-Columbia, including Native Americans, explorers, salmon and other wildlife, canoes, wagons and trains. Early American explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark stayed near Wallula Gap in 1806, when they camped there with Walla Walla tribe members on their return trip to the East Coast.

On the Walla Walla County side of Wallula Gap is the county-owned Twin Sisters rock formations -- two basalt pillars that were carved out during the Ice Age floods and which are featured in Clement's photo. Energetic climbers frequently scaled the pillars until recently, when the county banned the practice. Native American legend says the rocks are actually two Cayuse sisters who were frozen there by their jealous husband, Coyote.

On the other side of the Columbia is about 100 acres in three disconnected Benton County-owned parcels known as the Wallula Gap Preserve. The National Park Service transferred the undeveloped land to the county in the 1990s, said Adam Fyall, who oversees county parks. Though remote and without trails, the preserve offers grand views and native shrub-steppe with birds and other wildlife.

"Of the eight (Benton) County parks that we have, Wallula Gap is probably the least visited and least known," Fyall said. "But, ironically, it's getting the most attention" right now.

Carson knows many people think of places such as Wallula Gap as being no-man's land.

"A lot of people outside of Eastern Washington and Oregon think of us as a desert, a place to put nuclear waste, to build coal-fired plants," he said.

But he insists Wallula Gap merits exploration. And so does Whitman College environmental studies lecturer Don Snow, who wrote the preface to Carson's book.

"It's a desert place -- shocking to some, inspiring to others -- and it is a place worth knowing," Snow wrote. "Do your homework; go see it; let your imagination do the rest."

**Book signing planned:** Bob Carson will attend a book signing of *Where the Great River Bends* at 5 p.m. Wednesday at Adventures Underground, 1391 George Washington Way, Richland.

He also will talk that day at a 7 p.m. meeting of the Columbia Basin Chapter of the Native Plant Society at the Tri-Cities branch of Washington State University, Room 210 in the CIC building. More information about the book is available at [www.keokeebooks.com/greatriverbends.html](http://www.keokeebooks.com/greatriverbends.html).