

# Forgotten Stepchild

The Forest Service is asked to manage wilderness on a shoestring

The centerpiece of Washington's north central Cascade Mountains, the 577,000-acre Glacier Peak Wilderness, is a dreamscape. Wild and scenic rivers stretch up to meet a volcanic peak of classic form and elegance. Before 2006, access to the western slopes of this wilderness was up a gravel road driven through a heavily forested corridor paralleling a free flowing river. A small campground at the end of the road offered an open invitation to continue up the White Chuck River Trail and its way trails.

Northwest—not, I suspect, exactly what the founders of the Wilderness Act had in mind.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 was signed by President Johnson after a decade of debate, public hearings and over 60 revisions. This act established the National Wilderness Preservation System, and initially included 54 units totaling 9.1 million acres of land administered by the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Land Management and the National Park Service.



As a backcountry ranger for the Darrington Ranger District, I've been privileged to walk this trail and others around the Glacier Peak Wilderness off and on for decades. Glacier Peak and its environs was a showpiece of the original Wilderness Preservation system, because of its size, unparalleled diversity and beauty. Today, the edges are fraying.

The heart of the landscape is as untamed as ever, but only the most hardheaded and intrepid hikers can push their way past the decimated portals and blown-out trails to access this pristine wilderness. Extreme weather in concert with gutted U.S. Forest Service funding has created a "perfect storm" of benign neglect and minimal management of this and other designated wilderness areas in the Pacific

Prior to the Wilderness Act, the Forest Service's history ran deep with staff and expertise that supported resource extraction, road building, fire management and "multiple use" approaches. With the inception of the Wilderness Act, the values of conservation leadership within the Forest Service, as exemplified by Arthur Carhart, Aldo Leopold, and Bob Marshall and others who valued remote and undeveloped landscapes, gained equal footing with the wise-use politics of Gifford Pinchot.

The Forest Service had to shift gears and begin to manage "set-aside" landscapes as self-contained units within broader national forests. New management strategies included recognition of four statutory qualities of wilderness "character." These requirements demanded

## Russ Hanbey

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that wilderness be left "untrammelled" from human control or manipulation, that wilderness remain "natural" where ecological systems are maintained, that designated wilderness remain "undeveloped" and that "outstanding opportunities for solitude of a primitive and unconfined type of recreation" remain intact.

By 1976, the Darrington Ranger District in the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, the caretaker of the Glacier Peak Wilderness, had infrastructure in place to address these requirements. Their designated workforce included a full-time wilderness manager, six seasonal wilderness rangers, and two five-person trail crews. Additional support came from packers, fire lookouts, fire crews, contractors, and research scientists. The wilderness workforce also benefited from proportional support from fixed ranger district staffing, facilities and in-kind administrative contributions. Their overarching mandate was to create and implement plans for large-scale ecosystem management while honoring the Wilderness Act and broader Forest Service objectives.

Today, with even more land to manage following the 1984 designations of the Boulder River and Henry M. Jackson wilderness areas, the Darrington District gets by with one part-time wilderness specialist, one part-time lead wilderness ranger, one trail crew and as much volunteer help as it can muster. Darrington is relatively fortunate compared to many wilderness areas nationwide, which have no paid staff and rely heavily on partners and volunteers for the bulk of minimum-level maintenance tasks. The budget for wilderness protection has shrunk and yet all the work remains—trails and campsites to maintain, historic and archeological sites to support, endangered species to protect, and public education to coordinate.

What wilderness budget there is becomes intermingled with fire, recreation and trails funding. With heavy pressure for frontcountry recreational opportunities, a larger share of fixed money has shifted in that direction. New mandated responsibilities include non-native invasive weed monitoring and treatment, fire management planning, fisheries oversight and habitat restoration, but little money has followed these obligations.

According to Sue Sater, wilderness programs manager for the Pacific Northwest Region, "overall wilderness funding is way down, and Congress uses this funding to address direct wilderness administration. The agency budget changes over the years, in particular separating out the funding line items for wilderness and trails, have further reduced funding for wilderness administration."

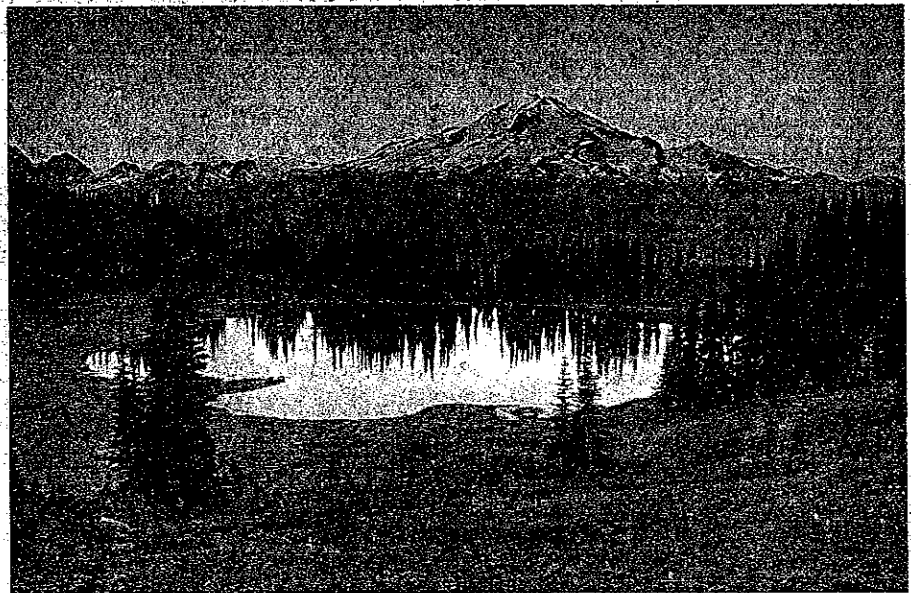
In essence, the Forest Service is being asked to govern its portion of 107,361,680 million acres of designated wilderness nationwide with less than a quarter of the staff and direct resources than it had thirty years ago. The belt has tightened to the point of gross negligence and under-management in many areas with staff burnout, public impatience and a National Wilderness Preservation System on the verge of unraveling due to neglect.

This becomes very real when viewed from the perspective of the three million people who live within 100 miles of the trailheads in the Glacier Peak Wilderness. Following the floods in 2003 and 2006 which closed out two of four access roads to the backcountry, the public's access to this wilderness has become extremely limited. If these hikers do manage to reach the backcountry, the likelihood of finding unrepaired trail and bridge damage along the way is high and the chance of encountering a backcountry ranger is low. Agency-supported restoration efforts of disturbed backcountry sites are a thing of the past in most areas, along with needed monitoring and onsite management.

In 2009, only 24.5 percent of the 410 national forest wilderness areas met the "minimum stewardship" standard established under the

**Opposite Page: Hiker at Little Giant Pass, Glacier Peak Wilderness. Photo by Trevor Anderson.**

**Below: Glacier Peak behind Image Lake. Photo by Randall Hodges.**



Forest Service's "Chief's Ten-Year Wilderness Stewardship Challenge." This 2005 initiative identified 10 elements that could serve as yardsticks against which to evaluate the quality of wilderness management, including such quantifiers as invasive plant management, recreation site inventories, outfitter management and wilderness education opportunities. Meeting six out of the 10 elements was defined as the "minimum stewardship" level.

*Both photos were entered into Northwest Exposure 2010. See the winning images, starting on Page 22.*

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## 20 Cowiche Canyon Conservancy

USGS Tieton, Naches

Oct 18, 2009 by MaryC

A group of five from the Tri-Cities did this trail in the Cowiche Conservancy just west of Yakima. The Cowiche Mountain Loop Trail starts at the parking lot and climbs 1,140 feet to the summit of Cowiche Mountain (2,970 feet). The round trip distance is 6.1 miles. We started out on the loop going clockwise. While the trail is marked with cairns there were two places where one could take a wrong turn. We met a fellow with a dog about a quarter of the way who was able to steer us on the right path. Once one is out on the open slopes the cairns are easy to see and follow. Coming down from the top, the path is a little easier to follow. The fall colors are wonderful right now. The view from the top was clouded for us but on a clear day can be spectacular. We could spot Rainier and Adams through the clouds. There were very few people on this trail. ♦

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Most wilderness programs fall short of having a baseline work force, which is itself a yardstick element and one that is needed to help meet the other nine Wilderness Challenge elements. I fear that without a major infusion of funding support from Congress, our invaluable Wilderness Preservation System will not stay viable, remain accessible to the public, nor survive intact in the face of climate change. Our beleaguered and diminished ranger districts will not be able to honor the language and intent of the Wilderness Act that states that "it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness."

In 1962, President Kennedy said, "It is our task in our time and in our generation, to hand down undiminished to those who come after us, as was handed down to us by those who came before, the natural wealth and beauty that is ours." The advice is as good as ever. Good preservation tactics demand proactive management as well as periods of reflection that recognize how important wilderness is to the health and wellbeing of our nation. ♦



**A look into Umtanum Canyon from Umtanum Ridge. This is a great hike for winter wildlife. Photo by Alan Bauer.**

MT ADAMS MT BAKER DENALI MT ELBRUS MT HOOD  
MT KILIMANJARO MT RAINIER MT SHASTA VOLCANOES OF MEXICO

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