

The Way In

A report and recommendations for sustaining public enjoyment in our Northwest national parks



November 2010



National Parks Conservation Association®
Protecting Our National Parks for Future Generations®

The National Parks Conservation Association would like to thank the following for their assistance in the drafting of this report:

Sean Smith

Jim Stratton

Scott Kirkwood

Ali Iliff

We'd also like to thank the following corporations for their financial support of this report.

The Boeing Company

REI

A special thanks to the following for their participation and support of our conference and town hall meetings

EnviroIssues

National Park Service

US Forest Service

The participants at our Seattle Conference
and three town hall meetings

The Way In

A report and recommendations for sustaining public enjoyment in our Northwest national parks

I. Introduction

Millions of Americans cherish the Northwest's national parks, including Olympic, Mount Rainier, and North Cascades. Our 393 national parks provide unparalleled opportunities for wildlife viewing, hiking, backpacking, camping and many other recreational pursuits. They remind us of our frontier wilderness heritage and embody the Northwest spirit. They are also home to many wildlife species including the black bear, gray wolf, and marmot.

The millions of people who visit our national parks experience them in many different ways, but most simply drive their cars on park roads. Overtime, Congress has mandated different kinds of park roads. For example, when Mount Rainier became a park in 1899, the thinking was that an extensive park road system was necessary for public enjoyment, as well as for access to visitor facilities, such as hotels and campgrounds. This park's Nisqually Parkway has been designated a heritage byway. Olympic National Park, by comparison, was established roughly 40 years after Rainier. It is ringed with roads, and approximately a dozen reaching a limited distance into the park's interior. The rugged terrain, as well as a change in Park Service philosophy, limited the construction of new roads deep into the parks' backcountry. And North Cascades, created in the late 1960s, has a single road traversing the park complex. A few primitive finger routes such as the Cascade River Road branch off into the backcountry. Most of North Cascades' 600,000 acres are designated wilderness, precluding new road development.

Most Northwest park road systems are connected to county, state, and federal road systems. And these park road systems take many forms, having evolved from roads through parks and ones to their boundaries. The Park Service rarely has complete maintenance authority over its roads and connector routes. As such, the agency must rely on other state and federal agencies to maintain access. A shared management structure may lead to inconsistent maintenance and inconsistent application of federal funds when many roads need repairs. In extreme cases, counties like Skagit and Jefferson, in Washington state, are considering abandoning popular park feeder roads because of the high maintenance and repair costs, a troubling development.

These roads leading to and into Mount Rainier, Olympic, and North Cascades are of varying quality and age. State Route 123 along Mount Rainier's eastern boundary is a major connector that receives considerable maintenance from the state of Washington. Other roads, such as the North Cascades' Stehekin River Road, are rough, primitive roads that receive minimal maintenance. And all Northwest park roads are prone to damage from heavy storm activity, which seems to be increasing.¹

Over the last decade, major storms, flood events, avalanches, and landslides have posed a significant threat to the parks' ability to maintain public access to many attractions, including trailheads, campgrounds, and visitor centers. At Mount Rainier, recent storms erased hundreds of miles of trails, swept

¹100-year storms occurred in the Northwest in 2006 and 2007 and other years; each had a profound impact on park roads.

away nearly an entire campground, and destroyed, buried, or swamped dozens of park roads. Damage from the 2006 storm forced NPS to close Mount Rainier for the first time since World War II. A subsequent storm in 2007 caused even more damage; the cost of repair was in the tens of millions of dollars. (For a detailed description of the 2006 and 2007 storm damage and how government, businesses, and community all responded to fix roads and trails, see the Appendix.)

The Park Service believes that climate change is driving some of the recent severe weather in the Northwest. At North Cascades, for example, the three largest floods on record have taken place in the past 15 years. Making matters worse, these are fall rain on snow floods, which often have more energy and inflict more infrastructure damage than do traditional spring floods.

If NPS is to keep our parks open for visitors to hike, camp, and view wildlife at Mount Rainier, Olympic, and North Cascades, there must be greater cooperation and coordination among everyone who loves and uses our parks, including local, state, and federal government agencies, businesses, community leaders, park activists and supporters, and a groundswell of concerned citizens.

To better understand which park roads are important to local communities and how those roads fit into the larger recreational access needs on all public lands in the Northwest, including the many thousands of acres of Forest Service land that are adjacent to our national parks, the National Parks Conservation Association (NPCA) engaged government officials, community leaders, business owners, and concerned citizens in a series of discussions about: the importance of parks and other public recreation land, how decisions should be made to prioritize which roads to fix after a storm, who should be responsible for park roads, and what role the public has in helping make all these decisions. These discussions were held under the umbrella of NPCA's "Way In" project, which included a kick-off conference in Seattle and subsequent community workshops held at Rainier, Olympic, and North Cascades National Parks.

Sentiment from the kick-off conference and community workshops made it clear that a well-coordinated, cross-agency approach is necessary to keep park and other important recreational roads open and well maintained. By coordinating the efforts of every agency that manages park roads, a logical and sustainable plan can be developed to determine where to allocate money and other resources to repair roads and trails in the most logical order following the next major storm event.

II. Way In Conference and Community Workshops

The storms of 2006 and 2007 left many wondering if more storms were on the way. Was this the beginning of a new fall flood trend? Many scientists believe this is the case, which means additional damage is likely to be inflicted on park roads, trails, and visitor facilities. And that raises many questions: Can we rebuild every road? Should some roads be retired or moved? Should jurisdiction for some of these roads be transferred to other agencies? Who will provide the funding and the people necessary to repair this damage? Who will make these decisions? And most importantly, how will Northwest park and public-land agencies maintain roads to our favorite trails, fishing holes, hunting camps, picnic sites, and campgrounds in light of these devastating and costly floods?

To answer these questions, NPCA received support from the Norcliffe Foundation and the Boeing Company to launch its Way In Project which included a kick-off conference in Seattle on sustainable public enjoyment/access, and a series of local town hall meetings in each of the three Washington parks, designed to solicit public conversation and suggestions on how best to respond to future flood events. This report is the final step in the project.

On Wednesday, September 3, 2008, at the University of Washington, the Washington Parks and Forests Coalition² hosted “The Way In: The Future of Access to Northwest National Parks,” a panel discussion featuring seven experts led by Rep. Jay Inslee (D-WA). Other panelists included:

- Michael Case, *World Wildlife Fund*
- Clara Conner, *Federal Highway Administration*
- Dr. David Louter, *National Park Service*
- Dr. Clifford F. Mass, *University of Washington*
- Dr. Paula Swedeen, *Swedeen Consulting*
- Rory Westberg, *Deputy Regional Director of the Pacific West Region for the National Park Service.*

The panelists were asked to speak on climate change and how it will affect national parks, especially Olympic, Mount Rainier, and North Cascades.

Rep. Inslee began the conference by speaking about his love and support of the outdoors, as well as his distress over the closure of the road to Glacier Peak wilderness. Rep. Inslee also spoke about the need for children to interact with nature and his concern regarding climate change’s ability to wreak havoc upon that enjoyment.

Dr. Clifford Mass, University of Washington, set the stage by discussing climate change. While Dr. Mass explained the difficulty scientists have in assigning blame for specific storm events to climate change, he made it clear that regardless of the cause of these storms they are causing significant infrastructure damage. Michael Case, World Wildlife Fund, provided examples of climate change impacts on wildlife and their habitat.

Clara Conner, Federal Highway Administration, highlighted some of the difficulties in funding road repairs. Federal agencies, for example, can apply for funds from the Emergency Relief for Federally Owned Roads (ERFO) program to repair washed out and damaged roads. However, Department of Transportation regulations require that these roads and bridges be repaired to the same standards and conditions existing prior to the storm damage. In other words, ERFO funds cannot be used to upgrade or improve the damaged roads or change the design and/or location to prevent future washout in the next storm. This can cause problems. For example, the storms of 2006 and 2007 destroyed many small culverts, leaving huge, impassable holes in the road. If road engineers determined that proper repair required larger culverts or even a bridge, regulations would forbid using ERFO funds for these upgrades. However, other funds can be used or repairs can be made in kind. But both of these solutions have significant disadvantages, most notably a delay in necessary repairs or the likelihood of continued road failure.

Dr. David Louter, NPS Historian, spoke about the northwest history and how the agency’s philosophy regarding roads has changed over time. As previously mentioned, NPS has moved from building extensive internal road systems connecting major features to an approach that relies on state and county systems reaching park boundaries with minimal internal park roads being constructed. Rory Westberg, NPS northwest regional director, set background on the agency’s overall philosophy regarding access and recreation. He specifically spoke about how citizens can engage in park-related access and recreation planning.

Following the panel discussion, the floor was open for wide-ranging questions from the audience including: Do all of Dr. Mass’s colleagues agree with his assertion that large storms are not related to climate change? How much risk should be taken when it comes to our national parks in terms of climate change when there is so much uncertainty about when those effects will seriously affect access?

²Coalition members include NPCA, the Student Conservation Association, and the Washington Trails Association.

III. Town Hall Meetings

Following the Way In panel discussions in Seattle, NPCA hosted three town hall meetings in communities surrounding Washington's national parks to collect local input and get suggestions on how to keep our parks and public lands open in light of recent and anticipated storm damage.

Olympic National Park: Port Angeles, WA, March 31, 2009

The first town hall meeting was held at the local library in Port Angeles, and more than 40 people turned out from across the Olympic Peninsula. Among those represented were local and tribal governments, local nonprofit organizations, property owners, and area citizens. The discussion focused on people's reaction to the storms, what is at risk, and possible solutions to keeping park roads and trails open.

Many longtime citizens are noticing a change in the flood regime; most notably, devastating floods have shifted from spring to fall. Some residents feel that today's storm and flood events have more impact because they build upon each other, causing more infrastructure damage.

Community members also recognize the storms threaten their livelihoods, public research, recreation opportunities, and local amenities such as clean water. Attendees identified road maintenance responsibilities spread across various government entities as a key threat facing access and enjoyment at the park. The Hoh Road, jointly maintained by NPS and Jefferson County, was singled out: The lower sections are the county's responsibility, and the county's inability to maintain the lower sections due to budget cuts threatens access to the upper sections, and ultimately limits access to the park's Hoh Valley.

The most important item to emerge from the meeting was group recognition that issues such as this need a leader—a point person who can facilitate these kinds of discussions. Someone pointed out that this meeting was the first time all these people had been in the same room, even though many were lifelong residents of the Peninsula.

Mount Rainier National Park: Eatonville, WA, April 23, 2009

At this second meeting more than two dozen locals, business leaders, elected officials, and conservation representatives discussed the recent storms and their impact on the park and adjacent communities. In particular, this meeting covered people's reaction to the floods; the change these floods are causing to the park and their lives; and values such as community, freedom, and recreation at risk from these changes.

As in Port Angeles, participants expressed surprise at the recent storms, some stating the 2006 storms may have been the worst ever in the park. Many of those in attendance said they were astonished by the road and trail washouts, bridge damage, and facility destruction.

Attendees also spoke about the changes these floods have caused the park and their communities. Climbing seasons have been shortened, limiting people's access to historic climber camps. Insurance companies have taken a renewed look at assuming risk in or near park flood plains, while property values have dropped in part from buyers' fear of future damage. People also expressed concern for the sustainability of local gateway economies that depend on the park and its visitors.

This discussion then led to why people live near Mount Rainier and the value they place on the park. The mood of most attendees was summed up when one resident stated that he chooses to live near Mount Rainier because it symbolizes both spiritual and family values.

The meeting concluded with an examination of the definition of access. While there was consensus on the storms' impact and the values being lost, opinions on what to do and how to insure enjoyment/access were varied. Some people stated that roads were critical to access and that most park visitors arrived in private automobiles--the implication being that park roads must be rebuilt. Others stated that the recent storms may require us to broaden our definition of access to include virtual experiences. The group did understand that the Park Service operates with limited funds and is constrained by law and policy, which in some cases limits the agency's ability to relocate roads to a more defensible location.

However, a local park resident cut to the heart of the matter when he stated that he had heard a range of solutions from defending and maintaining every current access point to having no roads or access at all. A middle course was necessary. "We are not going to have money to fix every road every year – that is a given. So the question is how we do maximize access with the funds available?" Addressing this question has become the central thrust of this report.

North Cascades National Park: Marblemount, WA, May 28, 2009

NPCA held its third Way In town hall at the North Cascades Institute in the heart of the Ross Lake National Recreation Area. As with previous meetings, attendees included local and state governments, local businesses, nonprofit organizations, philanthropic representatives, and local residents.

Participants again expressed surprise at the scope and ferocity of the floods. They also confirmed loss of access and enjoyment because of these storms. People pointed out that many visitors are shifting from heavily impacted areas to others less affected by the storms. This shift can have political impacts as inaccessible places lose their constituency for continued protection.

In contrast to the other meetings, when the North Cascades group discussed what is threatened by the storms, this conversation focused on more ethereal values such as family, fun, personal growth, democratic principles, connections to our past and future, and faith in one's government.

The unique theme to emerge from this meeting was the notion that parks represent many things to people (democracy, freedom, nature, business), but in the end, park experiences are to be fun.

If a common workshop theme could be pulled from these three meetings, it would be that in those communities that surround our parks, there is widespread love and appreciation for these special places. Many people have had powerful experiences in these parks which they hope to pass along to future generations. Many also expressed a desire that parks and public lands continue to provide fun, build a sense of place, test our bodies, and encourage citizenship. However, there is growing concern about ability to sustain these values in the face of increasing storm activity that impacts roads and trails. Clearly proactive action is necessary.

IV. Suggested Action

From the opening conference in Seattle and the three town hall community discussions, NPCA staff listened closely for solutions and heard the following. These proactive measures include steps that can be taken by Congress, the administration and the American public. These are not in any priority order; however, NPCA suggests that the first step is to create interagency working groups to inventory storm damage and prioritize early actions immediately after severe weather.

Inventory and Prioritization

During the town hall meetings it was apparent that state and federal public land managers must inventory, quantify, and prioritize their road and trail infrastructure. This inventory and prioritization process would provide managers with a tool to make both proactive and quick reactive decisions. Many participants suggested creation of a trail/road rating system which would help NPS and the Forest Service choose between competing rebuild and repair projects. Participants suggested rating infrastructure based on criteria such as use levels, historic value, and repair costs.

Address Management Conflicts

One key challenge is the number of park access roads crossing through multiple jurisdictions. These roads are often managed by the county, the state and other federal agencies. This leads to confusion and even disagreement over who has the authority to manage and maintain roads accessing parks. The Cascade River Road in North Cascades National Park was cited as a prime example of this multi-jurisdictional problem – it is a county road through Forest Service lands to an important national park trail head. Mount Rainer’s Carbon River Road and Olympics’ Hoh Road present similar cross-jurisdictional conflicts between the Park Service and the Forest Service. This is less serious at Mount Rainier because NPS has sole maintenance responsibility for many of the roads. Even so, Congress should investigate and propose, among other things, park boundary adjustments that would bring well-traveled roads under NPS management.

Regulatory Reform

Meeting attendees consistently raised problems with the funding of emergency road repairs. The public was confused about why funds seem to be available to rebuild park roads, but not to upgrade or improve them when conditions warrant. NPS often relies on funds from the Emergency Relief for Federally Owned Roads (ERFO) program for these rebuild projects. ERFO funds can only be used to make repairs in kind. As such, a culvert washout that may require a bridge replacement cannot be made using ERFO funds. Congress should consider legislation easing restrictions on the use of ERFO funds to make improvements.

Get Organized

Although Congress and the White House play a major role in maintaining and sustaining public enjoyment of Northwest national parks, the ultimate responsibility rests with the public. Throughout the three town hall meetings, it became apparent that successfully sustaining park roads necessary for public enjoyment will require the creation of park-specific friends’ groups dedicated to park enjoyment, access, and transportation issues. These groups would serve as on-the-ground eyes and ears providing up-to-date information on road and trail conditions. These groups should also serve as advocates voicing support for expanding park maintenance budgets or necessary boundary adjustments. Finally, these groups could assist in road inventories and maintenance prioritization, and help NPS managers vet and prioritize repair and rebuild projects.

Case by Case for the Long-term Sustainability

The town hall conversations also revealed that land managers take a case-by-case approach when responding to flood damaged road and trail infrastructure to ensure that repairs and rebuilds are sustainable. The North Cascades meeting revealed that the public may lose faith in government if roads, trails, and bridges are not repaired immediately after storm events. Yet, the park’s differing topographies, road infrastructure, maintenance responsibilities, and public expectations make a one-size-fits-all approach impossible. Park personnel, Congress, and the public must guard against what knee-jerk reactions to popular proposals (i.e., “rebuild now”) and focus instead on sustainable approaches in specific areas.

Go Where the People Are

During the floods, several park facilities were inaccessible. The recent storms show that park facilities may not be located in the most advantageous and accessible spots. The Paradise visitor center was mentioned as one facility that might have been better situated closer to a park entrance or in a gateway community. At its current site, access to the Paradise visitor center is limited by the number of surrounding parking spaces. On busy weekends the lot is filled to capacity with people in the visitor center, at the nearby lodge, and on local trails. Many visitors must continue past the visitor center and cannot access park information and exhibits. Moving the visitor center to an area that can handle more vehicles would expose more people to this information. In addition, placing visitor centers in less isolated locations would allow NPS to use them as incident command posts, where the public and media could be updated on developments.

Conclusion

As damaging as they were, the storms of 2006 and 2007 revealed how much Washingtonians care for their national parks. At Rainier alone, roughly 2,000 people turned out to repair trails and rebuild facilities. It is the love Washingtonians have for their national parks and the life-changing experiences they want to pass along to their children that has generated so much volunteer support. However, the storms also revealed just how fragile park roads and trails are. There will undoubtedly be more storms. More roads and trails will be washed out. The public will continue to respond, but the Park Service, the Forest Service, and state and county road agencies must begin working together to ensure that the most important and highest priority roads and trails receive the most immediate post-storm attention. There are only so many storm recovery dollars available for road and trail repair. Only by working together can we all ensure that those funds are invested for the most public good.

Appendix A: Summary of Storm Damage

A. 2006 Storms

In the fall of November 2006 a major Pacific Northwest storm caused widespread damage across the region. Washington State's national parks and other public lands were particularly hard hit. At Mount Rainier, for example, 18 inches of rain fell in 36 hours. This rain-on-snow event caused serious flooding of streams and rivers. Kautz Creek jumped its bank, took out the Nisqually Road and raced through the park's helicopter landing area. The Nisqually River took out much of the Sunshine Point Campground and threatened the historic Longmire District. When the water finally receded, park workers tallied nearly \$36 million of damage to Rainier's trails, campgrounds, roads, picnic areas, and buildings. Olympic and North Cascades parks and surrounding forests suffered about \$14 million in damage.

Mount Rainier

- *Sunshine point*
Most of Sunshine Point Campground, including 200 yards of the park's Nisqually Road washed away. The main utility lines were broken, including power cables to Longmire and Paradise.
- *Kautz Creek*
Kautz Creek jumped its channel and flowed through the forest and across a park road. This water undermined the road, damaged power lines and made Park Service helibase unusable.
- *Highway 123*
Along this major state and park highway, the 2006 flood caused four significant washouts—one cut across both lanes to a depth of 70 feet.

North Cascades

- *Cascade River*

The North Fork of the Cascade River carved a new channel along 300 feet of the Cascade River roadbed.

- *Boston Creek*

Boston Creek overwhelmed its culvert and washed away nearly 100 feet of the Cascade River Road.

- *Colonial Campground*

A debris flow dumped several hundred cubic yards of rock on the south entrance of the campground and damaged several trail log bridges.

Olympic

- *Hoh River*

At the confluence of West Twin Creek and Hoh River, a 25-by-75-foot section of road washed away.

- *Lake Quinault*

High winds knocked dozens of old-growth trees, closing the North Shore Quinault Road and knocking out power. The North Fork Campground access road was completely washed away.

Community Response

Almost before the floods dissipated, conservation groups including NPCA, the Washington Trails Association, the Student Conservation Association, the Mountaineers, and the Washington National Park Fund formed the Northwest Parks and Public Lands Storm Recovery Coalition with the help of progressive companies like REI. The coalition was formed to assist NPS in the recovery.

Over the summer of 2007, roughly 2,000 volunteers turned out at Mount Rainier, donating more than a \$1 million in labor. Kevin Bacher, NPS volunteer coordinator at Mount Rainier, was humbled by the public's response to the floods, stating that the turnout broke records.

Major sections of the Wonderland Trail and other popular sites were restored with volunteer labor. Compared to Mount Rainier, the level of damage at Olympic and North Cascades national parks was lower; repairs, costs, and volunteer recruitment was smaller. However, similar infrastructure repair at North Cascade's Colonial Campground and Olympics' North Fork Road were completed.

B. 2007 Storms

In spite of the enormous turnout in response to the storms, public good feeling was short lived. Like the previous year, the winter of 2007 produced major storms. Rain, wind, and flood damage was again wide-spread across Washington State, and public-lands infrastructure was damaged again. This time, Olympic National Park received the brunt of the damage with 14 inches of rain falling in 48 hours at the Hoh Visitor Center alone. Meanwhile, the park's Elwha River reached record heights, rising 14 feet in 24 hours. Rock slides, mudflows, downed trees, and power poles were spread throughout the park again, affecting public enjoyment and access.

Community Response

Like the previous year, the NW Storm Recovery Coalition organized public response to these floods, albeit on a smaller scale. Hundreds of volunteers were recruited again to rebuild trails, repair campgrounds and restore visitor facilities.



National Parks Conservation Association®
Protecting Our National Parks for Future Generations®

1300 19th Street NW | Suite 300 | Washington, DC 20036
800.NAT.PARK | Fax 202.659.0650 | www.npca.org