

# Mount St. Helens

**A look at the mountain on the thirtieth anniversary of its May 18, 1980 eruption**

Thirty years ago, Catherine Hickson's breakfast was interrupted by an event that would change her life. She and her husband witnessed the violent explosion Mount St. Helens at 8:32 a.m., May 18, 1980, from their ridgetop camp 15 miles east of the peak. The blast sent a dark, dense, billowing wall of ash and debris towards their camp, as a huge mushroom cloud soared 15 miles high in fifteen minutes. After snapping a few photos, they stuffed their dogs in the car and fled. Hickson, a geology student from Canada, had come to observe the volcano. She got more than she bargained for.

Another scientist, thirty-year-old David Johnston, was killed instantly as hurricane-force winds mixed with ash, rock and debris swept across the ridge that now bears his name. The eruption killed 56 others. Trees fell up to 17 miles away; millions of birds, elk, and other wildlife were killed. The largest recorded landslide wiped out bridges, washed away 200 homes and sent millions of tons of sediment down the Toutle River and into the Columbia River.

While the language used to describe this eruption tends to skew towards the tragic—*devastated*, *destroyed*, *cataclysmic*—the event also created opportunities for new life, a better understanding of the volcanoes that we live so near and better protection for a very unique mountain.

## Scientific Discoveries

Just as the Rosetta Stone unlocked the mysteries of Egyptian hieroglyphics, this eruption opened up a whole new understanding of volcanoes and their impacts on the environment.

Today, scientists have a rich laboratory to study the interactions of plants and animals in a transformed landscape.

Today, a hike along the Hummocks Trail reveals how the alder trees and beavers have colonized the curious mounds left by the massive landslide. Keep an eye out for the elk who have, through the spores and nutrients contained in their dung, enriched terrain sterilized by the blast. Hike across the pumice plain and you will see how lupine, pocket gophers and other pioneering species have established themselves on a once-barren "moonscape."

This unique laboratory, which mixes science with opportunities for recreation, might not have been possible but for the grassroots efforts of local activists dedicated to protecting the area.

## Creating a National Monument

Efforts to protect and conserve Mount St. Helens date back to the 1930s. At that time, the mountain appeared in a proposed Ice Peaks National Park that would have extended down the Cascade Range in Washington. World War II sidelined this idea.

As logging, mining, road-building and recreation increased around the volcano, interest in protection renewed. In 1970, local citizens formed the Mount St. Helens Protective Association (MSHPA) and forwarded a proposal for a national monument. Despite significant public outcry against the type of development underway around the mountain, the proposal failed to gain traction with Washington's lawmakers.

**Ryan  
Ojerio &  
Susan  
Saul**



In 1978, the MSHPA tried again with a proposal for a Mount St. Helens National Scenic Area, managed by the U.S. Forest Service to accommodate snowmobiling and hunting while also setting aside some areas as wilderness. The Forest Service declined to recommend any of the proposed wilderness areas. Disappointed, MSHPA wrote to the National Park Service to assess its interest in Mount St. Helens.

Just about that time, tremors began. As the world waited to see what would happen next, MSHPA took 20 people on a hike up the Green River Trail on May 10, 1980. Not a single expert foresaw the eruption that would take place just eight days later.

Following the eruption, MSHPA met to discuss how to react to the eruption. Media accounts suggested that everything MSHPA wanted protected had been irretrievably altered or destroyed in the blast. Everyone decided to spend the summer gathering information from scientists, doing aerial and on-the-ground tours, and meeting to reassess the situation in the fall. In 1981, MSHPA proposed a Forest Service-administered national monument and spent the next year promoting this proposal. It was a race against time, as road-building and salvage logging pushed deeper into the blast zone.

Finally, in 1982, after considering several bills including the MSHPA proposal, Congress reached a compromise: 110,000 acres administered by the Forest Service, but including key language from the MSHPA bill to allow "geologic forces and ecological succession to continue unimpeded."

### The Future of Mount St. Helens

Tensions over the balance between science, recreation and management continue. Some

advocate for the creation of a national park. Such a designation would put limitations on mountain biking, snowmobiling and hunting, which are popular pursuits in the area, but national park status could also stimulate local economies with an influx of tourism and provide more funding for recreational and educational facilities. An advisory committee tasked with making recommendations for the future of Mount St. Helens heeded local opposition to creating a national park by recommending that the monument stay under Forest Service management.

Sustaining adequate levels of funding for the monument remains an open question. Some relief came last year through federal stimulus funding authorized by the Obama administration. Along with much-needed road and trail repairs and building upgrades, a new amphitheater will be constructed at the Johnston Ridge Observatory, finally fulfilling plans developed in 1984.

### Inspired by the Eruption

Catherine, her husband, and several others fleeing the eruption escaped the blast and subsequent mud flows by following the Wind River Highway south to the Columbia River. Catherine went on to earn her doctorate studying the deposits left by the eruption. Today, she is an internationally recognized expert whose work on earthquakes and landslides associated with volcanoes has helped communities throughout the world to prepare for these events.

Commemorate this anniversary by letting Mount St. Helens inspire you. Visit the mountain, hike a trail and write a trip report. Get involved in protecting a place that is dear to you. ♦

**Left to right: Mount St. Helens the way it looked in 1980. Photo by Jim Nieland, Mount St. Helens National Volcanic Monument.**

**A plume of ash erupting from the volcano in July 1980. Photo by Jim Valance, U.S. Geological Survey (USGS).**

**Regrowth begins. Here you see fireweed in 1984. Photo by USGS.**

**A researcher documenting the dome from the crater rim in 2005. Photo by USGS.**

