

Alpine Lakes Reflections

Thoughts on the past, present and future of the popular wilderness

Rob Lohr



Pratt Lake, Alpine Lakes Wilderness. Washington's most popular wilderness area was the result of a six-year campaign that united politicians of both parties, concerned citizens and conservationists. It celebrates its 30th anniversary in July, 2006.

BY ROB LOHR

Crossing another talus slope I find myself in a familiar place, a place I've been a dozen times before. I'm hiking along the Dutch Miller trail headed to Pedro Camp, where Northwest Youth Corps is at work installing drain dips and building turnpike. I know the trail intimately. During the last four seasons as trail crew supervisor for the Snoqualmie Ranger District, I have spent close to 15 weeks working and exploring the ridges and valleys surrounding the headwaters of the Middle Fork of the Snoqualmie River.

The trek to Pedro Camp gives me time to consider how fortunate we are to have this as wilderness. Thanks to a grassroots effort in the early 70's by the Alpine Lakes Protection Society, the Alpine Lakes will celebrate thirty years of wilderness protection this year. What if, as Ira Spring and Harvey Manning pointed out in *100*

Hikes in Washington's Alpine Lakes, the Lake Dorothy Highway had been completed along the Middle Fork of the Snoqualmie River skirting Snoqualmie, Deer and Bear Lakes? We would have lost the solitude, the trail wandering through avalanche paths filled with red elderberry, columbine, tiger lilies, Indian paintbrush, false hellebore and slide alder. Gone would be the forests of Pacific silver fir marked with bear scratching. What if, from our driver's window we could view peaks such as Bear's Breast, Little Summit Chief, Overcoat Peak and Chimney Rock? It might be convenient, even beautiful, but this place would not be the wilderness it was destined to be.

I often take for granted the ability to walk the network of trails that stretch across the Cascade Crest and wind through terrain that varies from damp, densely packed forests of Western hemlock, Douglas-fir and alder of the west

to the spacious, arid climate and stands of ponderosa pine and tamarack of the east. I am grateful for the opportunity to visit the almost 700 alpine lakes (from which the wilderness takes its name) contained within its boundaries. The rugged peaks that tower over 9,000 feet or the remaining old-growth reaching diameters over six feet steal my breath every time I see them. I have difficulty imagining this area as something other than wilderness.

From wild area to Wilderness

After grinding my way up an arduous climb I reach the upper valley about 4 miles from the trailhead. It's a little past noon as I reach a boulder field tumbled from the lofty ridge of Iron Cap Mountain. Located on the south side of the trail sits a boulder so enormous I could place my entire house atop it. I've named it simply "house rock." I leave my pack at the base, grab my lunch, map and

compass and scramble to the top for a break. This is a regular stop; a place I anticipate once I reach the upper valley. With a bagel and peanut butter in hand I orient my map northward and compare the topographic lines with the landscape. Overcoat Peak dominates the view to the south. According to Doug Cardle's book on King County place name origins, A.H. Sylvester, once forest supervisor for the Wenatchee National Forest, intentionally left behind his overcoat on the peak during an 1897 survey trip. Discarded because it was too small and uncomfortable, the overcoat was left buttoned around a cairn he built on the summit.

Firmly inside the Alpine Lakes Wilderness, I haven't seen another soul all day. The Dutch Miller Gap area could quite possibly be the most remote region on the Snoqualmie Ranger District. Yet it occupies only a small sliver of Washington State's most popular wilderness area. At 394,000 acres the beauty here is unmatched, though the same argument could be made for many other places in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness. The Enchantments, the Stuart Range and Necklace Valley all have their enthusiastic fans.

The beauty and uniqueness of the area was recognized as early as the 1930's. The Alpine Lakes region was included in the Ice Peaks National Park proposal that would have protected land from Mount Rainier to the Canadian border. The proposal failed but the Forest Service in 1945 recognized the scenic qualities of the region and declared 243,000 acres as the "Alpine Lakes Limited Area." The intention was to prevent further development until a formal decision on the management of the area could be reached.

By this time the area had already seen substantial use. Eating lunch atop the boulder, I try to imagine myself in the area a hundred years ago. The Snoqualmie Pass area was an active trade route between east and west side Native

Americans. During the 1850's mining and logging activities began. Foot trails were reconstructed into wagon roads. Railroads were built eventually crossing the crest at Snoqualmie Pass. The Railroad Land Grant created a checkerboard land ownership pattern that has been one of the biggest challenges in managing the wilderness today.

Bits and pieces of this early history still remain. Wagon wheel ruts and railroad trestles are reminders of early use. Remnants of cabins and mining claims still dot the landscape. Farther along the Dutch Miller trail toward the junction to Williams Lake some of these sites are discernable. I have found myself on occasion eating lunch in the middle of an

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early home site. The only remains left are deteriorated logs outlining the foundation. At some sites I have found shards of flat glass and at others pieces of cast iron. Handling each iron fragment, I try to reconstruct the pieces like a puzzle. I'm amazed at the weight of such a small fragment. My fifty-pound pack with the most modern, lightweight camping gear seems irrelevant compared to the effort of these early travelers.

On July 12, 2006 the Alpine Lakes will celebrate 30 years of wilderness designation. With the area receiving substantial and consistent use for hundreds, if not thousands of years, what was the impetus for creating a wilderness in this area?

According to David Knibb, a founding member of the Alpine Lakes Protection Society (ALPS), the Alpine Lakes area was excluded from the 1968 North Cascades National Park legislation. This exclusion, in addition to aggressive log-

ging road building by the Forest Service in areas such as Eightmile Creek in the Icicle Creek drainage, spurred interest in protecting the Alpine Lakes. During a rainy Sunday in October 1968, a small group of hikers from the east and west side of the Cascades met for a hike to Hyas Lake. The common thread within this group was the desire to preserve the Alpine Lakes area. By the end of the day the Alpine Lakes Protection Society had formed.

ALPS campaigned intensively for six years to achieve wilderness designation. With input from various conservation and environmental groups including The Sierra Club and The Mountaineers, ALPS developed their proposal.

Throughout the six-year battle for designation an assortment of congressional delegates were involved in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness bill, but none more involved than Lloyd Meeds. Congressman Meeds introduced three proposals; a Forest Service proposal of 285,000 acres of wilderness, the timber industry's, 2-unit, 223,000-acre proposal and the ALPS 926,000-acre proposal of a National Recreation Area (NRA) that included a core of 364,000 acres of wilderness.

Support for the Alpine Lakes was drawn from two public hearings; in Seattle the majority of testimony favored wilderness, as expected. At the Wenatchee hearing the timber industry orchestrated a convincing show of opposition though not as overwhelming as the support in Seattle. The plan benefited from the momentum of the Wilderness Act and growing environmental movement of the late 60's.

Suspected pressure from timber lobbyists ultimately caused the proposal for a wilderness area within an NRA to evaporate. Governor Dan Evans, a Republican and a strong supporter of the Alpine Lakes, wrote to the Interior Committee asking for an additional 22,000 acres. In his letter he noted that the Alpine Lakes was not the heart of the timber industry. Meeds, concerned that

the proposal might disappear altogether, worked on a compromise with the timber interests. Industry representatives were willing to add almost all of the 22,000 wilderness acres Governor Evans asked for if the language in the management unit was toned down. On July 12, 1976, Congress passed The Alpine Lakes Management Act, which designated 393,000 acres Alpine Lakes Wilderness and a surrounding management unit.

The Wilderness today

Still on the “house-sized” rock, I hear faint voices growing louder. Two backpackers approach, headed toward Pedro Camp, Williams Lake or Dutch Miller Gap. I sit quietly as they pass and go unnoticed. Solitude returns. I take another bearing on my map locating peaks where the crest intersects Interstate 90. Through the mid-afternoon haze I can see what might be the shoulder of Snoqualmie Mountain. This recent encounter with the backpackers is the first today. Looking in the direction of the I-90 corridor I realize there is still the opportunity for solitude in certain parts of the wilderness.

The Alpine Lakes Wilderness is within an hour’s drive of the majority of the state’s population. As the population grows and more people use the wilderness, management becomes increasingly difficult. Because of this easy access, portions of the wilderness are suffering from overuse. The Snow Lake Trail at Snoqualmie Pass is a prime example. On a sunny, summer weekend encountering two hundred people in a 3-mile stretch of trail is not uncommon. The Snow Lake basin is braided with boot-beaten social trails between camps and the lakeshore. Signs mounted on wooden stakes and strung with twine outline restoration efforts. For solitude to be experienced here one needs to be creative in finding it. The challenge in dealing with this much use is protecting the landscape from further damage. According to Gary Paull, Wilderness and Trails Coordinator for the Mount Baker Snoqualmie National Forest, the use pattern has changed. “Prior to the wilderness, the backcountry saw a lot of stock use.” But

with the designation, party sizes were limited and the average length of stay decreased. “The majority of visits to these popular areas are day trips.” Paull says. To address the overuse problem the Forest Service considered implementing a permit system similar to the system in place in the Enchantments. But critics argued that limiting access would only



DAVE SCHUEBLER

A hiker above Hyas Lake. On a rainy trip to the lake in October 1968, a group of hikers organized to protect the Alpine Lakes.

spread the degradation to areas of the wilderness experiencing less impact. With budget decreases though, initiating the permit system has been stalled.

The future: more Wilderness?

“House rock” has grown quite warm in the mid afternoon sunshine. I’ve oriented my compass on a northeast bearing. The map indicates I am looking the Summit Chief group of peaks as well as Bears Breast Mountain and the ridge that holds La Bohn Gap. I hope to find some time during the evenings to wander around La Bohn Lakes and possibly a try at the summit of Mount Hinman, if I can muster the energy. As I sit here in solitude 26 miles from the nearest civilization I wonder what the future holds for the Alpine Lakes Wilderness. Land managers are still working to acquire private land surrounding the wilderness. In the eastern portion of the wilderness, expan-

sion through land exchanges is increasing the acreage of the wilderness. The goal is to add 16,000 acres to the wilderness through various land swaps. The draft Environmental Impact Statement for the wilderness expansion was released in December 2002 for public comment. Lack of funding has slowed progress on the final statement. The land up for inclusion is mostly slivers of private land around the edges of the Alpine Lakes, according to Tim Foss, wilderness/trails coordinator for the Cle Elum Ranger District. The parcels range from roughly three thousand feet in elevation to alpine meadows; all ten parcels are within the Cle Elum River drainage.

“In order to preserve the wilderness we have, we not only need to look at what is happening within the boundaries but assess the development encroaching around the wilderness,” says David Knibb. With developments enticing people to build along the wilderness edge and ski areas submitting proposals for expansion, it is important to create a buffer protecting the wilderness boundary.

Equally important to what the developers are doing is what we as visitors are doing when we are in the wilderness. With recreation use on the rise, practicing leave-no-trace techniques at our camps and in our personal hygiene has never been more important.

Jolted back into reality by the sound of another approaching hiker, I realize that it is time for me to shoulder my pack and continue up the trail. Folding maps and making one final sweep of the rock for pieces of trash, I scramble off the top and back to my pack. Cinching down the waistbelt and adjusting the shoulder straps I begin the last mile-and-a-half of trail to Pedro Camp and my base camp for the week. Soon I will be surrounded by eleven hungry, tired teenagers who have just spent the day installing drain dips and building turnpike. They will be tired but excited, as I am, to be in this place. ♦

Rob Lohr recently graduated from Evergreen State College and currently works for the U.S. Forest Service.