

The Dark Divide

Have you been there lately—or ever? This area offers all the charms of its well-known neighbors, but it's often overlooked

Make it to the top of Snagtooth Mountain in the Dark Divide Roadless Area and you'll be rewarded with the largest clearcut free vista remaining in the South Cascades. To the east, you'll peer into the Quartz Creek valley, home to towering old-growth trees. To the north, the spine of the Dark Divide is punctuated with craggy peaks. Ridgetop meadows extend west and east separating the Cispus and the Lewis River drainages.

At more than 75,000 acres, the Dark Divide is the largest roadless area in Western Washington, yet relatively few hikers venture there. Either they haven't heard of it at all, or what they have heard of the Dark Divide—that its trails are motorized and unmaintained—keeps them away.

The Dark Divide's neighbors all have impressive titles: Mount Rainier National Park, Mount St. Helens National Monument and the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. The Goat Rocks, Indian Heaven and Mount Adams are designated wilderness areas, garnering more hiker attention.

And yet the Dark Divide's wild character, scenic value and rich biodiversity are just as great as these other gems in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest. The Dark Divide missed its shot at wilderness status with the 1984 Washington State Wilderness Act that protected many other unique wilderness areas throughout the state. Strong opposition by a timber industry looking to log old growth in the area's deep valleys kept this area off the list.

Although the economics and politics around logging old growth have changed significantly in the last thirty years, the memories of timber's boom years persist and wilderness designation may not be politically viable yet. Opposition would also come from the motorized users who have historically ridden in the Dark Divide on trails originally designed for foot and horse traffic to access fire lookouts.

Motorized use is particularly common on trails in the area's northern terrain and hikers familiar with those trails know to expect deeply rutted trails and encounters with motorcycle riders. In the 1990s, the U.S. Forest Service sought to implement a recreation plan that would have greatly increased motorized use in the Dark Divide. This effort was defeated in federal court when a judge sided with a coalition of recreation and conservation organizations (including WTA) who showed that the

Forest Service had not considered the environmental impacts that such motorized recreation would impose on the landscape.

Of the area's 18 major trails, only the Quartz Creek Trail is designated nonmotorized. In the Quartz Creek Valley, where motorcycles are

The Quartz Creek Trail features tremendous old growth. Photo by Kurt Wieland.



prohibited, the principal deterrent to hikers is a lack of maintenance. Sections of trail are all but impassable due to the sheer number of trees that have been knocked down across the trail. Trail signs are often missing; the trail itself can be hard to find in the remote reaches of the valley.

This summer, a series of WTA work parties including two Backcountry Response Teams (August 12 to 15 and September 9 to 12) will address the most pressing maintenance problems in the first 8 miles of the Quartz Creek Trail. This work—as well as other high priority maintenance projects on the Gifford Pinchot National Forest—is being funded by a generous Title II grant from the South Gifford Pinchot Resource Advisory Committee.

Our hope is that an accessible trail into this spectacular area will invite more people to appreciate its wonders and carry on the effort to protect it for future generations to enjoy.♦

HIKE IT»

Read about the Quartz Creek Trail in our Take a Hike section on page 46.



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