

VOICE of the WILD OLYMPICS

Olympic Park Associates

Founded in 1948

Vol. 14, Number 2
Summer 2005



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Preserving the Wild Olympics I. The Olympic Ecosystem: A Planetary Resource

by Tim McNulty, OPA Board

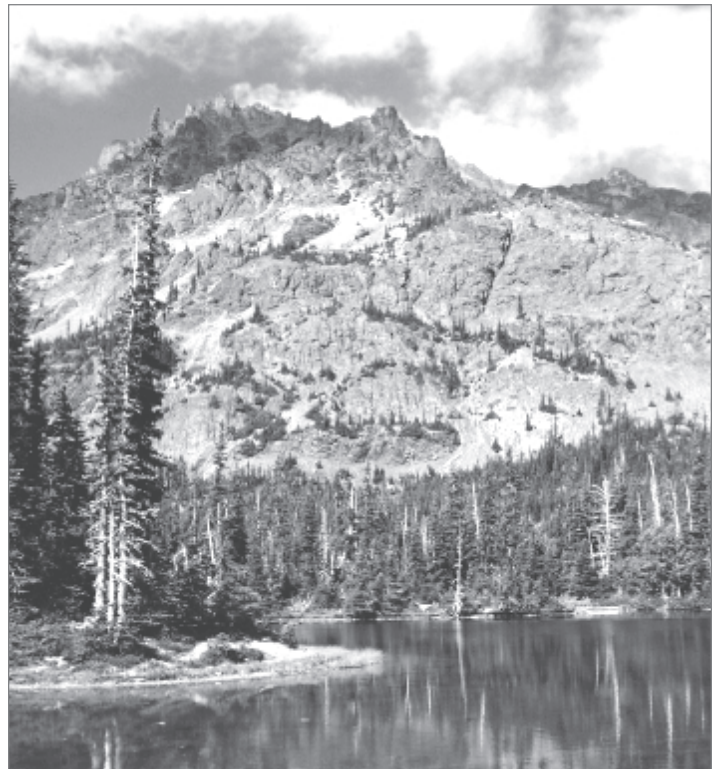
Olympic National Park, its surrounding wildlands, free-flowing rivers and undeveloped coastlines and estuaries comprise one of the earth's premiere ecological preserves. There are few other places where such an entire and diverse coastal forest ecosystem has been protected. Olympic harbors one of the earth's most spectacular temperate rain forests, intact and unmanaged wildlife populations, and a rich diversity of native plant communities including a number of species unique in the world. Olympic is the single largest preserve of wild anadromous salmon and steelhead of any park south of Alaska. With the Elwha River dam removal underway, Olympic will host the largest salmon recovery effort in North America.

It's no surprise that Olympic National Park has been designated a Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Site by UNESCO's community of scientists. Or that the park draws visitors from around the world. As UNESCO's Dr. Michel Batisse put it, Olympic is part of the heritage of all humankind.

With 95% of Olympic National Park and nearly 90,000 acres of the surrounding Olympic National Forest lands designated Wilderness, the heart of this remarkable ecosystem has been permanently protected.

But important as they are, these designations do not insure the future health of the Olympic ecosystem.

This area has already lost two key mammal species, the wolf and the



Greywolf Needles and Royal Lake. Photograph by Bob Kaune.

fisher. Northern spotted owls, indicators of the health of the old-growth forest ecosystem, are in steep decline. Three Olympic salmon stocks, including Lake Ozette sockeye, and one anadromous trout have been placed on the Endangered Species List. Many more stocks are at risk. Non-native species like mountain goats and barred owls are altering natural ecosystem functions, and nearly 200 non-native plants compete with native flora throughout the Park. Outside Park and Forest Service wilderness areas, clearcutting, roadbuilding and development have fragmented habitats, transforming the Park and surrounding wilderness areas into an ecological island.

It's with this perspective and a heightened sense of urgency that Olympic Park Associates and other citizen

(Continued on P. 3, Preserving Wild I)

OPA Board Meetings:

Next: Wednesday, September 28, 2005.

Time: 6:00 p.m.

Place: Kingston Community Center

Please join us. OPA members are always welcome at Board meetings.

The regular OPA Board meetings are in the Kingston Community Center on the 4th Wednesday of odd-numbered months, except no meeting in July.

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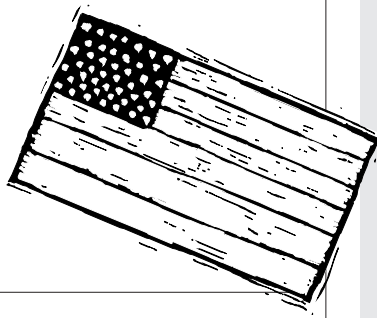
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Voice OF THE WILD OLYMPICS

is published three times per year by Olympic Park Associates.

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OPA membership dues are:

\$20 for individuals;

\$25 for families;

\$35 (or more) contributing member;

\$50 for organizations;

\$5 for students or low income individuals;

\$250 for an individual life membership.

Printed by EcoGraphics

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Preserving the Wild Olympics

I. The Olympic Ecosystem: A Planetary Resource

(Continued from P. 1.)

conservation organizations focus on the Olympic ecosystem. These concerns fuel our advocacy for ecosystem conservation, species reintroductions, wild river protection, and exotic species management. And these concerns underlie our demand for ecologically sound planning and decision-making by government officials.

Olympic National Park is currently preparing a **General Management Plan** that will set the course of park management for the next 15 to 20 years. The Park's **Wilderness Management Plan**, now more than a decade overdue, has once more been sidelined. Olympic National Forest's update of its 1990 **Olympic Forest Plan** is scheduled to begin soon.

OPA will take an active part in these and other planning efforts. We will work to protect integrity of the Olympic ecosystem and we'll continue our vigorous defense of the outstanding Wilderness that lies at its heart.

Currently that defense has taken us to U.S. district court to challenge a Park Service decision to

erect new and unnecessary buildings deep in the Olympic Wilderness. We have also appealed a Forest Service decision to rebuild a road through an irreplaceable ancient forest. OPA will continue to work with other organizations on these and other issues in defense of the wild Olympics.

At a time when ecological preserves, wildlife, and nature itself are under concerted assault, wild places like the Olympics offer hope for the future. As global warming, pollution, and other human-caused problems affect the earth's fabric of life, remaining healthy functioning ecosystems like Olympic are the biosphere's life rafts. They are critical both for preserving biodiversity and fostering the ongoing processes of natural selection and evolution in a rapidly changing world.

"In wildness is the preservation of the earth," wrote Henry David Thoreau. The Olympic Mountains have been part of that process since they rose from the Miocene ocean. Our job is to insure they remain so.

In wildness is the preservation of the earth.

Henry David Thoreau.

Preserving the Wild Olympics

II. From the Chair: OPA's Vision

By Donna Osseward, President, Olympic Park Associates

Olympic Park Associates has (OPA), lately, found itself at odds with the administrations of Olympic National Park on how to solve some park management issues. Since the passage of the 1984 Washington Wilderness Bill, we have expected Park administrations to provide the act's mandated **Wilderness Management Plan**. The law gave the administration ten years to develop this plan.

Those ten years expired ten years ago. Ninety-five percent of Olympic National Park has been mandated by Congress to be managed under the 1964 Wilderness Act. Without a management plan that recognizes those values, we will continue to struggle with the Park Service over a variety of issues.

OPA recently filed a legal complaint against the Park Service over their creation of and desire to fly two shelters into the high country Wilderness of the park. We struggle with the Forest Service and the Park Service on whether to close off or rebuild the road up the Dosewallips River and, now, the Hamma Hamma. We have commented against the attempts to "stabilize" the East Fork of the Quinault River in order to save, in place, the

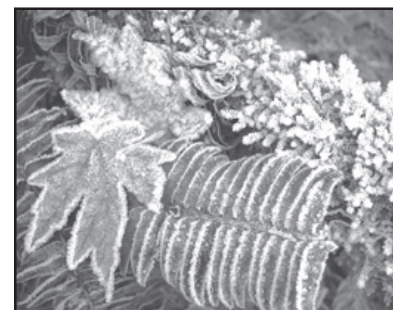
chalet in the Enchanted Valley. We commented against allowing the Park Service to essentially run a gravel operation in the Quinault Valley, using rocks bulldozed from Finley Creek, with their stated purpose to save the bridge crossing the creek. All these decisions by the Park Service interfere with the natural processes that support the ecosystem of the park.

Olympic National Park was created in 1938 to preserve the area's matchless rain forests and spectacular ice-capped peaks, populated with elk and other native wildlife. It has since been designated a World Heritage Site.

Our argument simply is: these activities or structures do not belong in Wilderness, which the designation Congress gave the majority of the park. Park Wilderness is to be managed according to the Wilderness Act, which provides that, "A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is . . . an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man.

The Wilderness Act of 1964



Barnes Creek Frost. Photo by Bob Kaune.

Continued on P. 4, Preserving Wild II)

Preserving the Wild Olympics *Continued from P. 3.*

II. OPA's Vision

landscape, is . . . an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man.”

Why this devotion to wilderness by Olympic Park Associates? Wilderness provides great benefits to us all even if we cannot not step a foot into it. In wilderness, we can save the winter snows for the summer heat. There, snow is not something we must salt or sand. It fills mountain lakes and streams, waters our gardens, washes salmon fry to the sea, and provides us with a summertime tall cool one. The trees and vegetation of its wild areas clean our air; hold our ancient forests, and mountain meadows with blueberries and bears. The ancient forests surrounding the Olympic Mountains give us laboratories on the workings of forests, and help us to understand how forest practices can better provide for the next generation of forests.

The Park was created to preserve habitat for the Roosevelt Elk and the wildlife of the peninsula. By keeping water and gravel clean, the Park helps to preserve our wild salmon and other native fish. The water from the rivers keeps shellfish beds clean and renews their nutrients. Wilderness holds nature's secrets until we have the

time and talent to discover them. Just as the “weed tree” Yew gives hope to breast cancer patients, other cures remain untrammelled so that we may search there for other cures. We do not know where all the wonders are, but we can keep the possibilities in wilderness.

In economic terms, this wild park has brought economic stability to many peninsula communities that once rose and fell on the price of lumber. Tourism brings jobs. Done with care and respect, tourism can enable visitors to enjoy the park for generations, leaving an economic and natural legacy to their children and grandchildren. Communities can now welcome tourists who come to experience the beauty and peace that their local residents enjoy year-around.

The wilderness of America is no longer a vast challenge to human progress. It is now the endangered vestige of the earth's natural processes. Since the time of Thoreau, we have seen the need to save parts of wild America for nature, the wildlife, and ourselves. To continually compromise what has been designated as Wilderness will eventually leave none.

Preserving the Wild Olympics

III. Staving Off the Onslaught:

Clinton-Era Roadless Protections Scrapped

by Tim McNulty

On May 5, the Forest Service repealed the most popular, far-reaching, and inclusive conservation measure to come along in years, the roadless area conservation rule. The rule was enacted during the Clinton administration after an extensive, two-year public process that included more than 600 public

hearings and 1.6 million letters to the Forest Service in support of the initiative.

The roadless rule protected nearly 60 million acres of federal forestlands, the last, best, undeveloped lands in the West. Under it, Forest Service

roadless lands were placed off limits to road building, logging and mining. The action protected millions of acres of wildlife habitat, sources of clean water, opportunities for recreation and solitude and refuges for threatened and endangered species. As a single conservation measure, it was spectacular.

Now, under the Bush rule change, those lands are opened again to what is euphemistically called development.

Unlike Clinton's roadless rule, Bush's assault on roadless forests took place without extensive public hearings or scientific review. In spite of that, 1.8 million people wrote the Forest Service opposing the repeal, all to no avail. In a stunning reversal of historic federal land management, the new strategy allows state governors to make recommendations on which lands will be logged, mined, drilled, or delivered up for motorized recreation. But even if “blue states” on the West Coast opt for roadless conservation, the Forest



Cougar tracks along the Bogachiel.
Photo by Bob Kaune.

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Preserving the Wild Olympics *Continued from P. 4.***III. Staving Off the Onslaught: Clinton-Era Roadless Protections Scrapped**

Service can override it.

In Olympic National Forest, de-facto wilderness lands protected under the roadless rule included such spectacular scenic areas as: South Quinault Ridge, the middle Dungeness valley, Mount Townsend, Lena Lake, Jupiter Ridge, upper Hamma Hamma, the South Fork Skokomish River, Moonlight Dome and Rugged Ridge. At present, about 37 percent of Olympic National Forest, or 145,000 acres, is off limits to road building. But only 88,265 acres of that are congressionally protected as Wilderness. The rest is administratively protected under the 1990 Olympic Forest Plan and 1994 Northwest Forest Plan. The 1990 plan will soon be up for review. The latter plan,

put in place to protect federally threatened spotted owls and other old growth-dependent species, has already come under the crosshairs of the Bush administration's rule changes (see *Gifts of the Magi*, Spring 2005 *Voice*).

Like those concessions to private profit, like the "Clear Skies" and "Healthy Forests" initiatives and the Bush-Cheney energy plan, the roadless repeal is a bold giveaway to resource industries. It is part of a wholesale attempt to transfer the public estate to private interests. And so far, this giveaway shows no sign of slowing down.

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Preserving the Wild Olympics**IV. 100 Years of
Olympic National Forest**

by Jim Scarborough, Olympic Forest Coalition, OPA Board

The USDA Forest Service will celebrate its 100th anniversary on July 1, 2005. On this date 100 years ago, the Forest Service was created as an agency with a unique mission: to sustain healthy, diverse, and productive forests and grasslands for present and future generations. The creation of the Forest Service initiated a century of change in managing public forests and grasslands, with introduction of a new conservation ethic and professional workforce to carry it forth. (From the USDA Forest Service website.)

Innumerable visitors, scientists, students, government officials, and nature lovers the world over have sung the praises of Olympic National Park (ONP) since its establishment in 1938. Known far and wide as one of the richest and most intact ecosystems on our fair Earth, the park doesn't suffer from any lack of public attention. Yet the same cannot be said of its little sister, the adjacent Olympic National Forest (ONF), which has whiled away the years in comparative obscurity. This relative inattention has sometimes been to ONF's detriment, as it succumbed to nearly a half-century of aggressive logging with only minimal constraints. Still, far more ecological value remains in this crescent of green than is typically acknowledged.

If one might venture to compare ONP with Botticelli's emergence of the goddess in *The Birth of Venus*, ONF must then surely be the oft-disregarded, though indisputably lovely, handmaiden



Elwha giants. Photo by Bob Kaune.

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Preserving the Wild Olympics

IV. 100 Years of Olympic National Forest *Continued from P. 5.*

ing roughly 630,000 acres, ONF's boundaries actually included the entirety of the national park's domain in the early 20th century. By the end of World War II, vast reaches of ONF still remained wild and pristine, in some cases almost as trail-free as it was roadless. Clearcut logging began in earnest soon after, however, reducing many of the finest forest stands in the world to burned-out stubble. Neither the rain forest of the west end nor the rain shadow of the east was spared, with this taxpayer-fueled destruction hitting its peak in the 1980s. In the Skokomish and Wynoochee watersheds, a particularly nefarious "public/private partnership" resulted in the cutting of obscene amounts of old-growth, much of which was shipped overseas.

By 1990, the ecological health of ONF had reached perhaps its lowest point, with

formerly vibrant salmon streams choked with sediment from thousands of miles of ill-conceived logging roads, made worse by ridge after ridge of sadly fragmented, pockmarked forests ravaged by the timber beasts. Nonetheless, and mercifully, the profiteers didn't get it all. With the listings of the northern spotted owl, marbled murrelet, Puget Sound chinook, Hood Canal summer chum, and bull trout as threatened under the Endangered Species Act, decades of plunder and pillage abruptly all but ceased. ONF was finally given a breather.

Now, one hundred years since the Theodore Roosevelt administration designated ONF (and other national forests), it's worth considering the important natural attributes that remain, the prospects for recovery of its lands and waters, and future risks to its integrity. Estimates vary on the amount of original forest remaining on ONF, though it's probably safe to say that roughly one-third of its acreage features forest stands, at a variety of elevations, which existed prior to Euro-American settlement (much of it scattered about in smallish patches). Just under 90,000 acres in five units on ONF were awarded Wilderness Area protection by the U.S. Congress in 1984, while a near-equal amount of generally untouched acreage has been administratively inventoried as Roadless. Some additional primitive country of note, such as Chapel Peak on the Wynoochee/Skokomish divide, has not yet been inventoried. The bulk of these protected and semi-protected lands are contiguous to the wild country of the national park.

The advent of the Northwest Forest Plan in 1994, coupled with the listing of the marbled murrelet, halted the logging of ancient forests on ONF. No old-growth timber sales have occurred here since the highly controversial "Salvage Rider" of 1995/96. The Northwest Forest Plan operates by zoning ONF lands into several, sometimes overlapping, management classifications, including late-successional reserves, adaptive management areas, riparian reserves, and key watersheds. Although offering fairly strong protections to the national forests of the region in its original incarnation, the Plan has been steadily weakened – first by the Clinton administration via minor adjustments, and now wholesale by the Bush administration on behalf of the timber industry.

What's left is a watered down Forest Plan. Simultaneously, the Bush administration has systematically eliminated or weakened a number of federal regulations pertaining to the upkeep of quality wildlife habitat, watershed health, and public participation in the management of our national forests, instead empha-



Quinault tributary. Photo by Bob Kaune.

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Preserving the Wild Olympics

IV. 100 Years of Olympic National Forest *Continued from P. 6.*

Red alder along the Queets. Photo by Bob Kaune.

sizing resource extraction. Meanwhile, Congress is poised to undermine several landmark environmental laws in order to appease industry lobbyists and campaign funders, such as the Endangered Species Act and National Environmental Policy Act. In short, the stage is all but set for the resumption of yesteryear's plunder. The moneychangers are banging at the temple doors.

Management of ONF is at a crossroads. In the past ten years, Forest Service activities have been limited primarily to productive watershed assessments, removal and rehabilitation of unneeded roads, and a small-scale thinning program in ONF's abundant second-growth forests. Although by no means perfect, the Forest Service's recent focus has facilitated the gradual process of recovery for ONF as a whole (or at least not hindered it seriously). The landscape and waters are genuinely in better shape now than they were in 1990. The chances of this happy peace lasting, however, are becoming increasingly slim, as evidenced by current proposals being floated by the agency in deference to the Bush administration.

Absent a foundation of empirical research, the Forest Service has expressed a desire to triple the

amount of current logging on ONF, through thinning sales ostensibly designed to "accelerate" a forest's development of old-growth characteristics. Despite being a popular flavor-of-the-month silvicultural technique among agency officials, the timber industry, and even some environmentalists, thinning operations risk significant terrestrial and aquatic damage. Forest stands are often homogenized as a result, with copious amounts of the area's characteristic biomass removed, while so-called temporary roads inflict long-term damage to fragile soils and life-sustaining streams. A prime example is the newly proposed Jackson Timber Sale, which would thin a 110-year-old, naturally regenerated forest on Mount Walker and nearby Mount Turner, with up to nine new miles of road construction. This new wave of projects like this one will jeopardize ONF's recovery and, by extension, the Olympic Bioregion itself.

Anticipating these renewed threats, the Olympic Forest Coalition (OFCO) was formed in 2002 to advocate for the protection and restoration of the Olympic Peninsula's forested ecosystems. Working closely with OPA, a central component of OFCO's program is the monitoring of Forest Service projects across the entirety of the ONF. Through written comments, attendance at committee meetings, field trips, on-site dialogue, and legal appeals, OFCO works to positively influence agency actions for the good of the forest. One high-profile example of OFCO's work, in collaboration with OPA, Olympic Audubon, and others, has been to thus far prevent the loss of four acres of classic old-growth in the Dosewallips Valley that would otherwise be cut for road reconstruction.

Standing high atop Green Mountain in 2005, overlooking the Big Quilcene drainage, one can't help but be struck by how verdant and lovely the scene appears in comparison to just a few years ago. With anchors of old-growth here and there, the surrounding younger forest is growing and greening up splendidly, softening the harsh edges of past mismanagement. Fish swim and feed more contentedly in clear, chattering waters, while thrushes herald the deep forest's triumphant return in hypnotic song – a testament to the resilience of this extraordinary place. Will we each have the conviction and determination, like nature itself, to ensure that this upward trajectory continues unencumbered?

The Bush administration has systematically eliminated or weakened a number of federal regulations pertaining to the upkeep of quality wildlife habitat, watershed health, and public participation in the management of our national forests, instead emphasizing resource extraction.

Dosewallips Road Washout: OPA and Others Check It Out

By John Woolley, OPA Vice President

As reported in the Spring 2004 and Fall 2004 Voice, OPA, Olympic Forest Coalition, Olympic Audubon, and two individuals appealed a Forest Service decision in March 2004 to re-route the Dosewallips road upslope of a massive washout. The proposed reroute would have sliced through at least four acres of centuries-old forest and critical habitat for threatened murrelet and spotted owl.

For the near-term at least, our appeal was successful, as Forest Supervisor Dale Hom on June 22 withdrew his decision to implement the reconstruction. Instead, further study on slope stability will be conducted, with a third environmental assessment expected.

On April 16 and 17 OPA held a campout and field trip to check out the Dosewallips road washout. OPA Chair Donna Osseward, Treasurer Tom Bihn, Tim McNulty, Heidi Walker hiked the proposed bypass and went on up the road to check out the tough part, which is still Subaru passable, but barely.

Ed Henderson, chair of the Mountaineers Access Committee, showed up at the OPA camp out specifically to do a survey study of the proposed reroute for Bonnie Phillips of Olympic Forest Coalition. Len Ficasi and I accompanied Ed for four hours of poking holes and earth core samples.

The gist: The road reroute is not feasible, even using only a 60-foot right of way. The laws of trigonometry will not permit the proposed slope and fill factors. Ed planned to recommend that the Mountaineers give up on any road rebuild. He felt comfortable suggesting this, as he had climbed Mt. Anderson last year with the additional five miles on each end.

Len Ficasi is a Libertarian who favored the road rebuild until he walked the surveyed route. He still fantasizes connecting roads on the south side of the Dose, but did groundtruth the inadequate remnant road across the Elkhorn Bridge. He is 83 years old, still backpacking and able to crawl over awkward fallen logs. He's my new role model.



I had made an earlier trip to the Dose washout on February 27, 2005. The Evergreen University's chapter of Earth First was holding a tree-climbing workshop there. I counted 23 vehicles at the washout trailhead when I arrived. The riverside route was even more im-

passable than on my previous trip. The "Up and Over" trail had picked up some definition from use and a little trail work. The erosion was remarkable along the top of the slope.

I passed two pairs of tree climbers practicing getting up into the limbs of big Douglas firs. As I walked the old road to Elkhorn Campground, I met four others heading up for tree practice. At Elkhorn, about a dozen tents were still up along the river at 1:30 PM. I met at least a dozen more Evergreen students. Not all of the 23 vehicles were the Evergreen group, but most were, and I was told folks kept showing up all weekend.

Hiking beyond the campground, I followed an old single lane road, now a faint trail, through nice old growth, especially one fir over 6 feet in diameter. I saw a forest phantom, the Hermit thrush. The Dose corridor is very scenic. The maple bottoms were freshly defined with a carpet of winter-flattened leaves. The bottom cliffed out, and as I climbed up to the old road, I met a couple who were visiting a friend down the road. Their friend had told them of a scheme to re-build the Dose road and extend it through the Park to the Coast. I walked with them and chatted about the situation, giving them information.



On another day later in spring I checked out the Dose again with Andi Niesen. Lots of snowmelt water was running down the slopes, but the river was a bit low. The trees were even bigger than last time!

The survey route had been quite destroyed since my last visit, and was newly marked with orange ribbon and posts. Funny thing: the ribbons keep getting closer to the edge. The ribbons had been moved down to get the proposed route out of the Wilderness, but now the edge of the cliff had moved twenty feet closer than last year! Much of the Up-and-Over Trail now had an open view.

I watched as a bike rider stared at the washout, wondering how he was going to get to the old road on the other side.

On a blank Forest Service signpost was written: "Wilderness is an escape from industry, greed, and injustice."

Elwha Research Consortium Awarded Major Funding

This spring, the Elwha Research Consortium announced the award of two National Science Foundation grants totaling \$1 million. With two major dams set to be removed from the Elwha River, the grants will fund unprecedented ecological research in the Elwha watershed.

Dr. Jerry Freilich, research coordinator for Olympic National Park who organized the consortium, called the pending dam removals “an ideal scientific situation that deserves study.” Because the 1992 Elwha River Ecosystem and Fisheries Restoration Act made no provision for funding scientific research, and federal agencies cannot receive research funding, Freilich coordinated with members of the surrounding academic, tribal, scientific and educational communities to form the consortium. Members are: Peninsula College, Western Washington University’s Huxley College, the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe, NOAA, Northwest Fisheries Science Center, Olympic National Park, USGS, and Olympic Park Institute.

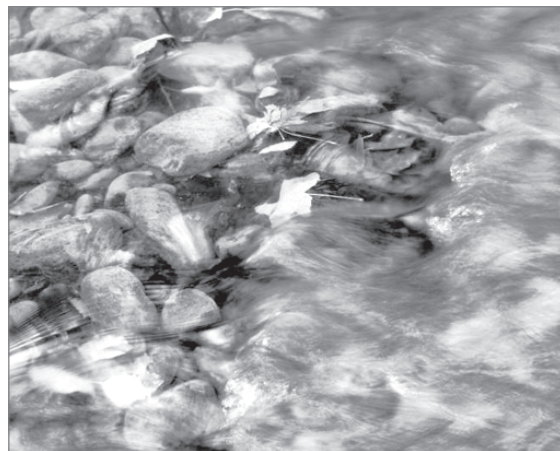
The grants will support five-year field studies of the Elwha River ecosystem before, during and after dam removal. Students at Peninsula College and Huxley College, including members of the Elwha Klallam Tribe, will design and develop research projects under the guidance of consortium scientists. This research will provide invaluable baseline data that will be the foundation for ecological monitoring of the watershed for years to come. The consortium will also provide a regional

and national model for public, private, educational and tribal cooperation on major ecological research efforts.

At a celebratory event held at Peninsula College in Port Angeles on April 26, Olympic National Park Superintendent Bill Laitner pointed out the importance of the Elwha restoration and research funding. “This is the second-largest restoration effort within the National Park Service. These grants will allow scientists, educators and the general public to take full advantage of the learning opportunities of this remarkable project.”

Rob Elofson, river restoration director for the Elwha Klallam Tribe, spoke of the power of the Elwha River and its potential for salmon restoration. “Once the river supported all runs of salmon. The Elwha River was in beautiful shape until the dams went in. As late as the 1960s..., there were still harvestable numbers of naturally spawning Coho and Chinook salmon returning.”

Currently, dam removal is set to begin in 2008. “I look forward to walking with you back to the future,” Superintendent Laitner told scientists, educators and guests at the event, “to a fully restored Elwha ecosystem.”



Autumn leaves in the Elwha. Photo by Bob Kaune.

Arctic National Wildlife Refuge:

Exhibit of Subhankar Banerjee Photos

Coming to Burke Museum in Seattle on June 25

Olympic Park Associates is among the partners supporting an exhibit of Subhankar Banerjee photos coming to Burke Museum in Seattle:

Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: Seasons of Life and Land.

The exhibit will open on June 25, 2005 and run through December 31, 2005. Scheduled during that period are presentations by some of the book’s authors and lectures on arctic animals, native cultures, migrations, energy and climate change.

For the program schedule, see the Burke Museum web site: www.washington.edu/burkemuseum.

As a member of OPA, an organization that is a community partner, you may visit the exhibit in September for half price.



Subhankar Banerjee

An Olympic Mountains Experience

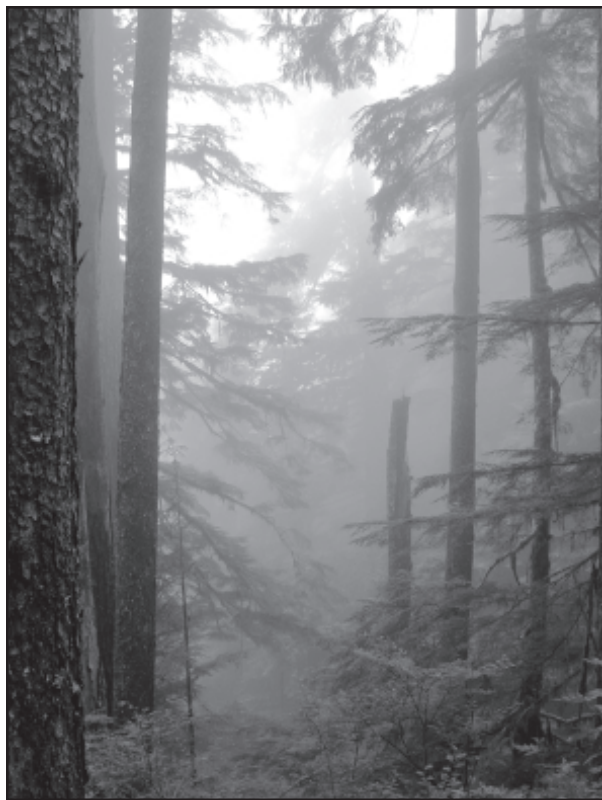
by Jim Scarborough

[Names have been changed and omitted to protect the innocent. - JS]

After hours of mind-numbing driving, my hiking partner and I paused at the lone gas station in a faraway West End town. No cliched tumbleweeds here, but plenty of spindly, replanted and volunteer hemlock baking in the summer sun. I worked the gas pump amidst half-hearted chatter with Bill, both of us anxious to ditch the car in favor of boots, me dimly aware of the usual guilt I experience at every service station stop these days – now that the fuel is laced with blood. For whatever reason, I felt inclined to tilt my gaze toward the sky, whereupon were spotted telltale patterns of high, feathered wisps of clouds marching deliberately from the south. After two weeks of lazy, hazy monokini weather, the Olympic Peninsula’s seasonal thirst would soon be relieved.

Our first day out, on well traveled trail, was as simple and straightforward as a backpacking textbook. We had packed for six days of wildland immersion, and made our way up the rain forest valley with the same linear efficiency we had frankly hoped to escape by venturing here. The first night’s camp on the bank of the mere trickle of river later proved, nonetheless, to be a gateway of sorts beyond the constraints of linearity; beyond, in fact, nearly any sense of day-to-day normalcy.

Photo by Bob Kaune.



After another trail mile or so the second day out, we traded the beaten path for several consecutive days of the rawest of wilderness. Admiring an incongruous and solitary white pine in our initial ascent up a forgotten tributary drainage, we noticed that the thick fingers of fog caressing the ridge tops in the morning hours had begun to assert

themselves as rain. The steep, forested lower slope transformed itself into a brushy and rocky upper slope as we hauled ourselves higher, pulling an additional layer of clothing on every few minutes. The shower became an unabashed August deluge, soaking us through rain gear and polypro, to the point that repeated bonus dousings received from pushing our way through tight vegetation made little difference.

By the time we reached the divide, marking the collision point of the Western and Eastern Olympics, visibility was down to a meager few yards, though the rejuvenation stemming from the near-certainty of our physical location managed to briefly penetrate the gloom. Yet this was no place to camp. From the divide, we would traverse an abruptly angled, dripping mountainside choked with young mountain hemlock, complemented by an obstacle course of tricky ravines. The final half-mile to our intended camp on a broad pass, with its promise of hot food and nylon shelter, would take the better part of the afternoon. We learned quickly that following established wildlife paths was a vastly superior strategy to relying on our own soggy judgment.

I pitched my tent, and Bill his bivy, on a spacious, grassy meadow just above the gentle saddle. Here, we passed two consecutive, somewhat uncomfortable and chilly nights, but tedium never entered the equation. An abundance of bears, most quite large, repeatedly passed along the periphery of camp, gorging themselves on the multitudes of blueberries blanketing the mountains. Often, we found ourselves mimicking this very same grazing behavior, staining our already-pruned fingers.

On day three, the sun managed to free itself during a temporary tearing of the afternoon’s gray shroud, allowing us to explore the rarely visited wild countryside surrounding us. By evening, fog and drizzle had returned, but not before we’d had the opportunity to gaze upon verdant, unmolested forested valleys stretching to the horizon in every direction, jumbles of violent peaks rising above them, and diverse subalpine meadows knitting the landscape’s disparate elements into a comely whole.

To adequately describe the experience and sensation of traveling on foot through wilderness freely and unencumbered, with essentially no sign of human impact whatsoever, may exceed the capabilities of even a master wordsmith. For lesser

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riff-raff like me, the task is overwhelming, though I can at least describe the feeling as something akin to harnessing the full wisdom and evolutionary history of one's body at the cellular level. Once that same body is allowed to function as intended, the mind is freed from its modern slumber, and the world is suddenly very much alive. The secrets become ours.

Our fourth day out dawned again in dejected fashion, a split-pea soup of fogbanks weighing on our shoulders. By the latter part of morning, however, the weather largely broke, and we even flirted with drying off a bit while traversing the highlands. Windows through the moisture broadened into outright spectacles of fresh beauty, populated with ever more shy bears, whistling marmots in remote nooks, and one high-flying bald eagle heading north above the ruggedness in great haste. Innumerable lakes and tarns greeted the sun's return with silent eruptions of mist. The height of our adventure was marked by a large herd of Roosevelt elk, well below us in a golden, multi-leveled basin. We watched them for a good hour: they were unaware of our presence, calm and content in their secure, natural cul-de-sac, young ones frolicking and older ones chewing their cud.

Perhaps the eagle was fleeing the oncoming storm. By evening of that same day, soon after establishing camp not far from our elk sighting, the wind and rain assaulted us literally out of the blue. This freakish beast of a low-pressure system pounded us relentlessly throughout the dismal night. By morning, without any respite from the "pineapple express" action, we beat a hasty retreat up and over the knife-edged ridgeline and back down into a trail-less rain forest canyon. More tough going, for sure, with slippery heather up high, massive fallen trees down low, and an endless supply of punishing ravines. Crossing the canyon's rowdy creek, choked and booming with silty runoff, vertigo got the best of me, and I was forced to frantically dogpaddle to the far side. Had it been five degrees cooler, I might well have been in deep trouble.

That final night we camped in the only semi-suitable place we could find – a narrow sandbar in the canyon bottom, a half-dozen feet or so from the big, rip-snorting creek. Bill's bivy was now all but useless, so we shared the tent after sponging as much standing water out of it as I could. I donned the few half-way-dry items remaining in my waterlogged pack, then crawled into my bag and slept fitfully, but happy to be out of the storm's direct onslaught for a while. Morning saw

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no change in the weather and the creek's edge had moved to within a foot of the tent's corner.

The river was our final obstacle of the trip. In order to reach the trail and the short walk to the trailhead where Bill had cached a bicycle, we would have to ford the flood. While planning the outing two weeks before, we had thought nothing of it, given that August rivers are generally more pleasurable than forbidding to navigate. But now, after days of downpour, the river was genuinely frightening. After much thought and debate, we opted to stow our unwieldy packs under an extensive rootwad, then make the best of it on the wide, unruly streamcourse. Our other alternatives were to return via the many rough miles by which we had come (which was completely unpalatable), or establish another camp with dwindling food supplies, wet equipment and clothes, and moderate risk of hypothermia. We chose the course of instant gratification/injury.

With two stout poles, Bill somehow managed to successfully ford the pounding river, upright all the way. With my stumble in the creek the day before in mind, I naively determined the best means for crossing would be to swim a much deeper area upstream, where the current was more slack. I had awkwardly stridden across a third of the stream channel's width when I was forced to let go entirely, and began thrashing madly for the far shore. The pace of the flowing water was quicker than it appeared, and I felt the strength draining from my muscles at an alarming rate. Downstream, Kevin extended one of his poles for me to grab hold of, but I sailed past helplessly, beginning now to gulp water. For the briefest moment I felt as if my time might be up, though it was not an altogether terrible sense of fatalism. Before panic could set in, I reached down without thinking and grasped solid rock. Swimming horizontally, I hadn't realized that I'd reached shallow water. After clinging to that rock for some time, in mild shock, I eventually pulled myself together and clambered onto shore, dripping like a beached porpoise.

What little remained of this backcountry adventure was relatively uneventful. The rain never really let up, and the trail itself was mostly flooded. Bill later biked nine miles to retrieve my newly vandalized car (other adjacent vehicles were roughed up more), while I walked three

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Our wildlands are the unblemished face of the Divine. To walk there is the highest of privileges, the greatest of life's lessons.

Profile of a bull elk, Hoh River. Photo by Bob Kaune.





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miles or so on the quiet muddy road in order to stay warm. An osprey and what likely was a northern spotted owl kept me company as my psyche began the inevitable process of sorting and categorizing, and ultimately diminishing, what had only minutes before been direct, unfiltered experience. A week later, we returned and crossed placid waters to rescue our abandoned packs.

What possesses a person to consciously hurl himself into such circumstances? Although we certainly didn't anticipate all the hardships in store, not one tinge of regret has since crept into my thoughts. I can even assert that my outlook for the entirety of the trip was composed of at least a foundation of joy, with the high-profile annoyances, fear, and discomfort never extending much beyond superficial afterthoughts. The explanation for this apparent contradiction is straightforward, at least to my muddled mind: Our wildlands, put simply, are the unblemished face of the Divine. To walk there is the highest of privileges, the greatest of life's lessons. It is why we return, and it is why many of us will defend the land and waters until our days are finally done.

