Wild Olympics Included in Defense Appropriations Bill

By Tim McNulty

It’s been a wild ride for the Wild Olympics Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers Act this year. As this issue of the Voice goes to press, we’re hopeful that 2020 sees this critical legislation cross the finish line.

In February, thanks to years of diligent effort on the part of D-6 Rep. Derek Kilmer, the Wild Olympics passed the U.S. House with bipartisan support. The bill was included in H.R. 2546, the Protecting America’s Wilderness Act, which protects wilderness, wild rivers and recreation areas in Colorado and California as well as Washington.

Then, in July, Wild Olympics, as part of the Protecting America’s Wilderness Act, was attached as an amendment to the National Defense Appropriations Act (NDAA). The NDAA passed the House and U.S. Senate, but the Senate version failed to include the wilderness amendment containing Wild Olympics.

A conference committee (appointed by the House and Senate to resolve bill differences) will convene after the election to negotiate and finalize full congressional approval and passage of the NDAA. This is "must-pass" legislation and it is the best hope for Wild Olympics since the bill

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Sol Duc River Lands Proposed for Conservation

The Sol Duc River is the longest on the Olympic Peninsula, incredibly scenic and an extraordinary sanctuary for wild salmon. It flows 65 miles westward from the spectacular Seven Lakes Basin through Olympic National Park and Forest to its confluence with the Bogachiel River near Forks.

Western Rivers Conservancy proposes to conserve and preserve 1,023 acres along four miles of the Sol Duc River adjacent to the Park. The property is an in-holding in Olympic National Forest. The Conservancy’s goal is “to safeguard the strong fish and wildlife habitats while preserving public access to this reach of the Sol Duc River and the Olympic Discovery Trail.”

The Sol Duc hosts good runs of wild spring and summer Chinook, winter steelhead and pink, coho, chum and sockeye salmon. Dolly Varden, sea-run cutthroat trout and resident trout also inhabit the river.

The Sol Duc supports some of the healthiest stocks of wild winter steelhead in the Pacific Northwest, with as many as 19,000 steelhead returning to spawn in some years. In 2012 it became the first river on the Olympic Peninsula to be designated a Wild Steelhead Gene Bank by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

This property is also at the very transition point from nearly unbroken stands of ancient forest upstream in the Park, to industrialized forestlands downstream. It provides important critical habitat.

OPA enthusiastically supports this acquisition. For more information, please go to www.westernrivers.org.

Navy to Increase Training Flights Over the Olympics

The Sound of Garbage Disposals Overhead at the Hoh?

The U.S. Navy is planning to increase training flights for their EA-18G “Growler” jets, some of the loudest aircraft in the world, over one of the quietest spots in America: Olympic National Park’s Hoh Rain Forest.

The Navy’s own analysis, just released in the final environmental study for their Northwest Training and Testing Range, revealed that the maximum noise levels heard on the ground are projected between 81.5 and 100.6 decibels (dB). According to the Navy, these noise levels are roughly equivalent to a garbage disposal (80dB) and a handheld drill (100dB). The Department of Defense assesses noise impacts at more than 75dB as incompatible for most land use, says the Navy’s study.

Ironically, Olympic’s popular Hoh Rain Forest Visitor Center is at the edge of the military airspace, just a short hike away from the “One Square Inch of
OPA Funds Efforts to Bolster Genetic Diversity of Fishers

Fishers are forest carnivores closely related to wolverines. They are about the size of a large brown cat with a hunched back and a long thick tail. They den in cavities in old trees, making the old-growth forest of Olympic National Park an ideal habitat. Fishers prey on squirrels, mountain beavers, snowshoe hares and other small mammals.

Although fishers are native to the Olympic Peninsula, they were trapped to extinction a century ago for their silky, luxurious fur. Some 90 fishers were reintroduced into Olympic National Park between 2008 and 2010. About half of them survived but few were reproducing. By 2016, third-generation fishers were widely distributed throughout the Peninsula. However, genetic analysis demonstrated that the few females from the founding population showed up in all samples. This is troubling because it means a significant loss of genetic diversity over time, a condition that could endanger the long-term survival of the species in the Olympics.

Geneticists estimate that ONP will need at least eight new female fishers from a different genetic source every 10 years. Earlier this year, ONP and other partners were pleased to contribute a significant portion of the funds for a supplemental reintroduction of fishers from a source population in Alberta.

Overcrowding

Forest Service: “The extreme numbers of people recreating at Lake Cushman are creating unsafe conditions and degrading the experience for everyone,” said District Ranger Yewah Lau. “No one wants to be stuck in a six-mile long traffic jam on a narrow, gravel road with no way to turn around.”

The spike in visitation to public lands was a pattern seen throughout the country this summer, according to Forest Service officials. The Forest Service, seriously hampered by limited staffing, has been hard pressed to manage the overcrowding, illegal parking, excessive trash and scattered human waste.

Olympic National Park reported a 48% increase in backcountry permits for August 2020 from August 2019, and a 37% increase for people in campgrounds. This causes me to ask if there are adequate facilities for this dramatic increase in campers. More concerning, is there sufficient monitoring of where all these people are camping? I have never seen any backcountry rangers in the National Forest and very few in the Olympic National Park in recent years. It’s clear more funding and staffing are badly needed. This is a problem that is going to get worse.
Chasing the Light

Story and Photos
By Stephen Grace

I’ve returned from Mount Gladys, the most magnificent place in the Olympics. Or so I believe as I peruse my photos. Hunkering under a boulder near Gladys Divide while waiting for a cold drizzle to dissipate—this is now a distant memory. Plus I’ve nearly forgotten that my jaws jackhammered so forcefully after I snorkeled in Flapjack Lakes I had to bite my sleeping bag to keep my teeth from cracking.

During my first trip into the Olympics just a few months ago, the mountains spoke of spring. How quickly the seasons turn. Meadows painted bright with blooms have been replaced by tawny fields. At Gladys Divide, clouds colored like soot curtained the view and freezing rain burned coldly on my skin. It’s easy to fall in love with wild places in their prime. Who wouldn’t love the mountains when their slopes are resplendent with wildflowers in July? Loving the mountains when autumn turns to winter—this takes more patience, more perseverance.

In the night the clouds did part, revealing the stars, and the next morning I saw the Sawtooths, aptly named. Their jagged summits sawed the sky as sunlight slipped between toothed peaks. Frozen grass that edged the rocks was sugared with frost. Ponds paneled with ice glimmered beneath the blue sky. After crunching my way up a path paved with hoarfrost I reached the top of Mount Gladys. My breath smacked in the air. From the shadows of river valleys, mountains took shape in the dawn. When the sun lifted over the Sawtooths, I was suffused with sudden warmth. My mood soared. I was in love. These mountains! Visible beyond the range that forms LaCrosse Basin and the Duckabush drainage was Mt. Anderson, the hydrologic center of the Olympic Range, a sort of axis mundi among this universe of peaks. From Mount Anderson’s slopes, major rivers radiate and run in three directions: toward Hood Canal in the east, the Strait of Juan de Fuca to the north, the Pacific Ocean to the west.

While standing atop Mount Gladys I remembered that slung across my shoulder was a pair of binoculars. By the time I looked through their glass for a detailed read of the landscape, a new round of clouds had formed. The next storm was building. Summer’s steady high pressure was being upended by winter’s stormy chaos. Soon the view would disappear, closed off by clouds. Daylight was dwindling. For the first time this year I ate dinner on a backpacking trip while wearing a headlamp.

When I returned from the mountains to the world below, I brought with me these memories: the roots of a western red cedar gripping the earth like a hand, a coral mushroom burning with orange light like a struck match. A varied thrush fluting its whistled song, practicing for spring.

In the weeks to come I will chase what light is left in high places, gathering memories to brighten my mood when the darkness descends.

**Great American Outdoors Act is Great for National Parks**

By Rob Smith

Despite partisan rancor and an economy hit hard by COVID-19, Congress came together and passed the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) which was signed into law by President Trump on August 4.

The act would permanently and fully fund the Land and Water Conservation Fund at $900 million annually to buy critical land for parks and wildlife, as well as support local parks and open space. It would also commit $6.5 billion over the next five years to repair ailing and aging facilities in national parks including trails, roads, buildings, and water systems. Additional funding would go to other public lands.

The biggest priority at Olympic National Park is renewing water and wastewater systems that were installed several decades ago, which are not only in need of modernization but now serve many more visitors than for what they were originally designed for. ONP is the Northwest’s most visited national park, now seeing more than 3 million visitors throughout the year.

In many ways, the GAOA is what the doctor ordered for our nation right now. It creates and protects open space for us to enjoy, it rebuilds access to the outdoors, and it creates jobs from youth trail-building programs to skilled labor for construction projects. The GAOA is a landmark conservation achievement which was fought for over many years. Every member of the Washington State Congressional delegation (except R-4 Rep. Dan Newhouse) voted for final passage.

Beyond that, special thanks should go to D-6 Rep. Derek Kilmer, who was a lead sponsor of the national park funding element of the bill and to Senator Maria Cantwell for being a tireless champion for the Land and Water Conservation Fund. Please let them know how much we appreciate their efforts and this investment in the future.

**Wildfire Report for the Olympic Peninsula, 2020**

By Tom Hammond

Given the incredibly large and devastating wildfires that burned over five million acres in California, Oregon and Washington in 2020, OPA wishes to provide a brief update on fires that burned across our Olympic Peninsula this fire season and comment on fire events across the western United States.

A dozen or so fires burned on the Peninsula this past summer. Of those, only two grew in size to be of note or require firefighting resources. Thunderstorms on August 16 sparked many of the fires, but nearly all lightning-caused fires were quickly extinguished or reduced by passing rains within a week of ignition. Only the Mount Lena fire persisted. At its apex, it burned only some 20 acres in very steep terrain. It resulted in trail closures in the area, but by any measure it did little damage to forest ecology.

The other fire of note was the East Beach Road fire above Lake Crescent, which was started by humans in mid-July and burned about 84 acres. It was actively fought due to its proximity to developed areas and forced a closure of the East Beach Road for the remainder of the fire season.

The fires on the Peninsula do offer educational opportunities. While some declare that a lack of “forest management” (read: logging) has led to the out-sized fires burning throughout California, it should be noted that most of the fires in California started in chaparral and grasslands—not forests.

The fires of Oregon were of such a nature that they were originally designed for. This has happened for millennia.

In many ways, the GAOA is what the doctor ordered for our nation right now. It creates and protects open space for us to enjoy, it rebuilds access to the outdoors, and it creates jobs from youth trail-building programs to skilled labor for construction projects. The GAOA is a landmark conservation achievement which was fought for over many years. Every member of the Washington State Congressional delegation (except R-4 Rep. Dan Newhouse) voted for final passage.

The same proponents of “forest management” also declare that if we had more roads crisscrossing our forests, people would be better able to access and fight fires. One need look no further than our own East Beach Road fire to see that roads provide access to people who start fires. Indeed, according to the U.S. Department of Interior and the Insurance Information Institute, 90% of all wild land fires are caused not by lighting, but by people. Fewer roads mean fewer fires.

It is evident, based on the nine days of air quality in the “Hazardous” category across the area that these fires have global, not regional impacts, as predicted by all legitimate climate models.

OPA extends our sincere sympathy and support to communities across the western United States as they seek to rebuild their lives and livelihoods.
Why they're a problem and what's being done

Invasive non-native plants in the Olympics

By Dan Lieberman

They were the flowers in my mother’s hair in San Francisco in the sixties, the bouquet at my sister’s wedding and even the boutonniere at my wedding. They are naturally beautiful and a joy to behold.

There’s only one problem: they destroy other species and even entire ecosystems. Yes, this is the bitter truth about daisies.

In Olympic and other national parks, ox-eye daisies and dozens of other invasive species, including Himalayan blackberry, reed canary grass, tansy ragwort and many, many others, are wreaking havoc on ecosystems. According to the National Park Service, the proliferation of ox-eye daisies and other invasive plants leads to “a species-poor plant community of use to few wildlife species.”

Daisies are just one species. Countless other plants and animals are disrupting the balance of all our local ecosystems.

Over the past few decades, Hurricane Ridge Interpretive Ranger Janis Burger has led informal efforts to eradicate weeds at and leading up to the Ridge. When I worked as an interpretive ranger at the Ridge with Janis in the early 2000’s I remember pulling many invasive plants from the meadows and roadway. Janis recently updated me, “Canada thistle and St. Johnswort on the upper road seem to have been beaten back,” but “dandelions, ox-eye daisy, some clovers, cheat grass, etc. require constant vigilance as they thrive on the disturbed shoulder and adjacent slopes.”

Fortunately, Olympic National Park has recently brought on an invasive species exterminator-in-chief, Janet Coles. Janet’s and her seasonal crew’s jobs are Sisyphean, as essentially all areas near roads and heavily trafficked trails are overrun with invasive plants. Janet’s goal is “to maintain ecological integrity in the face of wave after wave of exotic invasive plants and animals.”

Because they lack natural checks and balances in the ecosystem and they reproduce by seeds, stems and roots, invasive plants spread and cover the ground in an exponential way. As a result, species that have evolved alongside and rely on the native vegetation often cannot survive.

What can citizens do? Janet shares that park visitors can be part of the solution “by cleaning their shoes, clothes, packs, pets and vehicles before coming into a park or hiking trails.”

She adds, “From a native plant perspective, locals can help by using native species at home, checking the county noxious weed board’s lists, maybe volunteering with them (or the Washington Native Plant Society) and controlling non-natives on their own property.”

It took a bit of a paradigm shift for me, but in recent years I have come to relish tearing up and trashing ivy, herb Robert, Scol’s broom, bull thistle and, best of all, ox daisies. Try it, you too may find killing weeds enjoyable, or at least tolerable. Our local ecosystems will show their thanks through increased biodiversity and true beauty.

Invasive plants from top to bottom: Ox-eye daisy. NPS photo by Mni Harte
Himalayan blackberry has five-petaled flowers and pointed-ovate leaves. NPS photo by Wil Elder
The leaves on this tree-climbing English ivy are five-lobed. NPS Exotic Plant Management Team
Scot’s broom branches showing flowers and three-part leaves. NPS Exotic Plant Management Team

Slab Camp Area, Gray Wolf Ridge in distance, ONF. Photo by John Gussman

It goes without saying that Congress has a lot on its plate this fall, so remind your senators that protection of wilderness and wild healthy rivers is critical to our country’s health and long-term security. Ask them to make sure the Protecting America’s Wilderness Act is included in the final National Defense Appropriations Act.

Sound

Continued from P.1

Silence” spot informally identified as the most naturally quiet place in America due to its moss covered landscape and dense forest. Natural sound levels here can be less than a whisper.

Senator Maria Cantwell and D-2 Rep. Rick Larsen have recently required the Navy to study its jet noise impact across the region with actual measurements rather than modeled projections. In a new study partially funded by OPA and soon to be published in the Journal of Northwest Science, researcher Lauren Kuehne has found that 88% of all aircraft noise over the west side of the Olympics comes from military flights, with their noise two to four times louder than the natural background.

More than 4,400 Growler flights take place each year over the Olympics – an average of more than 16 every weekday– and each one may be heard multiple times as they circle around their training area over the Park. They typically fly out to the Pacific Coast from the Navy’s airbase on Whidbey Island over the north side of the Park and return from multiple locations as far south as Lake Quinault, so few places even in the Park’s wilderness interior are a respite from military jet roar.

With the arrival of 36 more Growlers to enhance the existing fleet of 82 already based on Whidbey Island, expect even more noise soon. The Navy prefers this airspace because it is close to their Whidbey Island base and it’s more lightly populated than urban areas. But what may appear as a convenient blank spot on the map to the Navy is home to the most visited national park in the Northwest. Olympic National Park now sees more than 3 million visitors annually and they come year-round. Also, Olympic National Park is recognized internationally as a World Heritage Site and an International Biosphere Reserve.

The Navy could fly elsewhere and in fact has done so. They have conducted Growler jet training from Mountain Home Air Force Base in southern Idaho and there are many military airbases and airspaces around the country which could be used instead.

It’s time to have the Navy join us in protecting Olympic National Park and its surroundings by moving their Growler jet training to less noise sensitive areas.

Continued from P.1

Wild

was first introduced in Congress in 2012.

Wild Olympics legislation will protect the best of the Peninsula’s remaining ancient forests and free-flowing rivers and salmon streams for future generations. It will designate more than 126,500 acres of Olympic National Forest roadless lands as Wilderness, including some of the most popular hiking areas in the eastern and southern Olympics. It will also protect 19 rivers and their major tributaries as Wild and Scenic Rivers.

Native plants in the Olympics – a problem and what’s being done

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Olympic Park Associates

The value of an organization endeavoring to promote the protection and integrity of a World Heritage Site and its Wilderness is infinite.

Visit us at olympicparkassociates.org

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