

OPA at 75: A Storied Past and Vision for the Future

By Tim McNulty
April 28, 2023

Seventy-five years ago, a group of conservationists came together to defend the recently created Olympic National Park against attempts to remove its magnificent rain-forest valleys. A decade earlier they had succeeded in establishing a large park with some of the most spectacular ancient forests remaining in the U.S. No sooner was the new park signed into law than raids against its forests were mounted. Knowing this would be an ongoing battle, the group incorporated as Olympic Park Associates, now Olympic Park Advocates.

Three-quarters of a century later that same organization continues to defend this world-class park and work for protections for its surrounding ecosystem. Only now, OPA pursues its mission amidst a cavalcade of threats fueled by increasing human demands and a rapidly warming climate.

As we celebrate our 75th year, it's worth reflecting on our legacy of successes. But it's also critical that we face current challenges honestly and refocus on the work that remains to be done.

A Legacy of Success

As a small citizens-based group, OPA not only fought back repeated efforts by timber interests to shrink the park, we added significantly to its outstanding protected areas. We lobbied to add the wild Pacific coastal strip and the Queets River corridor to Olympic. We turned back a highway proposal along the coast with two well-publicized hikes led by then-U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas. We put a stop to destructive salvage logging in the park and sent a timber-oriented superintendent packing.

OPA led the effort to add scenic Shi Shi Beach and Point of the Arches to Olympic and we beat back several dam proposals on East Olympic rivers. Responding to increasing pressure to log Olympic National Forest, OPA and allies secured designation of some 90,000 acres of unprotected wildlands as the Buckhorn, Brothers, Mount Skokomish, Wonder Mountain and Colonel Bob wilderness areas. We also led the effort to secure congressional designation of 95% of Olympic National Park as the Daniel J. Evans Wilderness. OPA helped establish the Olympic Coast National Marine Sanctuary. And we worked with Tribal and conservation partners to pass the Elwha River Restoration Act and lobbied for funding to see both Elwha dams removed and salmon return to the river's free-flowing waters.

We're proud of these and other landmark accomplishments, and we continue to dedicate ourselves to major legislative campaigns. The Wild Olympics Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, which has passed the U.S. House several times, was reintroduced in this Congress in April 2023. But much of our work proceeds quietly and diligently to ensure that day-to-day decision making by government agencies provides maximum protection to the peninsula's invaluable natural resources.

OPA lobbied to ban noisy jet skis from Lake Crescent and we organized public support to influence the park's General Management Plan to recommend wild river protections and no-take intertidal reserves. We urged the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to undertake a feasibility study to reintroduce wolves to the Olympics, and we supported a Park Service and Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife initiative to reintroduce Pacific fishers, the only other mammal species missing from the park. Ten years later we helped fund a supplemental fisher reintroduction to insure genetic resilience. We went to court to successfully block the park from airlifting two preconstructed shelters into remote wilderness meadows. We opposed Navy warfare training over the Olympics. And we advocated for removal of non-native mountain goats from the park and national forest. We also helped fund glacier research, Roosevelt elk research, and martin research in the park and national forest.



Mt. Olympus and Deer ~ John Gussman

A Vision for the Future

As OPA enters a new quarter-century, we are heartened by past accomplishments and we resolve to meet new challenges with the same dogged determination. The reality of climate change adds urgency to our actions. The Olympic ecosystem needs to be bolstered to respond to coming changes. Legacy forests, whether on state or Forest Service lands, should be off-limits to logging and preserved for carbon storage. Threatened and endangered species, such as wild salmon stocks, spotted owls and marbled murrelets, must be restored across the ecosystem. Rare and endemic species should be monitored and their populations enhanced when needed, and critical, willing-seller habitat lands should be added to the park. The Olympics' apex predator, the wolf, should be returned to the park—to strengthen Roosevelt elk herds and to curb coyote predation on endemic Olympic marmots.

The list is daunting. But with continued support and engagement by you, our members, we pledge to meet these challenges. In the meantime, take a moment to celebrate this spectacular place we love—and renew your support for the tenacious, grassroots outfit dedicated to protecting it.