


COLUMBIA

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INSIDE

*Mount Rainier
National Park—
thinking about
wilderness as a
commodity*

WASHINGTON STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Wilderness as a Resource

MOUNT RAINIER NA

BY SARA ALMASY PORTERFIELD

The mountains of the Cascade Range are a dramatic collection of peaks stretching from Mount Lassen in northern California to Mount Baker in Washington. The tallest and most commanding of these peaks is Mount Rainier, elevation 14,411 feet. Visible from the Washington cities of Seattle and Tacoma, Mount Rainier towers above the forested lowlands. Some people never escape the mountain's spell; they have what National Park Service historian Aubrey Haines called "mountain fever," the unshakable desire to climb Mount Rainier, to gain the spiritual refreshment that comes with spending time on its slopes.

Mount Rainier National Park was created on March 2, 1899. Those who believed that the majestic beauty of the mountain rated the highest degree of federal protection available at the time—national park status—had advocated and won support for the idea on a platform of preservationist ideals—solitude, beauty, and the salubrious effects on people's minds and bodies that could be found in pristine, untrammelled wilderness. Preservationists thought nature should exist for its own sake, not simply to support human life, and that open land possessed its own intrinsic value. Conservationists, on the other hand, adhered to a doctrine of the "greatest good for the greatest number," believing that land should be managed as a collection of resources, such as timber or minerals, and that it should be put to use to benefit the American people. While the

modern definitions of preservation and conservation have changed, their differing ideologies still exist.

The establishment of Mount Rainier National Park seemed at first to be a victory for preservationists, but in actuality the park is managed under a conservationist agenda. People's use of the park necessitates a management plan to prevent overuse while preserving the wilderness experience, just as activities such as logging or mining are regulated on other public lands.

Early published accounts universally acknowledge the mountain's beauty and grandeur and echo John Muir's sentiments that wilderness, especially one as magnificent as Mount Rainier, is a place of spiritual inspiration that fosters character development and growth. Without the early and continued local and national interest in the mountain,

it likely would never have received designation as a national park.

Philemon Beecher Van Trump and General Hazard Stevens made the first successful ascent to the summit of Mount Rainier on August 17, 1870. Their climb and the press coverage it received were indicative of 19th-century interest in wilderness adventure. Summiting Rainier was regarded as the "supreme physical challenge in the region" for residents of Northwestern cities such as Tacoma and Seattle; this is indicated by the wealth of local and national press coverage mountaineers were given in such publications as the *Tacoma Daily Ledger*, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, the *Northwest Magazine*, *Harper's Weekly*, *Scribner's Magazine*, and *Overland Monthly* through the end of the 1800s.

Despite having endured great hardship on the mountain—lack of food, a freezing night at the summit, serious injuries—which the papers chronicled in detail, Stevens and Van Trump had come away from their adventure with a profound respect for the mountain's beauty and power. Six years after the climb, Stevens wrote in *Atlantic Monthly* that for days after returning to Olympia he and Van Trump were still caught in the mountain's spell. While "walking along the smooth and level pavements, [they] felt a strong impulse



TIONAL PARK

to step high," as though still on the slopes of the mountain.

According to Van Trump, it was not necessary to climb the mountain to experience its power—one had merely to be in its presence. The dramatic character of what was then thought to be the tallest mountain in the United States would shock visitors into a greater appreciation of their natural surroundings and prompt a desire to preserve some of it.

John Muir's writings began to be popularly published at roughly the same time that Stevens and Van Trump ascended Mount Rainier. The two men's experience—especially Van Trump's—reinforced and supported what Muir wrote about the inspirational power of the wilderness. Van Trump would certainly have agreed with Muir's statement that mountains were "fountains of life," responsible for the physical and spiritual sustenance of civilization.

The popular appeal and wide readership of the accounts by and about climbers on Mount Rainier served to popularize the recreational and spiritual opportunities available in the Puget Sound area. While people of the region may or may not have read John Muir's prose glorifying nature in general and the Sierra Nevada in particular, they would certainly have read the local accounts of their own mountain. The national trend toward an appreciation of wilderness was

bolstered on a local level by the growing popularity of mountaineering.

In 1888, while on a trip through the Pacific Northwest, John Muir climbed Rainier with Van Trump. Muir's ideas about wilderness preservation had preceded him via his friend George Bayley—who had climbed Rainier with Van Trump in 1883—and greatly influenced Van Trump and others who came to believe the mountain's beauty should be federally recognized and preserved. In Muir, Van Trump found a kindred spirit. It can reasonably be concluded that the spark George Bayley struck with the idea of national park status for Mount Rainier was fanned into flame in Van Trump's mind during campfire talks with Muir. In an 1891 article for the *Daily Ledger*, Van Trump first suggested that Mount Rainier be set aside as a national park. His efforts gained strength in the early 1890s, and he spoke and wrote throughout the Northwest as an advocate for the mountain's preservation.

In 1893, shortly after passage of the Forest Reserve Act and the establishment of the Pacific Forest Reserve, which encompassed Mount Rainier, Van Trump gave a speech entitled "Up the Mountain High" to a joint meeting of the Academy of Science and the newly formed Washington Alpine Club. In his speech, reprinted in

a local paper, Van Trump discussed the "Different Lines of Ascent, and Dangers and Pleasures of Climbing." This was printed under a subheading that declared the "Lives of Everyone Would Be Made Happier and More Healthful by a Visit" to Mount Rainier. After a lengthy discourse on the technical aspects of the mountain, Van Trump ended his speech with a short section entitled "As a Health Resort," which addressed the benefits of Mount Rainier to the visitor's physical well-being. Mount Rainier "as a health resort" would logically need a management plan in order to administer to the needs of both the wilderness and the visitor. The budding science of forestry could not attend to this because it centered around the extraction of the timber and other resources a forest reserve possessed. Setting aside the land as a national park, however—as had been done with Yellowstone in 1872 and Yosemite in 1890—would ensure preservation of the wilderness in its natural state while allowing for visitation.

Mountaineers had found in the heights and parks of Mount Rainier what Ralph Waldo Emerson called the "oversoul," the spiritual glory of wilderness that had made John Muir a popular figure. These men and their philosophies had primed Americans to receive and embrace the physical manifestation of the intellectual thought they had



been reading about and discussing. The mountain had become a symbol of the grandeur and beauty of the American wilderness and was therefore believed to be worthy of preservation as a national park, just as Muir's beloved Yosemite had become first a national symbol and subsequently a national park.

When Mount Rainier was declared a national park in 1899, there was no National Park Service, nor would there be for another 17 years. Just what did "national park" designation mean? Mount Rainier National Park personnel created their own administrative system, one that sought to employ a utilitarian calculation. While one of the main goals was to preserve wilderness, it was done in a way that was profitable for both the concessionaires of the park and its visitors, turning Mount Rainier into a commodity. The overarching goal of the national park was to draw attention to the beauty

and grandeur of Mount Rainier, which, in turn, attracted more visitors, resulting in increased use of the land.

The first influx of visitors came looking for the promised "product"—the postcard scenery and fresh air that was the subject of advertisements and national park literature. Wilderness was protected because it was what the people wanted, and they were willing to pay for the intangible experiences they had been promised. The park was therefore forced to operate under a conservationist approach and cater to the demands of its visitors. It became the goal of the park's management, therefore, to give visitors the comfort and experience they desired while protecting the watershed and wilderness—and turning a profit. The national park could not be sustained if it was not profitable.

The park was developed with an eye toward private, profit-seeking benefit. Transportation to the mountain was an issue even before it became a national park, and in 1893 James Longmire took it upon himself to construct a road from present-day Ashford to his property, which lay six miles inside the park. This was the only road into the park until various interests such as mountaineering clubs, automobile hobbyists, and investment companies successfully lobbied for a public road, which was built in 1903–04. The road mimicked Longmire's route from Ashford, which was directly connected to Tacoma, thus creating easy access for citizens of the growing urban centers on Puget Sound.

James Longmire also had a hand in the initial accommodations inside the national park. He and his family owned and operated the Longmire Springs Hotel, known for its "medical springs." The Longmire Hotel existed before the national park and continued to be managed by the family until 1920 when the Rainier National Park Company purchased the hotel. The second hotel constructed in the park, also located at Longmire, was the National Park Inn, completed in 1906. This hotel, run by the Tacoma Eastern Railroad

ABOVE: Mount Rainier's snowy heights have been infecting the adventuresome with "mountain fever" for decades, inspiring in them a desire to preserve and protect such wilderness areas.

LEFT: Prior to its designation as a national park, Mount Rainier formed part of the Pacific Forest Reserve.



Commodifying the wilderness experience, something supposedly removed from the commercialism of everyday life, is inescapable.

Company, was decidedly more upscale than the rustic Longmire Springs Hotel. These two early establishments represent the desire of private interests, whether individual or corporate, to use the draw of the wilderness for profit.

The idea of the national park attracted those who likely would not otherwise have been interested in the mountain. National park designation denoted some degree of cultural amenity present within the park's boundaries. As a place belonging to the people, the park must, above all, be accessible—it was the people's right to see their America and their cultural heritage. These expectations created a demand for an infrastructure. Since there was no National Park Service to oversee this at the time, the need was met by profit-seeking private interests who used the allure of the wilderness and the mountain to entice visitors.

Although the people demanded comfortable accommodations, they still sought the wilderness experience and spiritual discovery of a pristine backcountry. However, all those who chose to camp in a place such as Paradise—one of the first established campsites on the mountain—or spend the day hiking and return to the National Park Inn at night inevitably left their mark upon the landscape. Wanton cutting of trees for tent poles and the “social trails” that evolved from many people wandering through the landscape made it clear that “the camping public, no matter how well-intentioned, needed direction from park rangers or else it would unwittingly destroy the natural conditions that the park was intended to preserve,” wrote environmental historian Theodore Catton in *Mount Rainier: Wonderland*. In short, the park was in danger of being loved to death.

By the beginning of the 20th century wilderness was increasingly becoming a resource in its own right. If the remaining open space in America was to be seen as a collection of resources, which lands could be considered wilderness resources? Historian Alfred Runte, in his

book *National Parks: The American Experience*, put forth the “worthless lands” philosophy, declaring that national parks are simply land which is good for nothing other than to look at. The government and private interests can make money off this land because people are willing to pay for their belief in the spiritual power of nature. Dramatic vistas, such as the Grand Canyon, garner support from the public because they are charismatic and alluring; they are completely unique and unlike the day-to-day landscape of a tree-lined suburban street. These places are both uneconomical for development and appealing to people for their distinctiveness.

For example, suppose Mount Rainier and a tract of virgin forest in the Cascade foothills are both under consideration for national park status. Mount Rainier obviously holds greater sway over the hearts and minds of those living in the region. The majority of the public would almost certainly feel a greater attraction to the mountain for its dramatic and inescapable presence while the trees in the tract of virgin forest may seem like a plentiful resource. A hemlock or a western red cedar found in an old-growth forest may grow in a city dweller's backyard, but there is only one Mount Rainier. Alfred Runte put it his way: “Mount Rainier itself can be interpreted as an example of scenic preservation designed to the specifications of big business and frontier individualism, not the needs of the environment.” The park was formed with the idea that the preservation of wilderness would, by default, protect the valuable watershed originating on the mountain, while the Mount Rainier National Park Act left provision for mining operations should mineral deposits be discovered within the park.

Commodifying the wilderness experience, something supposedly removed

from the commercialism of everyday life, is inescapable for two reasons. First of all, without a management program, parks would be threatened with overuse by enthusiastic tourists. Park visitors and administrators recognized this shortly after the park was established, and it is a problem that plagues parks to this day. For example, Zion National Park in southwestern Utah implemented a



Hazard Stevens (left) and P. B. Van Trump (below) summited Mount Rainier in 1870, after which Van Trump became a vocal supporter of national park status for the mountain wilderness.

Washington State Historical Society, #2005.0.137



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To allow wilderness to exist for its own sake would mean setting aside a reserve of land closed to all human intervention.

shuttle system in 2002 that replaced personal automobile traffic in the park. Park service literature states that the system was “established to eliminate traffic and parking problems, protect vegetation, and restore tranquility to Zion Canyon.” The shuttle runs in the peak visitation season, between March and October. Without management such as this Zion would be a hive of smog, automobile noise, and loud, crowded parking lots. Management programs reduce and/or concentrate the human impact on the park in order to preserve its wilderness aspects and heighten the visitor’s experience, thereby preserving the commodity.

The second reason wilderness cannot avoid being treated as a commodity is simply because humans have created the construct of “wilderness.” It is something exotic and therefore appealing, and the mystique of outdoor life adds to its allure. People want to experience what John Muir and P. B. Van Trump wrote about. Wilderness does not exist for its own sake but for the selfish reason that humans want to get something from it, even though that “something” is intangible. The intangible can still be coveted, and therefore marketed.

People will come to the wilderness because they seek something intimate in its very remoteness, therefore increasing the usage of an area and eventually necessitating a management plan under a conservationist philosophy.

If wilderness were not administered as a commodity, if it were left alone without a management plan, it would simply be a block of land as locked up as land used for resource extraction. To allow wilderness to exist for its own sake would mean setting aside a reserve of land closed to all human intervention. Regardless of its scenic wonders or other resources, it would instead be completely untouchable. There are arguments for such reserves that could be made solely on behalf of maintaining healthy ecosystems, air, and water, but the purity of a wilderness experience would not be possible in such a reserve.

Our land reserves that come closest to this idea are those designated as wilderness areas, sanctioned by the Wilderness Act of 1964. These reserves are roadless areas of at least 5,000 contiguous acres where the use of machines—including bicycles or power tools—is not allowed and where “the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not

remain.” Even though people are visitors to these areas and the land is therefore supposedly “untrammelled,” there is still an extensive trail maintenance system, complete with signs and established campsites, that leaves no doubt humans have been there. Wilderness areas have their own administrative structures that oversee trail maintenance and management and send out park rangers to patrol the public’s use of the environment.

Thus, conservation and a program of resource management prevail in the United States. The public’s love of wilderness and the scenic wonders of the nation necessitates management; otherwise, the open land of the country would be in danger of destruction through enthusiastic appreciation. While many environmentalists may disagree, managing with the goal of the “greatest good for the greatest number” is not a negative philosophy and can in fact move us toward a more holistic view of wilderness. Instead of being seen as opposing forces, one for the virtuous fight to maintain untrammelled land (preservation), the other for resource management (conservation), the two can be used in conjunction to form a complementary set of land use principles.

Conservation as an overarching management philosophy can include preservation. Preservationist ideals are just one of the many interests vying for attention, alongside uses such as resource extraction (mining, logging, etc.), public health (clean air and water), healthy ecosystems (wildlife preservation), and jobs created by national parks and forests and neighboring communities. All of these uses are necessary, and they are all resources we rely on for our continued existence. This is not to suggest these resources are being used in a healthy, balanced manner at the present, but by reevaluating our



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This 1925 view of Paradise Valley campground gives some intimation of the park’s popularity. Without some kind of management plan, Mount Rainier would run the risk of being damaged by overuse.

relationship to the natural world and adopting a broader view that gives balanced weight to all needs, we can move toward a more sustainable use of the land.

By extending our stewardship beyond wilderness areas and national parks to include our everyday environments as places where nature can be experienced, we can assure that the values associated with wilderness are not only to be found in the most spectacular and dramatic places—they can also be found in the beauty of fall colors among the trees on a city street or the first flowers to bloom in a suburban yard in the spring.

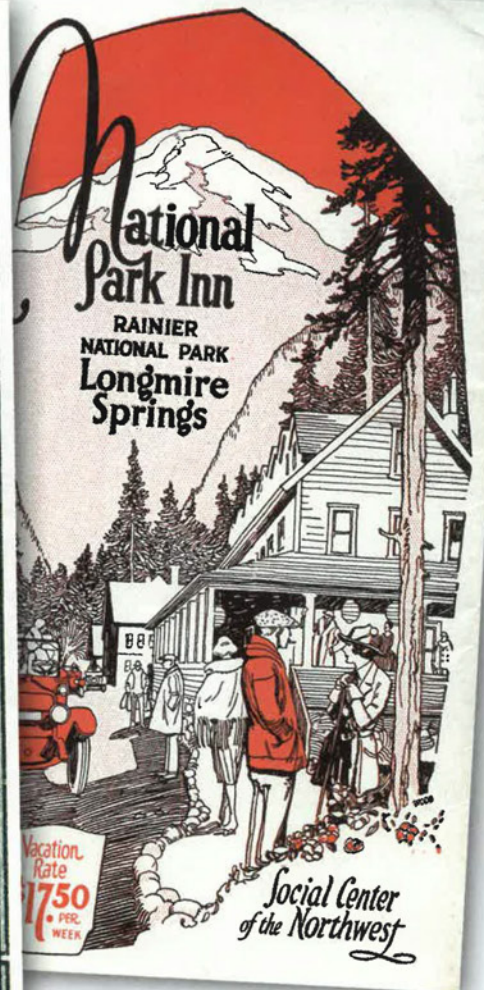
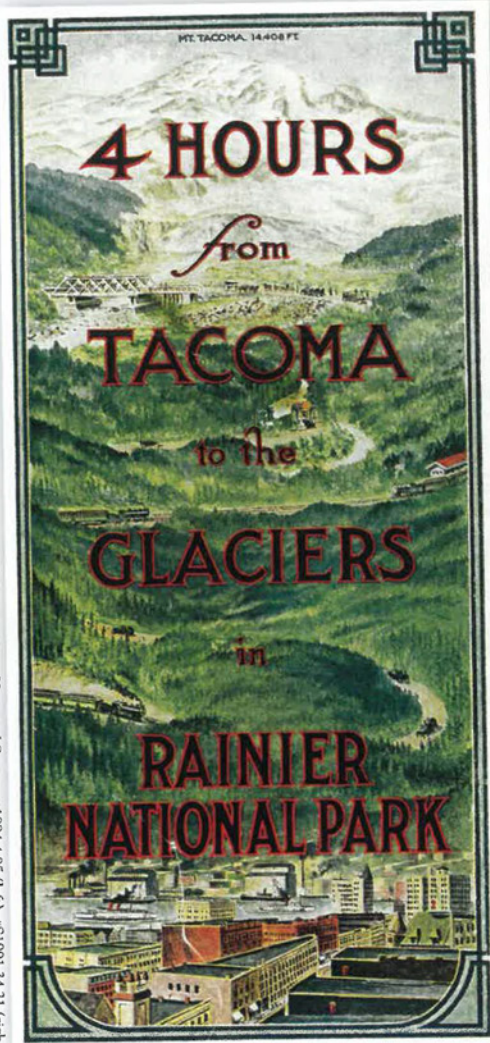
The integration of these “natural values” into our everyday lives would lead to a greater sense of responsibility to the land that surrounds us, not just to the pristine areas. As environmental historian William Cronon writes,

Idealizing a distant wilderness too often means not idealizing the environment in which we actually live, the landscape that for better or worse we call home. Most of our most serious environmental problems start right here, at home, and if we are to solve those problems, we need an environmental ethic that will tell us as much about using nature as about not using it. The wilderness dualism tends to cast any use as abuse, and thereby denies us a middle ground in which responsible use and non-use might attain some kind of balanced, sustainable relationship.

This approach would mean the containment of sprawl and an inclusion of the natural world into new development. If, on the other hand, we maintain the same dualism present today, a clear view of Mount Rainier from the shoulders of nearby Mount Adams may one day be impossible because the less dramatic land in between will have turned into strip malls and housing developments. Wilderness is not possible in isolated blocks.

This debate is just as important and relevant today as when President McKinley’s signature established Mount

Washington State Historical Society: #1994.4.85 (left), #S1991.134.21 (right)



A 1915 brochure (left) and a 1925 brochure (right) for Rainier National Park. Transportation improvements and the proximity of Mount Rainier to western Washington urban centers made the national park a popular wilderness destination for city dwellers. Park concessionaires lost no opportunity to promote it.

Rainier as a national park. The Obama administration is currently considering the reinstatement of President Clinton’s Roadless Area Conservation Rule, a 2001 law that would bar development such as logging, mining, and road construction on 58.5 million acres of public land. This rule has consistently been met with enthusiastic and broad-based support throughout the country; despite this support, the Bush administration repealed the rule immediately after taking office in order to allow logging, mining, and other industrial interests to challenge the rule in court. In May 2009, Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack announced that any new development in the areas under consideration in the rule would require his personal approval, providing interim protection for the nearly 60 million acres until the issue is officially ruled on.

If we can rethink our relationship to wilderness, the spiritual, physical,

and aesthetic value of an outdoor, active life as recognized by P. B. Van Trump and John Muir, among others, will not cease to exist but rather become more pervasive. Dramatic vistas will not cease to amaze or inspire, but they will no longer seem to exclude humans. Instead, we will belong to Mount Rainier as we take in the beauty of a subalpine meadow resplendent with wildflowers, the serenity in the whipping wind at the summit, or the sunset’s last light as it ignites the glaciers into flame. 🏔️

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COVER: Mount Rainier, oil on canvas, painting by Lionel E. Salmon, 1938. There is something magical about a mountain meadow beneath a snow-capped peak that makes us want to preserve such a place for posterity. Mount Rainier National Park was created in 1899 for that very reason, but at times the mountain has been at risk of being loved to death. See related story beginning on page 20. (Washington State Historical Society, #1990.0.103)