



Meadow Restoration, Mount Rainier National Park *Bob and Ira Spring*

VIP's View of the New Management Plan At Mount Rainier

Gerald J. Sabel

Seventy-five years have passed since the establishment of Mount Rainier National Park. During that time our world has changed, we have changed and our park has changed. Visitors have increased from 500 in 1899 to approximately 2,000,000 in 1973. People-pressure is causing severe damage to the park back-country, especially the fragile high meadows.

To insure the best and most enjoyable experience for the largest possible number of people consistent with minimizing damage to the park, a new management plan was instituted at Mount Rainier in 1973. As a VIP I was able to observe first-hand the way in which this new plan operated.

VIPs—VOLUNTEERS IN PARKS—have been used successfully at Mount Rainier and in other national parks for several years. VIPs are qualified volunteers who serve without pay except for reimbursement of incidental expenses and uniforms. They serve in fields such as interpretation of the natural and human history of an area, environmental study and resource management. VIPs must meet the same standards as seasonal employees.

During 1973 I worked as a VIP on weekends and for three weeks of my vacation. I was able to observe the operation of the back-country management plan from its inception on July first until the snow closed the back-country to normal use.

In the summer of 1972 Mount Rainier management personnel began exploring methods to reduce the problems of over-use of back-country areas. By the spring of 1973 a plan was drafted. Users, representatives of outdoor clubs and interested individuals were asked for their opinions. Detailed explanations were released to the press so that the public would be aware of proposed changes in back-country management policies.

Starting July 1, 1973, visitors to Mount Rainier National Park were handed a statement which explained that new policies were being implemented affecting all back-country hikers and climbers.

The park is divided into zones and an upper limit is set for the

number of people in any zone at one time. Permits are required for all campsites and prior reservations are recommended.

Back-country users have not been forced to comply with the new policy and no citations have been issued for non-compliance. Warnings can be issued at the discretion of a ranger if circumstances warrant.

Back-country campsites were established throughout the park. Some campsites were eliminated from high parks and relocated elsewhere. A number of the old trail shelters, including Van Trump, Indian Henry, Mystic Lake, Lake James and Berkeley Park, have been removed. It is felt shelters tend to concentrate people to the detriment of the areas. Most were built in the 1930s and were in varying stages of deterioration. Vandalism was an extensive problem and littering was more prevalent than in camps without shelters.

I was based at White River on the east side of the park and worked at most of the areas administered from this station. I found Summerland the most interesting. Typical of over-used park areas, Summerland is located at timberline in the Hudsonian Zone at about 5,400 feet. The high alpine meadows terminate here into rock cliffs and rock debris left by earlier glaciers. The meadows are snow-free for only a few months a year, making them extremely fragile.

Summerland is reached by a 4.2-mile hike on the Wonderland Trail and is probably one of the most popular areas at Mount Rainier. A good stone shelter is located among the trees near the upper end of the meadows. Fire rings, unauthorized trails and campsites were scattered throughout the meadows.

During the summer a tremendous effort was made to restore Summerland to its natural state. A campsite area was established along a small ridge just east of the shelter. Five campsites were built, each out of sight of the others. All have excellent views of the mountain and cannot be seen from the large meadows. The shelter is the sixth site and is used for group camping. Restoration of the meadows required digging out the old campsites and making provision for reseeded. All trails in the area with the exception of the Wonderland Trail were dug up and also reseeded. Signs were posted explaining the importance of staying on the trail.

The hikers and campers I talked with in the back country approved of the plan if it was properly explained to them. Sometimes, though, a person would become upset and respond with, "I've been hiking around here for twenty years and I'll camp and build a fire wherever I

like. Nobody's going to tell me what I can and can't do." This type of response is a rare exception. The majority of the back-country users are great!

The reservation system worked much better than expected. There were occasional errors but the biggest problem was failure of people to cancel reservations when their plans changed. There were a number of Saturday nights at Summerland when two campsites were empty.

I learned a lot about people in the back country. An amazing thing is the large number of people who do not understand signs. We were restoring a meadow adjoining the Wonderland Trail at Summerland. Large signs were posted "MEADOW RESTORATION — STAY ON TRAIL". Numerous times people would stop, look at the sign, walk around it, start across the freshly spaded meadow. When I asked them if they had read the sign, the answer was always "yes". When I asked, "What did it say?" they would look blank and reply they didn't remember. I would walk back to the sign with them; they would be surprised at what it said, apologize and walk off down the trail.

Although total numbers of VIPs are quite small, young people as well as adults are involved. Two youngsters — my eldest son, Stephen, and Don Graham — were based at White River Ranger Station. They had worked in the park for several years as part of the Boy Scout program. Before they were 17 years old they understood park methods of operation, work requirements, etc., and were brought into the VIP program.

Assigned to assist the back-country ranger they helped build campsites, did meadow restoration and the like. They received training in fire fighting, first aid and search and rescue techniques, and put their training to use helping fight fires and in searches.

Park personnel did a fine job of making sure the assigned tasks were meaningful, that they understood what they were doing and why. By summer's end both had spent many hours digging, planting and hauling. They knew what it takes to restore a meadow damaged by mis-use and were not in the least reticent about passing on the information to visitors who ignored park regulations.

Management personnel at Mount Rainier were pleased with the results of the first season's use of the back-country plan. This coming season additional changes will be made to improve the reservation system. Additional back-country campsites are planned with preparations for an even greater number of visitors to the park.

Each person will come to be enriched in some way by their visit to "The Mountain". I wonder how it will look 75 years from now?

**Back-Country Management Policy
Mount Rainier National Park
1973**

Many areas of the backcountry in Mount Rainier National Park have suffered in past years from overuse and overcrowding. To restore these areas and to prevent further deterioration, new policies are being implemented for all backcountry hikers and mountain climbers.

All hikers who plan to make overnight trips into the backcountry of Mount Rainier are required to have a backcountry use permit. These permits can be obtained from any ranger station in the park or in advance from park headquarters at Longmire. To get a reservation for a backcountry trip, write to the park Superintendent stating your name and address, the number of people that will be in your party, the sites you wish and the dates that you will be camping at each site. If spaces are available, they will be reserved for you and you will receive a notice informing you to pick up your permit at the ranger station nearest to the starting point of your trip.

For management purposes, the park is divided into three zones. The trail zone includes all the trails in the park. Camp areas existing now along the trails, and new areas which are proposed, have only a certain number of designated sites. Some camp areas in fragile subalpine meadows are closed in order to restore them to their natural conditions. New campsites will be constructed in more durable areas near these locations to prevent overcrowding and damage to the environment. Wood fires are permitted only in certain designated camp areas. Hikers are reminded that only dead and downed wood may be collected and that fires may be built in existing fireplaces only.

The climbing zone, in general, includes all areas above 7000' elevation. Camp Muir and Camp Schurman are the only established camp areas in this zone; however, all other routes are open to two parties per night on the south side of the mountain and one party per night on the north side. Camp Muir is limited to 72 climbers and Camp Schurman to 35 climbers per night.

The cross-country zone includes all areas which are below 7000' and are at least ½ mile from trails, roads, or other development. A small number of permits will be issued to hikers wishing to travel cross-country and camp away from developed areas. Because so many parts of Mount Rainier are extremely delicate, cross-country hikers are urged to travel and camp in such a way as to have a minimal impact on the land. No open fires are allowed in the cross-

country zone. Cross-country permits may be requested by mail or by phone in advance of the date the backcountry trip is to begin.

Party sizes are limited by the number of sites available in a camp area. Four persons (or one immediate family) are considered the maximum number of persons occupying one site. Thus, if eight people are travelling together, they will only be able to camp in locations where two sites are available. Many camp areas will have special group sites which can accommodate twelve hikers, which is the maximum number permissible in an organized group.

Seventy miles of the more durable trails in the park are open to horse use. There will be five special horse camps allowing either six or twelve head of stock per camp.



Cascade Meadow Jean Balter