

North Cascades

Ross Lake and Lake Chelan

North Cascades National Park
Ross Lake National Recreation Area
Lake Chelan National Recreation Area
U.S. Department of the Interior

Native People



Indigenous People

Native people have lived along the Skagit River for many centuries. Many different bands have traditionally occupied the Skagit valley. Today these bands are represented by the Upper Skagits, the Sauk and Suiattle tribes, and the Swinomish. Archeologists have found evidence that the Upper Skagit band lived in the area now called Ross Lake National Recreation Area at least 8,000 years ago.

The archeology of this area tells the story of a people who lived from the land through fishing, hunting, and gathering. The Newhalem area is a known fishing and hunting area as well as the head of canoe travel on the Skagit River. The name "Newhalem" is a corrupted Lushootseed word for "place where the goats are snared." (Lushootseed is the language of the native people around Puget Sound.) In the winter, you can often find the mountain goat on the slopes visible from near the North Cascades Visitor Center near Newhalem. The mountain goat provided wool which was used to make clothing and blankets. Newhalem was also a place for salmon fishing. It is evident each autumn, when the salmon are spawning, why the Upper Skagits chose this area to fish. The archeology that has been done in the North Cascades National Park so far has only scratched the surface of the story of these ancestors.

North Cascades tribal use

Newhalem is only one place that has been traditionally used. Many of the mountains, rivers, and even glaciers around the park still bear the names given by the native people. There were primarily four bands that occupied North Cascades National Park: the Upper Skagit, the Chilliwack, the Nlaka'pamux (Lower Thompson), and the Chelan. There were no absolute boundaries for the bands, but the tribal boundaries did overlap and much trade occurred between tribes. The Upper Skagit people occupied the area along the Skagit River from Diablo all the way down to its mouth. Today's Ross Lake was once the domain of the Nlaka'pamux (Lower Thompson) people. The northern section of the national park around Mt. Baker was used by the Chilliwack tribe. The area around what is now the Lake Chelan National Recreation Area was occupied, as the name suggests, by the Chelan people. Recent evidence suggests that other bands probably used the North Cascades: the Nooksack, Similkameen, Stillaguamish, Methow, and Entiat bands.

Links With The Past

Places around the park still bear the ancient names given to them by the native people; for example Sahale, Nooksack, Shuksan, Nohokomeen, Hozomeen, and Stehekin. The Chelan tribe has left some special markings on the cliffs around Lake Chelan known as pictographs. These drawings made with red ocher, a natural form of iron oxide used as a pigment, are a continuing link with the past. A replicated panel of one of the Lake Chelan pictographs can be seen in the North Cascades Visitor Center at Newhalem. The exhibits there display some examples of stone tools and a piece of ocher used by native people of the North Cascades.

Native People Today

Native people are very much a part of the Skagit area community. The Upper Skagit Tribal Center is located near Sedro-Woolley, and others make their homes in the up-river areas. The Chilliwack and Nlaka'pamux (Lower Thompson) people continue to live in what is now British Columbia, and some are part of the Stolo Nation. The Chelan tribe is part of the Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation. The native people today continue to have a strong tie to their cultural traditions. It is by preserving these traditions and stories that the people continue to survive. Some tribal members still pursue careers in the traditional hunting, gathering, and fishing occupations. Others are artists, lawyers, scientists, clergymen, etc.

Also today, native people carry on traditional ceremonial practices in the North Cascades, and for this purpose seek pristine ecosystem characteristics, such as are found in the park's wilderness. Increasingly in today's world, the lands are shrinking in size where old-growth cedar and raven ruled. This has affected the traditional practices of native people throughout the Pacific Northwest.

How to Learn More

As you explore the North Cascades, remember the ancestors who walked in this area before you and respect their memory. If you would like to know more about the Native American people, please ask a ranger at the Visitor Center front desk to find reading materials and information about classes on subjects ranging from basket weaving to archeology available through the North Cascades Institute.

If you would like to read more about the native people, here are a few good sources: June McCormick Collins. Valley of the Spirits: The Upper Skagit Indians of Western Washington.

University of Washington Press, Seattle. 1980.

Erna Gunther, Ethnobotany of Western Washington: The Knowledge and Use of Indigenous Plants by Native Americans. University of Washington Press, Seattle. 1995.

Vi Hilbert. Haboo. University of Washington Press, Seattle. 1993.

Ruth Kirk and Richard D. Daugherty. Exploring Washington Archeology. University of Washington Press, 1978.

Robert Ruby and John A. Brown. A Guide to the Indian Tribes of the Pacific Northwest. University of Oklahoma Press, Norman. 1992.

Hilary Stewart. Indian Artifacts of the Pacific Northwest. University of Washington Press, 1977.



"You must teach your children that the ground beneath their feet is the ashes of our grandfathers. So that they will respect the land, tell your children that the earth is rich with the lives of our kin.... All things are connected."
attributed to Chief Seattle