

STEPHEN MATHER WILDERNESS

in North Cascades National Park

North Cascades National Park, established in 1968, has always been a wild land--with its rugged peaks, magnificent watersheds, and ancient forest. The 1964 Wilderness Act provided for inclusion of National Park lands in the Wilderness Preservation System. Ideals preserving wilderness values were strongly supported in enabling legislation for both the National Park Service and the North Cascades National Park Service Complex.

The 100th Congress passed the Washington Wilderness Park Act (S.2165) in 1988. This bill designated 634,614 acres of wilderness in the North Cascades (93% of the total Park Service Complex) as the Stephen Mather Wilderness. Though park visitors noticed no change in the National Park Service administration of the Park Service Complex, including North Cascades National Park, Ross Lake National Recreation Area, and Lake Chelan National Recreation Area, this act gave the park's wilderness management policies the strength of law.

Questions and Answers

What is Wilderness?

As defined in the 1964 Wilderness Act, "A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." An area of wilderness retains its primeval character without permanent improvements or human habitation. By law, wilderness is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and 1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature; 2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive type of recreation; 3) has at least 5,000 acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; 4) and may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.

Who was Stephen Mather? Why was this wilderness named after him?

Stephen Mather was the first director and 'founding father' of the National Park Service. During the early 1900s he became a wealthy self-made businessman. He enjoyed visiting parks and mountaineering but complained to the Secretary of the Interior that the parks were poorly managed. Mather's complaint brought a quick reply: "Dear Steve, If you don't like the way the national parks are being run, come down to Washington and run them yourself." So Mather did! In January 1915, Mather became assistant to the Secretary of the Interior in charge of national parks.

Mather immediately took on the task of promoting the establishment of an agency to manage the National Parks. His campaign took him on travels of more than 30,000 miles. Mather's enthusiasm and charm along with his talent for quick action impressed Washington politicians. On August 25, 1916, the National Park Service Act was passed and signed into law by President Woodrow Wilson.

Mather's contribution to the National Park Service is honored with the designation of the Stephen Mather Wilderness in the North Cascades.

How the Wilderness legislation affects...

Potential Wilderness: 5,226 acres of "potential wilderness" have been designated by this bill. These are lands that have wilderness character but have some encumbrance that precluded their designation in 1988. Examples include patented mining claims or potential hydroelectric development. If these encumbrances are removed, the Secretary of the Interior may designate the areas as wilderness.

Mining and Mineral Leasing: North Cascades National Park has always been closed to mineral entry except on patented claims. The 1988 Wilderness legislation also closed Ross Lake National Recreation Area. Lake Chelan National Recreation Area is closed to all forms of mineral entry except for the sale of sand, rock, and gravel to Stehekin residents, which will occur outside wilderness boundaries only.

Logging and Renewable Resource Use: Logging has never been allowed in the National Park. Utilization of certain natural resources may continue in Lake Chelan National Recreation Area if these activities are "compatible with, or do not impair public recreation and conservation of the scenic, historic, or other values contributing to public enjoyment." Within the Ross Lake National Recreation Area removal and disposal of trees within power line rights-of-way are permitted "as necessary to protect transmission lines, towers and equipment." All of these areas lie outside wilderness boundaries.

Hydroelectric Development: Dams are prohibited in the Stephen Mather Wilderness. Areas which would be affected by licensed hydroelectric projects are not included within Park or Wilderness boundaries.

Buildings: A few historic structures within the wilderness, remain and are listed as National Historic Structures (I.E. Lookouts).

Administrative Use: The Park Service will continue to manage the area in concert with the definition and spirit of wilderness values such as quiet, solitude, and use of minimum tools to accomplish trail work. The Wilderness Management Plan adopted strategies to minimize human impact to the wilderness resources. The specifics of how wilderness is managed can be found in the Wilderness Management Plan.