

LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION

The North Cascades

NATIONAL PARK COMPLEX

A Wild Land Right Under Our Noses

W

hen trappers, miners, and loggers first ventured into the North Cascades in the mid-1800s, they found a land serrated with peaks, shrouded in forests, and alive with bears, wolves, and birds of prey. Waterfalls roared down cliffs, and more than 300 glaciers crushed through the valleys. It was a wild and impenetrable region, and it scared many settlers off to find fortune elsewhere.

The North Cascades is a rarity. It is one of the largest intact forests left in the continental U.S. and one of the largest roadless areas near a major city.

“No where do the mountain masses and peaks present such strange, fantastic dauntless and startling outlines as here,” wrote Henry Custer in 1858.

One of the first white men to encounter the mountain range, Custer said it “must be seen, it cannot be described.” »

Mountain Goat © Shadoflamex/Dreamstime

Mountain Landscape © Jersan98115 / Dreamstime

A Threatened Landscape

Incredibly, not much has changed in this northwestern corner of Washington. Human settlements, such as Seattle, about 100 miles southwest, have mushroomed around the rugged mountain range, but much of it looks precisely as it did when Custer arrived more than 150 years ago. That is thanks largely to a ruggedness that isolates it from human travelers, and to visionary conservationists who established the 684,000-acre North Cascades National Park Complex, which includes the North Cascades National Park, Ross Lake National Recreation Area, and Lake Chelan National Recreation Area.

More than 90 percent of the complex is wilderness. Mountains rise as much as 9,000 vertical feet from valley to peak, creating a dazzling array of habitats. Some 1,600 plants thrive here, and scientists believe more species, some currently unknown to humankind, find refuge in the park's untold corners. One of the last populations of American grizzly bears outside of Alaska and the Rockies roam these forests as well as wolverines, wolves, mountain lions, and lynx. For the few visitors, it's not uncommon to spot bald eagles, northern spotted owls, endangered bats, and dozens of species of migratory birds.

Percentage of the park complex that is wilderness:

90%



North Cascades NP © Ethan Welty

Though the North Cascades National Park Complex may seem vast and wild, it is unnervingly vulnerable to threats. Of major concern are the effects of climate change that have already hit the park. In 2006 and 2007, unseasonable and catastrophic storms tore through the mountains, obliterating some of the park's few access roads and a campground in a matter of hours.

Glaciers have started to melt, and permanent snowfields have shrunk. Pernicious invasive species, like knapweed and reed canary grass, have spread like viruses across park borders, laying waste to rare and fragile native plants, and pests like pine bark beetles have started to infiltrate the forests.

Meanwhile, population growth and development outside of park borders threatens to shrink habitat for the park's wide-roaming animals, such as deer, wolverines, and bears, which pay no heed to invisible human borders.

Even locals are unaware of the threats to the park, in part because many haven't witnessed its beauty and value themselves. Though the park's ruggedness has preserved it, it has also insulated it from humans. And much of the limited services for visitors, such as roads and trails, are in disrepair.

"Already, North Cascades is one of the least visited national parks," says Sean Smith, policy director in NPCA's Northwest Regional Office. "If people don't experience these places and make an emotional connection to them, they won't know or care about them—or have a desire to preserve them." »

Groundbreaking Solutions

Big problems require far-reaching solutions. Preserving the North Cascades National Park Complex will require protecting the entire ecosystem—a 3.5-million acre patchwork of Forest Service, National Park Service, state, and private lands that trace the ragged spine of the range.

In the past, agencies such as the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service have worked in vacuums, rarely collaborating on projects beyond fighting fires. But the unforeseen, large-scale, and fast-moving threats of climate change, such as unpredictable storms, will require these agencies to work quickly and cooperatively. Connecting the disparate land agencies of northwest Washington into one management powerhouse is a task no independent organization has tackled—until now.

In 2012, NPCA brought together representatives from both the National Park Service and the Forest Service, forming an unprecedented alliance: the North Cascades Landscape Management Collaborative. Through the new collaborative, the agencies will perform cooperative projects that will help preserve the entire ecosystem, starting with comprehensive studies of sensitive wildlife like wolverines and critical shared trail and road repairs.

A Brighter Future

Over the coming months and years, NPCA expects to strengthen the collaboration with representatives from other agencies, such as the Washington Department of Transportation and local county governments.

NPCA's long-term goal is increased land protections, such as new wilderness areas, new Wild and Scenic River designations, and new national recreation areas. The result of these collaborative conservation efforts will have a ripple effect, establishing not only a park that is healthy and resilient in the face of climate change, but a whole ecosystem. »

Wolverines

Little is known about elusive and solitary wolverines, but this much is true: They are spectacular predators. Even though it's no bigger than a border collie, an individual can roam up to 15 miles in a day and take down animals more than three times its size. Wolverine are particularly susceptible to the effects of climate change because they require snowy habitats and lots of room to roam. There are only about 300 left in the U.S., and the North Cascades is one of their last refuges.



North Cascades NP © Ethan Welty

Wolverine © Lukysluky/Dreamstime

