



# Park on the Edge

FUNDING SHORTFALLS  
AT OLYMPIC NATIONAL PARK

# Table of Contents

---

- 4 Executive Summary
- 6 Introduction
- 10 Findings
- 12 Case Studies
- 14 *Elwha River*
- 20 *Wilderness Coast*
- 24 *Hoh Rainforest*
- 28 *Hurricane Ridge*
- 32 Conclusion



Kayaker explores  
newly free-flowing  
Elwha River.  
© John Gussman

ON THE COVER:  
Pacific Coast trails in  
disrepair at Olympic  
National Park.  
© Braeden van Deynze/  
NPCA

ON THE BACK COVER:  
Rocks along Olympic  
National Park's coast.  
© Loren Klein

*Dedication: To the employees of the National Park Service, their partners, and their volunteers who strive to provide the best visitor experience and resource protection possible for our national parks, "America's best idea."*



Creek rapids at Olympic National Park.  
© Scott Kirkwood/NPCA

# Executive Summary



Olympic National Park, the most visited National Park in the Northwest, is undeniably the key driver for the Olympic Peninsula's already significant recreation and tourism economy. Each year, 3.2 million recreational visits generate \$264 million in spending in gateway communities, such as Port Angeles, Forks, and Sequim, contributing to over 3,600 jobs. The park's popularity continues to grow, with June visits up 40 percent in 2015 over the same month the previous year.

Insufficient funding across the National Park System have strongly impacted the visitor experience and, in turn, the park's ability to drive economic activity.

**Of the estimated \$13.3 million required to fully maintain and operate the park in 2014, only \$7.8 million was appropriated, leaving the park 42 percent underfunded.**

This chronic underfunding leads to yearly increases to Olympic National Park's \$133 million maintenance accumulated backlog.

The effects of operations funding shortfalls and the growing maintenance backlog can be observed throughout the park:

- Along the Elwha River, assuring restoration of historic fish passage for native salmon under unpredicted drought conditions requires additional rock and debris removal; the revegetation of a dry lakebed left behind by a \$325 million dam removal project will run out of funding eight years short of the time it is projected to become self-sustaining.

- Trails along the weather-beaten Wilderness Coast go without repair for years as an understaffed trails crew reaches less than 75 percent of its projects annually.

- The recently renovated Hoh Rainforest Visitor Center remains staffed with only one ranger most of the year and without any new exhibits, despite being one of the most popular and iconic regions of the park.

- The road to the winter recreation area atop Hurricane Ridge is only plowed and opened three days a week, greatly diminishing opportunities for visitors to enjoy the most popular scenic vista in the park and the ability of local businesses to generate more consistent traffic during the off-season.

As the Centennial of the National Park Service approaches in 2016, Congress has an opportunity to reverse years of fiscal neglect of America's favorite places. Olympic National Park's struggles are representative of similar challenges faced throughout the country in the National Park System. Filling the \$5.5 million funding gap at Olympic National Park and providing additional funding to address deferred projects will ensure that the park's natural treasures are protected for future generations while allowing local communities to grow a sustainable recreation economy.

# Introduction

Olympic National Park is one of the most popular parks in the National Park System and provides vital protection for our country's natural wonders while generating economic activity in a developing region. Despite its clear value, Olympic National Park, like other national parks across the country, remains chronically underfunded. This report will examine the ways that operating on a critically small budget has undermined Olympic National Park's ability to provide a quality visitor experience and generate economic value for gateway communities.

Olympic National Park is one of the largest and most diverse units of the National Park System. The value of protecting the natural state of the Olympic Peninsula is recognized internationally; the national park is both an International Biosphere Reserve and a World Heritage Site. Within the park, visitors can enjoy a wide range of distinct ecosystems.

Proclaimed as a national monument in 1909 by President Theodore Roosevelt, the area was named a national park by Congress in 1938 and today encompasses 922,000 acres of mountains, forests, and rugged ocean coastline. With such diverse natural offerings, Olympic National Park is understandably one of the most popular parks in the National Park System. In 2014, over 3.2 million visitors explored the trails, stayed at the campgrounds, and stopped by the visitor centers at Olympic National Park. Over the last

decade, Olympic National Park has averaged the fifth highest visitor count among all National Parks, and the highest in the Pacific Northwest. Recent years have shown upward trends in visitation mirroring increases observed throughout the park system. In June 2015, Olympic National Park was visited over 550,000 times, an increase of almost 40 percent from the same month the previous year. Olympic National Park's popularity translates to economic value for nearby communities such as the towns of Port Angeles and Forks. Visitors spent \$264 million in gateway communities around Olympic National Park in 2014, supporting over 3,600 jobs. Hotels, guides, restaurants, and grocers all benefit from the park's ability to draw visitors from nearby Seattle, throughout the United States, and even internationally.

Maintaining and expanding Olympic National Park's status

as a tourist destination and protecting its natural resources is vital to supporting the Olympic Peninsula's residents and businesses. Despite steady employment and income growth over the last four decades, the Peninsula has experienced volatility as timber-related sectors declined due to market conditions, globalization, overcutting, and mechanization. During the most recent recession of 2007-2009, job losses were almost entirely in timber-related sectors.

Real estate, lodging, food service, entertainment, and recreation were among leaders in job growth over the last decade, even through the national recession. The tourism sector now employs double the share of employees that the timber sector does on the Peninsula, accounting for 19 percent of total employment. Continuing to support Olympic National Park is vital to ensuring that the region's

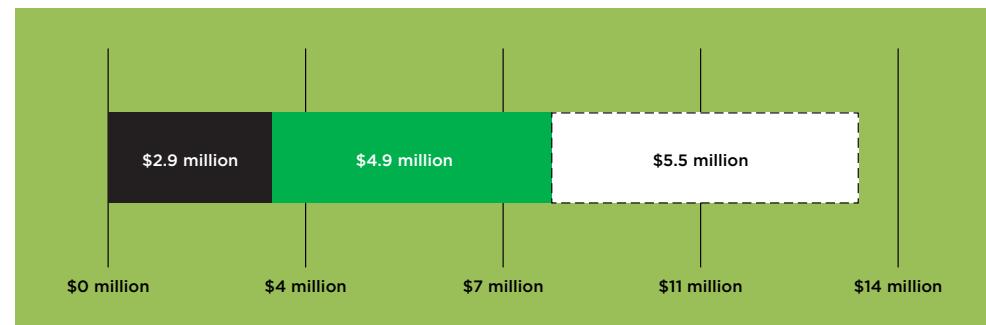


## OLYMPIC NATIONAL PARK

**The most visited National Park in the Northwest, with 3.2 million annual recreational visits generating \$264 million in spending in gateway communities, such as Port Angeles, Forks, and Sequim, contributing to over 3,600 jobs.**

STUDY AREA MAP





economy can remain strong and sustainable.

Although it constitutes only 1/15th of one percent of the federal budget, the National Park Service has suffered from inadequate funding in recent years. Since 2010, the agency's operating budget has declined by 7 percent, a \$178 million loss in today's dollars. Its budget for new construction and renovations has declined by \$230 million in today's dollars over the last decade, a 62 percent cut. In addition to poor transportation funding, the National Park System's total maintenance backlog has reached \$11.5 billion and will surely take years to reduce to an acceptable level. Each year that the National Park Service remains underfunded, this maintenance backlog will continue to grow: the Park Service receives only 58 cents of every dollar that would be needed to simply keep the backlog at its current level.

The effects of insufficient funding can be seen at Olympic National Park. For 2014, park managers estimated that \$13.3 million would be necessary to operate and maintain existing assets at an acceptable level. The park was granted \$2.9 million in operations funding from

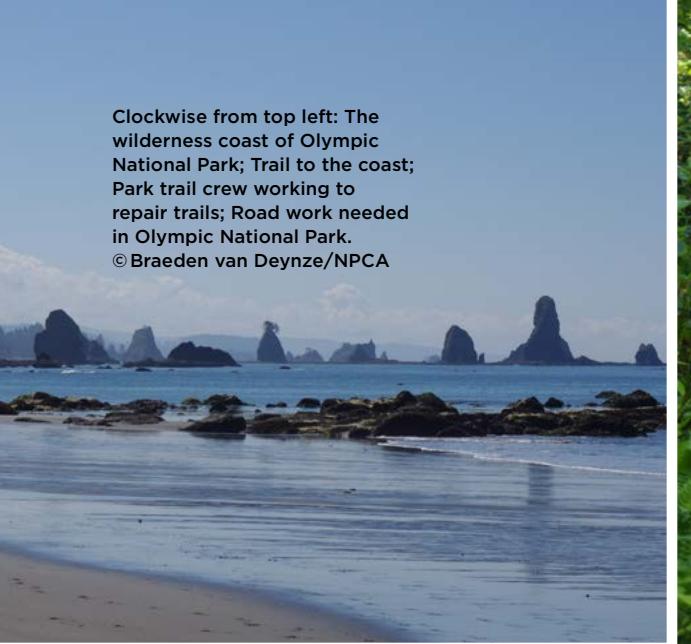
## Funding sources at Olympic National Park

the National Park Service base budget, and was able to acquire \$4.9 million in supplemental funding from concessionaires, donations, and grants from other federal agencies.

This leaves Olympic National Park \$5.5 million short. Olympic National Park's base operations budget is only 59 percent of what would be necessary to prevent roads, trails, campgrounds, and visitor centers from falling further into disrepair. If Olympic National Park is unable to fill this sizable funding gap, its \$133 million maintenance backlog will balloon. Of that \$133 million, \$25 million is needed for projects to address the most critical non-transportation needs – an achievable price for a vital economic and conservation need. If the backlog continues to go unaddressed, the visitor experience will very likely begin to noticeably decline.

*"Olympic National Park is vital to the economic well-being for the community of Port Angeles. We estimate nearly 300,000 people stay in our lodging each year, and it is safe to say that the majority of these guests are here because of the draw caused by Olympic National Park." – Russ Veenema, Executive Director of the Port Angeles Regional Chamber of Commerce*

Clockwise from top left: The wilderness coast of Olympic National Park; Trail to the coast; Park trail crew working to repair trails; Road work needed in Olympic National Park.  
© Braeden van Deynze/NPCA



# 1/15th

**Fraction of one percent of  
the total federal budget  
devoted to the National  
Park Service**

Clockwise from top:  
A park ranger assesses  
Hoh River trail bridge  
damage; Road closure  
in Elwha Valley; Scenic  
views along the wilder-  
ness coast. © Braeden  
van Deynze/NPCA



# Findings

Insufficient funding for Olympic National Park's annual budget over the years have resulted in major reductions to two crucial elements of park operations.

1. Reductions in available payroll have forced the elimination of ranger and maintenance positions by 12 percent over the last five years, a reduction of 24 full-time equivalent positions.
  2. Construction and maintenance shortfalls have caused the maintenance backlog to grow to over \$133 million.
- These funding gaps have had numerous negative effects on the park's ability to protect its resources and provide for visitor experience. The consequences of funding shortfalls have also damaged the potential for park visitation and maintenance as an economic driver in gateway communities:
- Inconsistencies now exist in trail and facility quality throughout the park and between program scheduling throughout seasons. Inconsistent visitor experiences reduce the ability of local businesses to market the park as a tourist destination.
  - Without guaranteed long-term funding for programs, park staff cannot effectively make plans for the perpetual restoration, monitoring, and protection of park resources.
  - Reductions in total staff force remaining rangers to take on duties previously handled by others, stretching them thin, reducing job satisfaction, and preventing the development of new programs.
  - The freeze on new hiring makes it difficult for young people to gain experience within the park system. An aging workforce makes it increasingly difficult for the park to engage a younger audience.

# Case Studies

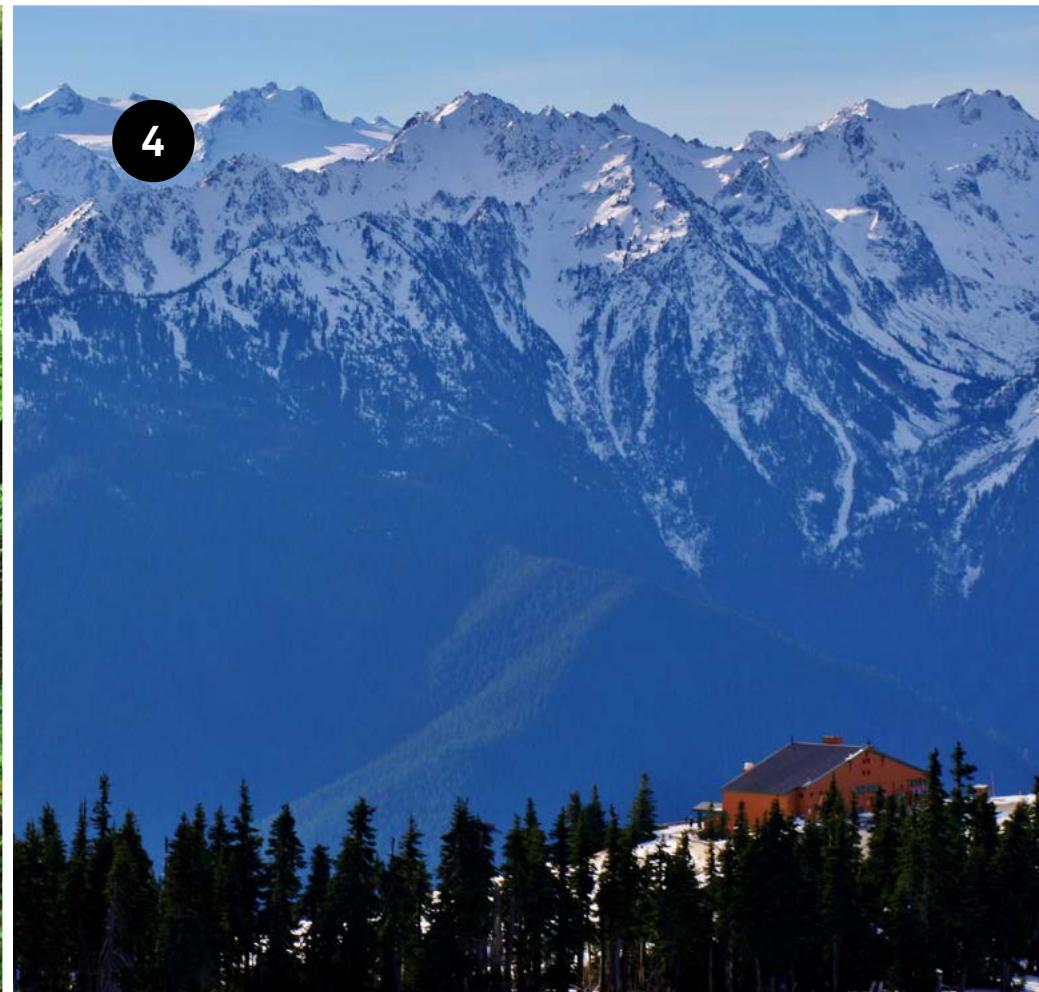
- ① Elwha River
- ② Wilderness Coast
- ③ Hoh Rainforest
- ④ Hurricane Ridge

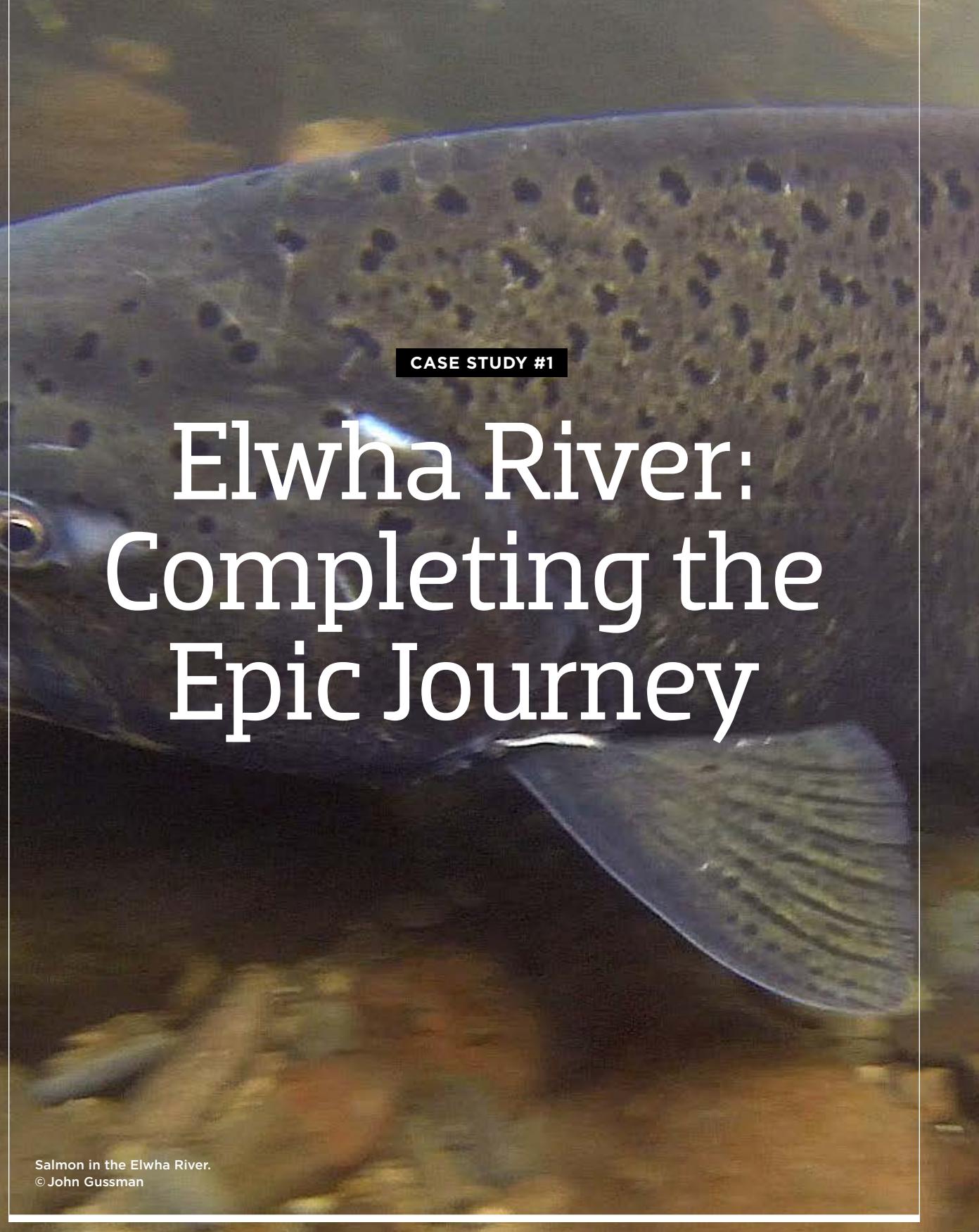
The effects of insufficient funding have been felt throughout Olympic National Park. Every department, from interpretation to maintenance to resource management, has been forced to make sacrifices, the effects of which can be clearly observed by visitors.

To demonstrate how funding shortfalls can harm the park experience, conservation efforts, and economic development, four case studies have been prepared, each focusing on a different iconic region frequented by visitors. These case studies are based on publicly available data, news reports, and conversations with National Park Service officials, park visitors, and local business associations.

It is important to note that these case studies are examples NPCA has selected to illustrate the types of funding needs throughout a park with a wide variety of resources and visitor opportunities. They are not meant to be exhaustive, indicate funding priorities, or suggest management direction. Instead, they are meant to bring awareness of overall park funding needs to the general public by using tangible examples at some of the most visited locations at Olympic National Park and demonstrate why funding for our national parks needs to be restored.

Elwha River. © John Gussman; Wilderness Coast.  
© Braeden van Deynze/NPCA; Hoh Rainforest. © Mirekdeml/  
Dreamstime.com; Hurricane Ridge. © Douglas Scott/Exotichikes





CASE STUDY #1

# Elwha River: Completing the Epic Journey

Salmon in the Elwha River.  
© John Gussman

## SUMMARY

*The Park Service has an obligation to monitor fish recovery for salmon and other species through 2022, projected at \$1.1 million; additional costs of restoring effective fish passage for all native salmon species past the two former dam sites is yet to be determined under current low-water conditions. \$3 million in additional funding through 2024 would allow the Park Service to monitor and execute the revegetation plan to the scientific standards commonly used for forest restoration projects, ensuring salmon recovery, clean water, and increased recreational opportunities. \$108,000 in additional funding annually would allow the park to fund its own vegetation management crew which could identify and eliminate harmful exotic species before they gain a foothold on bare ground in the newly exposed Elwha River Basin and in other areas throughout the park.*

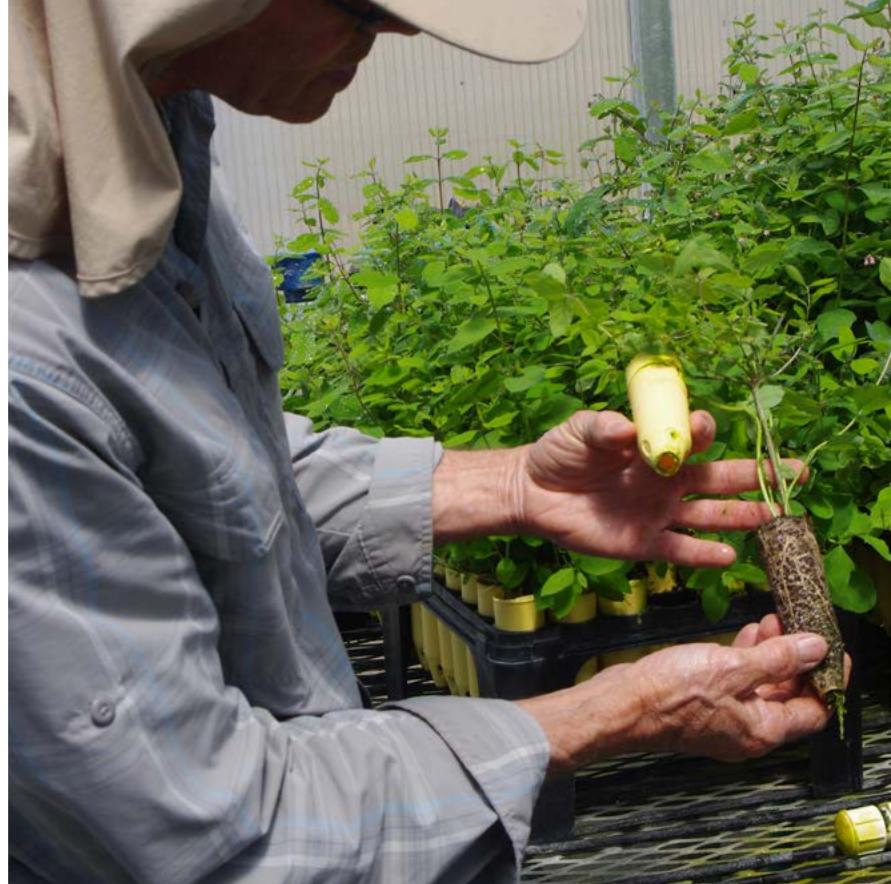
With the completion of the removal of the final dam on the Elwha River in the summer of 2014, many celebrated the event as a victory for conservation and social justice in Olympic National Park. The removal of both the Glines Canyon and Elwha dams was funded by a \$325 million act of Congress after years of negotiation between the Lower Elwha Klallam tribe, the City of Port Angeles, the National Park Service, and the local timber industry. But the work of restoring the unique and complex river ecosystem is just beginning. While

Park Service ecologists have had great initial successes, continued funding will be vital to ensuring the revival of historically vibrant salmon spawning grounds. The project helps America honor our commitment to the tribe while also expanding recreational opportunities and protecting water quality for residents and visitors in nearby Port Angeles.

The largest share of the initial funding was dedicated to a new water treatment plant to safeguard drinking water supplies

for Port Angeles, and this project is complete. The remainder was committed to the longer term recovery effort based on expected river conditions following removal of both dams.

2015 was a very low water year for the Elwha and other streams on the Olympic Peninsula. This followed a record low snowfall and rain pattern over the winter and widespread regional drought conditions during the summer. This has been a setback for salmon recovery because water temperatures have increased



and the rivers are much more difficult for fish passage due to lack of water. The lack of normal seasonal floods from rainfall and snow melt has not done the expected work of clearing river debris and silt for effective fish passage and successful reproductive conditions. The park has responded by continuing to restore river gradients and clearing the last dam construction remains from key areas around the dams, but even this relies on future natural high water events to create channels suitable for fish migration. If regional drought conditions and mild winters continue as predicted, salmon recovery cycles will be delayed.

To monitor fish passage, reproduction and recovery, the park needs funding for river surveys and removal of blockages, but the extent of this is unknown. This is dependent upon the degree to which seasonal flooding events, which have been at less volume than expected

in recent years, can move remaining debris and create new channels. Additional rock and debris removal will soon be beyond the current project budget, but is essential for assuring the success of the Elwha River restoration as measured by recovery of all five species of native salmon and steelhead.

Another key element of the restoration project is the revegetation program, the largest of its kind ever attempted. When the dams were removed, an 800-acre valley covered in sediment was left behind as the lake drained into the ocean. In order to create suitable habitat for salmon recovery, \$5 million from the dam removal project was allocated to revegetate the land.

Meanwhile, the City of Port Angeles relies upon the Elwha for clean drinking water. If the riverbanks begin eroding into the water, the city's treatment plants could be severely damaged, forcing the city to rely on expensive well water instead. The revegetation will provide

benefits both within and beyond the park boundaries. As trees establish complex root systems, they provide stability along the riverbed, preventing erosion and allowing the river to establish a fixed path. Vegetation will also shade the river, providing vital habitat for cold-water fish.

A number of local stakeholders are relying upon the success of the revegetation as well. Local recreation businesses rely upon a stable river to provide consistent launch sites for their guided trips. Without foliage to keep the river in place, launch sites are regularly washed away, forcing the company to cancel reservations as they seek out new routes.

The revegetation will provide

**"The long-term success of the revegetation project is vital to ensuring our business can offer consistent and quality service to tourists."**



From left: A replanted former Lake Mills; Park staff with new plant starts; Park greenhouse and soil for native plantings. © Braeden van Deynze/NPCA

Finally, many members of the Lower Elwha Klallam tribe rely upon salmon harvests for their well-being. The success of the salmon restoration depends on revegetation to stabilize the riverbanks, shade the water to keep temperatures cool, and provide vital nutrients through falling leaves and insect hatches. Continuing the revegetation project will directly affect the livelihoods of many of the tribal fishermen.

The bustling restoration nursery is a testament to Park Service efficiency. The greenhouse itself was built for \$400,000 using local contractors. The rest of the nursery complex, including two cold shelters, a soil bin, a potting shed, and a large shade structure for protecting young plants, was built for under \$10,000 using primarily salvaged materials and volunteer labor. The annual cost to keep the facility running is under \$15,000. Each year, volunteers plant 80,000 new starts out in the valley,

which is quickly beginning to look less like a drained lakebed and more like a young forest.

After five years of operation, the nursery has found great success. Exotic plants have been kept at bay, and salmon populations, which rely on insects and debris from native riverside plants for nutrients, have more than doubled according to fisheries specialists. Additionally, the nursery has provided an opportunity for more than 150 volunteers to interact with the park in a unique and meaningful way.

However, river restoration is a dynamic process, and since this project is the first of its size ever attempted, Park Service staff are adapting to new challenges as they arise. First, drought-like conditions have made widespread planting more difficult than expected over the last two years. Second, the river has yet to establish a consistent path

through the valley. As it shifts from year to year, park staff are prevented from planting in areas that may be washed away should the river shift. The earliest revegetation activities started in 2011 as work on dam removal was just beginning. With funding for revegetation set to expire in 2017, the greenhouse and its staff will be decommissioned just as the new habitat is beginning to take shape. Commercial forestry standards suggest that restoration sites be maintained and monitored for 15 years before they are considered self-sustaining. The current budget for the Elwha revegetation allows for only seven years of restorative activity, less than half the time that experts typically suggest.

The Elwha Valley could be left with only the limited permanent resources the park has available to protect it. The park has no permanent, on-site greenhouse and will have to import seed and starts from outside sources,

risking the genetic integrity of the valley and the ultimate success of the restoration project. Olympic National Park also shares a single exotic vegetation management crew with the entire Northwest region, meaning response will be slow to sightings of destructive invasive grasses and weeds.

Unless operations funding increases, Olympic National Park will be unable to fund these programs vital to guaranteeing the Elwha River's long term success and the successful completion of a \$325 million project. Project leaders estimate that extending the program through 2024 would cost around \$3 million total. This funding would provide salaries for ecologists and botanists, wages for seasonal staff to monitor planting activities, and supplies for continued nursery operation. For an additional \$108,000 annually, the park could employ a crew of dedicated vegetation managers to keep invasive exotic species at bay and monitor populations of rare native plants park wide. Restored funding for the Park Service operations budget would allow for these extensions of an important and unique natural resources program.

*"The final Elwha River Ecosystem Restoration Act states that 'the Department of Interior therefore finds there is a need to return this river and the ecosystem to its natural, self-regulating state, and proposes removing both dams to accomplish this purpose and fulfill the congressional mandate.' The areas in the Elwha River where both dams were located still have stretches with much higher gradients than before the dams were built. This will cause problems for returning salmon and need to be restored to the pre-dam gradient to facilitate fish passage. Until this is done, the river will not be restored to its natural self-regulating state. With drought conditions on the Olympic Peninsula this year, it is even more important to restore these areas to their original state. The Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe's position is that this needs to be done as quickly as possible."* – Robert Elofson, Elwha River Restoration Director of the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe

*"The removal of the Elwha dams has opened up countless new recreation opportunities for our customers, from more advanced rafting routes to guided snorkeling tours among Chinook salmon. However, just last season one of our primary boat launch points was washed away by the river's changing course, delaying the start of our rafting season*

*and forcing us to cancel reservations. The long-term success of the revegetation project is vital to ensuring our business can offer consistent and quality service to tourists." – Morgan Colonel, Owner and Manager of Olympic Raft and Kayak*

*"The Elwha restoration project has provided students at Peninsula College and Western Washington University's Huxley on the Peninsulas with meaningful undergraduate research opportunities that contribute to our broader understanding of large-scale ecological restoration. It provides students with the opportunity to work directly with professional ecologists, managers, and researchers. Continued support for the project will hopefully encourage other aspiring ecologists, not only from our region but from across the country, to seek out our programs because of our unique collaboration with the Olympic National Park restoration ecologists and other researchers, and because of our close proximity to the Elwha River project itself." – Barbara Blackie, Professor of Ecology at Western Washington University's Huxley College and Peninsula College*



Clockwise from top left:  
The Elwha flowing free below former Glines Canyon Dam; Life returns to the new river banks. © Braeden van Deynze/NPCA; A restoring Elwha River delta with new sediments from the former reservoirs. © John Gussman;

**CASE STUDY #2**

# Wilderness Coast: Eroding Funds and Trails

The wild Olympic coast.  
© Braeden van Deynze/NPCA

**SUMMARY**

*\$500,000 in allocated construction funds would allow the park trails crew to restore the severely eroded Taylor Point trails to acceptable condition. An additional \$200,000 annually in operations funding would allow the trails crew to reach the remaining 25 percent of trails that do not see routine maintenance along a scenically spectacular and accessible section of the park that draws visitors year round.*

In addition to the temperate rainforests and the glacial highlands, the rocky western coast is one of the icons of not just Olympic National Park, but of Washington State itself. Stretching from the Queets River in the south to Shi Shi Beach in the north, the Olympic Wilderness Coast stretches over 70 miles of continuous, undeveloped coastline, making it one of the longest stretches in the contiguous United States. In order to preserve its wilderness character, the majority of the coastline is inaccessible by road and can only be reached by trails designed and maintained by National Park Service and partner crews.

The trail maintenance program at Olympic National Park is responsible for maintaining over 600 miles of trails through a wide variety of environments. Many of those trails run through remote regions, though even those

trails are highly trafficked by backpackers: over 40,000 backcountry permits were issued last year. Ideally, every mile of trail would receive annual routine maintenance, including brushing away overgrown foliage, clearing blown down snags, and replacing rotting boardwalk planks. The majority of the materials are created from blowdowns and gravel found near the trails, which both eliminates the need to haul materials along the trails and maintains the natural character of the environment.

Along the isolated Wilderness Coast, trail crews face a variety of unique challenges. The coast line receives 140-180 inches of rain annually, turning trails into muddy streams, washing out gravel, and rotting wooden boardwalks and bridges. Locally sourced cedar wears much faster than the sturdier spruce found further inland and sandy coastlines are not conducive to gath-



## TRAIL INDEED VS. TRAIL IN NEED

Left: Well maintained trail to Sand Point on Ozette Loop. © Bryan Bell, NPS;

Right: Crumbling 'sand ladder' on Taylor Point in Olympic National Park. © Braeden van Deynze/NPCA;



ering gravel for repairs. As a result, much of the materials used in construction must be airlifted into these isolated locations. This adds another unique expense, alongside other materials, tools, and wages and lodging for crews.

At Olympic National Park, the trail funding has not kept pace with increases in traffic and changing conditions. The trail crew receives around \$500,000 annually in base funding, down from \$600,000 seven years ago. This funding supports a mere 29 full-time crew members who work alongside 18 AmeriCorps volunteers who are responsible for over 600 miles of trail. The Park Service must rely on privately contracted helicopters to airlift materials to remote trails, which can cost up to \$200,000 per job.

The trail crew has done its best to maintain popular trails with what little resources they have available. Decreased staffing means relying more on volunteers, who contribute more than 12,000 hours annually to trail projects. Volunteers are not free, however; time and effort must go into recruiting, coordinating, training, and supervising them to ensure that trails projects are completed properly. The park has recently hired a volunteer outreach

coordinator, but she must split her time between multiple divisions. Resource restrictions force the trail crew to make tough tradeoffs when it comes to how to spend their time. Each year, the crew gets to approximately 75 percent of the trails that need work. Some parts of the coast cannot be regularly maintained under current funding conditions. For instance, the well-used trail over Taylor Point cuts through thick coastal rainforest, connecting two sandy beaches with views of the Giants Graveyard collection of seastacks and sites for backcountry camping. This trail climbs almost vertically from the beaches over the point, requiring the use of ropes and "sand ladders" installed by the trail crew years ago. Maintenance of these sand ladders has been neglected over the last few years, resulting in many snapped cords and broken rungs that pose a danger to hikers and, through erosion, to the trailside environment.

Additional funding is necessary if the trail crew is to keep trails up to the standards needed by visitors as traffic increases in the coming centennial year of the Park Service. For approximately \$500,000, crews of park staff and volunteers could rehabilitate the three-mile Taylor

*"Olympic National Park's 70-plus mile wilderness coast a geologically unstable region where the geological plates collide. Stunning visually with a kaleidoscope of sea stacks, islets, and wildly configured rock, it also offers world-class ocean backpacking routes and numerous sublime shoreline hikes. Imagine trying to maintain hiking routes in a zone pounded relentlessly by the sea and storms, continually crumbling and collapsing tectonically. Unfortunately, Olympic National Park has been short of maintenance funding for more than 20 years and can't hope to keep up. We see it in crumbling boardwalks and missing sand ladders over headlands." -Greg Johnston, Author of "Washington's Pacific Coast; A Guide to Hiking, Camping, Fishing & Other Adventures"*

Clockwise from top: Frequent trail washouts need maintenance; Sand ladder in disrepair; Trail rope on the wilderness coast. © Braeden van Deynze/NPCA;



**"Olympic National Park has been short of maintenance funding for more than 20 years and can't hope to keep up. We see it in crumbling boardwalks and missing sand ladders over headlands."**

A photograph of a lush, green rainforest. Large, moss-covered tree trunks dominate the foreground and middle ground. Sunlight filters through the canopy, creating bright highlights on the moss and leaves. Ferns and other forest floor vegetation are visible at the base of the trees.

CASE STUDY #3

# Hoh Rainforest: A Visitor Center without Rangers?

Hoh Rainforest.  
© Mirekdeml/Dreamstime

## SUMMARY

*\$50,000 in additional salary each year would allow for the hiring of two more half-time interpretive rangers, who could develop new educational programs, offer more frequent guided hikes, and staff the visitor center when it would otherwise be closed during the winter months.*

One of the few remaining temperate rainforests in the country, and one of the most spectacular in the world, the Hoh Rainforest is one of the Olympic National Park's most popular destinations. Near constant rainfall during the winter months supports a wide variety of flora, creating a lush, dense forest covered in eerie mosses.

The Hoh is understandably popular among visitors, and traffic is increasing. During the summer vacation season, visitation reaches over 3,500 a day at the Hoh Rainforest Visitor Center, a 66 percent increase from a decade ago. As of June 2015, the Hoh trailhead had already seen a 22 percent bump in visits to date over last year. In response to increased visitation, federal funds were granted to

Olympic National Park for a \$1.1 million renovation of the visitor center, the first renovation since its construction 60 years ago. But as funding dries up for hiring new interpretive staff, the new visitor center's exhibits may be delayed and hours may be reduced, limiting the center's potential to serve and educate visitors.

Recent funding shortfalls have made finding rangers at many visitor centers increasingly difficult. At the Hoh Visitor Center, staffing levels have been halved over the last decade. As a result, programming has suffered, even while demand has skyrocketed. Ranger-guided hikes are now only available once daily, down from twice daily ten years ago. Once nightly campfire presentations on wildlife, history,

and cultural topics are now only offered five nights a week. As a result, fewer visitors are being reached with information which would help them enjoy and appreciate the park.

The staffing cuts have damaging effects on the quality of interpretive services beyond frequency. There is now only a single year-round ranger at the Hoh visitor center. When this ranger is furloughed or takes time off, the center is closed entirely, leaving visitors without a guide to the region and sacrificing revenue from the bookstore.

Cuts to maintenance and enforcement staff have led to an expansion of interpretive rangers' roles, cutting into the time they can spend with visitors and developing new

Clockwise from top: Fallen log in the Hoh Rainforest. © Loren Klein; Packed parking lot at the Hoh Rainforest Visitor Center. © Braeden van Deynze/NPCA; Fungus in the Hoh Rainforest. © Loren Klein; The Hoh River. © Braeden van Deynze/NPCA



**"The rangers always point out something fascinating that we never forget, like the huge amount of water that is soaked up by the forest."**

programs. In addition to former duties, they are now expected to assist in other duties such as security, parking enforcement, and restroom maintenance. The interpretive staff no longer have time to maintain and update exhibits and displays; over 80% of the park's exhibits are considered seriously dated. As staff are stretched thin, the quality of visitors' experiences is significantly impacted.

With fewer positions available, the Park Service has trouble bringing in younger staff. Institutional knowledge and protocols well understood by more experienced staff are now lost upon retirement. As the park staff ages, the park service begins to lose touch with younger audiences.

Reduced staff funding also restricts the interpretive staff's ability to develop new and innovative programs. At nearby North Cascades National Park, interpretive staff have collaborated with a non-profit educational institution to provide ranger-led backpacking trips for youth leaders through the park. While rangers have expressed interest in developing similar programs along the Hoh River, the team simply cannot afford to lose a ranger to develop and run this kind of program.

Interpretive rangers at the Hoh have expressed interest in embracing social media and other online tools to expand their reach beyond the park. A new website would allow

digital visitors to gain a deeper understanding of the Hoh's complex ecosystem, experience the rainforest's unique soundscapes, and allow future visitors to know what to look for when they arrive. However, staff simply do not have the time to learn the technical skills to develop or maintain such a website, and hiring a full time programmer is impossible under current budgetary restraints.

To bring the ranger staff in the Hoh region up to acceptable levels, Park Service staff have looked into hiring two more rangers to split a full-time equivalent position. This hire would allow the current staff to share best practices before they move on and give the park an opportunity to hire younger staff to prepare for the future, while ensuring the visitor center remains open during furloughs and vacations. These positions would cost approximately \$50,000 a year in salary and benefits.

In addition to salary, providing adequate lodging poses another challenge to hiring more interpretive rangers. Olympic National Park is faced with a \$1.5 million housing maintenance backlog, coupled with a \$2.7 million water treatment backlog. If these maintenance backlogs are not addressed, visitor centers like the one at the Hoh Rainforest will not have the capacity to support newly hired staff with lodging or clean water.

The completion of the Hoh Rainforest Visitor Center renovations is a victory for National Park funding.

#### HOH RAINFOREST: A VISITOR CENTER WITHOUT RANGERS?

But without related increases in funding for supplemental interpretive staff's salaries and lodging, visitors will continue to struggle to find rangers and the opportunity for the park's educational message to reach more young people will be missed.

*"The Hoh is unique among all other UNESCO World Heritage Sites and Biosphere Reserves located within the United States because it is sonically the most diverse and also the least polluted by mechanical noise. This double honor makes the Hoh a world class destination for urban dwellers to reconnect with nature through listening."*

*"Wildlife are as busy communicating as we, but what are they saying? And can their messages help us answer questions about global climate change or other emerging environmental challenges?"*

*"Interpretive exhibits and talks are urgently needed to help park visitors unlock this invisible world at the United States' preeminent place of natural listening." – Gordon Hempton, Acoustic Ecologist and Author of "One Square Inch of Silence"*

*"After driving the long road into the Hoh Rainforest it's so refreshing to step into the calm of the visitor center and let the kids stretch out a little while looking, touching, reading -- learning good bits and pieces about where we've come. The rangers always point out something fascinating that we never forget, like the huge amount of water that is soaked up by the forest."*

*– Ann Soule, Resident of Sequim, WA*



CASE STUDY #4

# Hurricane Ridge: Snowed Under by Underfunding

Overlooking the lodge at Hurricane Ridge.  
© Douglas Scott/  
Exotichikes

## SUMMARY

*A \$325,000 increase in annual operations funding would allow the park to clear the road to a popular winter recreation area and staff the visitor center, supporting the Port Angeles recreation economy through the winter months and generating an estimated additional \$750,000 in annual visitor spending.*

Hurricane Ridge is one of the most popular sites for park visitors throughout the summer. Visitors can enjoy panoramic views of the Olympic Mountains from the ridge's trails, which are accessible from a trailhead and visitor center only an hour from nearby Port Angeles. Because of its popularity and proximity, many Port Angeles businesses rely on traffic to and from Hurricane Ridge.

A problem many businesses in Port Angeles have been facing in recent years is seasonality. Because of weather and school schedules, traffic to the park peaks during the summer vacation seasons and drops off during the winter months. This challenge has been exacerbated by

the reduction of weekday access to Hurricane Ridge during recent winters.

Hurricane Ridge has the infrastructure and attractions to be a premier winter alpine attraction within a National Park. For decades, the visitor center has provided downhill skis, cross country skis, and snowshoes for rental. Two rope tows and a T-bar lift provide access to a number of groomed and ungroomed runs at a concessionaire ski area run by a local ski club. Popular ranger-guided snowshoe hikes are offered daily.

While these amenities have been available for decades, they are only accessible by the Hurricane Ridge

Road, which must be frequently snowplowed from December through March. Plowing is expensive, and in 2011 the Park Service chose to discontinue the service from Monday through Thursday in light of significant shortfalls to the parks operations budget.

As a result, Hurricane Ridge has become a far less attractive destination for winter tourism. Businesses complain that without consistent road access, they cannot properly market Olympic National Park as a winter destination. Dozens of local recreation shops have signed petitions lobbying park management to offer road clearing on additional days, but doing so simply is not possible under current funding conditions.

Even on days that the road is open, proper transportation services are not provided. The parking lot at the Hurricane Ridge Visitor Center is frequently overloaded during winter weekends, forcing rangers to close the road at the park gate. To alleviate similar parking problems, many National Parks, including nearby Mount Rainier National Park, run free or discounted shuttle services from nearby towns in partnership with public transit or local charter companies.

One Port Angeles charter company, All Points Tours and Charters, proposed to run a shuttle from Downtown Port Angeles to the top of the ridge for as little as \$10,000 for the winter. This service would support a local entrepreneur while generating increased business in Port Angeles and alleviating traffic issues within the park. However, even this has become beyond the park's budget, with the result being traffic jams and reduced access to Hurricane Ridge.

Keeping the road open seven days a week would require \$325,000 annually in additional operations funding. These funds would pay for snow plow maintenance and fuel and an additional ranger to patrol the area. Local businesses are willing to contribute as well; in the winter of 2015 a local campaign raised over \$20,000 to keep the visitor center open on Thursdays when plowing was not necessary.

But additional federal funding is necessary if these businesses are to generate repeat customers and create long-term growth for the region. In 2011, the last winter that the road was cleared seven days

a week, over 9,000 visitors made the drive up to Hurricane Ridge on weekdays. If the same number were to return, they would spend a projected \$750,000 at local businesses.

Investing in the National Parks allows for features like Hurricane Ridge to achieve their full potential for visitor experience with local economic benefits. Shortfalls to Olympic National Park's operation budget restricts its ability to stay open year-round, putting pressure on local businesses and struggling gateway economies that rely on National Parks to draw in customers.

*"Winter in Olympic National Park is enjoyed by very few due to the extreme limited access, and the Port Angeles Visitor Center has hundreds of disappointed guests when they are told Hurricane Ridge and other access points are closed for the season." – Russ Veenema, Executive Director of the Port Angeles Regional Chamber of Commerce*

*"Our business is negatively impacted in the winter seasons due to the perception that the park closes from September through May. This is mainly due to the fact that visitor centers operate only seasonally with inconsistent hours. In the winter, our guests love ranger-led snowshoe hikes and wish they were offered more regularly. Some winters, the inn has closed because of the perception that no one would come during the winter because of perceived lack of access to the park." – Stephan Fofanoff, Innkeeper of Domaine Madeleine Bed and Breakfast in Port Angeles, WA*



**"Some winters the inn has closed because of the perception that no one would come during the winter because of perceived lack of access to the park."**





Along the Olympic  
National Park coastline.  
©Braeden van Delynze/NPCA

# Conclusion

**N**early a century ago, the National Park Service was founded with the purpose of conserving parks like Olympic National Park for the enjoyment of future generations. Since then, rangers have worked valiantly to protect our natural treasures and interpret and present them proudly to the world.

But as observed throughout Olympic National Park, inadequate funding in recent years have impaired the Park Service's ability to maintain the parks. Restoration projects such as the revegetation of the Elwha River may not have the resources to ensure sustained success. Trails along the dynamic coastline go years without attention, creating hazardous conditions for backpackers. The brand new Hoh Visitor Center is understaffed and without quality exhibits. Popular attractions such as Hurricane Ridge remain inaccessible for long stretches of the year, limiting economic growth in nearby towns and visitor enjoyment of the park.

As the Centennial of the National Park Service approaches, Congress has an opportunity to renew its commitment to restoring Olympic National Park and other parks like it for future generations. By increasing funding to sufficient levels and ensuring continued, multi-year support, Congress can restore the National Parks for their next century of service to American families while ensuring robust economic development in surrounding communities.

# Take Action

The number of visitors who experience Olympic National Park each year and the ten-fold return on every federal dollar of funding from our national parks make them one of the smartest investments our Congressional leaders can make. More importantly, investing in our national parks represents a commitment to future generations.

The National Park Service is responsible for managing gems like Olympic on our behalf — but they need our collective voices to speak up for these special places. We all must do our part to protect and support our national parks. Please join National Parks Conservation Association, our partners and our supporters in urging Congress to restore funding to our national parks, often called "the best idea our country ever had."

## Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Braeden Van Deynze, lead report writer, along with Madelaine Spiering and the many NPCA staff who contributed to its development.

NPCA acknowledges and thanks the following individuals who provided information or suggestions during the development of this report. However, the contents and opinions expressed are solely those of NPCA and do not necessarily represent those of anyone listed here outside of our organization.

Willie Nelson/All Points Charters and Tours; Stephen Fofanoff/Domaine Madeleine Bed and Breakfast; Barbara Blackie/Huxley College on the Peninsula; David Allen, Josh Chenoweth, Sarah Creachbaum,

Larry Lack, Barb Maynes, Jon Preston, Lisa Turecek, Brian Winter/Olympic National Park; Tim McNulty/Olympic Park Associates; Morgan Colonel/Olympic Raft and Kayak; Charlie Comstock, Russ Veenema/Port Angeles Chamber of Commerce; Gordon Hempton/SoundTracker; Kathy Fox/The Mountaineers;

Ben Greuel/The Wilderness Society; Jeff Duda/U.S. Geological Survey; Andrea Imler/Washington Trails Association; John Bower/Western Washington University

NPCA also extends a special thanks to Robert Elofson and the Lower Elwha Klallam Tribe. Without their work and leadership, the Elwha River would not be the great shared resource it is today.

Special thanks for support from the Martin Foundation.





[npca.org](http://npca.org)