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9/14/2021

## Nisqually-Paradise Corridor Planning Team Public Comments

### RE: Mount Rainier NP Nisqually to Paradise

#### General Comments:

Thank you for the opportunity to offer comments again on such an important process. Mount Rainier National Park should be managed sustainably so it remains an iconic destination for future generations, as well as high-quality habitat for wildlife. As a regional non-profit group with more than 4,000 local members and supported by more than 18,000 activists and online followers, Conservation Northwest supports a Mount Rainier Nisqually-Paradise Corridor plan that improves the park experience for visitors, while not diminishing the park's naturalness, habitat, and wildlife. Therefore, we do not support a plan with new roads and large anthropocentric infrastructure to address current congestion issues. However, we can support modest development in the form of campgrounds, trails, parking lots and RV services designed with the ecology and adaptive potential of the park's wildlife in mind. With species like wolverine returning to the park and the potential of other extirpated species like gray wolves returning in the future, planners should be seeking to improve and increase habitat, not limit or fragment it. Functional and well-connected habitat also supports flora and fauna's ability to adapt to climate change—which is going to increasingly affect the park's landscape and wildlife. It is clear restoring, protecting, and maintaining the park's natural integrity should be a top priority of any solution implemented, and will also support quality experiences for park visitors.

#### Topic Questions:

### 1. What questions do you have about these ideas (reservations, trip planning, shuttles, etc.)? Please share them so we can address these questions in the next phase of analysis!

**Reservations:** Reservations are excellent tools for controlling when/where people are visiting and limiting attendance during peak hours/days. There is an opportunity to give visitors a more secluded and intimate experience with the park. However, reservation systems, much like camping reservations, can favor wealthy and affluent classes. In fact, these systems almost always require a credit card and cost more money than the entrance fee. This is a critical concern as the National Parks belong to every single citizen of this nation. Therefore, to be more inclusive there should be a way to make reservations without using a credit card or pre-paying. Are there plans to make the reservation system accessible to all? Would these supersede or replace camping reservations? Will folks be able to reserve numerous days/locations at once? At times, online reservations are sold out the morning they are available, due to those with the time and means to buying numerous reservations at once. How will the process be made equitable for folks without easy access to the internet? Will there be limits on how many reservations a person can make in a day, week, or even year? And what outreach and education will be available to support new users to the reservation system?

#### Web and email

conservationnw.org  
facebook.com/ConservationNW  
info@conservationnw.org

#### Seattle headquarters

1829 10th Ave W, Suite B  
Seattle, WA 98119  
206.675.9747  
206.675.1007 (fax)

**Trip Planning:** This feature would help some visitors plan less impactful and congested trips, and would be a useful tool for the public. However, it relies entirely on access to the internet. Are there plans to create a call-in option or physical material (brochure, pamphlet, added in the Mount Rainier map material at entry) that can be handed out at libraries and the park that help to educate folks about the app and tools but to also offer general guidelines on trip planning (when, where, peak times, etc)?

**Winter use:** This is an excellent idea. Have there been any inquiries about what wildlife might be using the park in those areas during off-season months? What impact does human presence have on wildlife during this time?

Trip reports in combination with NWAC avalanche forecasts are instrumental in trip planning for skiers/snowshoers. Are there ways that social media could help amplify conditions in a more standardized way? Is there a way to share NWAC forecasts in a consistent way?

Offering off-season camping opportunities at low-land campgrounds (if sunset campground is re-established) could give local campers opportunities to enjoy the mountain outside of peak visitation times.

**Paradise Parking Area:** The ideas presented by the Planning Team seem to be excellent ways to limit parking. Two questions do come to mind:

1. Are there plans to create parking spots with different time limits, say 1 hour, 2-3, 4-6, 7-8? The park could implement reservations for anything over 2 hours, to limit how long folks use any given spot.
2. Are there plans to cap visitor group at say 6 people, unless they make a large group reservation?

**Cougar Rock Picnic Area:** This area has been underutilized for decades, using it for parking and camping is an excellent idea. Can the new camping area be built specifically for RVs? Taking RV camping out of the original cougar rock campground. The proximity to a newly built parking area could mean that the new area is more equipped for RVs and could have better access built into it. Moving RVs to the new location and making the old campground tent only would improve tent camper overall experience.

Are there plans to add sites beyond the group sites at Cougar Rock? Adding more group sites of varying sizes could also improve congestion.

**Westside Road:** If access is returned to this area, a shuttle exclusive tour might drive people to the shuttle and limit congestion. However, if there is a way to make it safe for any amount of time, offering a reservation only experience for small groups of people could make the experience more personal and interesting.

**Shuttle Concept:** The idea is a good one. However, the limited scope and scale offered in the plans will most likely not achieve the goals it needs to. Shuttles have run in the past, but few folks took them, and fewer folks knew they even existed.

First, the shuttle must at minimum go into Longmire, so it can shuttle folks from the parking opportunities and sites in this location. Furthermore, if the park really wants to limit vehicles in the park, then having an off-park parking lot in Ashford where folks can pick up a shuttle, get in

the park at a reduced fee and leave their vehicles could really give folks an option that does not further disrupt the park. Can the park team up with some private locations already built, team up with the junction park developers to include a large NPS parking lot, or acquire a small piece of land? Giving people a place to park and taking a shuttle into the park is a sure-handed way to limit the impact of vehicles on the mountain. Please also note that including a parking lot at a newly built campsite (see comments about a near-entrance campground), could also be a suitable location for the shuttle to start its route.

Second adding another entrance booth (or two) at the main entry could allow for shuttles and pass holders to get on the mountain much faster easing delays. In addition, a shuttle-only parking lot could be built just inside or outside the entrance booths.

Third, additional parking and shuttle stops could added to these areas like Longmire where the park may want to extend some parking areas and include a well-established shuttle stop. Also both fall outlook points have parking lots that could be expanded, for parking and shuttle service.

Will a recorded tour play on the shuttle? Will there be fee or reservation discounts for those who use the shuttle? Will there be exclusive parking and pick up locations for the shuttle?

## **2. How would these ideas (reservations, trip planning, shuttles, etc.) influence your visit to Mount Rainier?**

If these ideas are developed with equitable outcomes and with long-lasting impact, these changes should make the park experience better. However, if reservations, shuttles, parking reservations, camping reservations and entrance fees, become so complicated and expensive and require credit cards, the process could heavily favor the affluent, which could be exclusive for many Americans. If the park can limit processes and requirements that benefit some folks and not others, then these ideas are a decent place to start.

## **3. What information do you think the planning team should consider when analyzing these strategies?**

The planning team should consider correlations between visitation increases with average wealth of visitors. Over the last three decades we have seen more RVs, day trippers and international travelers. Currently, few low-income families and individuals have the means to access camping and hiking on the mountain. Any action taken must compensate for this uneven disruption of public land.

The Park should consider the relationship between human presence and wildlife when analyzing each strategy. What strategies would negatively or positively impact wildlife for the sake of better experience for visitors?

## **4. What tools do you use to help plan your trip to Mount Rainier? How could these tools be improved, and where should this information be provided?**

This information should be online, have a call-in option, included in Mt. Rainier handout material when visitors enter the park and there should be brochures/pamphlets in hotels, airports and libraries.

## **5. Based on your desired experiences at Mount Rainier, which combination of these ideas**

**do you think best achieve the purpose of the plan? Which do not, and why?**

It will require a hybrid of many or all strategic options and some that are not even listed to make park visitation sustainable for the next 50 years.

**6. Are there other ideas that should be considered and analyzed that are not already presented? What is missing, and why should it be considered?**

We already mentioned a more robust shuttle route, off-park parking, and moving RV sites to the new cougar rock campground. Another idea that should be considered is adding a campsite near the entrance that has camping, parking, and a shuttle stop. Although this does require some development, it will be replacing a campsite already lost to floods and could give the park an edge with visitation over the next 50 years. Perhaps it is within a 1/8 mile of the entrance or maybe it is located near Longmire where there is already development that needs to be removed. Either way, adding 35 sites, plus 35 parking spots and a shuttle stop could help stagger attendance at higher elevation locations and offer more opportunities to recreate.

Lastly, placing signage that represents multiple languages in and around Paradise informing visitors not to crush or trample the meadows could go a long way for protecting the landscape while also being more inclusive.

**Sincerely,**

**Brian Stewart M.E.S.  
Cascades to Olympics Program Coordinator  
Conservation Northwest**

**Kurt Hellmann  
Advocacy Associate  
Conservation Northwest**