



February 28, 2022

Joel Sisolak  
Planning, Recreation and Outreach Section Manager  
Washington State Department of Fish and Wildlife  
P.O. Box 43200  
Olympia, WA 98504-3200  
c/o Cynthia Wilkerson, Eric Gardner

Re: Conservation Northwest comments on 10-year recreation strategy for WDFW-managed lands

Dear Mr. Sisolak,

Thank you for offering the ability to comment and share input on Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife's 10-year Recreation Strategy plan. Conservation Northwest (CNW) has an over 30-year history of successfully leveraging funding and public support to protect, connect, and restore habitat and wildlife in the Pacific Northwest. We represent more than 17,000 supporters dedicated to conservation in our state. Our success is largely owed to our practical adherence to science and policy and commitment to collaboratively work with managers, scientists, Tribes, user groups, industry, and other stakeholders to develop and implement durable conservation plans, projects and solutions.

As our state continues to grow and change, we have evolved our conservation efforts to include how recreation affects wildlife and wildlands. We recently launched the Wildlife-Recreation Coexistence program to help address conservation concerns regarding the sharp increase in recreation in our region. We aim to apply science and collaborative engagement with the recreation community to help shape both sustainable recreation management policy and the culture and practices of backcountry visitation to reduce impacts on wildlife and other natural, cultural and Tribal resources.

### **Response to draft**

Recreation in Washington state has increased to an extent where a proactive and comprehensive plan must be created and implemented for the sake of the longevity of our natural heritage. The status quo of recreation management is no longer sufficient in protecting our state's diverse natural, cultural and tribal resources. We support Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) and its mission to "preserve, protect and perpetuate fish, wildlife and ecosystems" and address increases in recreation and its associated impacts on our state's resources.

Conservation Northwest supports WDFW's inclusion of Tribes in the recreation strategy planning and implementation process. Recreation in Washington does affect Tribal interests and rights pertaining to First Foods, cultural significant areas, wildlife, and other Tribal resources. We also recognize that numerous Tribes have uniquely brought concerns about recreation to the



state and public purview. Where possible, we hope that deliverables within each recreation strategy initiative can be explicitly tied to protecting Tribal resources moving forward.

We also support WDFW in its attempt to add clarity to its recreation rules and regulations. In this draft, we would encourage additions to any rules that, as currently worded, may present significant changes to recreation activities. Specifically, we suggest that rules pertaining to dispersed land use and off-trail travel that acutely affect hunting, angling and wildlife viewing on WDFW lands, to clearly specify rule implications. And where compatible with goals to minimize negative recreation impacts, we recommend rule adaptations to ensure a pragmatic way forward for sustainable recreation activities.

CNW also supports WDFW in seeking ways to better serve diverse Washingtonians through more refined and accessible recreation and wildlife information. We encourage efforts listed in the recreation strategy draft that expand investments to welcome more diverse audiences and allow all visitors to WDFW-managed lands to enjoy sustainable recreation activities.

We care deeply about our collaborative efforts across recreation and conservation and are excited to bring ideas to the table where considerable progress can be made to abate damaging impacts to natural, cultural and Tribal resources, while also supporting sustainable recreation opportunities.

### **Science-based approach**

The six strategic initiatives listed in the recreation plan provide a launching point for protecting our natural heritage. Conservation Northwest strongly supports the use of the latest data and applied science available to inform these initiatives, combined with well-rounded collaboration. We hope to lend our scientific expertise to recreation policy formation and are eager to engage in recreation strategy initiatives that can be informed through the lens of wildlife and habitat.

As thorough data collection related to recreation is not yet common in Washington, we enthusiastically support the inception of a robust monitoring system of WDFW managed lands, in hopes that this system will lead to information gathering and best strategies to minimize damaging impacts caused from recreation. Methods of obtaining reliable data, namely from sources such as visitor data collection, should have means to reduce bias or subjectivity. We encourage well-defined and specific data objectives, as opposed to watchdogging, to inform any voluntary data collection system.

CNW applauds the “adaptive and iterative” management described in the recreation strategy draft. As data continues to be collected regarding recreation, we broadly support the continual reshaping of policy so that the latest science and successful management efforts lead the way in Washington. In addition, we support the consideration of changing landscapes, climate, and recreation behaviors in the refining of policy as needed.

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## **Habitat connectivity**

Securing habitat connectivity for fish and wildlife is vital for conservation as Washington continues to grow and observe change. As human development and climate pressures continue to alter environments and further fragment landscapes in our state, habitat connectivity must be prioritized for the longevity of fish and wildlife populations.

Within the 10-year recreation strategy draft, CNW encourages WDFW to pursue sound science pertaining to landscape level planning, such as habitat connectivity, wildlife migratory routes, and wildlife corridors. Recreation management, and especially any future expansion proposals related to recreation, should be shaped by thorough scientific consultation specific to geographic habitat connectivity zones and wildlife corridor areas.

The Washington Wildlife Habitat Connectivity Working Group is a collaborative effort that helps condense and proliferate this specific conservation science related to habitat connectivity. We urge WDFW to consult the expertise available through this group, in addition to scientists on staff at CNW, that contribute to current wildlife habitat connectivity mapping.

We emphatically support robust management of travel networks on WDFW-managed lands. Better management and assessment strategies are needed in areas where road or trail densities are affecting fish and wildlife habitat. When over certain thresholds, road and trail density is known to degrade riparian areas and wildlife habitat, in addition to limiting wildlife permeability. WDFW's proposed changes related to travel management offer a good first step to assess the existing networks for trails and roads, and find best strategies forward to better protect habitat for fish and wildlife.

## **Collaboration**

Our Wildlife-Recreation Coexistence (WREC) program has a strong interest in collaborating in efforts related to education, engagement, and recreation impact monitoring. WREC offers balance of recreation and conservation perspectives that is needed in Washington's recreation context. This program will continue to meet WDFW in the recreation management sphere, advocating and helping to pursue scientific understanding regarding recreation impacts, foster public engagement, and lending to collaboration efforts with stakeholders in the form of the Recreate Responsibly Coalition and other opportunities as they arise.

Conservation Northwest has a strong record of organizing volunteers to help conservation efforts. Through our successful Community Wildlife Monitoring Project and other conservation programs, we've accumulated deep experience with volunteer management and recruiting personnel for specific projects and programs. As we continue to build the Wildlife-Recreation Coexistence program, we are keen to add to efforts in establishing an ambassador program as it pertains to WDFW's public engagement and recreation impact monitoring initiatives.

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CNW is eager to help craft solutions pertaining to complex recreation topics that contain competing interests. CNW is proud of our collaborative work on the Snoquera Landscape Analysis project that has successfully found ways to mitigate damaging recreation impacts while still allowing sustainable dispersed camping and riparian area use. Our solutions aim to prevent major recreation impacts on wildlife and sensitive habitat, yet also allow for the continuation of sustainable recreation. We are happy to share insights and examples from our past collaborative work in this conservation area.

Thank you again for offering the ability to comment and share input on Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife's 10-year recreation strategy plan. Please let us know if there is any further clarity we can provide related to our above comments. CNW is looking forward to engaging further in this recreation strategy, and continuing our mission to connect, protect, and restore wildlife and wildlands across Washington state.

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