

Public Access - The Upper Valley Road & The Law

Laws creating this vast park complex specifically address the maintenance of Stehekin's upper valley road to provide for public access.

Senators Dan Evans and Brock Adams introduced the Washington State Wilderness Act of 1988. They were clear concerning the intention of this act. Even though they were recommending a vast wilderness complex be created in Washington State, Senators Evans and Adams spoke to the importance of maintaining public access into the heart of these wilderness areas. How do we know Senators Evans and Adams valued continued access into the wilderness? Introducing the bill, Senator Evans testified before Congress stating:

"What the bill would not do is to keep the park visitor shut out of the park. All the existing transportation and development corridors would be excluded from wilderness designation. ... I believe the parks are there to provide recreation, as well as, the preservation of the natural ecosystem."

Congress listened to Senators Evans and Adams and included provisions for maintaining the Stehekin Valley Road in the Act. The Washington State Wilderness Act was (and still is) unambiguous concerning the importance of public access along the 21 mile Stehekin Valley Road.

The legislative history of the Wilderness Act speaks specifically to maintaining an essential recreational corridor in the Stephen Mather Wilderness. Visitor access by vehicular transport was codified in the WSWA of 1988. Americans were promised that a primitive road corridor would be maintained to provide visitor access from the Stehekin into the heart of the Cascades.

Given the responsibility to maintain access into the Stephen Mather Wilderness the first management decision by the NPS was to recommend cutting the potential of a 100' from centerline corridor to a 50' corridor, thereby narrowing their ability to maintain the road by 50%. Was this a responsible action considering the mandated need for public access? (See box below.)

Unfortunately, since the passage of the 1988 Washington State Wilderness Act, the National Park Service (NPS) has not always managed the upper Stehekin Valley Road in a manner that is congruent with the intention of the WSWA and its legislative history. This fact was especially evident when the NPS officially chose to close the road with a finding of "No Significant Impact" 2006.

NPS Environmental Assessment

"This action will officially close the valley road to all motorized and mechanized use at the current physical termination just downstream of Car Wash Falls, approximately 12.9 miles from the Stehekin Landing on the Lake Chelan and remove it from the National Park Service Road and trail system."...Summary: "National Park Service Environmental Assessment "Finding of No Significant Impact"

***Stehekin Heritage believes there was a predisposition by the agency (NPS) when performing its EA that biased the finding in favor of closing the road. Furthermore, we believe the agency bias against maintaining the road and access can be seen throughout the twenty year history of NPS management along the upper Stehekin Valley Road.**

***We believe the NPS Environmental Assessment process did not effectively assess public access and safety issues before reaching its 2006, "Finding of No Significant Impact," and closing the Upper Stehekin Valley Road.**

***We believe that the NPS should perform an EIS to determine if the Upper Stehekin Valley Road should be and/or could be reopened.**

In response to the flood of 2003, the NPS conducted an Environmental Assessment (EA) to decide whether or not to repair or close the Upper Stehekin Valley Road. There are multiple levels of questionable management revealed when the NPS chose to use an EA rather than an EIS (Environmental Impact Statement). We believe the question of the Upper Valley Road should have received the benefit of an EIS rather than an EA.

- This was a decision of extreme import to park visitors from across the nation and the EIS would have required a more detailed, scientific evaluation of the ability to repair the road. An EIS would have also broadened the search for public input concerning the importance of public access into the North Cascades.

- The significance of maintaining the Upper Valley Road was recognized as having significant value in the 1995 General Management Plan (GMP).

- In responses to the 2006 EA, the majority of letters submitted supported maintaining the Upper Stehekin Valley Road.

- The impact of the road closure on visitor access was not clearly articulated in the "Finding of No Significant Impact."

- The impact of the road closure on public safety as it pertains to the ability to fight fires in the upper valley was not addressed in the "Finding of No Significant Impact."

Finally, the NPS sought no input concerning the development of a multi use trail (much less expensive with little environmental impact) to replace the washed out road.



1995 General Management Plan Supports Road Corridor

"Unconstrained private vehicle use would end at High Bridge. Private vehicle use would be allowed, but traffic flow would be regulated by season of the year and/or hour of the day. Public shuttle bus service would be provided from the landing to Cottonwood. Only the public shuttle service, hikers, horses, and bicycles would be allowed to use the road from Bridge creek to Cottonwood. The National Park Service would seek a concessionaire to replace the National Park Service operated public shuttle service. Frequency of shuttle service would increase of the current rate. Fare structures would provide discounts for frequent and local public shuttle users.

The management plan further states:

A wide spectrum of visitors would have diverse means of access to prime natural, cultural, scenic and recreational resources without significantly affecting park resources or degrading the experience of other visitors."