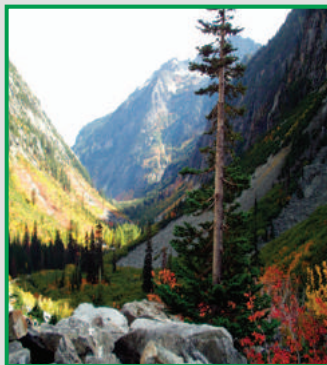


DON'T CALL IT A 'NATIONAL' PARK

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It used to be the term “national” in national park implied mutual ownership. It was everybody’s. The people, whoever they might be, could visit and appreciate the nation’s natural heritage, the places we valued so highly that we set them aside to be preserved in perpetuity. Exclusivity wasn’t part of the concept. National parks weren’t backpacking preserves only for the enjoyment of the tiny minority who are fit, healthy, wealthy and endowed with much free time. Although the nature of backcountry and wilderness made much of the parks accessible only on foot, there were always a few places set up for ordinary people to come, look and share the experience, to have a chance to appreciate the park that in a real sense belongs to them.



For the Stehekin Valley that kind of populist it’s-everybody’s-park attitude has been fading for years, kept alive mainly by the stubborn locals who based their economic existence on it. They are losing the struggle. The National Park Service seems indifferent and the environmentalists who greatly affect official opinion are openly hostile. Some promote exclusivity in the name of preserving the wilderness which, if their attitude prevails, will be accessible only to people like them. That’s the idea: Humans begone, except us.



So in the absence of the political will to prevent it, access to some of the most beautiful places in North America will be lost permanently, and a community that relies on less-than-exclusive public access to those areas will wither and fade. The effects are already felt, as Sunday’s story on the closure of the Stehekin Valley Road by The World’s K.C. Mehafeey showed vividly.



The road once ran from Stehekin landing 23 miles upriver to Cottonwood Camp, well within the North Cascades National Park. That Stehekin itself is accessible only by boat, plane or foot meant the road was lightly used compared with national park thoroughfares elsewhere. But, it made the North Cascades accessible, putting such great beauty only a short walk away. But in 2003 a massive flood and washout cut the road in half. Last August the National Park Service announced it was abandoning the upper 10 miles of road. The must-see places the road once reached now are accessed only after a strenuous backpack.

The proposed remedy is simple. Rebuild the road on the old mining trail, above the river. It’s cheap, relatively, and could avoid future washouts. But, building there requires changing the boundaries of the Stephen Mather Wilderness, which the road bisects. That requires an act of Congress, which is extremely difficult to get, next to impossible some say. Propose any change in wilderness boundaries and people will fight it, even one this small, even if this proposal would not lose a square inch of wilderness, only exchange one road for another.

Wilderness boundaries are not a divine writ. They are human creations. Humans can change them. Doing it to rebuild a road, to return to the public what the public has lost -- access to its national park -- is an entirely just reason. The wilderness system will not fall if this is done. Vacation home builders and mining engineers are not waiting for this opportunity to pounce.

If the road is never rebuilt, the Stehekin Valley will become something different: an exclusive zone, only for some, and most likely not for you. It won’t really be a “national” park, not anymore.

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~ JIM TRAPPE ~