

WILDERNESS FANS LOBBY FOR ... A ROAD

BY RON JUDD

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In the Northwest, the battle for the future of wilderness is increasingly being fought where the rubber meets the road. The roads in question are mostly gravel and lead into some magnificent pieces of wilderness. Case in point: the Stehekin River Road in the North Cascades. A lot of you will remember the ride: A shuttle bus used to make semi-regular runs from Stehekin, the picturesque community at the head of Lake Chelan, 23 miles up the river to Cottonwood Camp. From there, the splendor of wilderness literally surrounded you. Unforgettable alpine haunts such as the waterfall-festooned Horseshoe Basin were a short day-hike away — a five- or six-mile roundtrip. That hike became medium-length in 1995, when the upper three miles of the road washed out. And it got flat-out long in October 2003, when floods closed the road in the High Bridge area, leaving the upper 10 miles accessible only by foot.

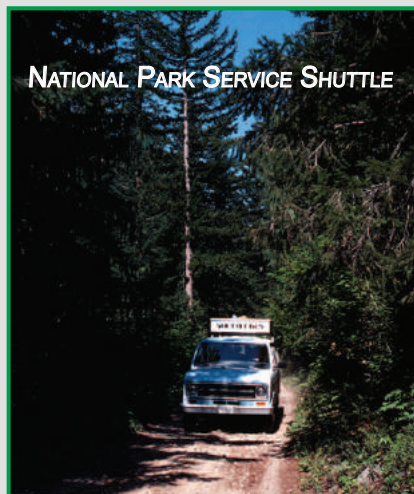
As it mulled the future, the National Park Service heard from Stehekin visitors and residents who wanted the road reopened. They also listened to environmentalists arguing that the road should be left closed, to help restore true “wilderness.” The park, noting that wilderness rules tied its hands on relocating washed-out stretches, announced last year that the upper road would revert to nature.

It hasn't set well with a lot of Stehekin fans, who have launched a new lobbying effort for Congress to nudge the wilderness boundary enough to allow the road to be rebuilt. Environmentalists, predictably, argue that such roads are inherently anti-wilderness, and that it's silly for cash-starved federal agencies to spend millions sending out the road graders after each major flood. It's a reasonable position. And it's one repeated in battles over dozens of other Northwest backcountry roads in sensitive areas, such as the Carbon River Road in Mount

Rainier National Park and the White Chuck River Road, a primary access to the Glacier Peak Wilderness.

The problem, from this longtime trail-wanderer's perspective: People who show up at public hearings about such things tend to be a bit too in love with their own arguments. Stereotypes are flung about: Enviros call road advocates fading, selfish, gimpy-kneed hikers who want Horseshoe Basin to be a five-mile roundtrip walk, like it used to be, rather than the prohibitive 32-mile backpack it is today. Road advocates call environmentalists elitists who believe the only true wilderness is the one they can enjoy by themselves.

There's some truth in all that, and also a lot of bunk. Life is a lot more gray. So, too, wilderness management. A more reasoned approach would be to consider wilderness access questions not with religious zeal but case-by-case reasoning. Some logical criteria: Is a washed-out road the only access into an area, and will leaving it closed lock out the vast majority of potential wilderness visitors? Is there another road access to similar wilderness in the same area? Will reopening



a road subject the lands to crowds incompatible with “wilderness?” Is the road project itself an environmental hazard outweighing the convenience of easy public access?

I apply those questions to the upper Stehekin Valley Road and come to an easy conclusion: Rebuild it. This isn't a road that will bring a billion SUVs into the wilderness. It's one that starts in a tiny village inaccessible by car, and then sends only an occasional shuttle bus into wild lands. I'd never argue for building a road to Cottonwood Camp — or any place like it — from scratch today. But since the bulk of the road is already there, fixing it to restore previously established public access just makes sense.

Some people will call that an environmental cop-out. I call it a real-world compromise. Fortunately, those who want a more solitary, untrammelled wilderness experience are in luck. They can simply avoid Stehekin Valley and set foot toward the other million-plus acres of pristine North Cascades wilderness (combining the National Park and adjacent Pasayten Wilderness), the vast majority of it nowhere near anything that even looks like a road. That's the blessing we enjoy in the Northwest, where — thanks largely to visionary environmental groups, some now arguing for road closures — the last, greatest unspoiled places in the lower 48 states are expansive enough to provide for both uses.

A road here and there, and millions of acres of true wilderness all around it. That's a pretty healthy balance. Maybe we should embrace it — and expend our energy protecting it from real threats. A shuttle bus and a strip mine are vastly different creatures. And with a vigilant public in charge, the continued existence of one need not necessarily herald the arrival of the other.

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