



Kanchenjunga - 28,169'

September 19, 2016

Mount Rainier Backcountry Ranger:

I recently had the privilege of hiking around Mount Rainier on the Wonderland Trail. In the process, I had the opportunity to talk with four of you along the trail. I met two more of you in the office while picking up our permit and talked to several more of you on the phone before and after our trip. What a team! In every case I was impressed with the dedication and professionalism of Mount Rainier's Backcountry team. Thank you for what you do.

I am writing this open letter to the park's backcountry staff because I am concerned that the quality of the wilderness experience in Mount Rainier has been seriously compromised. From my perspective as a visitor, management of Mount Rainier's wilderness area has drifted far from the vision and ideals of the Wilderness Act and is increasingly making management decisions based on resource allocation and target attainment at the expense of wilderness values.

When Congress recognized the value of wilderness and passed legislation to protect remnants of the vast areas of untracked land that once spanned this continent it did so with vision and an awareness of the need to restrain the hand of man. The Wilderness Act was groundbreaking legislation but today, many of our wilderness areas are suffering from management decisions in conflict with the very ideals defined in the Wilderness Act. National Parks in particular have awarded themselves a huge degree of latitude to operate outside the bounds of what many consider the congressionally mandated limitations of wilderness management. In doing so park managers have eroded the very essence of the wilderness entrusted to their care.

Every management decision can enhance or erode the quality of the visitor's wilderness experience. At Mount Rainier, one by one the most egregious decisions add up and the net is negative: splashes of orange and yellow paint marking rocks in the high meadows, stark steel signs on square metal posts, filter cloth peeking out from beneath imported gravel, metal, plastic and fiberglass culverts, rotary-peeled, creosote-treated water bars; all compounded by the roar of chainsaws and the whump-whump of countless helicopter flights bringing in yet more gravel or roofing or decking for shelter renovation. Such management decisions bother me; they are short sighted and willingly violate the sanctity of wilderness; they represent a vote for the efficiency of horsepower chosen over ideals and hard-won trail craft skills.



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Historically, management of Mount Rainier had a different perspective on such matters. Who can visit the Backcountry Office in Longmire without a nod to the vision needed to dedicate the extra time and money to create such a building, indeed to build such a fireplace! In a similar manner consider the extra time and resources required to conceal the steel trusses supporting the trail bridges on the North and South Payallup River with log facing; clearly an effort supported by a management that valued and supported development in harmony with the environment.

Today many of our National Parks proudly maintain structures created by the Civilian Conservation Corps; the C's. We treasure this history and marvel at the quality of their craft. The ability of the C's to work and in build harmony with nature is astounding and admired. But today, where the C's used crosscuts Mount Rainier crews use chainsaws. Where the C's bucked out openings wide enough for a trail to pass Park crews cut a swath 30 to 50 feet wide leaving in their wake an unsightly jumble of rounds and smiley faces that, heaped below the trail, look like an industrial woodlot. It is a demonstration not of restraint or harmony with nature but of the unbridled power of our society; we do it because we can.

On another note I must ask; why is almost every campsite on the Wonderland down in the river bottoms, secreted in dark, drip-misty forests with campsites tight upon one another? Why are hikers herded into sites so cramped you are forced to listen to your neighbor relate yet another Mountain House monologue or endlessly decry their day's aches and pains? How do you teach the your son or daughter the meaning of solitude in such a setting? How do you explain alpenglow or instill a sense of wonder if the new backpacking initiate is denied the opportunity to savor the first light of morning kiss the mountain or idle away an hour lounging against a ridge-top boulder as the sun drops behind the peak? Why cannot the Wonderland Trail hiker greet the mountain with morning coffee or share dinner watching the sun slowly set behind its summit?

The Park has asked the visitor to give up much in the interest of restoring and protecting the Mount Rainier backcountry. Don't get me wrong. I too cringe when I see hikers wandering off trail through wildflower filled meadows. But, today Wonderland hikers are expected to experience wilderness while adhering to a non-negotiable schedule, display permits at all times, camp in crowded, unappealing, sometimes flooded, assigned camps. They are required to forgo campfires and must expect almost daily compliance visits.

I offer that perhaps the pendulum has swung too far. Just as managers today are more sympathetic about protecting the natural environment than those of a past era perhaps it is time to appreciate that today's wilderness user is not the same as the chop-and-burn trailblazer of years ago. Perhaps with such an understanding, management can return some freedom to the wilderness experience. After all, why are Wonderland hikers constrained to such limited and unappealing sites? It is certainly not due to a lack of better, much better, opportunities.

Pretty much every other hiker on the trail knew that Indian Bar #2 was the best campsite on the Wonderland Trail. Why cannot we have more such campsites? Is the Park so afraid that the public will use up every last mountain view or consume the very dregs of each sunset? Certainly



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creating such camps will have small impacts but sites, carefully and thoughtfully selected and well managed, can absorb such use. You know the campsite you would want; seclusion, privacy and views are things we all value. I am asking you to speak up and promote change—to help the user be able to enjoy a more wilderness, wilderness experience.

I understand the ideas I am expressing are not part of current Park Service doctrine. I respect that you may well not agree with all, or much, of what I have to say. However, it is my hope that this letter will promote serious discussion and a rigorous examination of every aspect of Mount Rainier's wilderness management program against the highest wilderness standards

I hope you will be a voice for the mountain. You know the Mount Rainier backcountry—you live and work there. If you don't advocate for *your* wilderness, ask that it be managed with vision, purity, and restraint, then Rainier's wilderness values will continue to erode, it will become less wild, and we shall all have lost another small bit of our heritage.

Thanks for listening

Sincerely,

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