
LETTER FROM THE SUPERINTENDENT

December 2011

Dear Friend of the North Cascades,

It is with great pleasure that we provide to you the *Ross Lake National Recreation Area Final General Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement* – a plan that articulates a vision and management philosophy for guiding decision making in Ross Lake National Recreation Area (NRA) for the next 15 to 20 years.

If you are reading this letter, it is likely that you have been a part of some of what the North Cascades has to offer. Perhaps you have camped at Colonial Creek Campground or kayaked across the turquoise water of Diablo Lake. Perhaps you have climbed Pyramid Peak, hiked the Easy Bank Trail to Desolation Lookout, or attended an interpretive program on the night sky. Regardless of your experience, you know the enjoyment and adventure that the North Cascades can offer, and you understand the importance of ensuring its protection for future generations.

We deeply understand that responsibility as well, and that is why over the past several years we have worked with surrounding communities, local businesses and non-profit organizations, and most importantly, park visitors to create this plan. Over the course of this effort, we heard your desire to recommend 33 river miles for wild and scenic river designation, to convert the Thunder Creek Potential Wilderness Area to designated wilderness, to preserve the natural soundscapes of the Cascades, to protect crucial grizzly bear habitat, and to offer more accessible hiking trails for the average visitor. We heard your recommendations to maintain or improve important facilities like the Wilderness Information Center and camping facilities in Hozomeen and to continue to work with partners like the U.S. Forest Service, North Cascades Institute, Skagit Environmental Endowment Commission, and Seattle City Light to manage and protect these lands. Mostly, we heard your overwhelming desire to connect to this place, to visit these mountains and waters, and to enjoy their history, diversity, and wildness.

We believe this plan heeds your suggestions, concerns, and call for action. This final GMP/EIS sets forth clear actions to manage Ross Lake NRA as a gateway to millions of acres of wilderness by providing enhanced visitor opportunities along the North Cascades Highway and ensuring the long-term stewardship of the surrounding North Cascades ecosystem and wilderness.

As you will see in reading this plan, we have many goals set out for us in the coming years – goals that we created thanks to your involvement in this planning process and goals that we cannot meet without your ongoing help and support. Thank you, to all of you, for sharing your time and energy in helping to make the Ross Lake National Recreation Area what it is today and what it will be in years to come: a place for adventure, education, and engagement, where nature and wildness thrive.

Sincerely,



Palmer (Chip) Jenkins
Superintendent, North Cascades National Park Service Complex



Kayaks at Diablo Lake. Photo by David Snyder.

Ross Lake National Recreation Area

Draft ~~Final~~ General Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement

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Devils Creek Gorge on Ross Lake.

**Draft Final General Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement for
Ross Lake National Recreation Area
Skagit and Whatcom Counties, Washington**

Prepared by United States Department of the Interior: National Park Service

Ross Lake National Recreation Area was established on October 2, 1968 (P.L. 90-544). It is administered as one unit of the North Cascades National Service Park Complex, which also includes North Cascades National Park (north and south units); and Lake Chelan National Recreation Area. The current North Cascades NPS Complex General Management Plan was completed in 1988 and no longer provides adequate guidance to address the management and operational issues now facing park management for Ross Lake National Recreation Area (NRA). These issues include the re-license of three hydroelectric facilities, new and diversified recreational uses, and long-term management of natural resources, cultural resources, and wilderness within Ross Lake NRA.

This draft final general management plan and environmental impact statement examines four possible management strategies, called “alternatives,” and the impacts of implementing these alternatives on Ross Lake NRA. These alternatives address visitor use and the preservation of natural and cultural resources to protect and interpret the North Cascades ecosystem. They comply with National Park Service planning requirements and respond to issues identified during the scoping process. Alternative B is the National Park Service’s preferred alternative. If approved, the preferred alternative will become the general management plan for Ross Lake NRA.

Alternative A is the No Action Alternative and assumes that existing programming, facilities, staffing, and funding would generally continue at their current levels. The primary emphasis of the No Action Alternative would continue to be protection of resources and maintaining existing recreational uses in the NRA.

Alternative B, the Preferred Alternative, focuses on managing Ross Lake NRA as a gateway to millions of acres of wilderness, providing enhanced visitor opportunities along the North Cascades Highway, and making better use of facilities along that corridor, while ensuring the long term stewardship of natural resources, cultural resources, and wilderness. The North Cascades Highway corridor would be managed to provide a variety of day-use and overnight recreational opportunities for visitors with a range of abilities and interests. Management of wilderness and back-country areas would focus on resource protection and compatible recreational activities. Interpretation and education would be a key component of this alternative, emphasizing hands-on experiential learning and stewardship programs.

Alternative C emphasizes the role of Ross Lake NRA in preserving the greater North Cascades ecosystem, which includes two additional National Park System units, two national forests, as well as provincial parks and protected areas across the Canadian border. Park management and education efforts would focus on broader ecosystem issues through leading and coordinating regional and international environmental stewardship programs.

Alternative D focuses on enhancing connections between visitors and the outdoors by providing a wide variety of recreational and educational activities. Overnight accommodations, several new trails, and additional visitor amenities would expand visitor opportunities in Ross Lake NRA. Park management would continue to protect resources and minimize impacts from visitor use.

This final general management plan and environmental impact statement is presented in two volumes. The first volume includes the purpose of and need for the plan, the foundation for planning, the scope of the GMP/EIS, and the alternatives that were considered in the planning process. Volume II includes the description of the affected environment, the environmental consequences, and the appendices which contains, among others, the Skagit Wild and Scenic River Study. Volume II also contains a description of public involvement and consultation processes for the GMP/EIS, the summary of substantive comments on the draft GMP/EIS, responses to those comments, and copies of the letters received from agencies, organizations, and businesses.

The draft general management plan and environmental impact statement was available for public review from July 1 to September 30, 2010, and approximately 1,645 comments were received by mail, email, fax, and on the park’s website.

In July 2010, the NPS held six public meetings to discuss the plan, answer questions, and encourage public comments. Substantive comments are addressed in this final general management plan and environmental impact statement, and



Fishermen in early morning mist on Diablo Lake. Photo by David Snyder.

the text in the document has been changed, clarified, or expanded where necessary. Changes made to the general management plan and environmental impact statement as a result of these public comments are shown in gray highlight or text that is in ~~strikeout~~. The alternatives have been revised or clarified for the following topics: management zones, grizzly bear core area, motor boats, sport climbing, seaplanes, the bridge over the Skagit River in Newhalem, campgrounds, trails, concessions, the land acquisition associated with Diablo Townsite, and a name change from Ross Lake National Recreation Area to North Cascades National Recreation Area has been added. This list does not include those changes made to clarify points, provide additional rationale for decisions, or correct minor errors or omissions.

A 30-day no action waiting period will be initiated upon publication of the EPA's notice of filing of the final GMP/EIS in the *Federal Register*.

For more information about this document, contact

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The Draft Skagit Wild and Scenic River Eligibility and Suitability Studies are included in the appendix of this draft GMP/EIS. The findings and recommendations of these studies are also included in the alternatives chapter.

This document includes a detailed description of the alternatives followed by a description of park resources affected by the alternatives and the projected environmental consequences of the alternatives. Also included in this document are the results of public involvement and consultation with other agencies, organizations, and individuals associated with planning for Ross Lake NRA's future.

Please refer to "How to Use This Document" on the following page for comment procedures and submittal methods and addresses. This draft final general management plan and environmental impact statement has been distributed to agencies, organizations, and individuals for review and comment. The public comment period will extend through September 30, 2010.



Ross Lake from Lighting Creek Bridge. Photo by Elizabeth Boerke.

How to Use This Document

This draft final general management plan and environmental impact statement (GMP/EIS) for Ross Lake National Recreation Area (NRA) is presented in seven chapters and appendices, consistent with federal requirements that guide the preparation of an EIS.

Volume I:

The **Summary** at the beginning of the document provides a condensed version of this document. **Chapter 1: Introduction** sets the stage for the draft GMP/EIS by describing the National Recreation Area, the planning process, the purpose and need for the plan, and implementation of the plan. **Chapter 2: Foundation for Planning and Management** includes the "Foundation Statement" which describes the NRA's purpose, significance, interpretive themes, and fundamental resources and values. It also describes the special Congressional designations, authorizations, mandates, and legal and policy constraints and guidance. **Chapter 3: Scope of the GMP/EIS** details the issues that are addressed in the GMP/EIS, resources and values at stake in the planning process, and the relationship of this GMP/EIS to other plans in the region. **Chapter 4: Alternatives** describes four management alternatives, including the National Park Service's preferred alternative. The alternatives represent reasonable sets of management directions consistent with National Park Service policy and applicable laws and planning requirements. This chapter includes two useful charts: "Alternatives Comparison Table" and "Summary of Impacts."

Volume II:

Chapter 5: Affected Environment provides detailed information on the NRA, focusing on those resources that could be affected by the decisions contained in the individual management alternatives. **Chapter 6: Environmental Consequences** describes the impacts of each alternative on resources within the NRA. **Chapter 7: Public Involvement** summarizes public involvement and the consultation process, including summaries of the public comments received by the NPS during scoping, public review of the draft alternatives, and public review of the draft GMP/EIS. This chapter also presents the substantive comments received by the NPS, the NPS's responses to those comments, and includes copies of the letters received from agencies, organizations, and businesses that was an integral part of the creation of this draft GMP/EIS. This chapter also summarizes public comments received by the NPS during scoping and draft alternatives public review. The **Appendices** provide more detailed information related to the plan, including the full text of the **Skagit Wild and Scenic River Eligibility and Suitability Study**.

All maps and figures are placed within the text of the applicable chapters. In many cases, decisions or other discussions contained in this draft final GMP/EIS refer directly to maps and figures. In fact, many decisions themselves are "map based." The reader must rely on the text, maps, and figures taken together to fully understand the proposed decisions described in this draft final GMP/EIS.

How to Comment on This Document

The public comment period for this draft final GMP/EIS will extend through September 30, 2010. We encourage you to review the document and welcome your comments. During the comment period, comments may be submitted using several methods:

- We prefer that readers submit comments online at the Ross Lake NRA GMP/EIS project website: www.nps.gov/noca/parkmgmt/rlna-gmp.htm
- A postage paid comment form is included in the Ross Lake NRA Draft Final GMP/EIS Executive Summary Newsletter Number 3. You may use this form and attach additional pages as necessary.
- Letters may be sent to:
____ Superintendent, attn: Ross Lake NRA Draft Final GMP/EIS
____ North Cascades National Park Service Complex
____ 810 State Route 20
____ Sedro-Woolley, WA 98284

In addition, comments may be made in person at one or more of the upcoming public open houses. The specific dates and times for these meetings will be announced in local newspapers, in the draft final GMP/EIS newsletter, and on the North Cascades NPS Complex website and Ross Lake NRA GMP/EIS project website. A limited number of additional paper and digital copies of this report are available from the above mailing address. The full report is available for viewing and downloading at the Ross Lake NRA GMP/EIS project website. This document is also available for viewing at public libraries in Concrete, Sedro-Woolley, and Bellingham and at the NPS Pacific West Region's library in Seattle.

Your comments and contributions have been an invaluable component of this planning process so far, and we look forward to your comments on this draft final GMP/EIS.

Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment — including your personal identifying information — may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so.