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## **Mount Ranier National Park**

### **A Study in Recreational Use of Wild Land<sup>1</sup>**

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The national park system came into existence in 1872 when members of the Washburn—Langford—Doane expedition succeeded in having Congress set aside 3,348 square miles of outstanding natural phenomena in northwest Wyoming as Yellowstone National Park. With a precedent thus established other areas were soon set aside for the use and enjoyment of the public. Yosemite, Sequoia, General Grant (now a part of Kings Canyon) and Mount Rainier were included in the system before 1900.

The administration of these areas was usually under any nearby federal agency. Each park was free to develop its own operational plan. To establish a more uniform policy of national park philosophy and operation Congress created the National Park Service in 1916. In the establishing act Congress outlined the basic national park philosophy to be "to preserve the natural phenomena for generations to come and to provide for the needs of park visitors."

Through the first seventy years of national park operation this philosophy could be carried out without too many problems developing; but

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<sup>1</sup> Presented at Weatherford, Dec. 11, 1959.

following World War II more leisure time and paid vacations, a greater mobility and a higher standard of living enabled more Americans to tour the nation. Millions of these tourists descended on the national parks and taxed facilities developed for a much smaller number of visitors—facilities that were further reduced by their neglect during World War II because of man-power and money shortages. In the decade following the war Congress failed to appropriate adequate funds for rehabilitation and expansion of park facilities. Finally, alerted to the problem, Congress agreed to a ten-year "crash" program for park improvements. This is the Mission 66 program, so-named because it is to be completed in 1966.

However, the additional visitors have helped cause a conflict in the basic philosophy of park operation. How can a park play host to a million or more visitors each year, provide for their physical needs and still carry out the congressional mandate to preserve the natural phenomena? Needless to say, when "growing pains" cause a conflict, visitors and park officials do not always agree as to which part of the establishing act should be given preference.

The week-end or holiday visitor to Mount Rainier National Park can observe this conflict as fifteen thousand or more persons enter the park, occupy every available camp or picnic site, crowd the hotels and dining rooms and then overflow into "protected" areas. Park officials are now faced with the problem of planning to meet the needs of ever increasing numbers of visitors.

*The Natural Features of Mount Rainier National Park.* Mount Rainier National Park covers over one hundred square miles in the Cascade Range of west central Washington. The eastern boundary follows the crest of the Cascade Range. Fifty miles to the west is the densely populated Puget Sound Lowland.

There is little question that the leading attraction of the park is THE MOUNTAIN. This "king of the western fire peaks" is 14,410 feet in elevation and towers seven to nine thousand feet above the peaks of the Cascade Range at its base. It is the fifth highest peak in the United States excluding Alaska, but is a much more significant landscape feature than those higher peaks because of the greater height above its foundation.

The upper part of the mountain has been carved into jagged peaks by the work of glaciers that cover almost forty square miles. The glacial system has been created by a combination of cold temperatures at high elevations and a very heavy snowfall. The normal precipitation at Paradise is about one hundred inches a year with most of it falling as snow. Snowfall will exceed fifty feet with accumulations of from fifteen to twenty-five feet on level areas. The approximately one thousand inch (about eighty-three feet) fall of 1955-56 accumulated to a depth of twenty-seven and one-half feet, a record for the United States.

The twenty-six glaciers of Mount Rainier make up the most complete single-peak glacial system in the United States. Individual glaciers extend downward on all sides with the snout of the Carbon Glacier at about 4,600 feet. Others extend to the five thousand-foot level. The Emmons Glacier is the largest; the Nisqually is probably the best known because it is near the intensively used Paradise service area. Until recently the glaciers had been receding slowly, but in the late 1940's several of the more active glaciers began growing again. The Nisqually, for example, is moving downward about 125 feet annually. Whether this is a temporary movement is not known, but it has been thought that eventually the glaciers will stabilize at about six thousand feet where the snow left each year about balances the ice lost by melting.

Ice-carved valleys radiate outward in all directions from the peak. Lower valleys along streams fed by the more active glaciers are covered by boulders carried downstream from the ends of the glaciers. All lakes in the park are of glacial origin. A great number of falls occur where streams drop from the mountain parks into the glacial valleys. Comet Falls, one of the highest, drops about 320 feet from Van Trump Park.

The heavy precipitation assures a dense vegetation cover in the lower elevations where Douglas fir, western red cedar and western hemlock grow to great size. The vegetation pattern changes with increased elevation. The park visitor passes through plant combinations comparable to those he might see in traveling from the Puget Sound area to the Arctic. Colorful flower fields cover the open parks of the Arctic-Alpine zone at five to seven thousand feet elevation. Over seven hundred different varieties of wildflowers have been observed.

Wildlife is not as plentiful as in other national parks, but bears, wapiti, deer, mountain goats and smaller animals can be seen. Lakes and streams are stocked with fish but fishing is not considered exceptional.

Skiing is permitted but since only rope tows are in operation, commercial skiing areas outside the park where chair lifts are used attract skiers in greater numbers. Surveys indicate that two-thirds of winter visitors come to view the snow-covered scenery.

The average park visitor is much like the winter visitor; he comes to see the park's scenic attractions and natural features. The number who come to camp, fish, hike, ski or climb the mountain is a relatively small percentage of all visitors.

*Park Visitors.* Over 1,115,000 persons visited Mount Rainier National Park in 1958. Most of them fall into three general groups with each requiring a rather definite type of service. The largest group is composed of people who reside within a two hundred-mile radius. They come for a one day visit and often bring guests from more distant points to view THEIR mountain. They usually require picnic sites or inexpensive eating facilities, good roads, good viewing points and gasoline—most often in this order. These people usually visit the park on week-ends or holidays and help overcrowd the picnic areas and food services.

The second group is made up of visitors who have included a brief park visit as a part of their vacation plans. Frequent automobile license checks during the summer of 1959 indicate that this group comprises from 55 to 60 per cent of week-day visitors. They are usually more leisurely in their movements and less demanding of services. Their primary requirements are travel information, food, gasoline and lodging if they arrive late in the afternoon.

The third group is made up of people who plan to spend two or more days in the park. One part of this group can afford and prefers the comfort and ease provided by hotels and a more elaborate food service. The services they demand can best be provided by a concessionaire. The second part of this group prefers the campground and open fire. These people are interested in fishing, hiking, mountain climbing and other activities. Campsite, water, restrooms and refuse disposal must be provided. Many in this group are ardent conservationists; a few become problem visitors because of their philosophy that the national parks should belong only to the rugged outdoorsmen. They would eliminate hotels, restaurants and many roads and set up rules that would permit themselves to roam without regulation.

The park officials are subjected to many pressures by people with

demands for services or with ideas on how the park should be operated. On the one side are those demanding more facilities and services while on the other are those who would eliminate some of those presently in existence.

*Park Facilities.* In planning visitor facilities the needs of the visitor must be balanced against the desire to maintain the natural character of park features. This has largely resulted in the concentration of most activities in selected areas where the construction of buildings and other facilities will not mar the scenic attractions. This leaves the greater part of the park relatively free for the natural development of plants and wildlife.

Good hard-surfaced roads permit visitors to cross the entire southern and eastern parts of the park. Equally good roads lead to Paradise and Yakima Park. The four main service areas—Longmire (park headquarters), Paradise, Ohanapecosh and Yakima Park—are located along these roads. One secondary road extends along the west side of the park to the North Puyallup River. Numerous scenic spots are found along this road. Two other roads, not in good condition at present, lead to Moyich Lake (a good fishing spot) and to the Ipsut Creek Campground.

Food and souvenirs can be purchased at all main service areas. Limited sleeping accommodations are available at Paradise, Longmire and Ohanapecosh. Gasoline can be purchased only at Longmire and Yakima Park.

Campgrounds and/or picnic areas are located at White River, Tipsoo Lake, Sunshine Point, Tahoma Creek, Mowich Lake and Ipsut Creek in addition to the main service areas. Professional mountain and glacier guide service and guided horseback trips can be contracted for at Paradise.

Interpretive activities are scheduled at each of the main service areas (or visitor centers as the park service prefers to call them). Ranger-naturalists are stationed at these points to answer questions, explain exhibits, lead nature walks and give illustrated talks. In addition, naturalists are usually present at roadside exhibits at the Box Canyon of the Cowlitz River and at Sunrise Point during peak daytime hours.

*Future Park Needs.* At present all public lodge and food service is under contract to two concessionaires. All rooms available will probably not accommodate more than three hundred guests. Food service for travelers with limited budgets is restricted to snack bars and fountains.

The present buildings are in need of repair or replacement. Since the buildings are old and not likely to withstand the heavy snows of many more winters, replacement is most advisable. Plans for replacing the buildings are complicated by a short summer season that makes it difficult for the operator to show a profit unless relatively high prices are charged; and prices are regulated by the park administrators. The operating season is about one hundred days at Longmire and Ohanapecosh and about seventy-five days at Paradise and Yakima Park. Past experience indicates that winter sports at Paradise are a week-end activity for local people who do not use the concession facilities. And it is doubtful if new buildings would change winter use habits. Thus profitable operation is almost entirely dependent on the summer tourist season.

Present concessionaires have no plans for new buildings and attempts to locate new concessionaires have been unsuccessful. It appears then that any new construction will be financed by the Federal Government. Two alternatives are present: (1) the government construction of building with leasing to concessionaires or (2) government ownership and

operation of facilities. The park service prefers the first alternative. A third suggested alternative is to provide food service only and encourage hotel and motel developments outside the park. The idea is favored by some park officials, but the popularity of Paradise as a vacation spot has already resulted in pressure on Congress to appropriate funds for the construction of a new hotel there.

The increased popularity of camping has caused intensive use of camp areas. Good weather on week-ends or holidays will result in all sites being occupied by 3:00 p.m. Picnic sites are available for only a fraction of the twenty-five to thirty thousand week-end visitors. As a result picnickers spread out over the park and leave garbage and destroyed plants in their wake. However, one phase of Mission 66 is the rebuilding of present camp and picnic facilities and the increasing of the present six hundred sites to three thousand.

Improved hotel, restaurant, camping and picnic facilities will satisfy the basic needs of park visitors, but one question will still remain. How far should the park service go beyond providing the basic needs? Some visitors want additional roads—even to the summit. Others want chair lifts for skiers with their operation to continue during summer months. Requests are made to permit the operation of motor scooters and motor-cycles on trails. It has also been suggested that animals, especially bears, be placed in cages in order that children would be certain to see them.

In my opinion none of these things should be permitted. Much of the northwestern and northern parts of the park is a wilderness area where plants may grow without being trampled and wildlife can live in a natural environment. There are those who prefer the quiet beauty of the unspoiled wilderness where the view of a mountain goat silhouetted against rugged peaks becomes a summer's thrill and where the smell of frying trout whets the appetite for breakfast. Trails lead into the wilderness from all directions and it can be reached by anyone with the time, desire and stamina to do so. It is in such areas that the purpose of the national park system becomes real; here is preserved the best of nature for our enjoyment and for those who follow.

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