

A Mount Hood National Park? It's time to start thinking of how to save this mountain of history for all Oregonians

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by Albert Kaufman and Tom Kloster

Mount Hood has been logged, gouged and scraped. Yet after a half-century of overuse, its 11,240-foot peak still beckons the thousands who climb it each year and the millions who drive, camp and hike along its flanks.

Oregon's hard-working iconic mountain could use some TLC. It's time to push for national park protection. Even with all the state's beauty, Oregon boasts just one national park, Crater Lake. With an incredible lack of foresight, Congress hasn't approved any sizable additions to the state's wilderness in two decades.

Sen. Ron Wyden's welcome proposal would nearly double Mount Hood's protected wilderness. But much of the Mount Hood region remains open to logging, mining and commercial development. A national park designation provides significant environmental and historic protection, reserved for only unique natural places.

We're not the first to savor the mountain. Mount Hood is entwined with Oregon's history. The mountain has erupted and changed the local landscape four times in the past 10,000 years. When Lewis and Clark visited the region, the volcano sent mudflows as far as Troutdale.

The mountain, rising full force from a low-point in the Cascades, dominates our horizon. Early estimates of its height were wildly off, with some adventurers claiming it topped 20,000 feet. Oregonian editor Thomas Dryer published a since-debunked account of climbing Mount Hood in 1854, claiming climbers passed out from the altitude and "Captain Travillot found blood oozing from his skin . . ."

Mount Hood was both feared and revered by Native Americans, who still harvest huckleberries in the high country around the peak in a tradition spanning countless generations. Later, the mountain became the symbolic beacon for white settlers arriving on the Oregon Trail, and the final obstacle as they struggled over the Barlow Road.

In the 1890s, climbers and skiers began discovering the mountain with the construction of Cloud Cap Inn. In the early 1900s, the Mount Hood Loop Highway finally opened the entire mountain to tourism; the south side blossomed as a major winter sports area.

From 1905 to 1940, Mount Hood was considered for national park status several times, which would have prevented decades of logging. Even now, many visitors think Mount Hood and the Columbia Gorge are already a national park because of the parklike scenic highway, lodges and monuments at Crown Point, Multnomah Falls and Timberline.

Most of the mountain is publicly owned and under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Forest Service. After World War II, the Forest Service increasingly managed Mount Hood for its commodities:

logging, grazing and mining became the driving forces. By the 1990s, these economies declined after criticism about their sustainability and the scars of overdevelopment. In that decade, recreation use on the mountain has only increased.

A park with development

Although scarred and abused, Mount Hood keeps enriching our lives. The mountain and surrounding forest provide drinking water for millions and recreation and income for millions more. National park status would continue to offer these enhancements while adding others and countering the threats, mostly from development, facing the mountain.

A Mount Hood National Park would follow a different path than Crater Lake or Mount Rainier, two Northwest gems set aside as national parks long before development took its toll. Instead, we'd use the eastern model guiding the development of the Shenandoah, Great Smoky Mountains and Everglades national parks. In each case, the value of the park was realized long after the land was altered. The park designation became, to a great degree, a restoration effort.

National park status would benefit Oregonians in many ways. First, commercial logging on the mountain would end, allowing the area to recover from nearly a century of over-cutting. Hundreds of new jobs would be created planting trees, building trails, decommissioning logging roads and creating the infrastructure for the new national park.

Other work would include National Park Service staff to serve new visitors attracted to the area. New campgrounds and lodging would be built and local towns along the Loop Highway such as Troutdale, Sandy, Cascade Locks, Rhododendron, Dufur, ZigZag, Hood River, Parkdale and Welches would benefit.

The assault continues

Sure, a multitude of questions arise before such a big change would happen. How would ski areas within park boundaries be managed? Would there be park entry fees? What would the boundaries of the new park be?

Consider these questions, too: What would Oregon be like without Mount Hood's triangular peak keeping watch? How would we tout our quality of life without its fern-wrapped rivers, verdant meadows and tucked-away campsites? You'd expect the U.S. Forest Service and our elected officials to place a strong emphasis on protecting the mountain from overdevelopment.

Yet, the mountain is under assault from highway widening, logging of the few remaining stands of big trees and proposals to greatly expand the

Cooper Spur resort on its northeast flank. Meanwhile, the number of trails, picnic areas, scenic drives and campgrounds has declined, despite increasing use by our growing metropolitan population.

It doesn't have to be this way. Oregon Senator Wyden's plan to expand wilderness areas in the Mount Hood National Forest is great. But it would still leave important parts of the region unprotected.

Why not designate all of Mount Hood and adjoining portions of the Columbia Gorge a national park? That would unleash the full scope of scenic and historic protections needed to ensure the mountain remains for future generations to enjoy. As the first step, our congressional delegation should ask the National Park Service for a feasibility study on Mount Hood.

We have an opportunity to leave a great legacy: a new Mount Hood National Park. We could be part of a national movement -- just like the Maine Woods, Hells Canyon and Sonoran Desert efforts -- working to protect this country's remaining gems. Mount Hood is worth protecting and restoring. Oregonians owe it to our children and grandchildren to pass down this legacy.

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