

The Role of American Alps Legacy Proposal in Public Lands Conservation

The American Alps Legacy Proposal will provide protection for public lands in the North Cascades that are threatened by natural resource extraction, energy development, and global warming. Some of these threats are immanent and others may develop over decades.

The frequently heard statement, “if it’s not broke, don’t fix it,” is short-sighted, especially when it is applied to conservation of wild and pristine public lands. It would be convenient if there were a single dominant and immediate threat to the North Cascades. That would make it much easier to organize around protecting the area and to increase public support for immediate action.

But, N3C and its American Alps partner organizations take a long-run view of conservation. It has been more than 50 years since we first started promoting the North Cascades National Park and we will still be committed to protecting the North Cascades 50 years from now. When you love a place with 500 year old trees, you can not narrow your focus to just immediate environmental threats. You must take the long-run approach to conservation.

Some of the long-term threats to the North Cascades ecosystem are linked to the competitiveness of the US economy. Who can predict where the US economy will be in 10 or 20 years, little lone in 50 years? Will the US remain the dominant economy in the world? Or, will we become more dependent on natural resource extraction and export to help preserve our economic strength? We would all like to think everything will remain the same, but there are no guarantees that resource extraction will not come to again dominate the US economy in the future.

How long has it been since an endless stream of logging trucks were carrying old growth trees out of the North Cascades? Not much more than 30 years, and perhaps only a brief pause in the traditional extractive approach to the North Cascades. With continuing resource depletion in Asia and South America, and aggressive logging in northern Canada, who can say that the US won’t become a major source of timber for developing economies around the world? How much pressure is there going to be to “harvest” the maturing and valuable timber in the Bacon Creek, Baker River, and Cascade River watersheds? We need to protect our forests before the logging pendulum swings back the other way.

Mining is also a long-term threat to the North Cascades. Gold and other minerals are present in the American Alps area. As world population increases and demand for minerals inevitably increases, there will likely be more pressure for mining in the North Cascades. Mines not only damage the land, but they also pollute streams with acids and heavy metals. Converting the American Alps proposal area to national park will limit future mining claims and likely make a big difference in the number of new mines in the American Alps over the next 50 years.

Energy sources are coming to dominate environmental discussions at the national and state levels. The North Cascades has many pristine streams that are ideal for small hydropower production. Energy from small hydropower is now perceived by some as “green” energy. Green energy is being aggressively promoted at the national level. Every year, Washington State considers legislation to designate small hydropower as a “renewable energy source.” Multiple public and private entities are searching the North Cascades for small hydropower sites. One of the constraints on small hydropower is the cost of building and permitting the power lines that carry energy from source to user. The power lines penetrating up the Skagit Valley to Ross Dam make Skagit watershed streams a powerful attractant for small hydropower developers.

The US is actively pursuing biomass as a source of future energy. The Forest Service, with its multiple use mandate, is already looking at its role in producing biomass for energy production. Most of the trees east of Ross Lake are not currently attractive for traditional logging. However, they could make excellent biomass to feed the US demand for energy. When the energy spigot in the Middle East dries up and the price of energy makes forest biomass harvest economically feasible, as it likely will some day, will conservationists be able to withstand the public demand for biomass from National Forests to fuel our cars? Even the most ardent alternative energy proponent will have a hard time justifying biomass extraction from a national park.

Global warming is also a threat to the North Cascades. Water is an increasingly sought after resource in the Methow Valley, as it is in many areas of the North Cascades. Already, there is a history of conflict between ranchers who need water for irrigation, developers who need water for development, and agencies and conservation groups that would preserve in stream flows for fish and other aquatic resources. This conflict will only increase as glaciers melt, snow and rainfall patterns change, and streams become drier in the summer. How long will it be before there are very serious calls for water storage dams in the upper Methow watershed? We need to protect our pristine rives and streams now, before it becomes even more difficult.

Global warming also impacts wildlife. As forests continue to burn and riparian areas continue to dry out, wildlife must find suitable habitat to survive. Biologists do not fully understand how wildlife will be able to move and/or adapt to global warming. Renewed logging and mining, small hydropower development, water storage dams, and biomass extraction will all place further stresses on wildlife. Converting 304,300 acres of Forest Service and National Recreation Area lands to National Park will limit hunting in these areas and create a major refugia for wildlife populations, including wolves, grizzly bears, wolverine, lynx, and other endangered species.

National park status will provide significantly more long-term protection for the North Cascades than the current multiple use national forests, with its management plan overlays that can change forest management with the next administration. The public will likely fight harder in the future to protect a treasured national park than it will to protect multiple use National Forest lands.