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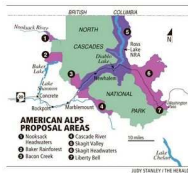
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A view of the mountains from Ross Lake in the North Cascades National Park.



Completing the North Cascades National Park would be a gift for our future  
By Peter Jackson

These feel like the worst of times, with a stymied economy and basement-level confidence in the nation's political class. All of us ache for something -- anything -- to restore a sense of hope and national purpose.

For lawmakers, Priority One must be jobs and the federal budget. Along the way, however, we also need to address the problem, real or perceived, of impoverished leadership.

There is an opportunity, however minor in the broader scheme of life, to demonstrate farsightedness and bipartisanship. It's called the American Alps Legacy Project, and it centers on our own back yard: the North Cascades National Park.

For years, a small group of volunteers, including veteran Everett schoolteachers Phil and Laura Zalesky, have labored to complete the original plan for North Cascades National Park. Forty years ago much of the park was, in the political lexicon, horse-traded away. It was a sign of the times, even in an era of sweeping, innovative legislation (and back when "bipartisan" was not an oxymoron).

On Oct. 2, 1968, the North Cascades National Park was signed into law by President Lyndon Johnson. Then-Gov. Dan Evans, Sen. Scoop Jackson, Rep. Lloyd Meeds, conservationist Harvey Manning and other visionary Northwesterners recognized the benefits that would flow from the new park.

Manning later reflected on the legislation. "In 2000, they will say, 'You were too timid. You compromised too much. You should have been more far-sighted, more daring.' I hereby place on record my personal apologies to the year 2000. In our defense, we will then only be able to say, 'We did not ask for protection for all of the land we knew needed and deserved protection.'" Manning had it right: Hundreds of thousands of acres were excluded in 1968 as part of the negotiating process.

Iconic areas, such as the Nooksack Headwaters, Baker Rainforest and Liberty Bell were not included. Low-elevation wildlife habitats and old growth forests also remain outside National Park boundaries. Many unspoiled rivers and streams still do not have the protection that will come with National Park designation. The National Park also failed to achieve the recreation and economic benefits that were promised.

Politics is the art of the possible, and compromise, some of it head-poundingly painful, is a necessary evil.

In fairness, against the backdrop of a resource, timber-based economy in 1968, the park was still a profile in neck-extending leadership. The Bellingham Chamber of Commerce famously sent a telegram to Rep. Meeds encouraging him not to return to town if he moved forward with his park bill. (Meeds later framed the telegram for display in his office). Things have changed: The Bellingham City Council recently voted 7-0 in favor of the American Alps Legacy proposal.

American Alps, with the leadership of Dan Evans, the Zaleskys, and many others, will make whole the original conservation vision for the North Cascades. Enactment will provide protection for at-risk fish and wildlife species, create family-friendly recreation opportunities, enhance economic benefits in communities adjacent to the park, and include iconic and beautiful places in the North Cascades appropriate for a world-class destination. Support for the proposal is far reaching, including regional businesses, conservation groups, and the Snohomish, Whatcom and King county councils.

Lands included in the American Alps Legacy Proposal range from low-elevation rainforest along the Baker River to 8,970-foot-high Black Peak along the Cascades Crest. The proposal will increase the National Park by 237,702 acres. The American Alps proposal focuses only on federal lands. No private, state or local government lands are included. Here's a snapshot of what's at stake:

- Nooksack Headwaters (3,790 acres): The headwaters of the Nooksack River include some of the most picturesque lands in the North Cascades. Mount Shuksan dominates the view. The beautiful blue waters of the Nooksack reveal the glacial source of this wild river. One of the larger hardwood/conifer wetlands in the North Cascades can be found here.
- Baker Rainforest (13,209 acres): The Baker Rainforest, with its giant old-growth cedars, cascading streams, pristine river and low-elevation winter habitats, will be a critical front-

country addition to the national park. Including this area will substantially increase low-elevation hiking opportunities that are currently limited.

- **Bacon Creek (10,709 acres):** Bacon Creek is a high-priority stream for salmon restoration in the Skagit River system. Bacon Creek watershed also provides excellent low-elevation winter habitat for wildlife. Including Bacon Creek in the National Park will provide new front-country recreation opportunities near the park entrance.
- **Cascade River (21,042 acres):** The pristine river, old-growth forests, popular trails and world-class scenery in the Cascade River watershed will contribute significantly to visitor experiences in an expanded park. Including these lands will enhance salmon recovery in the Skagit River system and increase low-elevation habitat for black bears and other wildlife.
- **Skagit Valley (94,644 acres):** Converting the Ross Lake National Recreation Area into national park will increase visitation to the North Cascades. Park designation signifies to potential visitors that world-class attractions are available.
- **Skagit Headwaters (84,953 acres):** The Skagit River headwaters are among the most remote and intact wild lands in the North Cascades. With towering peaks along the Pacific Crest and deep glacier-carved valleys to the west, these remote lands are an ideal location for grizzly bear, wolverine and wolf populations. The striking views from Cutthroat Pass, Granite Pass and other sites on the Pacific Crest Trail are truly unmatched anywhere else in the North Cascades.
- **Liberty Bell (9,355 acres):** The area between Rainy and Washington passes includes some of the most dramatic park-quality scenery in the North Cascades. With its precipitous peaks, popular climbing and hiking trails, and diverse wildlife habitats, this unique area will be an outstanding addition to the national park.

The American Alps area also serves as a linkage corridor between the North Cascades and the Rocky Mountains and between the North Cascades and the British Columbia Coast Range. The strength of biological connectivity between these three major mountain ecosystems in western North America depends, in part, on the ecological health of this core area in the North Cascades.

American Alps is not without opposition: Bear hunters will lose some hunting ground, and the U.S. Forest Service will need to cede land to the U.S. Park Service. These are manageable challenges, however, even in an age of lowered expectations. For Americans, problems are tractable. Obstacles can be overcome with a blend of imagination and political courage.

Politics is a raw extension of human nature, and human nature can be cutthroat and self-serving as well as farsighted and inspired. The idea of, say, Democratic Sen. Maria Cantwell pairing with Republican Rep. Doc Hastings on American Alps may sound like a lions-and-lambs illusion. It doesn't need to be.

Working across the aisle on the American Alps Legacy Project, lawmakers have a chance to make a meaningful difference for future generations, all the while restoring, piece by piece, our country's ebbing faith in its elected leadership.

Peter Jackson is an editor at Crosscut.com and co-chair, along with Jim Wickwire, of the American Alps Legacy Project. He is the son of the late Sen. Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson.  
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