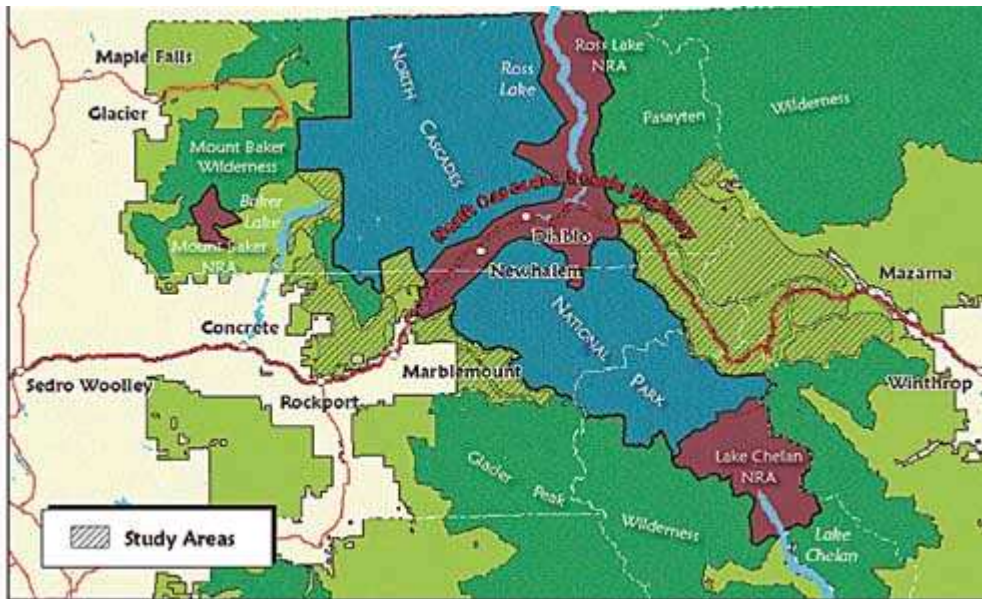


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American Alps Legacy Project envisions a bigger, better national park



By [Joyce Campbell](#)

A renewed effort is in motion to expand North Cascades National Park and nearby wilderness boundaries and build on the original vision of the park that was created in 1968.

The North Cascades Conservation Council launched the American Alps Legacy Project campaign on Friday (May 15) with the goal of completing the park by including lowland forests and rivers as well as scenic areas along the North Cascades Highway between Newhalem and Washington Pass.

"People think the scenic corridor is protected, but it could be developed," said Jim Davis, executive director for NCCC. He said it might not change in the next 10 to 20 years, but as the social structure changes, the land now under Forest Service management could support mining, downhill ski areas and small hydroelectric projects. As energy prices go up, it becomes more economically feasible to develop renewable energy that could de-water streams and string power lines to the west, he said.

The study area covers more than 350,000 acres and includes lands east and west of the national park and most of the Ross Lake National Recreation Area. The project focuses strictly on federal lands and no private lands will be affected, said Davis.

NCCC was founded in 1957 and played a lead role in the creation of the national park complex and the Pasayten, Glacier Peak, Mt. Baker and Wild Sky wilderness areas.

The boundaries of the park were drawn around timber sales and potential hydro projects, creating the arbitrary shape of the park border. Those projects are abandoned now, said Davis.

The American Alps project would protect critical watershed landscape features, extend wildlife corridors and non-motorized recreation opportunities to the growing population from the Puget Sound area.

The national forest already provides "scenery management" within the highway corridor according to Jennifer Zbyszewski, recreation manager for the Methow Valley Ranger District. There are restrictions on commercial timber harvest, road building and prescribed burning. "We have very strict management direction for that area focused on non-motorized recreation and visual quality. The goal is to look wild and unaltered."

"We will not cut people out of areas of traditional use," said Davis. "We'll make sure lots of areas are left for hunting." Harts Pass, a popular snowmobile area, is not included in the study area. More hiking trails will be available in the park, isolated from hunting.

"We need some land for multiple use," said Steve Darwood, owner of Cascade Wilderness Outfitters. He said parks are more restrictive for large groups. "I feel we're stewards of the land. We're vested and do a good job as it is without being restricted more."

The conservation organization is seeking local community support for the project, which is projected to bring major economic benefits to the gateway communities in the Methow and Skagit river valleys. Davis spoke to the Winthrop Chamber of Commerce Thursday (May 14) to talk to local business folk about potential economic benefits of increased visitation from tourists, recreationists and hunters under the American Alps Legacy Project vision.

"In terms of recreation it's ideal," said Rita Kenny, owner of Winthrop Mountain Sports. "We lost our Forest Service visitor center and this is an opportunity to bring it back and do it better." The study project includes a new visitor center with trails, roads and parking areas.

The project is in a five-month study phase and seeking input on areas appropriate for designation as national park or wilderness. A park/wilderness proposal will be released during the fall and American Alps volunteers are available for presentations to community organizations. Congress would have to take action for the changes to be implemented. It took 11 years to create North Cascades National Park after the first proposal.

For more information go online to www.americanalps.org or call (360) 296-5159.

The area being studied for more protection includes land on both sides of Highway 20 from just a few miles past Mazama.

Map courtesy of American Alps Legacy Project

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