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## Let's put North Cascades park in order

*Last updated March 12, 2009 9:36 p.m. PT*

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P-I COLUMNIST

POLITICAL STRUGGLES of the 1960s are literally mapped out in the kooky boundaries of North Cascades National Park. It's time to straighten out -- literally -- omissions made long ago.

Driving up the North Cascades Highway from Ross Lake to Rainy Pass, most visitors marvel at the scenery and assume they are in the 694,000-acre park-and-recreation area complex.

Not so. The highway is officially a parkway, but it leaves the Ross Lake National Recreation Area just above Ruby Arm on Ross Lake.

The result: A wonderful hike begins at Rainy Pass and leads to Lake Ann -- which is on national forest land -- but then enters the national park when it reaches Maple Pass.

Up off the Mount Baker Highway, a 4-mile down-and-up hike heads to another Lake Ann. It serves as base camp for those climbing nearby Mount Shuksan.

Lake Ann is outside the national park. The mountain is inside the park. Not far away, the hike into Nooksack Cirque -- an incredible "hole" beneath the northeast walls of Shuksan -- goes for miles before crossing the park boundary.

In the 1960s, wild places claimed by hunters, loggers and Seattle City Light were deliberately left out of the park.

The area around Hannegan Pass, in eastern Whatcom County, was the scene of a police bear hunt and home to a much-hunted mountain goat herd. It was excised. The North Cascades Park boundary is a mile over the pass.

The North Cascades Conservation Council is a venerable, and often contentious, conservation group. It fought for a park in the days when a writer at Seattle's duller daily sneered at "mountain climbers and birdwatchers."

Diatribes against horsemen, loggers, developers, cyclists and federal managers -- often under the pseudonym "Theirate Birdwatcher" -- filled the pages of "The Wild Cascades."

Harvey Manning, co-author of the "100 Hikes" guidebook, even took after the "North Gollydarn Highway."

The conservation council seems ready to give diplomacy a chance.

It is quietly consulting such folk as horsemen and local county commissioners, adversaries of the old days, about expanding the park..

If history is any guide, property rights radicals are sure to get out their pitchforks. Certain agitator-hustlers

have made a living preying on the fears of federal "land grabs."

It's not a matter of "taking away." The conservation council is sensitive to places, such as Canyon Creek off the North Cascades Highway, which is prized by hunters.

As well, it pays not to let such gun groups as the National Rifle Association draw a bead on you.

In 1994, Congress passed the California Desert Protection Act. Its centerpiece was to be a Mojave National Park, protecting a vast swath of desert roughly midway between Los Angeles and Las Vegas.

Enter the NRA: It decided to fight the 1.6 million-acre proposed park. Congress caved. The park was downgraded to a "Mojave National Preserve" in which hunting was allowed and which draws far fewer visitors than it would have as a park.

Corners of the North Cascades National Park Service Complex have the misfortune to lie in the district of U.S. Rep. Doc Hastings. Hastings has a rating of "zero" from the League of Conservation Voters.

What, then, could be done to sensitively enlarge the park and clear up conflicting land management?

The Cascade River Road is a place to start. The road leads into the national park. Its maintenance is a burden on Skagit County. Bizarre boundaries put Hidden Lake in the park while Hidden Lake Lookout is outside its boundaries.

The Cascade River would be a natural place to put land in the park. On the North Cascades Highway, land south and west of state Route 20 could go into the park, with Canyon Creek protected as national forest wilderness.

A big "dent" in the park boundary -- where Seattle City Light wanted to divert water out of Thunder Creek -- could be straightened. The land would be made part of the park instead of the Ross Lake National Recreation Area.

Such changes are needed, but may have to wait.

The priority preservation project in this Congress is putting 24,000 acres of the wild Pratt River, in eastern King County, into the Alpine Lakes Wilderness Area.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., and Rep. Dave Reichert, R-Wash., are working on the Pratt project.

Murray had to bust a Senate filibuster to get the 106,000-acre Wild Sky Wilderness, in Snohomish County, approved by Congress last year. She does not believe in legislative overload.

Rep. Rick Larsen, D-Wash., whose district includes most of the North Cascades complex, seems to need a rest. He went to the mat for the Wild Sky, but he has not signed on to the Pratt River legislation.

Still, a great national park needs boundaries reflecting natural features, not straight lines drawn by politicians.

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