

Date: Oct 2, 2011; Section: Front Page; Page: A1

ONE FINAL ATTEMPT

Story by **TAHLIA HONEA** t Photos by **FRANK VARGA** / Skagit Valley Herald

NORTH CASCADES NATIONAL PARK — Forty years ago, a group of mountaineers gathered to protect the wilderness and wildlife of the North Cascade Mountain range.

The group drafted a plan and lobbied politicians, eventually succeeding in creating North Cascades National Park. While they celebrated their victory, they were disappointed that the park didn't include more land.

Now in their 80s and 90s, members of that group, the North Cascades Conservation Council, along with younger members, have come together with the aim of expanding the park and fulfilling their original vision. "It's just nice to know it's finally happening," said 91-year-old Polly Dyer during a recent trip through the Forest Service land she's hoping will be added to the park.

Dyer, a leading Seattle conservationist in the Northwest, still serves on the Conservation Council board along with two other founders, 92-year-old Patrick Goldsworthy and 87-year-old Phil Zalesky.

With a conservationfriendly administration in the White House, the group is pushing to get its proposed expansion before Congress — and to see its dream come true.

"I want it while I'm still alive," Zalesky said. "I'm 87, and I don't have that many years to spend to try and get a park."

The proposal

What's being called the American Alps Legacy proposal includes converting the Ross Lake National Recreation Area — but not the lake — into national park land, as well as the Skagit River headwaters and the area between Rainy and Washington passes, including Liberty Bell. The Baker Rainforest, filled with old-growth cedars, also would be in the park, as well as the Bacon Creek area, the Nooksack headwaters and Cascade River.

The proposal would add 238,000 acres to the park, increasing it by about onethird.

Conservation Council Executive Director Jim Davis said this will add needed low-elevation habitat to the park for wildlife and make it more accessible to users.

The plan includes adding more user-friendly recreation opportunities, such as visitor centers, interpretive centers, more trails, improved parking and interpretive sites, and campgrounds.

While providing more opportunities for park users, the proposal also aims to protect the land that is critical habitat for wolverines, grizzly bears, gray wolves, mountain goats, marbled murrelets, spotted owls and salmon.

"Expanding the North Cascades National Park will provide the land management authority needed to assure long-term ecological health and biodiversity conservation in this critical portion of the North Cascades," the proposal reads.

On a recent stroll through the Baker Rainforest, the 91-year-old Dyer admired the moss and other growth that lined the forest floor, as well as a gigantic cedar that survived the logging frenzy there during the past century.

"The old lady and the old tree," she joked as she stood beside it.

Restrictions

All of the acreage in the proposed expansion is federal and would be changed to park land. More than 140,000 acres are now Forest Service land that would be incorporated. The entire Ross Lake National Recreational Area would no longer be a recreation area, but part of the park.

Those changes would likely bring more restrictions. Hunting and dogs are not allowed in national parks as they are in forest land or national recreation areas. Camping is more restricted and gathering things like mushrooms and wildflowers is not allowed in national parks, popular activities on Forest Service lands.

The possibility of mining and logging also would likely be eliminated.

The threat of restrictions has raised concerns among some, including Marblemount business owner Don Clark. His family has owned Skagit River Resort since before the park was formed.

He watched firsthand the original proposal for the park, which promised economic prosperity, but instead shut out industries like logging and depressed nearby towns. Ideas like a tram, expansive trails and visitor centers didn't happen, he said.

"With every five-year plan revision they've removed more of what was promised," Clark said.

He doesn't believe the expansion would do anything but restrict use and hurt the area, which already is struggling to stay viable.

With a federal budget crunch, the last thing politicians will spend money on is developing a national park, he said.

"What is the economic climate in the U.S. right now?" he said. "The U.S. government is busted and they're not taking on things like this. What guarantee do these communities have that a single dime would be spent in their communities when this designation occurs?"

Davis said the money to develop campgrounds and buildings would eventually come.

"It may not happen in the next few years while the economy is in the doldrums, but it will happen," Davis said.

Davis also said the final proposal leaves out large chunks of hunting ground the council had originally wanted in the park as a concession to hunters.

Clark said the Forest Service land also has served as a buffer between the national park as it stands and the people who live in the surrounding areas, protecting them from the dangers of bears and providing them wider opportunities for recreational activities.

"This plan reduces those buffers right down to the communities," he said. "It's not right."

More visitors

The Conservation Council says the expansion is what's needed to make a largely unknown park more usable to attract more visitors, and some business owners agree.

"This is like a little pot of gold in our backyard and no one wants to do anything with it," said Marshall Cooper, who owns the Buffalo Run Restaurant and Inn in Marblemount and heads up the local business association. "It just sits there and sits there and sits there."

A report commissioned by the Conservation Council says the expansion could create more than 1,000 jobs in the areas surrounding the park.

Cooper said the expansion and added attractions are exactly what Marblemount could use. Plus, he said, "it's the right thing to do."

Gerry Cook worked for the Forest Service before the national park was established, then was one of the first employees when it was created. He had worked the longest time of any other park employee, 44 years, until his recent retirement.

"It's a big deal to me," Cook said of the possible expansion. "You just have to look into the future. That's the reason I support the expansion."

Cook believes the national parks will become even more treasured as the population increases and said now is the time to add to the park.

To do that, a member of Congress would need to propose a bill. Davis said the Conservation Council is working to have Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., sponsor a bill to create the park that was first dreamed of by the mountaineers like Dyer, Goldsworthy and Zalesky.

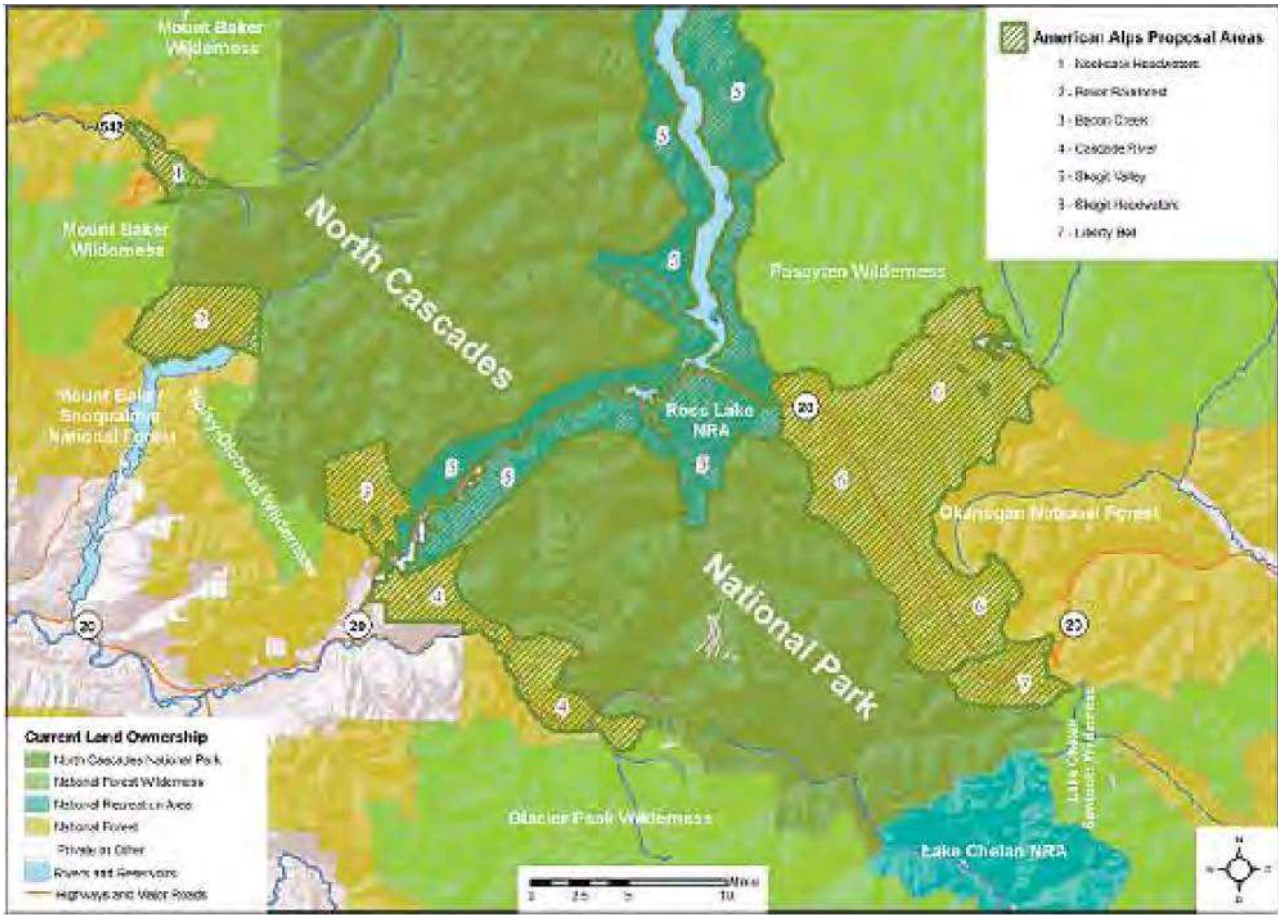
"With Obama in office there is a little window to get through," Cook said. "If they don't get through now they probably won't in a long time. The political moment is right."

n Tahlia Honea can be reached at 360-416-2148 or thonea@skagitpublishing.com.



Polly Dyer, a founding member of

the North Cascades Conservation Council, stands next to an old-growth cedar tree in the Baker Rainforest. The conservation group hopes this tree and the surrounding forest will be preserved by making the rainforest part of the North Cascades National Park.



Frank Varga

Skagit Valley Herald

Courtesy of the American Alps Legacy Project

Proposed notable additions

Liberty Bell, 9,355

acres: From Washington Pass to Rainy Pass along both sides of the North Cascades Highway, currently part of the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest.

Skagit headwaters, 84,953 acres: From Rainy Pass to Ross Lake along both sides of the North Cascades Highway, currently part of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest.

Skagit Valley, 94,644 acres: Land surrounding Ross Lake and along both sides of the North Cascades Highway, currently part of the Ross Lake National Recreation Area managed by the National Park Service.

Cascade River, 21,042 acres: Low elevations along the Cascade River with old-growth forests

southeast of Marblemount, currently part of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest.

Bacon Creek, 10,709

acres: A high-priority salmon-restoration stream in the Skagit River system north of Marblemount, currently part of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest.

Baker Rainforest, 13,209

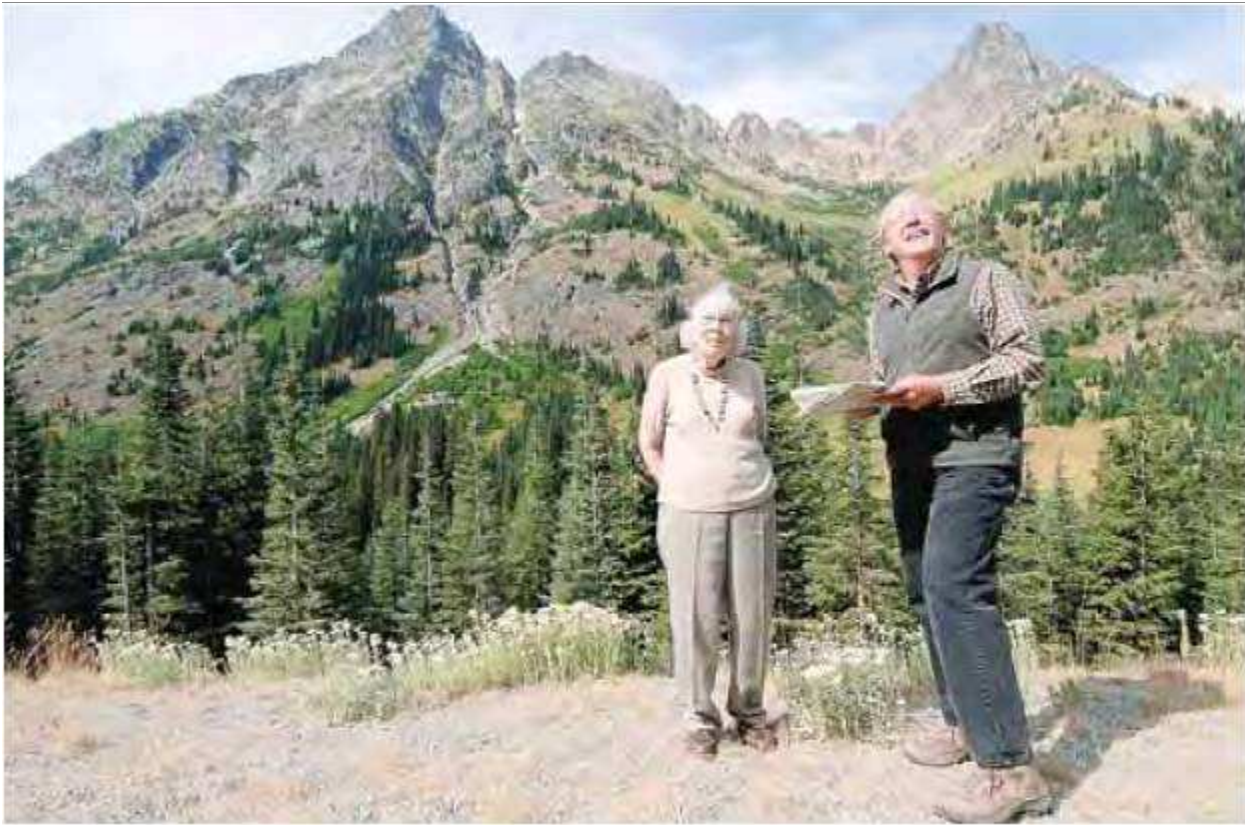
acres: Low-elevation habitat in Whatcom County along the Baker River north of Concrete with old growth cedar, currently part of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest.

Nooksack headwaters, 3,790 acres: Mt. Shuksan views and habitat for elk, currently part of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest.

■ Compiled from the North Cascades Conservation Council's final proposal. To read the plan, visit www.americanalps.org.



TOP: In this photo montage, Polly Dyer, 91, a founding member of the North Cascades Conservation Council, looks over the Ross Lake National Recreation Area, which would be incorporated into the North Cascades National Park under the American Alps Legacy proposal.



BOTTOM: Dyer stands with the council's executive director, Jim Davis, on the North Cascades Highway between Rainy and Washington passes in the Liberty Bell area.