

Reading



View of the Olympic Mountains from Hurricane Ridge. Photo by Jeff Gunn.

History of the Olympic Peninsula

Olympic National Park is renowned for the diversity of its three distinct ecosystems: the rugged glacier-capped mountains, the grand old-growth temperate rain forest, and the dramatic Pacific coast. Eleven major river systems drain the Olympic mountains, offering some of the best habitat for migrating fish species in the country. The coastline, which covers over 70 miles, is the longest undeveloped coast in the contiguous United States and is rich in native animal and plant species.

The richness of the Olympic Peninsula is due not only to its abundant natural features, but also its millennia of human history and interaction. Human connection to the landscape is rooted in the ancestral practices and uses of the land by regional tribes. Interwoven throughout the Park's diverse landscape is an array of cultural and historic sites that tell the human story of the park. More than 650 archaeological sites in the Park document 12,000 years of human occupation of land area presently within the boundaries of Olympic National Park. Throughout many transitional periods of the Peninsula's history, the tribal presence and historical land use activities remain strong, as numerous tribes still call the Olympic Peninsula home, including the Hoh, Ozette, Makah, Quinault, Quileute, Queets, Lower Elwha Klallam, and Jamestown S'Klallam.



Makah man carving a canoe on the beach in 1914. Photo by Asahel Curtis, courtesy of University of Washington Libraries.

In the late twentieth century, Euro-American settlement in the western United States led to large-scale resource extraction on the Olympic Peninsula, particularly of timber. Indigenous mammal species were also greatly impacted by early Euro-American fur traders. Ideas about land management for the sake of continuous resource extraction began to emerge as early as the 1890s. In 1897, the area received its first national designation as the Olympic Forest Reserve by President Grover Cleveland in response to concern about the area's disappearing forests. Eight years later, in 1909, President Teddy Roosevelt designated a part of the reserve as Mount Olympus National Monument in large part to protect the habitat of Roosevelt Elk, whose population was in steep decline.



Storm King Guard Station (Morgenroth cabin), built soon after the turn-of-the-century on the south shore Lake Crescent, is one of the oldest remaining buildings on the Olympic Peninsula. Photo courtesy of the National Park Service.



Olympic Hot Springs, c. 1930. Photo courtesy of the Clallam County Historical Society.



The Enchanted Valley Chalet shortly after completion in 1931. Photo by Asahel Curtis, courtesy of the Washington State Historical Society.

The public began to have a more widespread interest in the area for recreational purposes during the 1920s as tourism of the Peninsula developed along with the growing use of the automobile. With the election of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in the depths of the Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was created as part of the New Deal. Through the work of the CCC, the next decade saw a significant amount of recreation development including simple facilities like campgrounds and trails to more elaborate structures like amphitheatres and backcountry chalets. In 1937, President Franklin Roosevelt visited the Olympic Peninsula and added his support to the establishment of a national park, signing the act designating Olympic National Park the following year. An additional area of Pacific coast was added to park boundaries in 1953.

Olympic National Park's outstanding attributes have also led to international recognition. In 1976 the park was designated an International Biosphere Reserve by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). International recognition came again in 1981 when the park was declared a World Heritage Site by the World Heritage Convention, joining it to a system of natural and cultural properties that are considered irreplaceable treasures of outstanding universal value. And, in 1988, Congress established the Olympic Wilderness within Olympic National Park, providing an added layer of protections through the Wilderness Act. 876,669 acres of land, comprising 95% of the Park's total area are designated, Wilderness Area – all of which was renamed the Daniel J. Evans Wilderness in 2017.

Today, with its diversity of landscapes and cultural resources, the Park offers incredible educational and recreational opportunities for the public. While several roads provide access to various areas, the vast interior can only be explored using a network of hiking trails. In addition to backcountry travel, recreational activities range from boating and rafting, to camping and backpacking on the beach, to mountain climbing and skiing.

Mission of the National Park Service

This year at YHP we will explore two key concepts that govern the management of our national parks and the resources within them: the balance between historic preservation and wilderness conservation. The mission of the National Park Service is:

The National Park Service is dedicated to conserving unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the National Park System for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. The Service is also responsible for managing a great variety of national and international programs designed to help extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and the world.



Shi Shi Beach on the Olympic Peninsula. Photo from mdb15151515 via Flickr

The Wilderness Act - 1964

The Wilderness Act of 1964 established a program by which some federally owned lands, including parts of national forests, national parks, and national wildlife refuges, would receive an extra layer of management and protection. The purpose of the designation was to protect the lands for “the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness.” The text goes on to say that “wilderness areas shall be devoted to the public purposes of recreational, scenic, scientific, educational, conservation, and historical use.”

The Act defines “wilderness” as an area “where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” and as an area “retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation.” The law sets restrictions on the use of such lands, including no commercial enterprise, no temporary or permanent roads, no “structure or installation”, and no use of motorized equipment or vehicles.

Ultimately, the goal of the Wilderness Act is to provide for the protection of the “wilderness character” of those lands designated as Wilderness Areas. Today, the National Wilderness Preservation System contains 803 wilderness areas comprising 111,365,114 acres. Of those areas, 61 are managed by the National Park Service, comprising 44,030,560 acres.

Questions to consider:

What is the difference between “untrammelled” and “untouched”? How does that affect your ideas about what uses and activities should be allowed in Wilderness Areas?

Think about the concept of “wilderness”. Can Wilderness Areas be purely “wild” if they are consciously and purposefully managed by humans?



Sol Duc Trail Shelter on the North Fork Sol Duc River near Sol Duc Falls. (Sometimes spelled “Soleduck,” the spelling was officially changed to “Sol Duc” in 1992 by the State of Washington Board on Geographic Names. The name comes from its Quileute name, /só:lft'aq', meaning “sparkling waters.”) Photo by Monty VanderBilt.

The National Historic Preservation Act - 1966

While the establishment of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 was primarily sparked by significant loss of historic places in urban settings due to federally-funded urban renewal practices following World War II, it is a federal law that applies in all settings, including our National Park System. It was the first national policy governing preservation and established a system by which cultural and historic resources could be protected, including the creation of the National Register of Historic Places and its operating framework.

The Act also established an ordered pattern of collaboration between federal, state, tribal, and local entities for implementing the programs established by the act for the protection of cultural resources. This requires that federal agencies involved in any project that affects a historic place consult with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), and other parties that have an interest in that project’s effects, to eliminate, reduce, or mitigate negative effects that project might have on a cultural resource.

Overall, the Act established a more holistic approach to preservation with significance given to environmental and cultural context, instead of a narrow focus on buildings related to particular historical individuals. This attitude toward the broader significance of historic places was embodied in the opening statement of the Act: “the spirit and direction of the Nation are founded upon and reflected in its historic heritage; the historical and cultural foundations of the Nation should be preserved as a living part of our community life and development.”

Questions to consider:

Should historic buildings and structures located in remote areas and parks be treated differently than those found in urban areas and neighborhoods?

How does the setting or context of a historic resource impact the way we think about its use, both present and future?



The lower Elwha River before (left) and after (right) the removal of the Elwha Dam. Photos from The Seattle Times.