

**NOCA FRONTCOUNTRY AND VISITOR USE PLAN FOR ROSS LAKE  
NATIONAL RECREATION AREA AND STATE ROUTE 20 CORRIDOR  
PUBLIC COMMENT SUMMARY**

**Last Updated: September 29, 2025**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

### **PUBLIC RESPONSE**

- 2070 views of the Story Map
- 401 public correspondences mostly from people in WA state
- 180 views of a virtual recorded public meeting
- 27 people attended 2 public, in-person open houses

### **COMMON THEMES**

- Concerns about parking, trail crowding, vehicle traffic, campsite availability, and over-commercialization
- Strong support for permit system modifications
- Strong support for shuttle systems and continuing and expanding educational and interpretive programs, especially those run by the North Cascades Institute

### **MIXED RESPONSES**

- Floating campsites
- Motorized boating access
- Relocation of the Wilderness Information Center

# CONTENTS

<b>Executive Summary</b> .....	<b>i</b>
Public Response.....	i
Common Themes.....	i
Mixed Responses.....	i
<b>Public Meetings and Informational Materials</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Comment Analysis</b> .....	<b>5</b>
Definition of Terms.....	5
Comment Analysis Methodology.....	5
<i>Correspondence Received</i> .....	5
<b>Comment Summaries</b> .....	<b>7</b>
Important Experiences and Perceived Barriers.....	7
<i>Important Experiences</i> .....	7
<i>Perceived Barriers</i> .....	8
Opposition, Support, and Duplicates.....	8
Issues and Strategies.....	8
<i>Visitor Use and Experience</i> .....	8
<i>Visitor Accessibility</i> .....	10
<i>Circulation and Amounts of Use</i> .....	11
<i>Seasonal Operations</i> .....	13
<i>Alternative Transportation</i> .....	14
<i>Communication and Connectivity</i> .....	15
<i>Socioeconomics</i> .....	18
<i>Park Enforcement and Park Staffing</i> .....	18
<i>Park Infrastructure and Operations</i> .....	22
<i>Park Accessibility and Equitable Access</i> .....	23
<i>Natural Resources</i> .....	30
<i>Cultural Resources</i> .....	32
<i>Process</i> .....	33
<i>Climbing</i> .....	35
<i>Hiking and Trails</i> .....	36
<i>Camping</i> .....	39

<i>Newhalem and Goodell</i> .....	40
<i>Colonial</i> .....	40
<i>Cascade River Rd. and Other SR-20 Locations</i> .....	41
<i>Marblemount</i> .....	41
<i>Sourdough Mountain</i> .....	41
<i>Gorge Lake Campground</i> .....	41
<i>Sourdough Creek (Near Sourdough Beach, Learning Center)</i> .....	42
<i>Ross Lake</i> .....	42
<i>Hozomeen</i> .....	43
<i>Shuttles</i> .....	43
<i>Wilderness</i> .....	45
<i>Other</i> .....	45
<i>Additional Information</i> .....	46
<i>Out of Scope</i> .....	46

## FIGURES

Table 1. Meeting Schedule.....	4
Table 3. Correspondence Received by State.....	5

## PUBLIC MEETINGS AND INFORMATIONAL MATERIALS

The National Park Service (NPS) held a public comment period to receive feedback on planning effort outcomes for the plan from June 12, 2025, through August 11, 2025. During this time, the planning team held one virtual and two in-person meetings where they presented a slideshow and shared information about the study process, answered questions, and received feedback from the public. The meeting locations were chosen to represent both large and small population centers near the park, ensuring access for a variety of community members. The meetings were well attended by local community organizations and individuals alike. Public engagement meeting details are presented in table 2.

**Table 1. Meeting Schedule**

Date and Time (PST)	Location	Details	No. of Attendees or Views
June 17, 2025 7-8 PM	Virtual Public Meeting and Recording	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsiKGW8kYR4">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsiKGW8kYR4</a>	180 views
July 15, 2025 5-7 PM	The Mountaineers	7700 Sand Point Way NE Seattle, Washington 98115	12 attendees
July 16, 2025 5-7 PM	Burlington Public Library	820 E Washington Ave. Burlington, Washington 98233	15 attendees

In addition to these meetings, the public was given the opportunity to engage in the planning process by reviewing a StoryMap that was published on the project Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) website (<https://parkplanning.nps.gov/RossLakeVisitorUse>), which summarizes key issues and opportunities to be addressed in the plan. This StoryMap was viewed 2,070 times throughout the comment period. The public was invited to provide input on the planning effort through the online commenting platform available on the project website. Respondents were asked the following questions:

1. What experiences in Ross Lake National Recreation Area and along State Route 20 do you find most important?
2. What are park staff doing well, and what would you like to see continued?
3. What issues most interfere with your ability to access and get the most out of your experiences in the park? What can park staff do to better address these barriers?
4. After familiarizing yourself with the potential strategies, what would improve your visit?
5. What other ideas do you want park staff to consider?

# COMMENT ANALYSIS

## DEFINITION OF TERMS

The following definitions are useful for the purpose of understanding the analysis of public feedback received:

**Correspondence.** A correspondence is the entire document received from a commenter. It can be in the form of a letter, written comment form, note card, or other written communication about the study.

**Comment.** A comment is a portion of the text in a correspondence that addresses a single subject or issue.

**Code.** A code is a grouping centered on a common subject. The codes were developed early in the comment analysis process by reviewing a subset of correspondence to identify major recurring relevant themes and are used to track major issues.

**Comment Summary.** A description of a group of comments that are focused on a common subject. Comment summaries combine similar comments.

## COMMENT ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

The majority of public correspondence was entered directly into the PEPC system. A few additional correspondences were emailed or mailed to the NPS. Once all correspondences were entered into PEPC, each was read, and specific comments within each unique correspondence were identified. To categorize comments, each comment was given a code to identify its general content and to group similar comments in comment summaries. An example of a code developed for this project is 007 - Issues: Visitor Accessibility. These comments or comment excerpts related to accessibility issues. Once every correspondence was broken into comments, all comments were categorized and summarized with similar comments, and comment summaries were created.

## Correspondence Received

The park received a total of 401 correspondences from 19 states through PEPC, with over 91% from Washington state (table 3).

**Table 3. Correspondence Received by State**

State	No. of Correspondences
WA	366
OR	6
AZ	5
MT	4
TX	3
NM	2

State	No. of Correspondences
IL	1
NE	1
NY	1
WY	1
GA	1
AL	1
AK	1
MI	1
CO	1
ID	1
TN	1
CA	1
UT	1
Unknown	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>401</b>

## COMMENT SUMMARIES

The following comment summaries, organized by topic, capture the ideas and feedback received during the public comment period. Each comment summary includes bullet point summaries of the comments followed by a list of strategies respondents suggested for each topic. Comments responding to Questions 1 and 3 are summarized in the first section below, while feedback related to other questions, or more relevant to specific thematic codes, was integrated throughout the summaries where appropriate.

### IMPORTANT EXPERIENCES AND PERCEIVED BARRIERS

#### Important Experiences

Respondents listed the following as experiences in the park that are important to them:

- Activities such as water recreation, hiking, camping, fishing, backpacking, day hiking, sightseeing, kayak camping, canoeing, boating and boat-in camping, wildlife viewing, mountaineering, rock and ice climbing, bouldering, canyoneering, backcountry skiing, trail running, scenic driving, biking, skiing, snowmobiling and snowbiking, and mushroom hunting
- Access to:
  - Points of interest such as lakes, wilderness areas, old growth forest, fire lookouts, views of the dams, and beautiful trails
  - Amenities and facilities such as campgrounds, easy and accessible trails, roads, boat ramps, clean toilets, scenic overlooks, pullouts, Newhalem Visitor Center, Ross Lake Resort, and Learning Center
  - Commercial services such as canoe rentals and lake and Skagit tours
  - Educational opportunities such as ranger programs, interpretive signs, tours programing at the North Cascades Environmental Learning Center.
  - Information and maps on panels at trailheads and offices
- Feelings and sensory experiences, that respondents described as:
  - *“Being surrounded by the beauty of the North Cascades and feeling like I’m in the wilderness as much as possible.”*
  - *“A backcountry feel. . .”*
  - *“Remoteness and quiet. . .”*
  - *“[The smells and] . . . sounds of nature. . .”*
  - *“Backcountry experiences on Ross Lake. . .”*
  - *“Roadless experiences. . . wild spaces”*

They also identified valued characteristics of these experiences, including:

- Solitude
- Protection of cultural resources, including archeological findings
- Night skies
- Opportunities for physical challenge

Respondents mentioned they would like the park to continue to:

- Keep people informed of current conditions around the park and on SR-20
- Coordinate education partnerships to:
  - bring more children, young people, and families to the park,
  - offer more educational and interpretation programs to the public for free that are focused on natural resources in the park, and
  - expand overnight education experiences for local students

### Perceived Barriers

Most respondents cited overcrowding and difficulty accessing or reserving certain areas of the park as the main barrier to getting the most out of their experience in the park. These findings are reflected in many sections of this report.

*“As visitor population increases, attention to traffic, parking, overcrowding is critical for NC Park Service to address”*

### OPPOSITION, SUPPORT, AND DUPLICATES

While a handful of respondents supported the planning effort more generally, and none voiced outright opposition, partial support or opposition to specific strategies and topics have been integrated throughout the summaries where thematically appropriate. To reduce redundancy, coded duplicate comments have been excluded from this report.

### ISSUES AND STRATEGIES

#### Visitor Use and Experience

Most comments focused on available, desired, or undesired visitor experiences in Ross Lake National Recreation Area and along State Route 20.

Types of experiences currently available to and enjoyed by respondents include:

- Winter access on SR-20 by way of:
  - Skiing from Happy Flats gate
  - Snowmobiling and snowbiking
- Cycling SR-20 while plowed, but still closed to vehicular traffic

- Canoe camping from Colonial Creek campground on Diablo Lake, paddling up Diablo, portaging over the dam, and paddling up Ross Lake
- Staying at the Environmental Learning Center in the winter
- Boating opportunities in the summer, including:
  - The boat ride on Diablo Lake
  - The City Light Ferry
  - The water taxi service to the north end of Ross Lake

Types of experiences which are not currently available that at least one respondent mentioned they would like to enjoy in North Cascades National Park Complex and along State Route 20 Area include:

- Access to showers
- A place to rent kayaks at Colonial Campground
- A low-impact e-boat ferry on Ross Lake
- A mountain bike trail up Canyon Creek to Hart’s Pass or the East Bank trail up to Ross Lake
- Visiting the lake by bicycle
- More lodging options, particularly:
  - On the east side of the park, Marblemount, and along Cascade River Road to accommodate early alpine starts and reduce instances of camping in cars
  - Similar to Methow Valley lodges
- Opportunities to stay at the historic inn, dine at dining hall in Newhalem, and visit the town of Diablo
- Renewed and expanded collaboration between the National Park Service, Seattle City Light (SCL), and local Tribes, considering that:
  - Newhalem offers, such as a general store and a more commercially oriented visitor center, with popular Skagit Tours and chicken dinners that make engaging visitor experiences
  - A Tribal salmon dinner could be offered in Newhalem to modify this experience and share the cultural significance of the area from the perspective of the Upper Skagit people

Types of experiences not currently available that at least one respondent mentioned they would not like to see become available at Ross Lake National Recreation Area and along State Route 20:

- Constructing a road to Ross Lake, as most respondents expressed a preference for maintaining foot-traffic-only access

- Motorized Water Recreation, including:
  - Improvements that may substantially increase motorized boat access to Ross Lake such as *“paving the Skagit-Silverhope (Silver Skagit) Road in Canada.”*
  - *“Please do not make Ross Lake more accessible for jet skiers or high-powered motorboats. Bringing more people to Ross Lake, especially those who may not practice Leave No Trace principles, would degrade the experience from a cherished wilderness to an overcrowded recreation area. The goal should be to protect the existing experience, not to fundamentally change it by trying to accommodate ever-increasing visitor numbers and high-impact activities.”*
  - *“The primary issues that interfere with our experience are... the excessive number of motorboats already on the lake. The noise and presence of many motorboats detract from the serene wilderness experience we seek.”*
- Concerns about Over-Commercialization and Development:
  - *“I also don't think concessions are necessary. Don't add commercialism to nature. This is what people enjoying nature are trying to avoid.”*
  - *“I would like to see commercial businesses prohibited from the park.”*
  - *“...It would be great to rewild areas of the park that are over developed.”*
  - *“Minimize human footprint on the land, the pass, the park... I prefer that we don't add parking areas, gift shops, etc. and that this park is primitive. Keep all commercial development out.”*

## Strategies

Respondents suggested the following strategies:

- Limiting commercial guiding activities
- Limiting motorboats to core hours during the day to minimize noise disturbances early in the morning or late at night

## Visitor Accessibility

These comments focused on improving accessibility for people with a range of abilities.

Some respondents expressed support for strategies outlined in the StoryMap, particularly at Newhalem Creek, Goodell Creek, and Colonial Creek, citing reasons such as aging relatives and the desire to ensure future visits for people of all ages.

*“Making the outdoors more accessible not only benefits individuals with disabilities—it also supports families, veterans, older adults, and anyone who may need additional accommodations.”*

One group of respondents recommended creating a rubric to determine which areas, beyond the three listed, may not be suitable for reducing slopes and improving surfaces of trails strategy.

Respondents expressed that activities like hiking, off-roading fishing, camping, kayaking, and related infrastructure like campsites, viewpoints, restrooms, boat launches, and trails should be accessible to people of all ages and abilities.

Some respondents supported increasing the number of accessible campsites.

Others expressed concern that accessible campsites may go unused, potentially increasing crowding at other sites or that creating asphalt paths could detract from the natural beauty of the landscape.

## Strategies

Respondents suggested the following strategies:

- Installation of adaptive fishing platforms and boat launches, accessible restrooms, campsites, and viewpoints
- Expansion of accessible parking options and vehicle access to scenic areas and dispersed campsites, including where off-road vehicles are allowed
- Development of additional roads and trails along SR-20 to accommodate a range of abilities and help disperse visitor use that is currently concentrated around easily accessible trails
- Accessibility improvements to May and Rolland Creek crossings and the Thunder Knob Trail as well as modest improvements to trail surfaces
- Continued motorboat access on Diablo Lake to support inclusive boating experiences
- Upgraded toilet facilities at Diablo Overlook to better serve visitors with differing abilities
- *“Accessible access to Diablo Lake is important to allow a wide variety of individuals to experience the beauty of the North Cascades.”*

## Circulation and Amounts of Use

Respondent comments cited unwanted levels of use and circulation issues such as:

- Long lines for permit pick-ups
- Road conditions, closures, and lack of information acting as barriers to visiting less crowded areas
- Difficulty finding parking at popular trailheads and unwanted levels of use and crowding at both trailheads and on trails discouraging visitors from recreating in the park and impeding Tribal members from exercising their treaty rights
  - The areas mentioned included: Cascade Pass, Colonial Creek Campground, Thunder Arm, Diablo Lake Trailhead, Gorge Overlook, Rainy Pass, Ross Lake Trailhead, Maple Pass, Marblemount parking area, Sourdough Creek, Happy Creek, and Cutthroat Pass
  - *“I am a camper, backpacker and day-trip hiker, and I am concerned that the larger numbers of visitors at points along SR20 are becoming too much. I find myself opting out of visiting the area for the recreation that I love because I don't want to be a part of the*

*overwhelm and find it challenging to get reservations/permits for camping or backpacking.”*

- *“...I no longer plan to visit the park on weekends...”*
- *“...waiting for spaces at Happy Creek midmorning in the middle of the week in June...”*
- *“...visitation should be at 1980s level...”*
- Increased traffic and safety concerns with shoulder parking along SR-20
  - *“...People walking on the freeway, cars illegally parked in a narrow shoulder, squeezing the two-lane freeway so two cars can't pass in opposite directions...”*
- Instances of blocked equestrian access
  - *“Not able to park at trailheads, blocked equestrian access, overcrowded trailhead leading to harassment via non stop photography of self and stock, as well as creating unsafe conditions due to stopping on cliff sides while passing hoards of people. Stock camps being over run and reserved by non-stock users with no priority given to stock...”*

## Strategies

Respondents suggested the following strategies:

- Action in collaboration with WSDOT, including:
  - Adding more passing lanes on SR-20
  - Limiting lane closures during the day
  - Enforcing no parking on shoulder or formalizing shoulder parking areas
  - Decreasing speed limits
- Action in collaboration with USFS, including:
  - Issuing parking passes or timed entry passes for crowded trailheads such as Cascade Pass
  - Improving road conditions
  - Placing a cap on the number of visitors on trails at any one time
- Expanding parking and facilities, by:
  - Building vertically instead of expanding areas
  - Right-sizing parking with comfortable levels of people on trails
  - Developing parking areas that allow for horse trailer turn around
- Designated parking systems with:
  - Parking passes for crowded trailheads
  - Lottery systems or park passes for certain weeks

- Day use permit system,
- Differentiated and enforced parking for horse trailers, overnight, and day-use
- Minimizing crowding on trails by:
  - Closing trails after 9 a.m.
  - Placing a cap on the number of visitors on trails at any one time
- Staff directing traffic at Colonial Creek/Thunder Arm, Diablo Lake Overlook, Ross Lake trailhead in the meantime or until a shuttle is in place in areas
- Increase fees for non-citizens and King County residents
- Offer educational day hikes through education partners inclusive of transportation to cut down on parking space needs

## Seasonal Operations

These comments focused on concerns about sharp seasonal visitation surges, particularly during autumn 'Larch Madness', and a desire for extended seasonal operations and improved visitor services.

Respondents expressed pedestrian safety concerns related to visitation during the autumn season when interest in larch tree color changes cause sharp increases in regional visitation patterns. This phenomenon is locally known as “Larch Madness.” Respondents frequently cited roadway congestion on SR-20, numerous instances of roadside parking, and crowded conditions on popular trails such as Maple Pass and Blue Lake.

## Strategies

They suggested the following strategies to help manage this seasonal surge:

- Permits to park and hike trails near Washington Pass (i.e. Blue Lake and Maple Pass) to be obtained ahead of time
- Seasonal transportation shuttles and parking lots outside of the park, particularly in the autumn season
- Timed entry passes to minimize crowding on the trails

Additionally, respondents asked for more information and clarification on what non-vehicular traffic is allowed during off-season.

*“...when the snow is melted but the road isn't yet open to vehicular traffic/cars, are motocross bikes allowed? These use internal combustion engines, but are technically not vehicular traffic as they aren't street legal. What about dual sports? These are street legal, but are also allowed off road. What about ATVs? The issue is that it's pretty dangerous for people who are walking/hiking/bicycling on the roadway at 2-30mph to be sharing the road with vehicles travelling at 40-70mpg. I very much enjoy the non vehicular traffic period and hope to see it continue as it is an incredibly unique and special experience. I also appreciate how clear the WSDOT is in informing people via newsletter and social media about the*

*snow clearing status. But I also don't want to see anyone get run over by... an ATV miles out from cell service on Washington pass...*

Respondents also expressed a desire for extended seasonal operations and visitor services, such as:

- Opening and staffing the visitor center during the shoulder seasons:
  - *"I wish the visitor center was open in the off-season, at least on weekends..."*
  - *"...through October during the larch season"*
  - *"...when the highway is open"*
- Opening campgrounds a month earlier and closing them a month later to allow for more visitors to enjoy the park during non-peak times:
  - *"...open drive-up campsites year-round... even if no bathrooms"*
- All-season availability of drinking water
- Extending reservation periods into early springtime and the later fall season
- Installing seasonal bridges on Ruby Creek to make it more accessible as a shorter 6.5-mile round trip as opposed to a 10-mile round trip
- More frequent winter plowing to provide access to backcountry skiing on Ruby Mountain
- Opening roads in winter to vehicles with chains and 4WD
- Opening low elevation trails earlier in the springtime and clearing SR-20 by Memorial Day<sup>1</sup>
- Providing vehicle access for winter sports at the higher gate past Colonial Creek Campground (Ross Dam Trailhead)
- Snow grooming on Cascade River Road and SR-20

Respondents expressed their desire for the park to continue supporting seasonal recreational opportunities such as winter sports, biking, and boating. Others expressed support for improved boating access on the south side of Ross Lake and seasonal offerings at the ELC.

Other visitor recommendations for seasonal operations included:

- Pilot programs for seasonal or rotational access to remote zones to spread out use and decrease environmental impact
- Extending climbing season

## **Alternative Transportation**

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<sup>1</sup> SR-20 is usually cleared by April or early May.

These comments focused on visitor shuttles, public transportation connections, bicycles, e-bikes, and EVs.

Respondents noted that driving is the only way that people can access the park and expressed interest in alternative transportation methods. Many connected the idea of shuttles with public transportation, bike use, and popular activities in the park such as camping and backpacking.

- *“It is necessary to drive to access the entire area, and parking is limited near popular sites.”*
- *“...Shuttles should run seven days a week given heavy park usage and maximize access while minimizing impact... ensure that transit equipment meet the needs of recreational travelers, such as ample room for backpacking and camping gear, bike capacity, families with younger children, and so on.”*

## Strategies

Respondents suggested the following strategies:

- Improved bike infrastructure:
  - Hardened barriers on SR-20 to protect cyclists and accommodate bike touring in the park
  - E-bike charging and safe short and long-term bike storage
- A Skagit River Bike Trail from Marblemount to Newhalem to increase regional connectivity
  - Campsites for cyclists at Colonial Creek<sup>2</sup> and Easy Pass Trailhead
- Improved public transportation to the park
- Installing electric vehicle charging stations in developed areas such as the ELC and Diablo Lake
- A gondola to Ruby Mountain powered by the dams
- A carpooling app alternative instead of shuttles:
  - *“...consider a much less expensive alternative: carpooling in Newhalem, possibly with a low cost website and PWA app. Visitors sign up, carpool, and earn points towards something such as tshirts, discounted seasonal passes, first pick at a campsite, or just name recognition.”*
- See shuttles section for suggested strategies regarding shuttles

## Communication and Connectivity

These comments focused on park-provided visitor information, a lack of communication from the park staff, wayfinding and signage, and availability of Wi-Fi and cellular service.

## Strategies

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<sup>2</sup> Campsites for bicyclists currently exist at Colonial and Newhalem.

Respondents were supportive of the strategy to develop tools that provide visitors and travelers with up-to-date information and suggested the following strategies to improve park-provided information:

- Improving park messaging to better disperse visitors and only concentrate crowds in places where visitor services are available:
  - *“I would like park staff to reconsider advertising high-traffic trails outside the park complex on a board outside of the Newhalem Visitor Center. . . encourage folks to explore less trafficked areas [instead]. . .”*
  - *"No new radio or cell-phone towers should be constructed within the NRA, particularly within designated wilderness. However, the Park Service should consider providing low-power AM-radio park information at Newhalem, Marblemount, and possibly Mazama. Many visitors to the park do not learn much about anything in the park complex unless they happen to stop at the Marblemount ranger station or Newhalem Visitor Center, which many do not. For some, there's a sense that you are just driving up a highway that is missing the “park feeling” one gets when visiting other national parks. If less-informed visitors can be encouraged to stop at the visitor center they might gain a better sense of the kinds of sights and activities that are available, why also learning what's so special about this place, and why protecting the North Cascades was and is such a good idea."*
- Communications encouraging and incentivizing alternative transportation
- Improved information for some recreation types, including:
  - Improved clarity on messaging about allowed seasonal modes of travel, why climbing is not allowed in certain areas, and that the lakes are only accessible by boat or foot
  - Locations where hikers could encounter stock and what to do in the park newspaper and improved information on how to access horse trails, user guidelines, and status of trails
    - *“I was regularly referred to the website. I found the website to be not user friendly and lacking needed information on stock use. Frustrating catch 22, especially for someone not fully techy.”*
  - Improved signage on trails, trailheads, and campsites
    - pre-trip planning considerations like how much water to bring, whether dogs are allowed, levels of difficulty, and responsible waste disposal practices
    - *“with an arrow that says you are here.”*
- Educational communications, such as:
  - Guides to plants, animals, hikes and frequently asked questions about the water’s color and the dams
  - More information about Seattle City Light’s hydroelectric project and promotion of the Gorge Powerhouse exhibit

- More active interpretation outside of the visitor center in addition to passive or written forms of interpretation e.g. at the Learning Center
- Piloting voluntary stewardship education programs for off-road and dispersed site users
- *“While NPCA would like to see fully staffed visitor centers which provide important educational resources for visitors, the park may need to invest in more signage to help educate visitors about bears, especially given the park's recent decision to restore grizzly bears to the North Cascades. NPCA has worked with the National Park Fund (NPF) to help support signage in the past, and similar arrangements may be possible at NOCA. Similarly, the park should continue to enhance its infrastructure to reduce human-wildlife conflict with a focus on reducing attractants and conflict with a number of local species.”*
- Digital resources, including:
  - Suggested boating and hiking itineraries on the park website, along with guidance on what to do in case of hazardous conditions, such as strong winds on the water, including whether alternative camping options are permitted under such circumstances
  - Advertising state-specific hiking and trails sites on the park website to aid those who may not be familiar with local resources of information
  - Partnering with app-based outdoor companies to disperse key information to new visitors:
    - *“AllTrails has a program meant to work directly with land managers to improve their online information. . .”*
  - Partnering with nonprofits to *“station volunteers at high-use areas to disperse important information like bear safety, responsible and safe recreation practices, and explain certain rules or regulations meant better protect natural resources. . . Conservation Northwest. . . Wildlife Ambassadors, which recruits seasonal staff and volunteers to engage visitors with responsible, wildlife-aware recreation practices at popular trailheads and campgrounds across the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest. Since 2023, the program has reached more than 25,000 people. We would welcome the opportunity to partner with the Park to support public outreach at high-use locations within Ross Lake NRA, helping to reduce recreation-related impacts and promote coexistence with wildlife.”*
  - *“. . .ensuring that online planning tools and ranger-led materials include information on accessibility features helps visitors prepare effectively and avoid frustration or disappointment.”*
  - *“. . .the park could benefit from more interactive digital resources, like updated GPS-enabled maps, mobile trip planning tools, and user-submitted trail or water conditions to foster a shared responsibility among visitors. . . Improved digital access to maps and trip planning tools could also lower barriers for newer or less experienced users.”*

- *“Frequent website updates, event calendars, and other online tools are also likely to help inform visitors so they can plan to avoid delays, peak times, and crowded areas.”*
- Telecommunications:
  - *“...adding a Wi-Fi access point or cell coverage in Newhalem<sup>3</sup>... so Uber/Lyft can work out there”*
  - *“starlink friendly campsites”*
  - On cell service communications along SR-20, one respondent wished the park would *“...install an underground... communication line... [to] allow for the installation of better cell phone service...”*
  - On cell service communications at Hozomeen, one respondent mentioned that *“...there's a certain anxiety about pickup without communications on the lake and in this case perhaps cell service would make sense.”*

Strategies requiring collaboration with WSDOT and/or USFS:

- Improved road signage to reduce sudden stops e.g. Diablo Lake Overlook and Colonial Creek Campground
- Visual real-time updates on traffic, accidents, proper road etiquette /pulling over for sightseeing, time to destinations, approximate times that hikes will take, backcountry site availability, parking and campsite availability, water access points, and alternative routes
- *“Blue Lake requested to text a number but with no reception it can't be sent in real time. After the hike you just forget about it.”*

Strategies requiring collaboration with SCL:

- Reservoir level forecasts and communication about impacted water access points

## **Socioeconomics**

Very few respondents provided comments related to socioeconomic considerations.

One respondent noted that expanding access to climbing areas and supporting trail building and route development would contribute positively to the region’s outdoor recreation economy.

## **Park Enforcement and Park Staffing**

Respondents noted a broad range of issues that relate to the enforcement of visitor access and potential staffing needs.

Respondents expressed strong support for higher numbers of staff and the enforcement of park rules, including:

- Posting more visitor services and staff attention in front country areas.

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<sup>3</sup> Cell coverage is available in Newhalem.

- *“Park interpreters. . . should be posted at overlooks and in the campgrounds and offer programs at the campgrounds as used to be common.”*
- Following strategic staff placement strategies to help with communications:
  - *“. . .reinstate the NOCA backcountry or interpretive park ranger position at the Winthrop Forest Service Ranger Station and [allow] the ranger to issue backcountry permits.”*
  - A staffed information kiosk at Diablo Lake Overlook
  - Being able to speak with a ranger on the phone more easily or getting a timelier response to voice messages
    - *“. . .over the past few years it has been really hard to get a hold of anyone via email or phone call at the Marblemount station, and it is a long drive for most people to come up and just ask a question. I know staffing is a huge issue and our current administration is not helping that at all. But I know we have had situations before where we are like ok, what are we supposed to do with this, or this permit has an issue, or we need to change this, but we can't get a hold of anyone for a long time, and we end up hoping for the best. So I'm sure there are people less persistent than we are, and end up doing something they shouldn't because they couldn't get an answer.”*
  - Placing staff at the Golden West Visitor Center, the Methow Valley Ranger Station, on bus tours, in congested trailheads, at Marblemount to process permits, at the Learning Center to educate new visitors, and busy parking areas to direct traffic until plan strategies can be implemented
  - Allocating more staff to emergency response, facilities maintenance, and education (i.e. lake rescues, logging out trails, maintaining restrooms clean, visitor center programs, and providing information near lakes in campgrounds)
- Concerns about short staffing:
  - *“Short staffing has caused visitor centers to be closed more frequently and/or not staffed w/ NPS staff, which has affected my ability to get accurate, updated information in a timely manner throughout the year.”*
  - *“The current management plan states, "Interactions with knowledgeable, uniformed staff will be widely available, particularly in frontcountry areas of Ross Lake NRA." This expectation of contact with park staff should be retained.”*
  - *“Adequate staffing is required to implement, monitor, and adapt the... plan... Ultimately, none of these improvements will succeed without staffing levels that match the park's operational mandate.”*
  - *“. . .maintaining the full breadth of experience that most of us who are not fly-in, or drive-in tourists know and love about the North Cascades. We rely on trail crews and backcountry rangers to give us accurate and up-to-date information. This has been harder and harder to get, and the information that does exist is focused mostly on the "tourist track" . . .”*

- Issues with problematic visitor behavior:
  - Noise from large groups, unpreparedness, toilets getting filthy:
    - *“I see visitors misbehaving in the park all the time. Whether it be parking in prohibited areas, leaving trash around, leaving fires unattended or not putting them out entirely, walking off-trail through delicate eco-systems just to get a picture, or purely due to lack of care. A lot of folks listen to speakers, or fly drones. All of this really makes it hard to enjoy what you came for. To enjoy nature, to respect nature, to be a part of it. . . I don't know if there is some sort of educational component as you enter the park, some sort of extra fees, or heftier fines for littering/fire issues. Somehow there's got to be a way to get people to feel more of a connection to the place so that they want to protect it.”*
  - Off-leash dogs
  - Walking through campgrounds
  - Roadside parking and unsecured food on Cascade River Road and other areas
  - Approaching or feeding wildlife
  - Walking off-trail into sensitive plant areas

## Strategies

Respondents suggested the following strategies to address problematic visitor behavior:

- Continue educational activities about LNT to alleviate the noise/littering
- Increase park ranger presence to discourage visitors from approaching wildlife at unsafe distances, at Cascade River Road, and on front and backcountry trails, campgrounds, and beaches to educate and enforce rules
- Tow or fine more people for parking in undesignated areas to raise revenue for the park
- Increase control of Cascade River Road access to decrease overnight car camping and instances of unsecured food
- Prohibiting dogs on all trails
- Assign seasonal campground hosts to patrol and do some trail maintenance near where they are stationed

Respondents identified a need for interagency coordination.

One commercial guiding operator expressed frustration over the inability to lead guests on several trails along Highway 20 that are within North Cascades National Park but accessed via U.S. Forest Service-managed trailheads. Despite holding a permit for NCNP, the lack of USFS commercial permits restricts access to these trails for guided groups. The commenter emphasized that this limitation negatively impacts visitor experience, especially for those who prefer or require guided support. They emphasized benefits of guided trips, including small group sizes, carpooling, Leave No Trace practices, and wilderness medical training. The operator argued that if individuals can access

these trails independently, they should also be allowed to do so with a professional guide, which enhances safety and educational value.

Respondents identified a need to strengthen and expand collaborations with the public and external organizations by:

- Expanding volunteer programs to:
  - Distribute information and enforce rules
  - Collect fees
  - Discourage car theft and vandalism
  - Guide winter recreation trips
  - Help with facility maintenance:
    - *“Is there a way to put information out to the general public on things that we might be able to help with? Such as with garbage pickup/clean-up in local campsites?”*
- Collaborate with partners:
  - to interpret the natural and cultural history of the area including geology, history of the dams, logging, mining, and farming in the area, indigenous history
  - to hire positions that have been lost and expand the park’s capacity to engage in public education and outreach:
    - *“Other partners like Glacier Peak Institute, Washington Trails Association, Washington Conservation Corps, Pacific Northwest Trails Association, Concrete Boys and Girls Club, Student Conservation Association, Upper Skagit Library, Concrete School District and others either partner intermittently with the Park or not at all. There is little outreach effort from the Park despite the ability of these community groups and organizations to support the Park in meeting its mission and critical objectives. I would love to see the Park more involved with the local community directly and/ or through partnerships.”*
- Collaborate with WTA’s Lost Trails Found program and more generally with WTA to increase trail maintenance
- Partner with Tribes to log trails early in the season
- Partner with state law enforcement to decrease parking violations
- Partnering with large employers to educate new park users and increase responsible behaviors
- *“...We encourage NPS to expand opportunities for education, storytelling, and welcoming that reach beyond park boundaries to embrace the larger bioregion, including the Skagit River watershed. By sharing the natural and cultural history of these connected landscapes, fostering*

*inclusive interpretation, and creating spaces where all visitors feel welcome, the park can deepen public understanding and strengthen the bonds between people and place across the region.”*

Some respondents expressed opposition to outsourcing park ranger services to concessionaires

## **Park Infrastructure and Operations**

Respondents commented on existing park infrastructure and operations or perceived needs for new infrastructure, maintenance, or operational improvements not related to staffing.

Comments addressing maintenance suggested:

- Greater attention to trails such as Ruby Mountain/Fourth of July Pass
- More frequent garbage pickup and restroom cleanings and re-stockings:
  - *“...once per day... not once per week...”*
  - *“...garbage pickup daily during the spring, summer, and fall”*
  - *“...backcountry toilets...already disgusting and it’s just the beginning of the season”*
- Faster recovery from fire damage at campgrounds and trails such as Stetattle Creek and Sourdough Lookout Trails, and Gorge Lake and Colonial Creek Campgrounds

New facilities proposed in the comments included:

- **Gondola:** For summer sightseeing and winter ski from the Environmental Learning Center to the peak
- **Waysides:** To replace faded waysides at Diablo Lake Overlook<sup>4</sup> and Gorge Overlook Trail
- **New Docks:** To increase access to water levels at all campsites
  - *“...public canoe access to Ross Lake without a major portage”*
- **Drinking Water Stations and Food Storage:** To fill visitor water bottles and provide wildlife-resistant food storage boxes at more sites
- **Lodging:** To add at Diablo Lake
- **Updated Interpretive Signs:** To be placed near the visitor center
- **New Restrooms:** To add near key recreation areas
- **Additional Roads and Parking,** including:
  - More frequent grading of roads such as Thornton Lakes Road
  - A connecting road to Mt. Baker highway via Swift Creek Road
  - A scenic driving loop through the park

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<sup>4</sup> New waysides expected to be installed in 2026.

- Road maintenance at Grasshopper Pass and Harts Pass
- A road to reach Ross Lake by car as a need to facilitate boat and kayak access, and improve visitor accessibility
  - However, many opposed building a road or preferred a less steep pedestrian only access trail to preserve a more remote experience
- Upgrades to the Learning Center parking lot
- Large parking areas at Newhalem and/or Diablo townsite
- Parking space as a need at popular trailheads, campgrounds, and Diablo Dock Ferry, many also opposed expanding parking or creating new lots inside the park
  - However, those opposed emphasized the importance of preserving the area’s natural beauty and wilderness character, and expressed concerns about increased development in a region with steep terrain, prone to rockslides, flash floods, debris flows, wildfires, snow avalanches, and the potential failure of dams during an earthquake

One respondent also called for the removal of the boathouse on Diablo Lake by the SR-20 bridge.

Respondents suggested the following amenities:

- Docks that can adjust to lake levels
- Food service like food trucks at the visitor center

Respondents suggested the following operational strategies:

- Staff alternating lunch hours so the WIC is open in the middle of the day and hikers can avoid delays

Respondents suggested the following strategies for adjacent USFS areas:

- More frequent grading of roads such as Hidden Lake Road

### **Park Accessibility and Equitable Access**

Respondents commented on existing or potential concerns/impacts related to the accessibility of park resources to the public or equitable access.

Some respondents expressed appreciation and understanding of permit systems even as many also wished to make modifications.

*“I worry that the beauty and natural quality of the lake and surrounding area will be threatened as more and more people explore it. . . As personally frustrating as permits/lotteries are, I see their value and do not want to see the park become a free-for-all.”*

The walk-up permitting system was described as favoring west-side residents due to proximity to the Wilderness Information Center in Marblemount. Respondents noted:

- *“From the perspective of an east-side resident, the biggest barrier to Park Complex access and information is the current backcountry walk-up permitting system. The Walk-up permitting*

*system as it stand clearly benefits individuals who live on the west side of the cascades and have easier access to the Wilderness Information Center. Your website even explicitly says, “Priority for walk-up permits will be given to in-person visitors at permit issuing stations.” This is absurd for a number of reasons. . . numerous people access the backcountry of North Cascades National Park Complex via the east side (Methow Valley area). Second, it makes zero sense for folks who want to hike a trail on the “east side”; to drive all the way to the west side to pick up a permit in person - yes, you can apply for east side permits via email but again, your website **explicitly** states that priority is given to visitors who are **in person.**”*

- *“We used to be able to get permits at the USFS station in Winthrop which was helpful.”*

Respondents noted the lottery system favors commercial trip planning as opposed to individual trip planning, writing:

- *“I think the advanced lottery system for permits is not fair to the general public. Businesses always get permits to take people and secure the best camping spots.”*
- *“All of our permits are obtained by walkup, after all the food has been purchased and kayaks sourced. We have never won a permit in the lottery. Visitors accessing the campsites via speedboat do not have the same level of planning as groups with human propulsion. The current border issue compounds access as the resort prioritizes guest portages over the general public, and wait times can be 3 hours, limiting how far we can get up the lake after launching at Colonial. There is a pay-to-play environment for water access, as a portage costs our [scout] troop \$800 for a group of 12”*

Some respondents expressed frustration with repeat lottery system winners and noted the reservation and walkup permit system favors some over others, writing:

- *“At the very least, I wish there was some system that if you got early reservation one year, you wouldn't get it the next. . .”*
- *“It is a long way to come to try and get a day of permit. Catering to the wealthy with more flexible schedules should not be happening.”*
- *“While reservation systems can help manage congestion, they are often difficult to implement and can unintentionally create barriers to access—especially for first-time visitors and underserved communities.”*
- *“If the park started requiring timed entry/passes this would make a huge barrier to locals. People who are planning months in advance would get tickets while locals who make a spur of the moment decision to go would have a harder time getting access to tickets.”*

Others highlighted access inequities caused by unforeseen events and a desire to maintain or restore access. These comments included:

- *“A wildfire closed highway 20 before the park eastbound. We live on the west side of the state. We would have to drive several extra hours to access the westbound highway, plus drive the same to get home. The park service would not refund my reservation, even though the fire made it extremely difficult to access park.”*

- *“When access becomes hindered for one reason or another it is important that we maintain and restore that, rather than... decommissioning camps, trails, roads, boat ramps and other facilities.”*

Others highlighted the inefficiency of requiring in-person visits for those who are already familiar with park regulations and backcountry practices. One organization shared:

- *“Many of our volunteer leaders and general members are experienced and frequent users of the Park. While it may make sense for first-time visitors to the Park (or those seeking walk up permits for the most popular destinations) to visit the Wilderness Information Center in person to pick up a reserved or walk up permit, it is inconvenient for experienced and frequent visitors to get their permit in person. Often our volunteer leaders need to make a separate trip to Marblemount to secure a walk up permit, even for a less popular area, adding significant time onto what is already a volunteer activity. The Park's pilot Good Stewards Program was a significant benefit to our leaders, but unfortunately we have heard that the program does not exist anymore. We encourage the Park to streamline the process of securing permits for frequent users who adhere to Park rules and regulations, adequately prepare for backcountry trips, and follow Leave No Trace principles.”*

Several respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the Recreation.gov system, citing increased difficulty securing permits despite participating in lotteries, being unable to secure a permit year after year, and observing empty sites during visits. Respondents expressed frustration with the experience:

- *“It all feels very competitive and not super enjoyable.”*
- *“I'm excited that we can now book a week in advance, but it seems like a lot of people reserve campsites in the middle of the week and take up the whole week. It's so hard to get a campsite. I also hate the backcountry reservation system. I don't understand why we have to have a lottery. Why can't reservations for camps be like they are for campgrounds, I don't understand why it has to be so hard to get a backcountry reservation.”*
- One long-time visitor expressed: *“Recreation.gov is TERRIBLE. Access to Ross Lake boat-in and backcountry sites has become nearly impossible. After being on the lake nearly every year for over 20 years, we have been unable to secure permits, even if we paid extra to join the lotteries. Then on daytrips, we find empty sites!”*

Others offered possible reasons for the increased difficulties:

- *“I think part of this is because the lottery system forces people to try to plan something months in advance that winds up being cancelled. The visitors don't bother to let anybody know until it is too late for others to join in or alter plans.”*
- *“It is tough to need to reserve a backpacking spot so far in advance, well before weather forecasts are known.”*
- Short windows for same-day permit pick up

Another reason that respondents disliked the system was not wanting to pay fees to Booz Allen Hamilton. They desired alternative reservation mechanisms to be made available to visitors.

Some respondents noted limited water access opportunities available throughout the park as a concern.

Others emphasized the value of expanding access to dispersed recreation opportunities, particularly for camping and non-motorized watercraft, to support solitude and self-reliant experiences

Still others noted that thoughtful off-road access planning, balanced with protections for sensitive areas, would benefit visitors who use 4WD or OHVs to reach remote trailheads and sites

Other respondents stressed the value of preserving the park's remoteness and solitude, both for wildlife and for visitors seeking a more immersive wilderness experience. They cautioned against increasing access, arguing that it could lead to overcrowding, disruptive behavior, and a diminished sense of connection to nature. Some cited other parks, like Mount Rainier, as examples of how too much accessibility can attract large crowds and result in damage to sensitive environments.

Backcountry equestrians raised safety concerns related to accessing the park. Respondents wrote:

- *“There is currently no way for me to camp overnight with my stock to avoid this 200 mile round trip for a day ride. We need a spot to camp with the stock, our trailers and our camper rigs which would allow riding several days for day rides or a better shot and a pack trip into the park to one of the stock use camp spots. . . It is unsafe for us to have to unload on a road or highway with traffic. We need a safe area with adequate parking, adequate turnaround space, 50-60' diameter area for a long wheelbase pickup and 3 horse trailer. Aggressive enforcement of the parking spaces for stock and along the access roads. Cars parking in our space as well as parking on the sides of the access roads pose a safety liability for ambulances, fire and aid vehicles and for stock use as we can't get through this jamb up to our designated parking area. If we get part way and can't continue forward we have to try to back out with cars continuing to come up behind us.”*
- *“Blocked equestrian access, overcrowded trailed leading to harassment via non-stop photography of self and stock, as well as creating unsafe conditions due to stopping on cliff sides while passing hoards of people. Stock camps being overrun and reserved by non-stock users with no priority given to stock... Day use permit system.”*

Climbers expressed frustration with restrictions in Ross Lake National Recreation Area, noting that their user group has been deprioritized compared to others despite a history of low-impact and responsible use in an area where development is already present. Respondents explained:

- *“The area is. . . a National Recreation Area, yet one of the most low impact recreational activities, climbing, is not allowed. . .”*
- *“Climbing development near Newhalem is restricted - this prevents the community from getting the full recreational value of an area already impacted by highway noise and hydroelectric infrastructure.*
- *“The rock climbing community wants to access areas that are literally adjacent to a state highway where the most destructive activity is allowed to occur. Noise polluting groups of Harleys and giant RVs pollute the landscape, while a conservation-minded community of climbers want to simply recreate in an area that is legally set aside for recreation.”*

Motorboaters expressed frustration with limited access compared to other boating groups. One said:

- *“Limited access to boat ramps for motorboats. As a recreational area, it's not just about the canoes and kayakers that have taken over. Motorboats is what started recreation on the reservoirs.”*

Some respondents raised concerns about equitable access to Ross Lake Resort reservations and floating campsites, stating:

- *“Currently, the owner/manager of the cabins at Ross Lake limit reservations and priority to those who have stayed before. No priority or preference should exist concerning cabin stays.”*
- *“I am strongly opposed to... making the floating campsites a "unique experience" as I presume this would increase costs, decrease accessibility for many, and have a greater impact on the landscape.”*

Others expressed a desire for more affordable shuttle fees at Ross Lake and easier access to motorized and non-motorized boating opportunities. Their comments included:

- *“The primary issues that interfere with our experience are the consistently rising cost of the portage to Ross Lake, which makes access more difficult financially.”*
- *“I understand that this is controlled by Ross Lake Resort but it does affect the numbers of people bringing their own boats. The couple that was at Buster Brown said that they were not prepared to pay the \$90 round trip fee for their kayak. It's been that for at least a couple of years but they used to offer a \$10 each way multi boat discount. That wasn't offered this year. That fee could be one of the reasons why we saw a lot fewer boaters and why plans got changed if people were not aware of the fee.”*
- *“Boat access is currently only available for those willing to pay a rental fee to the privately owned lodge. We are in need of a public boat ramp to allow tax-paying citizens access the lake for the most amazing boat site camping experiences possible. We are missing out as long as the north end boat ramps are not accessible.”*
- *“Access to Ross Lake is extremely limited for kayaking and canoeing with the Hozomeen crossing closed. Only option is to pay for portage over the dam both ways at south end. The lake is now really almost a private use unless portage is paid or you rent a boat at the resort.”*
- *“It's tricky planning between getting permits and motorboats.”*

Several respondents urged the NPS to prioritize strategies that balance preservation of the park's ecological integrity and remoteness with improved access for lower-income, disabled, and marginalized communities. Some respondents emphasized the need to move away from car-centric transportation models inside the park and emphasized the importance of equitable access and environmental preservation, writing:

- *“...prioritizing car[s]... reduced accessibility for the 1/3 of people living in the United States that don't have a driver's license. Car ownership should not be a requirement to visit our public parks...”*
- *“The park is only really accessible to cars (and other vehicles). There are no shuttles, transit service, consideration for people who want to recreate without cars. This issue gets more salient as the population cares more about the environment but also ages. Cars should not be the sole*

*way to arrive and recreate. Shuttles are a must and will do the most to reduce human impacts to the area while increasing access for people who cannot or choose not to drive.”*

- *“Colonial Creek: It is unclear what parking improvement means. If it means adding parking, then absolutely not. . . this will not increase accessibility for people who cannot currently come to the park because we can't drive, and also that transit access could decrease demand for parking. Parking induces. . . a long list of negative consequences for humans, wildlife, and the park.”*
- *“. . . the public doesn't owe vanlifers easier access, especially if the park doesn't prioritize access for people who cannot currently get to the park at all.”*
- *“Having to drive into the parks is a significant barrier for me. Gas is expensive, and it would be much more convenient to take a shuttle into the region. I would love to visit the park more often, but I simply do not have enough money to spend on gas for a trip like that more than every once in a great while.”*

Other respondents expressed a desire for expanded educational opportunities at the Learning Center available to the public without an added cost. One shared:

- *“The Learning Center is not utilized enough as a space for the public. Park guests often drive there thinking there will be programming accessible to them and are disappointed to learn the education is reserved for paid guests of the lodges. It's an incredible space that provides so much opportunity for education. I wish NPS, NCI, and City Light would work together to make use of campus and provide some educational programming (talks for kids in the library, guided walks) that are accessible to the public on the campus. The mountain school and summer programs there are so important and I would love more park visitors to have access to that level of information and involvement within the park.”*

## Strategies

Respondents suggested the following strategies:

- Moving the Colonial Creek boat ramp to the north side of Highway 20 where the channel is slightly deeper
- Implementing alternative transportation methods and connections to public transportation networks:
  - *“Increased transit options as well as other multimodal methods of moving into and throughout the park would be the best way to address this barrier.”*
- Using [www.recreation.gov](http://www.recreation.gov) to make the Ross Lake boat shuttle cheaper and easier to access
- Integrating youth and underrepresented groups into stewardship and interpretation programs to build a broader base of support for the park's long-term protection
- Restoring public boat launch access at Ross Lake with reasonable fees for day use, camping, or launching
- Permitting system improvements, including:
  - Cancellation management

- Enforcing stiffer penalties for no-shows such as higher fees and suspension from making new reservations:
  - *“Washington State Park system will notify you that you have missed two reservations and if you miss the third you will be temporarily barred from the system...”*
- Offering online day-of reservations and making no-show sites available online:
  - *“...an easier way to get a permit within the 24-hour period without driving all the way to Marblemount (with no guarantees) would be wonderful.”*
- Limiting the number of people in a group reservation to decrease the chances of cancellations
- Limiting the number of nights that a party may camp at any drive-in campground e.g. 3 nights maximum
- Staggering the times when reservations can be made with 30-45 days to the date of entry:
  - *“Biggest thing that interferes is the inability to confirm a camping spot and it's so far away (distance wise) that I can't visit without a secured sleeping arrangement (otherwise it's 10x more stressful). I understand you can book in advance but sometimes with camping that is more difficult to plan out that far in advance. I wish there were more options for dispersed camping in this area or there were more opportunities to reserve spots...a month out.”*
  - *“Offering backcountry reservations similar to how the state ferries are managed: 1/3 of the sites are available 3 months out, 1/3 of the sites are available 2 weeks out, 1/3 of the sites are available 2 days out. So there are always new sites opening on a daily basis. And they are available for online reservation, so you know you have a specific site booked, and can plan accordingly.”*
  - *“...a parking pass system may reserve space for last-minute visitors, visitors with physical disabilities, as well as individuals with camping reservations and other plans in the backcountry. Reservation systems appeal to those who do like to plan ahead - and can be implemented while reserving some first-come-first-served options for those who do not or cannot plan ahead.”*
  - *“If a reservation system is considered, it should be extremely user-friendly, preserve a portion of walk-up access, and incorporate proven elements from other successful systems.”*
  - *“I suggest that a number of sites be set aside for local (whatcom and Skagit county) residents exclusively. Both for advanced reservations and*

*walk-ups. And/or, a priority reservation booking window period is established for whatcom and Skagit residents to have early/priority access to campsite reservations.”*

- Being able to troubleshoot or make changes easily online instead of having to travel to the WIC in-person
- Day use management
  - Reservation system for popular hikes such as Ross Dam Trail and Maple Pass
  - Lotteries for day use to reduce crowding on the trail
  - Day use permits for stock parties
- Overnight use
  - Pilot programs to provide more flexibility for multi-use trips (i.e. hiking and kayaking itineraries)
    - *“...but the fact that they are only bookable day-of or the day before in person makes it hard to plan a successful trip on Ross Lake, especially if you are hoping to rent a watercraft from the resort, use a water taxi, etc., as those resources aren't always available last minute... It is stressful to load up the car for a backpacking/canoe trip without knowing if you actually have a site, especially with kids! And then to drive past the lake by 45 minutes (we live in Winthrop), to then turn around and drive back to the trailhead... it makes for a long, more stressful day, and with how windy the lake gets it is nice to get an early start and that extra 90 minutes of driving makes a big difference.”*
- Less restrictive permitting in more remote areas like Picket Range or in places and during times of year that are not crowded
- Incentivizing carpooling by assigning a certain number of backcountry camping permits for groups that carpool
- Providing other options to reserve campsites such as calling the visitor center to reserve or emailing the wilderness information center instead of paying fees through Recreation.gov
- Simplifying the backcountry lottery communications to clarify what visitors should be doing, when they should be hearing back and what they should do once they receive a response

## **Natural Resources**

Respondents commented on issues or concerns with how natural resources and/or designated Wilderness may be affected by visitor use or actions in the plan.

Several respondents emphasized the importance of protecting natural resources, such as wildlife and critical wildlife corridors, old growth forest, fungi from recreation-related impacts. Many also perceived wildfire as a threat to natural resources and recreation in the park.

Some respondents expressed concerns about soundscape disturbances along wilderness trails such as loud dam sirens, chainsaws, and powered brushers. Others described the vehicle noise and pollution from SR20 as constant and problematic for wildlife and air quality. Some urged the park to prioritize the soundscape as a core element of the park and resource stewardship, on par with dark night skies, warning that once lost, the natural quiet may be very difficult to restore. In addition, some respondents viewed the number of motorboats on the lake as excessive, noting that their noise and presence significantly detract from the serene wilderness experience they seek in the park.

*“I support banning motorized watercraft on Ross, Diablo, and Gorge Lakes, with the exception of the water taxi service. Motorized watercraft do not match the wilderness character of the area and have impacts on wildlife and other users. The water taxi is an important service for recreationalists who want to access the north end of Ross Lake, and since it's fairly limited it feels like a reasonable exception.”*

Some respondents expressed concern about the degradation of natural ecosystems due to visitor behavior, such as illegal parking and off-trail travel due to overcrowding or ignorance. They emphasized the importance of maintaining and sustaining the park's ecological integrity and urged the Park to protect its flora and fauna from further harm. One respondent hypothesized that fewer vehicles and more enforcement of park rules would decrease human-started wildfires. Another respondent noted a growing issue with visitors gathering firewood in the park, which has led to trampled vegetation and the cutting of downed trees.

One respondent voiced opposition to expanding day-use areas or converting existing camping areas into day-use spaces, citing concerns that these areas tend to accumulate more litter and are generally treated with less care.

Other respondents emphasized that building and maintaining designated trails is an effective strategy for protecting natural resources, especially in high-use areas and climbing areas. Well-planned trails encourage visitors to stay on durable surfaces and follow routes selected by park managers, thereby minimizing trampling of sensitive environments. In addition, respondents urged the National Park Service to pursue stewardship projects that enhance ecosystem resilience and safeguard critical wildlife habitats.

*“...By restoring natural processes, protecting biodiversity, and addressing the impacts of climate change, these efforts are essential to preserving the park's ecological integrity and ensuring that the North Cascades remain a thriving refuge for plants, animals, and future generations.”*

Some respondents observed that First Nations in British Columbia are also working to restore grizzly bears and anticipated human-wildlife interactions to increase in the northern reaches of the park. Others expressed concern that signage alone may not be sufficient to prevent unsafe encounters that could result in harm to both visitors and wildlife, including the potential euthanasia of bears. They advocated for a more robust ranger presence to actively deter visitors from approaching wildlife and support responsible behavior in bear habitats.

One Tribe expressed a desire for the Natural Resources section of the Desired Conditions to include a specific goal that reflects the park's responsibility to Tribal nations and future generations. They also advocated for co-management of natural resources, emphasizing the longstanding cultural, historical, and treaty-based ties to these lands. Additionally, they requested that the document explicitly recognizes that natural resources are also cultural resources and that they be identified as “entirely unique and irreplaceable” too. The Tribe further recommended that the Draft Plan acknowledge potential infrastructure and operational changes associated with the upcoming federal

relicensing of the City of Seattle’s three hydroelectric dams, specifically, potential changes such as new flows in the Gorge Bypass Reach, construction of a new road to Ross Lake from State Route 20, and the implementation of fish passage at the dams.

## Strategies

Respondents suggested the following actions:

- Selling firewood to reduce illegal firewood gathering
- Planting conifers or natural vegetation in sparse areas
- Installing more signage, education, and wildlife-proof waste bins in areas where human-wildlife interactions are expected to increase
- Increasing ranger presence on trails
- Targeting new or inexperienced hikers with education
- Leveraging education partners to deepen partnerships with educational organizations
- Referencing Rockport Steelhead Park as a good example of inter-agency collaboration and improving the bald eagle sanctuary area
- Banning motorized watercraft on Ross, Diablo, and Gorge Lakes
- Banning campfires after 8 p.m. to improve air quality

## Cultural Resources

Respondents raised some concerns of how cultural resources (inclusive of Tribal resources) may be affected by visitor use or actions in the plan.

Several respondents supported the protection of cultural resources and ensuring privacy, access, and opportunities for Tribal or traditional activities in Ross Lake NRA. One respondent commented on how disappointed they were to learn about Tribally significant trees that had been burned in 2024 at Goodell Creek Campground and requested more support to honor and respect Tribal cultural concerns. Another suggested a space for Tribal or traditional activities at Goodell Creek.

## Suggested Revisions

One Tribe expressed a desire for the plan to state that “*site conditions shall be monitored to ensure the protection of unique and irreplaceable resources in partnership with the tribes and First Nations*” [who have] “*deep ancestral ties to the area.*” They also requested that the plan state that these attributes “*shall be protected and preserved for current and future generations in order for the Park to uphold its federal trust responsibility*”. They also suggested a statement acknowledging that large volumes of visitors have been adversely impacting the ability of the Tribe to exercise Treaty-reserved rights such as hunting, fishing, gathering, collection of cultural resources for spiritual ceremonies, and privacy for religious ceremonies.

Other suggested revisions include adding the following objective to the plan: “*Prevent additional harm to natural and cultural resources and preserve a wild experience by, in consultation with affected Tribes: focusing recreation on existing recreation areas, committing to not expanding the footprint of*

*recreation areas, preventing overuse, and taking management measures to limit the scope and intensity of recreation impacts.”*

## Process

Respondent comments focused on the planning process, process scope and parts of the process such as civic engagement, and consultation and coordination with external agencies, partners, Tribes and traditionally associated groups.

Some respondents perceived the planning process as incomplete or flawed should the inclusion of the Washington Department of Transportation, the US Forest Service, or Tribes be omitted from the planning process and funding, coordination, and broader regional level planning opportunities be missed. Others perceived the project scope as too narrow. One commenter urged the NPS to realign the Visitor Use Management Plan with the original intent of the SCL Settlement Agreement by expanding its focus beyond Ross Lake NRA, honoring interagency and Tribal partnerships, and prioritizing region-wide recreation solutions to relieve pressure on the core area. Another emphasized that expanding access may conflict with the perspectives of local Tribes and urged the NPS to prioritize Tribal concerns when making visitor use management decisions.

*“An excellent example of cooperation between local, state and federal agencies is the Rockport Steelhead Park to provide access, historical interpretation, fishing, recreational boating, picnicking, camping, restrooms, birding (during winter Bald Eagles feeding in the river and local festivals and activities educating the public about our national birds in the Bald Eagle Sanctuary). More sites like this could be developed nearby to attract year-round recreation and visitation. This could be done by signage, interpretation, and advertising in the Skagit River corridor.”*

One commenter raised a concern about possible impacts on the scenic integrity of the Pacific Northwest National Scenic Trail which should be discussed with the trail administrator and the Pacific Northwest Trail association. They emphasized that no action that “substantially interferes” with the nature and purposes of the trail may be authorized per the National Trails System Act.

Some respondents highlighted the need to account for several factors when determining carrying capacities and emphasized the importance of defining desired conditions as well as indicators and thresholds, writing:

- *“...account for both the "type and level" of use. As the current direction explains actions taken to manage visitor use, which might include engineering facilities to better accommodate visitors, could increase user capacity by reducing the likelihood of visitors to trample vegetation, park inappropriately or otherwise "leave a trace." ...counting vehicles in parking lots is an inaccurate measure of visitation, but it is particularly flawed in areas where vehicles are both parked for extended periods of time by backcountry users and subject to surges of highway traffic. Drivers may stop at popular sites like Colonial Creek to use the bathroom or briefly experience Diablo Lake. These individuals may or may not have a lasting impact on park resources but an increase in the overall number of visitors briefly stopping as they drive through the park could influence managers' perceptions of overall use. Counting cars does not tell managers about the type of user nor does it provide a particularly accurate way to estimate their level of impact.”*
- *“Don’t just count people in the NRA.”*

- *“If carrying capacity models are used to determine acceptable visitor volumes, we encourage the Park to apply resource-specific thresholds that can more precisely define sustainable use levels. Identifying the right carrying capacity is complex and will require adaptive management to refine targets over time. Ongoing assessment of the relationship between visitor use and resource conditions—through monitoring ecological impacts and visitor experience data—will be essential to successfully balancing access with protection.”*
- *“By identifying the desired conditions of any given place, the park can try to manage recreation within the parameters of those conditions. To justify managing recreational capacity, the park should communicate what impacts occur when capacity is exceeded. Resource damage, longer emergency response times, unavailable parking spots, and long lines at restrooms may create undesirable conditions that are a result when a site is being used beyond its visitor capacity.”*

One Tribe requested that the NPS commit to work and complete a co-stewardship and co-management agreement in the coming months. Some commenters requested that the planning process not only include Tribes as stakeholders but also as planning leads or co-managers.

One commenter expressed a desire for more robust civic engagement efforts.

## Strategies

Respondents suggested the following actions:

- Reconsidering potential solutions that have been proposed or analyzed in the past to address the challenges in:
  - Keeping Ross Lake campgrounds open when lake levels fluctuate
  - Managing hazard trees at Colonial Creek campground
  - Minimizing road crossing hazards on SR-20, especially near Colonial Creek Campground and Ross Dam Trailhead
  - Managing road debris at Roady Creek
  - Minimizing human-wildlife conflict and natural resource impacts
  - Communication of rules and expectations related to visitor use
- Expanding the project scope to include:
  - The entirety of the Skagit River watershed
  - Skagit River Wild and Scenic River Corridor and SR-20 east of Ross Lake National Recreation Area, and inventorying facilities in these areas and the organizations who manage them to identify other additional partners
  - Shuttle service stops outside of Ross Lake National Recreation Area
  - Sauk and Suiattle Rivers as the minimum westward boundaries of the plan
  - Rockport as the west boundary of the plan
  - Cascade Pass, Thunder Creek, Ross Lake access hike from the highway, Easy Pass, Maple Pass, Washington Pass, and Blue Lake

- Considering plan effects on nearby areas such as Concrete, Washington Pass, Methow Valley, Glacier Peak, Lake Chelan, and Mt. Baker
- Installing multilingual signage and clearer messaging about campfire rules, wildlife awareness, and natural hazards

## Climbing

Respondents provided feedback focused on climbing, canyoning, and mountaineering activities pertaining to the plan area.

Respondents mentioned specific climbing areas of high value to them include Space Wall, Canoehalem, Ryans Wall, and nearby bouldering areas. They expressed frustration over current closures and urged the park to restore access through a clear and collaborative management approach.

*“I genuinely treasure the rock climbing experiences in the NRA, in particular the Space Wall, Canoehalem, and Ryans Wall. . . closures [of these areas] have completely blocked my climbing adventures in the NRA. Park Staff can move forward with a climbing management plan at both walls and the bouldering areas to get the access codified and communicated ASAP so we can get back out there having fun.”*

Some respondents argue that climbing closures lack justification or that justification is not clear, especially in areas where no active nests remain and where climbers believe they maintain sufficient distance from sensitive sites. Others feel it is unfair that climbing is restricted while other human-powered recreational activities are permitted. Additionally, some contend that climbing has a lower environmental impact compared to activities involving roads, energy use, or motorized boats. Another point of contention is the perception that Ross Lake National Recreation Area (ROLA), despite its NRA designation, is being managed more like designated Wilderness.

## Strategies

Respondents suggested the following actions and strategies:

- Increased communication between partners, scientists, and climbers including regular updates and spaces for dialogue
- Including language and management provisions that facilitate continued access to existing climbing areas and create a pathway for new route development and climbing management planning across the ecosystem
- Formalizing and improving access trails and anchors, and modifying routes and canoe access in partnership with climbing organizations to improve safety and natural resource stewardship:
  - *“Have climbers strip the upper 2 pitches of Cold Beer in the River if the large ledges stop pitch 2 are potential nesting sites. Reopen Ryan’s Wall with a spring closure of the routes near Kate Moss if that’s appropriate. . . Open Canoehalem particularly during summer months. If old canoes are a concern, require annual Park passes on canoes and require them to be taken out for falcon season every year. Put or allow a 4-6 canoe rack in on at least the north side of the lake to minimize impact.”*

- *“Climbers died at Washington pass because the fixed gear was old pitons and the pitons failed. Bolting should be allowed for rappel anchors. Bolts also mean less colorful and ugly webbing left on routes. . . Bolted rappel lines save lives and reduces impact.”*
- Collaboration efforts between indigenous communities and climbers:
  - *“. . .is it not possible for Park Rangers to facilitate meetings between stakeholders so that climbers may be given opportunity to discuss programs/ways they may be able to give back to the Tribal community in exchange for sharing the land.”*
- Collaboration efforts between park staff and climbing organizations, particularly Access Fund, American Alpine Club, and the Washington Climbers Coalition
- Collaboration efforts to help monitor peregrine nesting sites, assist with closure communications, and promote stewardship by capitalizing on climbers’ willingness to act as citizen scientists:
  - *“Park Staff has been good about working with climbers in the falcon nesting program to maintain good communication about closures and to allow climbers to help monitor the nesting sites as citizen scientists. I would like it if the park would continue reaching out to the WCC to recruit climbers to help observe the peregrines and communicate the closures.”*
- Modifying closures:
  - *“I wonder if. . . the closure could be narrowed to the routes nearest the raptor nesting site.”*
- Canyoning, rock climbing, and mountaineering were identified as highly valued recreational activities within the NRA, and respondents requested that the plan recognize them as appropriate uses. They also recommended establishing a process through which canyon terrain could be evaluated for a designation similar to a Climbing Management Area (CMA), to support responsible access and long-term stewardship:
  - *“The North Cascades offers world class canyoning opportunities which can provide a unique and special way for visitors from around the world to experience the beauty of the Pacific Northwest.”*
  - *“The plan should explicitly recognize rock climbing, mountaineering, and canyoning as “appropriate recreational activities,” consistent with the legislative intent for Ross Lake NRA.”*

## Hiking and Trails.

Several comments provided feedback on hiking and trail strategies. Respondents were strongly opposed to removing any trails and some expressed a desire for expansion of the trail system, writing:

- *“More trails along North Cascades Highway.”*
- *“There are a few relatively short/easy trails around Newhalem- -which should be better publicized- -and hardly any more moderate trails, like Thunder Knob. The terrain is challenging,*

*to be sure, but there are some opportunities for new trails. Other ideas would be to improve roads to some trailheads so that they can be accessed by passenger car (like Hidden Lake Lookout and Thorton Lakes), and to expand/upgrade some existing trails. It would, for example, be nice if the Stetattle Creek Trail actually went somewhere (like the falls a little further on). The road to from the Newhalem Visitor Center could also be converted to a trail with viewpoints to see the falls. The Diablo/Reflector Bar area offers a good opportunity for an accessible interpretive trail if details can be worked out with SCL.”*

- *“I wish there were more trails on the western side of the park.”*
- More trails into the park from adjacent areas

Some commenters emphasized the importance of keeping roads and trails open and reopening them promptly after closures. They also called for improved trail maintenance, better access to high-elevation wilderness areas, and continued access to trails affected by burns, even if marked as unmaintained. One respondent suggested rotating trail closures to allow trail soils to recover and regenerate. Another respondent raised concerns about increasing off-trail use in wilderness areas and impacts of encroachment on wildlife habitats, proposing using trail cameras and enforcement measures to protect wildlife and sensitive habitats.

## Strategies

Some respondents suggested the following trail alignments and improvements:

- If permissible by the terrain, *“a portage/cart trail off of HWY 20 to the lake edge?”*
- New trails along SR-20, easy ones, dog-friendly ones
- Stock bridge over Bridge Creek
- Connecting trail from Happy Flats to Ross Dam Trailhead
- Rerouting Thornton Lakes Trail to Trapper Peak
- Extending the culvert under or over Happy Panther trail to account for strong spring flows
- A multimodal path for cyclists and pedestrians along SR-20 shielded with jersey barrier
- Restrooms at trailheads and near climbing areas
- Maintained trails to climbing areas and partnership with community member volunteers E.g. from Gorge Wall parking lot to Gorge Lake
- Improving or fixing the portion of Thunder Knob Trail that regularly gets washed out
- Revisiting and improving Thunder Arm Loop Trail along the east shore
- A new trailhead and trail on the south side of SR 20 between Colonial Creek and the park’s eastern boundary to expand access in a heavily visited corridor and draw visitors off the road into backcountry areas
- Reestablishing the trail to Ruby Peak from Fourth of July Pass

- Improving return access from Desolation Peak to the parking area to enhance visitor experience
- New Trail from Newhalem to Diablo and Bridge Crossing at Gorge Creek:
  - *“The trailless section from Diablo back to Newhalem, though rugged, also deserves a new trail. Despite costs and many design and engineering challenges, it would appear that the following route may be feasible. From Newhalem to Gorge Creek, the route stays south of the highway, sometimes along remnants of old road bed, sometimes at the highway shoulder just outside the guardrail, and sometimes on a new grade excavated or constructed on existing fill or cribbing. Prior to the first tunnel, the route descends to an existing concrete abutment and large pier in the river bed where a new trail bridge could span the river and connect to the maintenance road south of the river. The crossing also affords a good view of the remnants of the Devils Corner/Elbow structure utilized by miners and others a century ago. That and the historic bridge that utilized this giant pier in the river offer substantial and unique interpretive potential. Although this would be an expensive bridge (perhaps in the range of \$1 million), it would considerably reduce costs for the next trail section. The route could follow the service road that leads to the arched bridge below Gorge Dam. Trail users would re-cross to the north side, then follow the access road back up toward the highway a short distance, to where a new trail would veer right and gradually rise to connect with the Gorge Creek Loop Trail nearby. This leads to Gorge Creek Viewpoint and restrooms which would serve as a perfect intermediate access point for the Skagit Gorge Trail. From here, the route would cross at the existing crosswalk, continue across the grated bridge then probably stay low along the north side of the highway for the next mile in order to pass below cliffs, a large gulley, and a high waterfall east of Gorge Creek.”*
- Alternate route and phased approach:
  - *“However, a high route should also be considered here, including a bridge spanning the chasm (rock walls may potentially accommodate a fairly high bridge that might be generally out of range of most rockfall and avalanche activity). Nevertheless, the site is very rugged and may preclude serious consideration of a higher route. From this point, the terrain becomes less vertical, and though it is still steep and rugged, it may be possible to climb several hundred feet, connect various rock benches and forested areas (to minimize the need for blasting or major disturbances), then eventually make a gradual descent to the east bank of Stetattle Creek and the end of the Skagit Gorge Trail. By staying high, this easterly section from Gorge Creek to Stetattle would offer dramatic views of the gorge which simply cannot be attained through the limited views from a car's windshield. The Skagit Gorge Trail could be built in phases, each section connecting to another and creating a worthwhile opportunity in itself. The portion west of Gorge Creek could be built to a somewhat higher standard to accommodate more users, including "non-hikers," while the eastern portion could be more primitive to protect the natural character of the area and to provide a wilder and more challenging experience. The entire corridor would lie outside (below) the existing wilderness boundary.”*
- Trail improvements:

- *“...some trails in developed areas such as the highway or visitor center could be improved to a medium or higher standard to better accommodate less-experienced or less-mobile trail users. Pyramid Lake: A minor extension of the trail could be considered to access nearby views [to the lake] to make this a more rewarding hike. Stetattle Creek: This old trail just fades without a clear destination. It should be improved and extended a short distance to a reasonable view of the dramatic north face of Davis Peak. This wall was once determined to be the only place in the state of Washington where a mountain rises more than a vertical mile in less than one horizontal mile. Pierce Mountain: This trail should be improved and maintained to a standard comparable to the Sourdough Mountain Trail. This would greatly improve the loop trek that incorporates the Diablo Lake Trail. Newhalem Creek: This trail also fades without a clear destination and should be improved and extended to an appropriate viewing and resting area. Panther Creek: This trail might benefit from some realignment along the lower section. [Opportunities for trail connections exist], such as at the bottom of the Ross Dam Trail where very short links to nearby trails (Happy Panther, Diablo Lake, West Bank) would enhance the hiking experience and avoid the need to walk the roads. From the Ross Dam Trailhead, a short link to the Happy Creek Trailhead would make another good connection. Where the new trail to the Happy Falls historic site approaches very close to SR 20 east of the Happy Creek Trailhead, another connection from this point down to the Happy Panther Trail would create an attractive loop with only minimal impact. The trail might have to traverse eastward somewhat to easier terrain. Reconstruction of the old trail up Ruby Mountain has some appeal, as well, despite potential impact to wilderness values here. Superb views and the presence a radio tower atop the mountain makes this impact seem less of a concern than in other remote areas. Perhaps a good compromise is to extend the trail to the first good view from the ridge and essentially abandon the rest.”*

## Camping

Numerous comments provided feedback on camping strategies. Respondents were strongly opposed to removing any campgrounds and some expressed a desire for expansion of campgrounds, developing additional campgrounds and backcountry sites, or maintaining overall campsite availability by opening alternative sites when others are closed due to environmental hazards.

### Strategies

Respondents suggested the following strategies:

- Expanding camping opportunities, especially those that are first come first served
- Improved campground facilities:
  - *“...the Volunteer campground needs improvement. e.g., Plant materials for shading, better site features for aesthetics and buffering from WSDOT operations, Adirondack-type shelter for short-term volunteers, activate the hookups already in place for volunteer campsites, expand the service building for better cooking and food storage.”*
- Making backcountry campsites available through a reservation system
- Allowing cyclists to camp overnight at picnic areas after 7 p.m.

- Adding campsites close to Sourdough peak
- One respondent complained that the gravel used in tent pads makes it difficult to stake their tent and requested the park use a different material
- While some respondents expressed a desire for more campgrounds and campsites on account of how competitive it is to secure a site reservation, others suggested encouraging more camping opportunities outside of the park
- New boat-in campsite on the west shore of Ross Lake between Big and Little Beaver creeks
- While some respondents found floating campsites intriguing, others perceived them as impractical due to their vulnerability to strong winds and waves on the lake, unclear waste management system, and presumed cost. Some respondents suggested reopening and improving Hozomeen and land-based campsites would be a more feasible investment. One Tribe requested to remove floating campsites as an action from the plan.

### **Newhalem and Goodell**

Numerous comments provided feedback on strategies in this area of the park. Respondents supported areas being set aside for Tribal use and protection; Goodell Creek was specifically mentioned. There were comments both in favor and opposed to adding parking in Newhalem, though if connected to broader transit strategies (e.g., shuttles) some would be more in favor. There were comments both in favor and opposed to adding spaces in campgrounds for “van life” users. Those in favor of moving the group sites supported it to increase or improve qualities of individual campsites such as reducing noise. Another respondent opposed moving the Goodell Creek group camp to the south side of SR-20, on account that it would reduce single campsite availability in the most desirable area. One respondent described a desired alignment for a new trail between Diablo Lake and Newhalem. Other suggestions included turning group sites into individual sites.

### **Colonial**

Numerous comments provided feedback on strategies in this area of the park. Respondents agreed that parking and congestion along the highway 20 corridor are key issues that need to be addressed in and near Colonial Creek Campground, with some in favor of adding parking, while others opposed it and supported reallocating existing spaces. Respondents were in favor of any strategies to improve safety around the roadway. Some acknowledged the importance of preserving the old growth forest and natural environment and there were a number who wrote in favor of restoring Thunder Arm to a wetland.

Related to overnight use, some respondents did not want any changes to the area to result in a loss of campsites. One comment mentioned the campground was “busy but still very enjoyable” while another specifically mentioned enjoying watching the nighthawks with their family.

There were mixed responses among respondents about boat access and use. While most of those who commented on it, supported non-motorized access only, there were several strong proponents of keeping motorboat access in this area or, if not feasible, creating a new boat ramp somewhere else.

Strategies to improve day use at Colonial Creek included:

- Establishing specific day use areas for beach and water access

- Increasing day use parking, some suggested closing some campsites to do so
- Adding pedestrian safety measures such as boulder barriers and parking enforcement, with many respondents supporting the proposed pedestrian bridge under Highway 20
- Adding kayak or stand-up paddleboard rentals in the area
- Engineering solutions to seasonal flooding or permanent closure if not feasible
- Improving trails (see trails section for more)

### **Cascade River Rd. and Other SR-20 Locations**

Fewer comments provided feedback on strategies in this area of the park. Specific strategies mentioned around Cascade River Road were implementing a timed entry strategy to disperse use throughout the day and a shuttle to provide access while keeping private vehicles out of the area. See the shuttle section below for more details.

### **Marblemount**

Numerous comments provided feedback on strategies in this area of the park. Except for one, all comments related to Marblemount were entirely related to the Wilderness Information Center (WIC) and the potential of moving it. There were commenters very opposed to moving the WIC, especially for those needing permits for use along Cascade River Road. Others were in favor of moving it either to the Newhalem Visitor Center where they stated it could be easier to get same-day permits and could improve learning about wilderness for those less familiar with it. There were also proposals for moving it to Sedro-Wooley and/or adding a WIC on the east side either in Winthrop or Mazama and recommending a wilderness ranger be present at the Methow Valley Ranger Station. One commenter did acknowledge that with increasing access to online permits and no need to go to the WIC, this may be a less important consideration within the plan. One commenter wondered how search and rescue functions might be impacted if the WIC was moved from Marblemount.

#### **Strategies**

The only comment not about the WIC requested more lodging and trails within the Marblemount area.

### **Sourdough Mountain**

Several comments provided feedback on strategies in this area of the park. Respondents were strongly opposed to the removal of Sourdough Mountain Trail (Sourdough Trail) and advocated for either restoration or rerouting.

*“The current closure of the Sourdough Trail is an unfortunate consequence of the fire damage, but I would strongly oppose its removal or permanent closure. I understand it might need to be rerouted due to fire damage, but it is an important trail that should be rebuilt and exist. The Sourdough fire lookout is a historic and popular destination... and it was a fantastic and scenic hike. Stetattle Ridge and traversing below Elephant Butte is also one of the access routes into the Pickets and access should be preserved for mountaineers who want to get into those areas via this challenging and interesting route.”*

### **Gorge Lake Campground**

Numerous comments provided feedback on strategies in this area of the park. Respondents were split on what to do with the Gorge Lake Campground. Many wanted to keep it as a camping area, acknowledging the already high levels of competition for limited camping within Ross Lake. Those in favor, proposed increasing the number of sites, making it walk-in only, and adding “van life” spots to respond to trends and potentially draw some visitors away from Colonial. Others opposed adding “van life” spots at Gorge Lake, favoring more inclusive and less car-centric solutions. Fewer respondents supported switching the area to day use, in favor of improvements to lake access for kayaking and paddleboarding.

### **Sourdough Creek (Near Sourdough Beach, Learning Center)**

Fewer comments provided feedback on strategies in this area of the park. Some supported new visitor amenities such as restrooms and picnic areas. Some respondents advocated for maintaining shoreline access at Colonial Creek only to avoid increasing traffic across the dam or interfering with programming at the Learning Center (LC) and dam operations. Others suggested limiting shoreline access to shuttle users only, including those affiliated with the LC, Seattle City Light (SCL), and Ross Lake Resort, to reduce congestion and potential conflicts.

### **Ross Lake**

Numerous comments provided feedback on strategies in this area of the park. Respondents called out the need to address vehicle crowding and safety issues at the Ross Dam Trailhead and parking area. One comment noted, “Just expand the Ross Dam Trailhead already!” Not all agreed that expanding the car park was the solution, but general consensus was that the issues need to be addressed.

There was disagreement among respondents about motorized access and use of Ross Lake. Some in favor of non-motorized access only, while others advocate for ensuring ongoing motorized use.

There was disagreement among respondents about adding floating campsites to Ross Lake. Some respondents were interested in the idea, but there were a number of concerns about the practicality of such an idea, including questions around safety, human waste, comfort (e.g., windy conditions), resource protection, protection of scenic views, maintenance, and costs.

Other concerns raised around Ross Lake included:

- A perceived need to improve pedestrian access to Ross Lake and for people who own their own boats
- Water level impacts to dock access
- Consideration of parking if any more campsites are added (floating or otherwise)

### **Strategies**

Respondents suggested the following strategies:

- Provide alternate motorized boat launch elsewhere on Ross Lake if the Hozomeen launch is not open
- Optimize Ross Dam trailhead and consider the GMP parking configuration

- Expand parking at Ross Dam Trailhead
- Add adjustable docks to all ross lake campsites
- Expand Diablo Lake Trail all the way around the lake

One comment mentioned the idea of a reservation system for Ross Dam Trail and Maple Pass.

## Hozomeen

Numerous comments provided feedback on strategies in this area of the park. Respondents want to see Hozomeen reopened and accessible and support working with Canada to reestablish access and the joint ranger program. There was support for converting all or portions (lower loop) as permitted backcountry camping, but there was one comment opposed.

### Strategies

Respondents suggested the following strategies:

- Add a new gate south of Winnebago Flats
- Keep Winnebago flats camping as first come first served
- If there are staffing/maintenance limitations, only open Hozomeen when the lake is at full pool and close at other times
- Use Volunteers to manage the campground (could be housed in Hozomeen complex)
- Establish ferry service to Hozomeen
- Provide another motorized boat launch to Ross Lake elsewhere on Ross Lake if the Hozomeen launch is not open

## Shuttles

Numerous comments provided feedback about shuttles. Respondents expressed support for shuttle systems and strategies that encourage multimodal transportation and recreation for a variety of activities including day hikes, overnight trips, sightseeing, and staff commutes. Comments included:

- *“...for day visits...”*
- *“...overnight/backcountry permit holders, ADA visitors, and local indigenous people...”*
- *“...Learning Center participants and staff, Seattle City Light participants and staff, and Ross Lake Resort participants and staff...”*
- *“The biggest area that could improve my experience in the park is better transportation options to enable point-to-point hiking trips without needing two cars. This could include shuttle buses, connector trails when feasible, and generally more multimodal transportation options, which can serve both recreational and transportation needs. In an ideal world, it would be great for long-distance point-to-point and loop hikes to both be available and easy to access using a shuttle bus.”*

- *“We did a trip recently to Zion which only allows cars w/resort reservations in, and the experience of riding a bike in was FABULOUS. E-Buses and rules for bikes/other to move for the buses and regular stops/pickups at all trail heads.”*
- *“...Could limit carbon emissions and pollution...”*

Some respondents raised concerns about shuttles regarding:

- Limited shuttle operating hours without private vehicle access, noting that restricted schedules may not accommodate longer itineraries, especially on trips off Cascade River Road, where trips often begin early in the morning and could end well after shuttle service concludes
- Buses reaching capacity at the end of the day leaving some hikers stranded or infrequent shuttles that make people wait more than 20 minutes
- Worsening crowding and resource damage on trails even as shuttles may reduce car use since they could also increase overall visitation without implementing other strategies to limit the number of people on trails
- Shuttle prices set by external parties could be high, wait times could be long, and slow travel speeds could create barriers for visitors aiming to experience the park in shorter amounts of time

One commercial operator expressed interest in offering shuttle services but identified inconsistencies in inter-agency permitting requirements as the primary obstacle to participation.

## Strategies

Respondents suggested the following strategies:

- Bike-only days when car access is closed off and a shuttle system is in-place
- Shuttle-only access during the peak season, accompanied by the closure of parking lots, to better manage congestion and visitor flow
- Concession-run shuttles or partnering with public transit operators or agencies like King County Metro that receive some funding from the Seahawks to provide shuttle services throughout the park similar to Clallam Transit Strait Shot, Clallam Transit Hurricane ridge shuttle, and Cascades East Transit recreational service which provide ample space for recreational equipment
- Communicating transit options in a way that encourages shuttle use over limited parking options with the exception of visitors with mobility limitations. See additional information section
- Piloting the shuttle service by extending the springtime closure of SR-20 two more weeks where only shuttle buses have access to the park during that time
- Permits, reservation systems, parking fees, large free parking areas outside of the park, and limits on the numbers of visitors allowed per day coupled with shuttles

- Tiered pricing for shuttles based on length of stay
- Electric shuttle buses
- Extended morning and evening shuttle hours
- Specific shuttle stops and routes, including:
  - Newhalem, Marblemount, trailheads along SR-20, other points of interest such as overlooks, Diablo Dam Road, forest service roads, Mazama, Washington Pass, Rainy Pass, Easy Pass Trailhead, Winthrop, and Hidden Lake Lookout Trailhead off Cascade River Road
  - Separate routes, one to the WIC and Cascade River Road and another to Sourdough Creek, Colonial Creek, Diablo Lake Overlook, and Ross Lake Trailhead
  - Seasonal transportation shuttles and parking lots outside of the park, particularly in the autumn season to Maple Pass, Blue Lake, and other popular fall destinations along SR-20
- Connections to Concrete, Mt Vernon, and campgrounds outside of the park

## Wilderness

Numerous comments provided feedback on strategies related to wilderness. Some respondents specifically mentioned the importance of ongoing protection of wilderness and selecting strategies/actions with the least impacts on wilderness character.

These respondents raised specific concerns about the following:

- A need to consider/evaluate how changes to access and use in frontcountry impact wilderness
- Impacts from motorized uses (e.g., sights, sounds) on wilderness

## Strategies

Respondents suggested the following strategies:

- Completing a wilderness stewardship plan
- Banning motorized watercraft on Ross, Diablo, and Gorge Lakes, with exceptions for taxi services

## Other

Fewer comments or comment excerpts were not related to the other codes that are new ideas, concerns, or questions to consider.

Respondents made the following observations and suggestions to improve safety:

- Improving signage, barriers, and increase staff at Diablo Lake Overlook
- Improving vehicle security with ranger or volunteer patrols or stationed lookouts

## Strategies

Other suggestions included:

- Relocating park leadership offices from Sedro-Woolley to improve on-site presence and leadership visibility
- Opposing float plane access on Ross Lake
- Refurbishing the Newhalem Campground Amphitheatre for ranger-led programs
- Introducing entrance fees, peak day fees, or peak season fees
- Encouraging estate planning donations to support trail maintenance

## Additional Information

Respondents provided the following links and additional information:

- <https://parks.canada.ca/pn-np/ab/banff/visit/les10-top10/louise>
- <https://www.seattletimes.com/opinion/mount-rainier-reservation-system-is-no-paradise-for-locals/>
- <https://www.hikeolympic.com/trailhead-shuttle-schedule>
- <https://www.hikeolympic.com/hurricane-ridge-winter-shuttle>
- <https://www.hikecascades.com/hiker-shuttle>
- <https://www.theurbanist.org/2024/12/17/op-ed-transit-in-rainier-national-park/>
- <https://rivers.gov/sites/rivers/files/documents/plans/skagit-plan.pdf>

## Out of Scope

Some respondent comments included ideas that are outside the scope of the project. However, the park will retain these suggestions and consider them as appropriate for future planning efforts or related projects. These comments supported:

- Acquiring and developing land to enhance public access and conservation
- Increasing staff at Stehekin
- Developing public access to the Skagit River along the South Skagit Road
- Prioritizing shuttle service at Mt. Rainier over North Cascades if funding is limited
- Opening roads to Copper-Chilliwack Loop and Brush Creek–Whatcom Pass