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SUMMARY

Ross Lake National Recreation Area was designated as a unit of the National Park System on October 2, 1968. It is managed as one unit of the North Cascades National Park Service Complex, which also includes North Cascades National Park (north and south units), and Lake Chelan National Recreation Area. Although comprised of three separate units of the National Park System, the complex is managed under the leadership of a single superintendent. The North Cascades NPS Complex is located deep in the northernmost reaches of the Cascades Range in Washington State and borders British Columbia, Canada.

The Complex encompasses a vast “sea of peaks” replete with over 300 glaciers, sawtoothed granite pinnacles, myriad creek and riverine systems, and vast expanses of wilderness. Its rugged topography is home to a multitude of plant, animal, and fish species. Rare lichens, ancient cedars, Chinook salmon, bald eagles, marmots, mountain goats, the elusive fisher, and some 1,600 identified species share this diverse and expansive landscape. Human evidence spans over 9,000 years of habitation, use, and technological development. Within Ross Lake NRA lie three placid reservoirs and their impressive mega-engineered facilities that harness nature’s hydropower and convert it to electricity for the people of Seattle.

Ross Lake National Recreation Area is the most accessible part of the North Cascades NPS Complex via scenic Washington State Route 20, the North Cascades Highway. Ross Lake National Recreation Area protects 116,798 acres of the Complex and includes three reservoirs: Ross Lake, Diablo Lake, and Gorge Lake -- water gateways to more remote areas. Ringed by mountains and glaciers, most of Ross Lake NRA is designated wilderness and offers many outdoor recreation opportunities along the upper reaches of the Skagit River and between the north and south units of North Cascades National Park.

The purpose of this *Ross Lake National Recreation Area General Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (GMP/EIS)* is to articulate a vision and overall management philosophy for Ross Lake NRA that will guide decision-making by current and future management teams during the next 15 to 20 years. This new document presents management strategies for resource protection and preservation, education and interpretation, visitor use and facilities, land protection and boundaries, and long-term operations and management of Ross Lake NRA. It will replace portions of the North Cascades NPS Complex General Management Plan completed in 1988 that provided guidance for the management of Ross Lake NRA.

ISSUES ADDRESSED

Issues were identified during scoping, sorted into five major categories, and were subsequently addressed in the alternatives for this **draft final** GMP/EIS. The complete list of issues is described in the “Planning Issues and Concerns” section in Chapter 1. These issues were identified in NPS planning workshops, public workshops, and public comments received during the planning process. Public involvement sessions included seven scoping workshops, four draft alternatives workshops, and two workshops on the Skagit Wild and Scenic River Studies, and six public workshops on the draft GMP/EIS held in local and regional communities. Public comments also included responses to the publication of three newsletters and briefings and meetings with government agencies, tribes, and stakeholder groups. The five major issues addressed are:

1) *Public Use and Recreation: What kinds of visitor opportunities will be provided within Ross Lake NRA?*

This issue includes a variety of topics, such as identifying the direction of interpretive and educational programs, addressing the types and levels of compatible recreational uses, while also providing a spectrum of opportunities for visitors to experience Ross Lake NRA.

2) *Development: What kinds of facilities and services will be provided apart from the existing facilities?*

This issue deals with potential changes to visitor facilities and services within Ross Lake NRA. Facilities for interpretation, education, day-use and overnight recreation, orientation, parking, and operations are considered.

3) *Natural and Cultural Resources: How will natural and cultural resources be protected?*

This issue concerns the protection of fundamental resources and values related to the North Cascades ecosystem, wilderness, and cultural history within Ross Lake NRA. It also addresses the Skagit River and its eligibility and suitability for designation as a wild and scenic river.

4) *Climate Change: How will the park address climate related impacts on resources and visitor facilities?*

This issue concerns the management responses to the potential destruction of visitor facilities by catastrophic weather events and discusses the range of potential climate related impacts on natural and cultural resources. It also addresses greenhouse gas emissions by visitors and park operations.

5) *Coordination with Partners: How will the park coordinate with partner agencies and non-profit organizations to achieve the goals of Ross Lake NRA?*

This issue addresses cooperative relationships, operations, and projects with Seattle City Light, the Washington State Department of Transportation, the U.S. Forest Service, and the many non-profit organizations that provide key services to Ross Lake NRA and its visitors.

THE CONTEXT FOR THE PLAN

The management alternatives being considered present a vision and direction for Ross Lake National Recreation Area.

The context within which alternatives are proposed is also affected by activities occurring outside Ross Lake NRA. Management direction and activities in the two other units of North Cascades NPS Complex (North Cascades National Park and Lake Chelan National Recreation Area), the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie and Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forests, British Columbia Parks, Seattle City Light areas, and other public and privately owned areas in the region will have broad effects on conditions and use in Ross Lake NRA. The decisions made for this general management plan will affect resources throughout the region, just as decisions made by other governmental agencies will affect management of Ross Lake NRA.

On a broader scale, the North Cascades ecosystem is experiencing change that could dramatically and irreversibly alter the long-term health of the ecosystem. Factors that are contributing toward this change are: climate change, introduced species, habitat fragmentation, air pollution, loss of pre-



View of Ross Lake from Little Beaver Trail.

Euro-American fire regimes, and increasing human populations on the edges of the North Cascades. While these stressors are beyond the ability of any single governmental agency to control, they should be considered as decisions are made to protect park resources and values that also contribute to the protection and health of the broader ecosystem.

ALTERNATIVES

This ~~draft~~ **final** GMP/EIS presents four alternatives including the National Park Service's preferred alternative for future management of Ross Lake National Recreation Area. The alternatives, which are consistent with Ross Lake NRA's purpose, significance, and special mandates, present different ways to manage resources, visitor use, and facilities in Ross Lake NRA. The four alternatives include Alternative A (the "No Action Alternative" that proposes the continuation of current management), and three "action alternatives:" B, C, and D. The four alternatives vary by theme or overarching concept, resource management decisions, desired future conditions, and the application of management zones.

Management Zones

Each alternative would assign management zones to areas of Ross Lake NRA. Management zoning is the method used by the National Park Service to identify and describe the appropriate variety of resource conditions and visitor experiences to be achieved and maintained in the different areas of a park. Zoning is generally a two-step process: (1) identify a set of potentially appropriate management zones, and (2) allocate those zones to geographic locations throughout the park. The management zones define and spatially apply management goals and objectives for resource management, levels of development, and different types of potential visitors' experiences as follows:

- 1) **Frontcountry Zone:** A wide variety of high quality recreational and educational visitor opportunities and facilities would be provided. Natural and cultural resource conditions would be maintained with some modification to accommodate visitor or management needs. The scenic east-west route through the North Cascades along the North Cascades Highway and adjacent developed areas would be primarily located in this zone.

- 2) **Backcountry Zone:** Limited visitor facilities would provide a sense of remoteness and immersion in nature within a mountainous wilderness setting. Natural and cultural resource conditions would be preserved and some resources could be enhanced through restoration. This zone would include areas that are dominated by natural conditions with structured opportunities for visitor recreation.
- 3) **Wilderness Zone:** A wilderness experience, limited primitive visitor facilities, and very few encounters with other visitors would be the emphasis for visitor use in the Wilderness Zone. Natural and cultural resource conditions would be preserved and the NPS would focus on resource stewardship and restoration. Designated wilderness and potential wilderness would be located in this zone.
- 4) **Skagit River Zone:** Natural and cultural resource preservation of the Skagit River corridor and visitor facilities associated with river recreation would be the focus of this zone. The Skagit River and adjacent riparian corridor below Gorge Powerhouse in Newhalem and up Goodell Creek to the wilderness boundary would be located in this zone. This zone would be approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ mile on either side of the Skagit River through most areas.
- 5) **Hydroelectric Zone:** Seattle City Light operations would be paramount to resource conditions and visitor experience in this zone. Seattle City Light facilities and primary management areas, including the hydroelectric projects at Ross, Diablo, and Gorge Dams would be located in this zone. Most visitor experiences would be linked to learning about hydroelectricity and frontcountry recreational activities.

Common to All Alternatives

Several actions would be common to all alternatives (Alternatives A, B, C, and D). These actions span areas of resource protection, visitor use, and NPS operations. The findings of the Skagit Wild and Scenic River Eligibility and Suitability Studies would be common to all alternatives, including recommending the wild and scenic river designation of the Skagit River from Gorge Powerhouse in Newhalem to the eastern boundary of Ross Lake NRA, Goodell Creek, and Newhalem Creek. The Thunder Creek Potential Wilderness Area, totaling

3,559 acres, would be converted to wilderness through administrative designation and included in the Stephen Mather Wilderness.

Common to All Action Alternatives

Several actions would be common to all action alternatives (action alternatives B, C, and D).

The NPS would work with Seattle City Light to exchange lands at Diablo Townsite and plan for future management and use of the Hollywood site.

Climate change impacts and Ross Lake NRA's carbon footprint would be addressed through a variety of strategies and actions including the reduction of emissions, use of green energy, adaptive management, and support for scientific research and educational programs.

The configuration of the Wilderness, Hydroelectric, and Skagit River management zones would be the same under Alternatives B, C, and D.

Several additional actions would be common to all action alternatives. Please refer to the Alternatives Comparison Table in Chapter 4 for a complete list of actions.

Alternative A: No Action Alternative

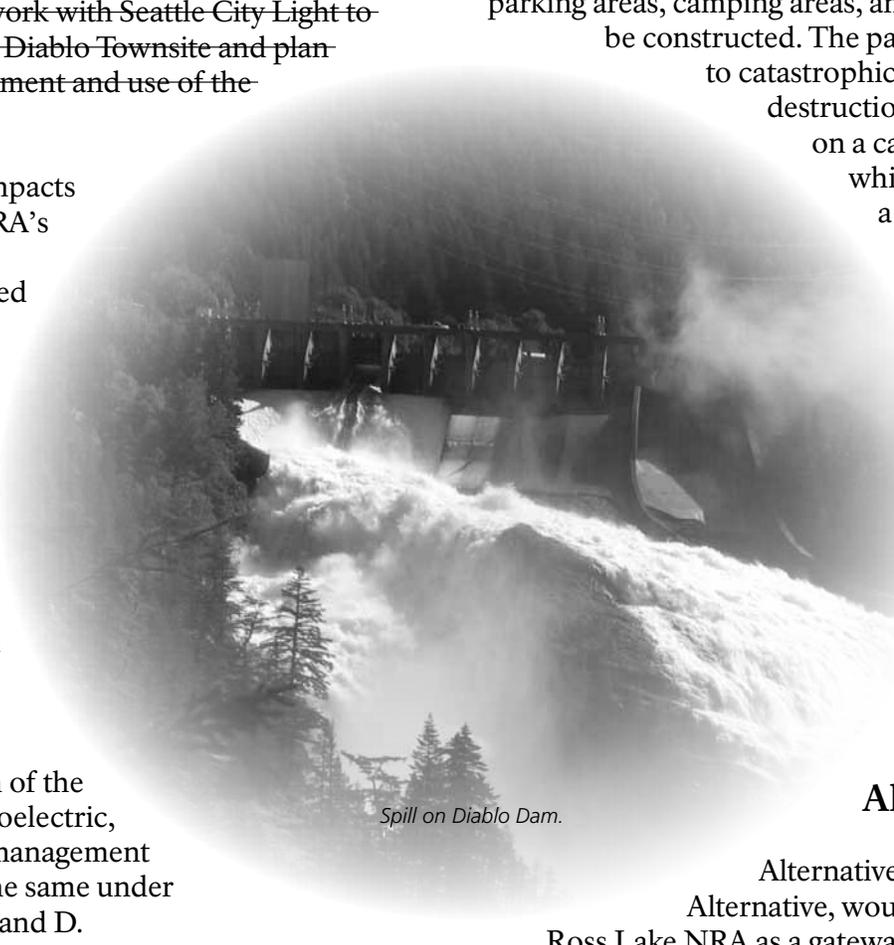
Alternative A is the No Action Alternative and assumes that existing programming, facilities, staffing, and funding would generally continue at their current levels. The No Action Alternative is required by the National Environmental Policy Act and also serves as a baseline for comparison in evaluating the changes and impacts of the other three alternatives. The emphasis of the No Action Alternative would be to protect the values of Ross Lake NRA without substantially increasing staff, programs, funding

supporting, or facilities. Resource preservation and protection would continue to be high priority for the management of Ross Lake NRA. Staff would continue to work with neighboring agencies for collaborative ecosystem management. Management of visitor use and facilities would generally continue through existing levels and types of service and regulation. Additional visitor facilities, such as new buildings, structures, roads, parking areas, camping areas, and trails, would not be constructed. The park would react to catastrophic events and the destruction of visitor facilities on a case-by-case basis, which could result in a net loss of visitor facilities.

The No Action Alternative uses the management zones from the 1988 North Cascades NPS Complex General Management Plan.

Alternative B: NPS Preferred Alternative

Alternative B, the Preferred Alternative, would focus on managing Ross Lake NRA as a gateway to millions of acres of wilderness, providing enhanced visitor opportunities along the North Cascades Highway, and making better use of facilities along that corridor while ensuring the long-term stewardship of natural resources, cultural resources, and wilderness. The North Cascades Highway corridor would be managed to provide a variety of day-use and overnight recreational opportunities for visitors with a range of abilities and interests. Management of wilderness and back-country areas would focus on ecosystem preservation and compatible recreational activities. Interpretation and education would be a key component of this alternative, emphasizing hands-on experiential learning and stewardship programs delivered by both the NPS and its partners. Recreation in Ross Lake NRA would be enhanced along the North Cascades Highway corridor through the addition of limited new facilities, including



Spill on Diablo Dam.

day-hiking trails, reconfigured parking areas, and the modest expansion of overnight facilities and concessions. Recreation in the wilderness and backcountry areas of Ross Lake NRA, including Ross Lake, would focus on providing visitors with opportunities for solitude and connections with the natural world. Self-propelled and non-mechanized recreation would be encouraged throughout Ross Lake NRA. Regulations for motorized water recreation would work to maintain the ambient character and experience on the lakes and the Skagit River, while also promoting cleaner motor technologies. The NPS would develop an online permit system option that could allow for advance trip planning and permitting and a streamlined permit process. A new reservation system for permits would allow visitors the opportunity for advance trip planning. Seaplanes would be allowed to land and take off on Diablo and Ross lakes only in the Frontcountry Zone. In the event of a catastrophic event and the destruction of visitor facilities, the NPS would strive to offer similar visitor facilities in the vicinity while limiting net loss of visitor opportunities.

The NPS would recommend a name change for Ross Lake National Recreation Area to North Cascades National Recreation Area. Congressional legislation would be required to authorize this name change.

Recreational activities, including hunting and dogs on trails, would continue.

This alternative contains Frontcountry zoned areas along the North Cascades Highway, Diablo Lake, Hozomeen, and near Ross Dam. Undeveloped areas beyond the North Cascades Highway road prism would be in the Backcountry Zone.

Alternative C

Alternative C would emphasize the role of Ross Lake NRA in preserving the greater North Cascades ecosystem, which includes two additional National Park System units, two national forests, and provincial parks and protected areas across the Canadian border. Management and education efforts would focus on broader ecosystem preservation and enhancement through coordinated regional and international environmental stewardship. The focus of visitor experiences would be linked to solitude, tranquility, natural soundscapes, and scenery through traditional outdoor activities. The NPS would actively work to reduce habitat fragmentation throughout Ross Lake NRA by consolidating development, eliminating certain trails, and limiting construction of new facilities in undeveloped areas. A new reservation system for permits would allow



Visitors explore the shoreline of Diablo Lake.

visitors the opportunity for advance trip planning. Educational and interpretive opportunities would be primarily structured, and the NPS would increasingly rely on partners to deliver educational and interpretive programs both on-site and off-site.

Alternative C would provide visitors with recreational opportunities along the North Cascades Highway. However, there would be no net increase in miles of trail in Ross Lake NRA. In the backcountry and wilderness, Alternative C would focus on resource preservation and enhancement while limiting and/or restricting some recreational uses. Seaplanes would not be allowed to land on lakes, and the NPS would recommend restricting commercial scenic air tours within Ross Lake NRA in order to protect and enhance soundscapes and wilderness character, experience, and values. In the event of a catastrophic weather event and the destruction of visitor facilities, natural geomorphological processes would be allowed to occur unimpeded wherever possible and affected facilities, including Colonial Creek and Goodell Creek Campgrounds, would be closed and restored to natural conditions.

This alternative contains the most Backcountry zoned areas, including Diablo Lake. Only high use areas are zoned Frontcountry.

Alternative D

Alternative D focuses on improving connections between visitors and the outdoors through a variety

of enhanced recreation and learning opportunities. The emphasis of park management would be to diversify Ross Lake NRA's visitor base and build stewardship through more hands-on/experiential recreation and education opportunities. Interpretive and educational programs would be offered by both the NPS and partners, with expanded offerings in the backcountry and limited areas of the wilderness zones. Park management would continue to protect resources and minimize impacts from visitor use.

Overnight accommodations, several new trails, and additional visitor amenities would expand visitor opportunities in Ross Lake NRA, primarily along the North Cascades Highway corridor. Services provided to the public by the Wilderness Information Center would be moved to an easily accessible location on Highway 20. A wide variety of recreational activities would be allowed throughout Ross Lake NRA, and there would be fewer restrictions on recreational activities than the other action alternatives. An online reservation and permit system would allow visitors the opportunity for advance trip planning. Seaplanes would be allowed to land and take off on Diablo and Ross lakes only in the Frontcountry Zone. In the event of a catastrophic event and the destruction of visitor facilities, the NPS would close affected facilities and build new facilities on other locations to ensure no net loss of visitor opportunities. This alternative contains the most Frontcountry zoned areas, including the entire North Cascades Highway corridor, Diablo Lake, Hozomeen, and areas near Ross Dam.



Rafting on the Skagit River.

USER CAPACITY

General management plans are required to identify and implement user capacities for all areas of a park. The National Park Service defines user capacity as the type and level of visitor use that can be accommodated while sustaining desired park resource conditions and achieving desired visitor experiences consistent with the purpose of a national park unit. The overall strategy of implementing a user capacity program is a tiered approach to monitoring indicators and managing to standards and conditions. At the general management plan level of decision-making, desired resource conditions are maintained and desired visitor experiences are achieved through the use of management zone prescriptions. User capacity includes managing all components of visitor use (levels, types, behavior, timing, and distribution). User capacity is discussed for each management zone, including an identification of indicators that may be monitored and a range of actions that may be taken when indicators are not showing progress towards meeting desired conditions.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

The potential effects of the four alternatives are analyzed for natural resources, wild and scenic rivers, backcountry (including wilderness), cultural resources, transportation, visitor experiences, land uses from Seattle City Light operations, NPS operations, and the socioeconomic environment. This analysis is the basis for comparing the advantages and disadvantages of the alternatives. Impacts are described in terms of whether they are negligible, minor, moderate, or major, and how long they would last.

Cumulative Impacts

Cumulative impacts on the environment result from the incremental (i.e., additive) impact of an action when added to other past, present, and reasonably foreseeable future actions, regardless of who undertakes such actions. Cumulative impacts can result from individually minor but collectively major actions over a period of time. For this planning effort, actions within Ross Lake NRA, and by others that have occurred within the region or would occur in the foreseeable future, were identified.

Impairment of Park Resources or Values

The Organic Act prohibits the National Park Service from impairing resources and values within the National Park System. An impairment is an impact to a natural or cultural resource in the parks that “would harm the integrity of park resources or values, including the opportunities that otherwise would be present for the enjoyment of those resources or values” (NPS Management Policies 2001, §1.4.5).

The determination of impairment is closely tied to the outcome of the natural and cultural resource impact analysis. This determination is also made with a parallel consideration of a unit’s legislative mandates (its purpose and significance), and resource management objectives as defined in relevant unit plans. Impairment would be a major adverse impact from actions taken inside Ross Lake NRA.

The impact analysis for this document shows that no values or resources within Ross Lake NRA would be impaired by actions considered under any alternative.

Summary of Impacts

The following discussion summarizes impacts of all alternatives considered, in accordance with the National Environmental Policy Act.



Visitors enjoy a view of the Picket Range.

Impacts from Alternative A

Implementation of Alternative A, the No Action Alternative, would generally result in minor to moderate impacts on natural and cultural resources from continued activities associated with infrastructure maintenance and NPS operations. A continued preservation focus on resource management in the No Action Alternative would also result in long-term benefits to resources. Impacts on wilderness character and values would be minor to moderate, and there could be some minor adverse impacts to wild and scenic river values depending on the activities needed to respond to storm events. Implementation of the No Action Alternative would not substantially change visitor services or programs and a full spectrum of recreation opportunities would continue, resulting in overall long-term benefits to visitor opportunities, with some minor adverse impacts from limited access to information at certain locations. This alternative would also contribute moderate long-term beneficial impacts to gateway communities and the socioeconomic environment.

Impacts from Alternative B

Implementation of Alternative B, the Preferred Alternative, would focus visitor activities along the highway corridor and preserve the wilderness character of the backcountry and designated wilderness areas, resulting in additional long-term benefits from resource stewardship. Regulations for motorized water recreation would improve natural soundscapes, wilderness character, and the overall visitor experiences in many areas. There would be moderate to major beneficial impacts to most uses from ~~potential expansion~~, improvements and new opportunities along the highway corridor. Responses to storm events and other operations to maintain infrastructure and enhance visitor opportunities along the North Cascades Highway could result in minor to moderate adverse impacts to resources in Ross Lake NRA. This alternative would also contribute moderate long-term beneficial impacts to gateway communities and the socioeconomic environment.

Impacts from Alternative C

Alternative C emphasizes the role of Ross Lake NRA in the greater North Cascades ecosystem through increased coordination with other partners and focuses visitor experiences on those traditional activities that encourage solitude and tranquility.

Construction of facilities and trails would be very limited, resulting in fewer impacts to resources from new construction; however, there would still be minor to moderate adverse impacts from maintenance of existing infrastructure. Visitor opportunities under this alternative would result in moderate ~~to major~~ long-term benefits; however, eliminating seaplane use throughout Ross Lake NRA could have moderate long-term adverse impacts to those users. This alternative would also contribute moderate long-term beneficial impacts to gateway communities and the socioeconomic environment.

Impacts from Alternative D

Alternative D emphasizes a variety of enhanced recreation and learning opportunities that would improve connections between the visitors and the outdoors. Increasing hands-on and experiential recreation and education opportunities and implementing fewer restrictions on recreational activities than other action alternatives would have long-term moderate ~~to major~~ benefits on visitor experiences. There would continue to be overall minor to moderate adverse impacts to resources from infrastructure maintenance and new facility development; however, the continued focus on resource protection and minimizing impacts from visitor use would result in long-term benefits to resource preservation. This alternative would also contribute moderate long-term beneficial impacts to gateway communities and the socioeconomic environment.

Environmentally Preferred Alternative

The environmentally preferred alternative is “the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy expressed in NEPA (Sec. 101(b))”. After the environmental consequences of the alternatives were analyzed, each alternative was evaluated to see how well the goals from NEPA section 101(b) are met. Taken as a whole, Alternative B is the environmentally preferred alternative because it would best meet all six goals stated in the National Environmental Policy Act.

The implementation of the approved plan (no matter which alternative is selected) will depend on future funding, service-wide priorities, and partnership funds, time, and effort. The approval of the GMP does not guarantee that funding and staffing needed to implement the plan will be forthcoming. Full implementation the GMP could be many years into the future.