



Questions and Answers about the Proposed Reintroduction of Fishers to Olympic National Park

What is a fisher?

The fisher is a member of the weasel family, related to mink, otter and marten. Fishers weigh about as much as house cats (between 4.5 and 12 pounds) and are between 2.5 and 3.5 feet long, including their long bushy tails that make up about a third of their total length. They have thick, dark brown coats with some lighter coloring on the head and back of the neck.

Fishers are nocturnal and stay active year round. They are active on the ground but can also climb well, spending a considerable amount of time foraging and resting in trees. Fishers are solitary except during breeding and denning season.

Where do fishers live?

Fishers are found only in North America. They once ranged throughout the forests of Canada and the northern U.S., including Washington and south along the Pacific Coast Range, Rockies and Appalachians. Over-trapping and habitat loss decreased the fisher's range and by the 1930s they were almost completely gone from the United States. Reintroductions have successfully restored fishers to Oregon, Idaho, Montana and Alberta, and areas of the northeast U.S.

Fishers are creatures of the forest and depend on large trees with cavities, along with large snags and downed logs to provide essential den and rest sites. These key features are typically found in mature forests, but are often absent or scarce in managed second-growth forests. Fishers usually avoid open areas like fields, roads and areas that have been recently logged.



Illustration by Peggy Ushakoff

What do fishers eat?

Fishers are carnivorous, feeding primarily on small and mid-sized mammals such as snowshoe hares, squirrels, mountain beavers, mice and birds. They also eat other foods, including insects, fruit, fungi and winter-kill deer and elk. Where porcupines occur, fishers are also well-known for their ability to prey on porcupines, a trait appreciated by foresters frustrated by porcupine damage to commercial timber.

Why aren't fishers found in Washington anymore?

Around the turn of the century, fisher pelts were second in value only to sea otter pelts, selling for as much as \$150 each. Easily caught in traps, fishers were vulnerable to exploitation, and by the 1930s had disappeared from a number of states. Although fisher trapping was banned from many western states, their populations did not recover. In Washington, trapping seasons for fisher ended

in 1934, but fishers have not recovered in the state.

Extensive harvest of old growth forest reduced and fragmented fisher habitat in Washington and worsened the population decline already caused by over-trapping. Today, there are only a few locations in the state where large tracts of suitable habitat still exist. These include the Olympic Peninsula and portions of the Washington Cascades.

Indiscriminant predator and pest control campaigns, incidental capture in traps set for other species, and poaching also contributed to the fisher's disappearance in the state.

Are fishers on the Endangered Species List?

The fisher is not listed as threatened or endangered under the federal Endangered Species Act, but was designated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 2004 as a candidate for listing. Reintroduction of fishers may help prevent the listing of this animal as federally threatened or endangered.

The Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission listed the fishers as a state endangered species in 1998. The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) released a recovery plan for fisher in December 2006. The plan can be viewed online or downloaded at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/wlm/diversty/soc/recovery/fisher/>.

What exactly are you proposing to do?

The preferred alternative calls for reintroducing fishers to Olympic National Park by capturing fishers from a source population, preferably in British Columbia. These animals are the most closely related to fishers that once occurred in Washington.

Fishers would be released in three reintroduction areas within the park: Elwha-Sol Duc area, Hoh-Bogachiel area and Queets-Quinault area, all selected based on the quality and quantity of fisher habitat.

Over a three-year period, preferably in late fall or early winter, at least 100 fishers would be released to establish a population. The first release could happen as soon as late 2007 or early 2008.

Scientists would monitor the reintroduced population to assess the success of the restoration effort and adjust the reintroduction process as necessary.

More details on the reintroduction process are presented in the Fisher Reintroduction Plan Environmental Assessment (EA), available online at the National Park Service (NPS) Planning, Environment and Public Comment website (<http://parkplanning.nps.gov/olym>).

Why reintroduce fishers?

Fishers are native to the forests of Washington, including the Olympic Peninsula. Reintroducing fishers would reestablish a missing predator and help restore a balance between native predator and prey species. A goal of the National Park Service is to preserve and restore native animals and processes; reintroducing fishers to Olympic National Park would be a step towards that goal.

There are no populations of fisher close enough to Washington habitats to reestablish on their own, so reintroduction is the only way to restore this animal to the state of Washington. If successful, this effort would lead to removal of the fisher from the state's endangered species list and restoration of one of Washington's native species. The WDFW completed the *Feasibility Assessment for Reintroducing Fishers to Washington* in 2004; this document found that fisher reintroduction could be successful on the Olympic Peninsula.

Why do this now?

Taking action to reintroduce fishers in the near future would likely prevent them from being listed as a federal endangered species.

Since the fisher is a Washington state endangered species, WDFW has already prepared a state recovery plan, which calls for fishers to be reintroduced to Olympic National Park.

Why the Olympic Peninsula?

The WDFW *Feasibility Assessment* concluded that Olympic National Park, together with surrounding Olympic National Forest lands on the western Olympic Peninsula, was the best location for the first fisher reintroduction in Washington. Key factors that contributed to this conclusion include the amount of suitable fisher habitat that is protected within the park and the Late Successional Reserves already established within Olympic National Forest.

Portions of the Cascade Range were also identified as potential reintroduction areas but the Olympic Peninsula was found to be best for the first reintroduction.

When would fishers be released?

The best time to release fishers would be in the late fall or early winter to allow them to acclimatize to their new area before winter. This timing would also give the animals enough time to establish home ranges and find potential mates and suitable den sites before the mating season begins.

Depending on the outcome of the environmental assessment process, the earliest fishers could be released would be late 2007 or early 2008.

Would fishers be added to the federal Endangered Species List if they're released?

Successfully reintroducing fishers to Olympic National Park would be a step towards recovering this species in Washington and would likely help to prevent the fisher's being listed as federally threatened or endangered.

What if fishers are here already?

Extensive surveys conducted from 1990- 97 by WDFW, the U.S. Forest Service and other agencies failed to detect fishers in areas

considered to be the best remaining habitats in Washington.

Carnivore surveys conducted from 2001- 04 in Washington's three national parks (Olympic, Mount Rainier and North Cascades), also failed to find any fishers. While there have been occasional, unconfirmed sighting reports, there are no known populations of fishers in Washington.

What is the likelihood that fisher reintroduction would be successful?

Fishers are native to the Olympic Peninsula and occupied the area's lowland and mid-elevation forests in significant numbers until they were eliminated by overtrapping and habitat loss. All trapping is prohibited within Olympic National Park and fisher seasons are closed throughout the state. Large areas of good habitat still exist within Olympic National Park and surrounding Olympic National Forest lands and support a plentiful and diverse food source for fishers.

Experience in other states (including Idaho, Montana and Oregon) suggests that fishers are among the most successfully reintroduced carnivores. For these reasons, we believe fisher reintroduction would be successful.

Would fishers stray outside the park?

Olympic National Park and nearby Olympic National Forest lands provide large tracts of suitable fisher habitat. If fishers are reintroduced to Olympic National Park, they would be released into these large blocks of mature forest and would not need to travel very far to find suitable habitat.

However, fishers are wide- ranging animals and some would be likely to explore lands outside the park after a potential release. Most of them would be expected to establish home ranges in the park and forest where the best habitat is located. Fishers wandering outside the park would be more susceptible to predation, vehicle collisions, incidental capture in live traps set for other species or illegal killing.

Are fishers dangerous?

Fishers are not dangerous to humans. They are small in size, weighing about as much as a house cat, and are solitary and rather secretive animals, typically avoiding people and developed areas. They are rarely seen in the west, where they tend to use remote, undeveloped habitats.

We are not aware of any documented or undocumented cases of a fisher attacking a person. However, attempting to handle a sick, wounded or cornered fisher would likely result in bites or scratches.

Will fishers be a threat to pets or livestock?

If fishers are reintroduced to the park, most of them would be expected to establish their home ranges in the park and nearby Olympic National Forest where the best habitat is located. Some could explore lands outside the park after a potential release, but west coast fisher populations tend to avoid humans and developed areas. Fisher predation on domestic animals is a rare occurrence throughout the western states and provinces.

However, the recovery of fisher populations near densely populated areas in the northeast U.S. and eastern Canada has brought fishers into closer contact with people. In these areas, fishers are known to occasionally prey on domestic cats, rabbits and poultry.

Would fisher reintroduction lead to more limits and regulations on how we use public or private land?

Changes in the use of public or private lands as a result of a fisher reintroduction are not anticipated. Most fishers are expected to remain within Olympic National Park or in large tracts of forest within nearby Olympic National Forest.

There is a chance that seasonal restrictions would be enacted on Olympic National Forest or Washington Department of Natural Resources land to protect known active den sites from mechanized activities such as timber harvest or road building. The

likelihood of such seasonal buffer zones is quite small however, as managed forests are not anticipated to be used by fishers for denning. There would be no restrictions on access or road use.

Who's involved in this project?

The Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and the National Park Service jointly prepared the EA and are partners in developing and evaluating this proposal. The Olympic National Forest is also cooperating on this project.

Two private nonprofit groups, Washington's National Park Fund and Conservation Northwest, have pledged financial support for monitoring the proposed reintroduced fisher population.

Who decides whether or not fishers will be reintroduced?

The proposal to reintroduce fishers to Olympic National Park is being analyzed and evaluated through an environmental assessment process. The initial public comment period was held in January and February 2006 and helped to define the issues and alternatives to be addressed.

The Fisher Reintroduction Plan EA was released on September 10, 2007 for a 30-day public review and comment period. It examines two alternative strategies for reintroducing fishers to the park, along with a no action alternative.

After the public comment period is concluded and all comments have been read and analyzed, the park superintendent will make a recommendation to the NPS Pacific West Regional Director who is responsible for the decision.

How can I learn more?

Visit the Olympic National Park website (<http://www.nps.gov/olym>) for more information and links to several WDFW documents, including the *Final Washington State Recovery Plan for the Fisher* (2006), the

Feasibility Assessment for Reintroduction of Fishers to Washington (2004) and the Final Fisher Status Report (1998).

How can I get involved?

Review and provide your comments on the Fisher Reintroduction Plan EA, which was released on September 10, 2007 for a 30- day public review and comment period. Each public comment is read and considered and interested people are encouraged to provide their input. Comments can be submitted online at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/olymp>, by selecting "Open for Comment". All comments must be received by October 10, 2007.

Comments may also be sent to:

Superintendent – Fisher
Reintroduction
Olympic National Park
600 East Park Avenue
Port Angeles, WA 98362

A meeting to discuss the proposed fisher reintroduction will be held on Tuesday, September 18 at 7:00 p.m. at the Department of Natural Resources Conference Center in Forks, Washington. The meeting will feature a presentation followed by an opportunity to ask questions and make comments on the proposal.

You may also want to add your name to the park's mailing list to receive information about the fisher reintroduction proposal. To add your name to the mailing list, contact the park at 360- 565- 3004 or send a request to the address shown above.