

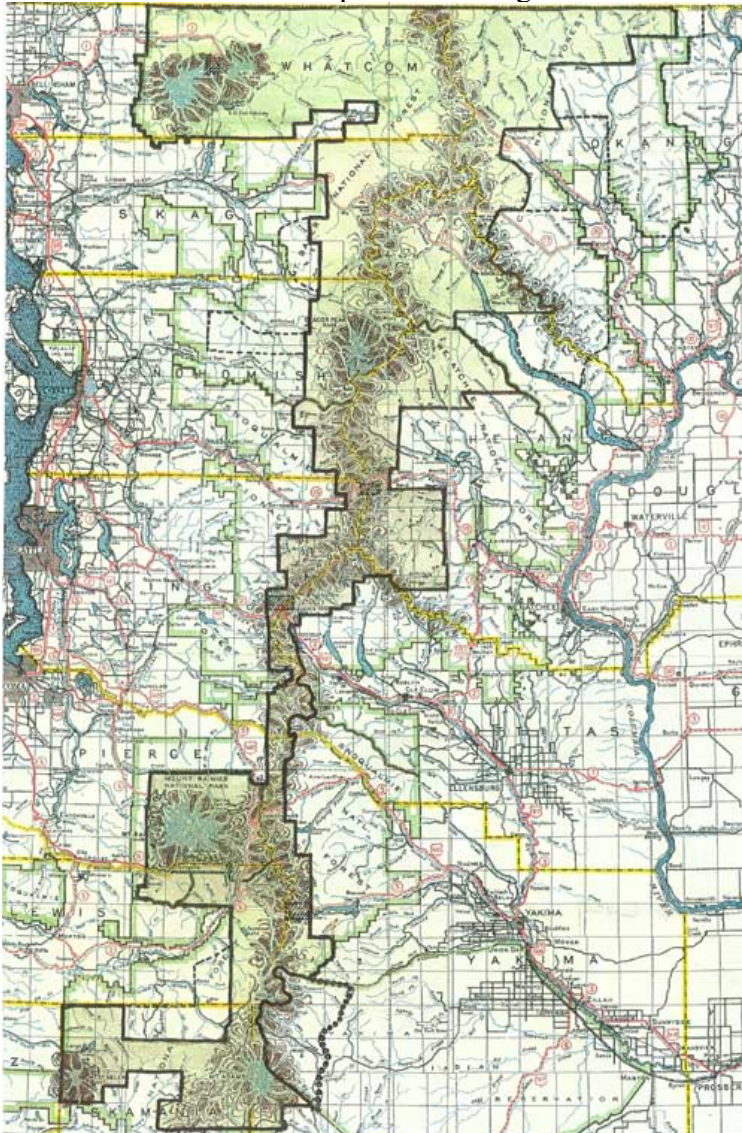
A hidden history

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN: THE ICE PEAKS NATIONAL PARK PROPOSAL

In 1937, 20 years before N3C was founded, a National Park Service team made a study of the Cascades. It's a remarkably interesting document with a stunning photo supplement. They called the proposal the "Ice Peaks National Park," and its goal was to protect the high mountain scenery of Washington's Cascades from the Canadian border all the way down to Mount Adams (see proposal map).

From today's perspective of almost a century later, it just sounds too good to be true. And so it was, for several reasons. Park proposals had been made previously in the Cascades but never went anywhere. In the 1920's the National Park Service thought that Mount Rainier was more than enough for Washington state. But the idea would just never go away.

Here's the classic NPS map of "what might have been:"



https://www.nps.gov/parkhistory/online_books/noca/adhi/images/map2.pdf

Politics in the United States changed radically with the Great Depression and the election of Franklin Roosevelt to the White House. It almost brings tears to one's eyes to think that this country once produced men of such caliber, especially Roosevelt, who became president at a time of such crisis that revolution was a real possibility. His bold actions to help people were a complete contrast to the do-nothing Hoover administration. The aura of confidence he projected with such seeming ease was just what the country needed during some of its darkest hours.

Roosevelt brought back hope. He was resoundingly re-elected with a landslide vote in 1936, and was quite possibly at that moment the most popular president ever. But even a master politician like Roosevelt could overreach. 1937 was not a good year for him. Economic stimulus programs were scaled back prematurely and the country began to slide back into depression. The centerpiece of the New Deal, the National Recovery Administration, was struck down by the "nine old men" on the Supreme Court, as Roosevelt called them. Still riding high, Roosevelt responded with a plan to expand the Supreme Court by adding new Justices. It was too big of a move even for Franklin Roosevelt, and its failure pulled Roosevelt down from the pinnacle of popularity he had so recently occupied. It also made it more difficult to get this rest of his agenda accomplished, though he did eventually bounce back and win an unprecedented third and even fourth term.

It was amidst all this that the Ice Peaks Park study was conducted by the National Park Service, under the orders of the Interior Department under Secretary Harold Ickes, quite possibly the best person ever to hold that office. Just a quick look at the accompanying map shows how ambitious it was, close to 200 miles north to south.

The formal proposal was not released until 1940, when politics had shifted even further. Roosevelt and Ickes were fighting to defend the brand new, and very large Olympic National Park, which was under heavy attack from the timber industry and Washington state politicians. It was the Roosevelt administration and citizen activists from New York that were responsible for its creation, and Olympic did not have many local defenders.

Unlike Ice Peaks, Olympic Park was established primarily to protect not mountain scenery, but the largest remaining extent of old growth forest remaining in the country. It was incredibly ambitious for an era when most people believed trees were for cutting. It was a miracle that it was ever designated, and that it survived repeated attacks that persisted for decades. But the timber industry was in no mood to concede more protections of forest in the Cascades.

War was raging in Europe by 1940, and although Roosevelt campaigned to keep America well out of it, he knew that the country would inevitably be drawn in. It was not the right moment to try to establish another big new National Park in Washington state, while the fate of Olympic still looked so precarious, industry was dead set against it, and war clouds darkened the horizon.

During WWII the demand for timber was so great that loggers were exempted from the draft. All consideration of protecting more timberland was shelved. One government poster went so far as to say "Log like hell! The woods are also a front line!"

Ice Peaks lacked local supporters except for what Harvey Manning in *Wilderness Alps* called "the noble little Everett branch of The Mountaineers." Without that support, and with the War and then the post-war building boom and advent of the gas powered chain saw, the recommendation for Ice Peaks was forgotten. It would take two more decades before the North Cascades Conservation Council would

form and revive the idea of a National Park in the Cascades. Luckily, some of the ancient forest remained to be protected in the most remote areas, mostly north of Snoqualmie Pass.

Perhaps the failure of the Ice Peaks proposal was not such a tragedy. Yes, it covered a lot of ground, but a close look at the map of the proposal shows that the boundaries were drawn to protect scenery in the form of high snowy mountains, and not a whole lot else. Some old growth forest was included, but most major valleys were excluded. In a lot of places it had very narrow corridors connecting volcanoes.

We sometimes forget, too, that had Ice Peaks happened, the National Park Service of Stephen Mather and his successors would have managed much of the Cascade Crest, and their proclivity for roads would probably have led to building a "parkway" or a network of them, along its spine, on the model of the Mather Parkway project that was once proposed to encircle Mt. Rainier (and luckily only made it 1/4 of the way around). The Park Service proposed lots of highways, lodges and even tramways for North Cascades National Park as recently as the 60s. So, although at first glance Ice Peaks may seem like a lost opportunity, it may have been a near miss in that sense. The intact wilderness core of the North Cascades we treasure today would almost certainly have been lost to the "infernal combustion engine" had Ice Peaks gone forward.

And perhaps worse, might it have created the impression that the job of conservation in the Cascades was done? Would logging have progressed right up to the proposed Park boundaries? We'll never know, but we do know that the reinvigorated northwest conservation movement, culminating with N3C's great victory in 1968, went on to eventually protect most of the area that was included in the Ice Peaks proposal, and perhaps more importantly, much else that was never included in Ice Peaks. And protect it more completely, as Wilderness as well as Park. It's Wilderness designation, after all, that keeps it wild.

Conservation itself evolved into much more than an effort to protect scenery. It became more about protecting natural ecosystems, forests, waters, and wildlife, rather than only picture postcard, big "ice peaks." The Olympic National Park was far ahead of its time in this, but the concept did finally take hold. Wilderness efforts in the Cascades have shifted over the years away from emphasizing high country to emphasizing biologically productive lower elevation lands wherever possible.

The little-known Ice Peaks proposal still stands as the most interesting "what if?" in the conservation history of the Cascades. We hope readers will take the time to study and ponder the map presented here. The history of the proposal, and much else, is related in detail in Harvey Manning's great history book, *Wilderness Alps*, a work that needs to be read by anyone with an interest in protection of the Cascades.
