

The push for Mount Hood national park status is a century old

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Mount Hood National Park Campaign

Timberline Lodge is still the crown jewel on the Mount Hood Loop, and was personally dedicated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on Sept. 28, 1937.

This fall, Ken Burns' documentary on national parks as "America's Best Idea" is giving new energy to the national parks movement. Across the country, park advocates are making the case to expand the system to meet a new century of demand for recreation and natural places.

Crater Lake is Oregon's only national park. But it might surprise some Oregonians to learn that Mount Hood and the Columbia River Gorge are routinely on the short wish list of "next parks," not because they're perfectly pristine, but because of their stature in the American imagination and potential to be restored to their former grandeur. Still more surprising, this vision for a Mount Hood National Park is more than a century old.

When Oregon Trail pioneers of the 1840s reached the final 100 miles of their journey, they expressed wonder and reverence at the towering new landscape around them, just as Native Americans had for millennia. Mount Hood and the gorge would soon become part of the American consciousness.

By the late 1800s, Portlanders became increasingly interested in setting aside their mountain as part of the new national park system. In early 1888, The Oregonian reported that "the Oregon Alpine Club are [sic] taking the preliminary steps (to

have) Mount Hood set apart as a national park," concluding that "Mount Hood belongs to the people of America, and it should be reserved for them for all time."

The interest continued for years, and in 1916 U.S. Sen. George Earle Chamberlain of Oregon authored a bill that would have created a large park encompassing the entirety of Mount Hood. The bill stalled out, as did later efforts in the 1920s and 1930s.

At about the same time the Chamberlain bill was being considered, Samuel Lancaster's new Columbia River Highway was nearing completion, and the rest of the Mount Hood loop was being planned. By the mid-1920s the loop was complete and the circuit came to define what many Americans considered to be a national park. The lodges at Multnomah Falls and Timberline, the Vista House at Crown Point and a host of inns and road houses along the beautiful new loop reinforced this notion. Few saw a need for more protection. But this "almost park" status would prove to be fatefully inadequate in the years to come.

2,600 clear-cuts later ...

World War II was a sad turning point for Mount Hood and the gorge. The forests were now viewed as a commodity under the "multiple-use" directive. Under Forest Service management, trees were auctioned off to the highest bidder, with the public footing the bill for nearly 4,000 miles of logging roads.

Nothing was sacred. Roads and clear-cuts extended into places like Portland's Bull Run watershed, over lakes and streams and within a mile of Mount Hood's famed Timberline Trail. By the end of the century at least 160,000 acres of forest had been consumed by more than 2,600 clear-cuts. Hundreds of miles of trails had been logged over, and the vast network of hastily built logging roads was already beginning to fail.

During this same period, the elegant Mount Hood Loop highway was bypassed for nearly its entire length with wider, faster roads. Sections of Lancaster's road were abandoned or destroyed to make room for the new roads that cut across the landscape.

Another blow came in 1957, with the completion of The Dalles Dam. The dam brought cheap hydropower, but at a catastrophic environmental and cultural price. The dam drowned Celilo Falls and adjacent villages that had been the cultural hub of Native Americans in the region. With it came a 60-mile transmission line corridor that cut an 800-foot-wide swath across the Hood River Valley and over Lolo Pass, scarring Mount Hood's rugged north side.

In just 50 years, Mount Hood and the gorge had been dramatically altered on an industrial scale, with huge impacts to the natural environment, and much of the land's charm and beauty erased.

Multi-use can't save icon

This brings us to the present and the opportunity for an era of renewal and hope for Mount Hood and the gorge. Dozens of nonprofit organizations are working for the restoration of the cultural and natural legacy of the two landmarks in an energetic, if disjointed, effort. These advocacy groups exist because the Forest Service mission of "multi-use" simply isn't up to the task of managing a world-class destination that draws some 4 million visitors each year.

Mount Hood and the gorge aren't just another tract of forest, they're national icons that remind us who we are, where we have been and inspire us to imagine our shared future. They deserve better than the Forest Service approach of slicing the remaining resources into ever thinner pieces. Our challenge is to restore the "park" that once was, and this is a job the National Park Service is uniquely charged to carry out.

What would a new Mount Hood National Park look like? It would follow the original vision, stretching from Troutdale to Hood River and from the gorge to the Clackamas River. The new park would be framed by the old Mount Hood Loop, and many sections of the old road would be restored, following the lead of work already completed in the gorge.

The tangle of old logging roads would be retired or converted to hiking, biking or equestrian trails. Sterile tree plantations would be managed to become healthy forests, and the vitality of rural communities around the mountain would be part of the long-term strategy for sustainability.

When urban visionary Lewis Mumford visited our region in 1938, he offered us a challenge: "You have here a basis for civilization on its highest scale, and I am going to ask you a question you may not like. Are you good enough to have this country in your possession?"

Realizing the century-old vision of a new Mount Hood National Park could be our long-overdue response to Mumford's challenge.

Tom Kloster, a Portland native, founded the Mount Hood National Park Campaign in 2004. Learn more about the project at www.mounthoodnationalpark.org.