

A Battle Looms: Skiers vs. Conservationists



A SPECIAL
FEATURE
By WALT
WOODWARD

A major battle looms on how much mass penetration there will be of the wilderness set aside in the new North Cascades National Park.

Oddly enough, the confrontation will come between conservationists and skiers, both outdoor enthusiasts, over the site and number of aerial tramways and permanent ski lifts.

THIS BECAME clear last week when The Times received replies from questionnaires sent to 26 key persons involved in the controversial park and recreation complex which was established when President Johnson signed Public Law 90-544 October 2.

The sharply contrasting views were ably stated by William F. Lenihan, Seattle attorney and president-elect of the Pacific Northwest Ski Instructors' Association, and Brock Evans, Seattle attorney and Northwest conservation representative of the Federation of Western Outdoor Clubs.

Lenihan wrote:

"If the North Cascades are to be the American Alps, then they must be used and enjoyed by many people.

"**THE PARK** and recreation areas should be made accessible and developed for the masses as well as for the more rugged outdoorsmen. Trams, narrow-gauge railroads,

access through tunnels rather than surface roads, resort complexes catering to the year-round uses should be the norm and not the exception."

Evans wrote:

"A great many people in our organizations are ardent skiers, but we do not feel that a national park is a proper place for it, particularly when we have already identified at least 15 other sites in the North Cascades area which ... could be developed for skiing.

"Remaining to be decided also will be the ultimate question of the establishment and location of tramways within the park and recreation areas. We do feel that there should be a tramway somewhere, perhaps two of them, to permit people to see some of the outstanding scenery in the area without having to do any physical work.

"However, we think it is possible to locate these tramways on the fringes of the area, and would object to the placement of any of them deep within its heart — a move which would only destroy the wilderness, without offering anything any better by way of scenic attractions."

WHAT THEY are about to battle over is one sentence in P. L. 90-544 which says that the Park Service and the Forest Service, both of which have lands to administer in the vast complex, within two years shall agree on a plan for construction of public-use facilities including "ski lifts." It is not just an obscure sentence. Of it, Senator Henry M. Jackson, author of the legislation, said: "This is the first park legislation in history to specifically authorize permanent ski lifts within the park."

Jackson also wrote The Times:

"The North Cascades, sometimes called the American

Alps and known now but to the hardest of mountaineers and wilderness hikers, will become readily available for the viewing of the average visitor. At the same time, the superb wilderness of the North Cascades will be preserved in perpetuity."

THOSE ARE hopeful words by a powerful political figure, but now subordinate federal officials are about to come to grips with the nitty-gritty of how to carry out that congressional mandate. Roger J. Contor, the park's first superintendent, has only been on the job four weeks. He limited himself to a general comment. He wrote:

"At the periphery of the park will be road and tramway access — hopefully with associated skiing opportunities — bringing all types of visitors to the threshold of the wilderness. The core of the two park units will remain in a wilderness state. It is not likely that we can do anything in the way of man-made developments which could 'improve' the character of that great wilderness."

Congress was shown Park Service development plans calling for three aerial tramways. They are:

1. Ruby Mountain at the southern end of Ross Lake, totally within the Ross Lake Recreation Area and close to the North Cross-State Highway, main access route to the complex. A Park Service artist's conception depicts this tramway on Page 1 of today's Times.

2. Arctic Creek about midway on the western side of Ross Lake Access would be provided by boat only. The tramways half in the park and half in the recreation area, would provide an overview of the jagged Picket Range.

3. Price Lake, on the edge of the park in the Mount

Baker Recreation Area, would provide an elevated view of the north side of Mount Shuksan in the park.

Lenihan, who asked to be additionally identified as an "avid conservationist," is scornful of all three tramways as far as skiing is concerned. Ruby Mountain, he wrote, has "no residual winter-use potential;" Arctic Creek is "not suitable for ski use in the winter," and the Price Lake tram "appears to have no value other than transporting summer-time sightseers to a viewpoint."

James W. Whittaker, nationally known mountain climber and chairman of the State Parks and Recreation Commission, did not agree with Lenihan on at least one of the tramways. The Ruby Mountain tram, he wrote, can be used "in the winter for skiers."

Evans, favoring the Ruby Mountain tramway, wrote that the Arctic Creek tramway "penetrates far too close into the interior of the wilderness, and we would oppose it." But Whittaker wrote of the Arctic Creek tram that it will provide "a fantastic view of the glaciers and spires of the Pickets."

So the die is cast. The battle begins on what kind of a park there is to be in the North Cascades.

LEIHAN said "it is incumbent on skiers and outdoor users who prefer some developed facilities rather than the more traditional camping grounds to bring their influence to bear on the representatives of the Park and Forest Services."

But Evans wrote that the recreation area at Ross Lake is the place for "intense development" because "it is the same kind of scenery as in the park, and location of mass-use facilities here (in the recreation area) will protect the park itself and yet give visitors the experience they desire."