

Are Skiers Ruining Our Wilderness?

'Every skier you meet is pushing a pet scheme for a spectacular new resort.' The second of two parts . . .

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NOWADAYS EVERY SKIER you meet, and many a non-skier as well, is pushing a pet scheme for a spectacular new resort.

A Port Townsend preacher is prodding the Forest Service to get something going in the northeast Olympics, either in the upper Dungeness River, or on Mt. Townsend, or at Marmot Pass. The Forest Service would like to oblige because it's catching hell for destroying thousands of acres of prime wilderness and needs public relations help to finish the logging.

Port Angeles people sporadically campaign to open Seven Lakes Basin and the High Divide, within Olympic National Park, to mechanized skiing, ignoring the fact that (1) this is one of the most popular hiking areas in the state, and (2) the slopes are too far away from the people (Seattle, that is) to support more than a few rope lifts, ruining a first-rate wilderness for a fourth-rate hill.

The Park Service is blamed for its "obstructionist" policy in allowing only temporary tows within the park, as at Hurricane Ridge, but what cool capitalist, I ask, is going to invest in chair lifts on the Olympic Peninsula in this generation?

Whenever "skier spokesmen" loose tirades at the National Park Service, they never forget the battle some 15 years ago over Paradise Valley on Mt. Rainier, which apparently they'll remember as long as the Alamo — and will always remember wrong.

To be sure, the Park Service denied the request for permanent lifts extending possibly all the way to 10,000-foot Camp Muir, giving runs with drops of more than 6,000 feet. But what the ranters and ravers forget is that after a few skiers testified Paradise - Muir offers skiing comparable to the Alps (at the cost of crumbing the foreground of Rainier with bulldozer tracks, towers, and the inevitable junk), other skiers stood up to say the only conceivable operator would be Murder Incorporated. (Turn bunnies loose in winter on glaciers that killed two hikers only this past summer — in a summertime storm — and the rescue patrols would outnumber the skiers.) Still others who had known and

loved Paradise for touring over many decades pointed out that during much of the winter these southwest slopes, the storm side of the mountain, are one vast white-out.

To throw in a bit of little-known history, it was largely skiers who were also preservationists, wanting a major area in the Rainier vicinity but knowing Paradise didn't fit the bill, and being as devoted to the national park principle as to their sport, who conducted the scouting, lobbying, and promotion that resulted in development of Crystal Mountain.

The lesson to be learned here, as at Snoqualmie Pass, is that preservationists consider each ski proposal, from whatever source, in the light of alternative values. They give up wilderness lands for mechanized skiing even when wilderness values are great — if the skiing value is greater. What they will not take lying down is the loss of first-rate wilderness for second-rate skiing, much less for ephemera without the ghost of an economic chance that are spread around by professional multiple-users strictly to confuse the skiing public.

The Forest Service, clawing and scratching to hang onto as much of its "land of many uses" as possible, has donned Santa Claus whiskers and scattered enticing proposals all along the new-abuilding North Cross-State Highway (which should become, and in this article will be called, the North Cascades Parkway). Presumably skiers are giggly with the prospect of slopes and scenic grandeur rivaling the Alps.

Interestingly enough, not even Milmanco takes these proposals seriously, giving them very low marks on the basis of limited slopes, limited drop, severe avalanching, and excessive remoteness. One of these sites is in the vicinity of Liberty Bell Mountain, near Washington Pass; another between Mt. Hardy and Tower Mountain, at Snowy Lakes Pass; and a third above Granite Creek on Gabriel Peak (also called Gabriel Horn). The wilderness values are enormous; if Snowy Lakes aren't part of Heaven, when my hour comes I'll refuse to go.

Driving time to these areas from Seat-

tle is advertised as 3-3½ hours. I'd like to know who is driving what, because it takes me that long to reach Diablo Dam. The road from Newhalem to Diablo is often blocked by avalanches, sometimes cutting off for several days the Seattle City Light community on the upper Skagit, and at Diablo the fun has just begun, with many mountain miles still to go to reach the proposed resorts. Under spring driving conditions, 5-6 hours from Seattle would be more realistic; in winter name your own nightmare.

The question is academic, since the State Highway Department says it has no intention of keeping the North Cascades Parkway open except in summer and fall; the expense of winter and spring maintenance would be prohibitive.

Unfortunately, though even the professional ski-boomers are cold, and simply on the insubstantial basis of these Forest Service dreams (schemes, really), Congress has so far been conned into eliminating the North Cascades Parkway from the proposed North Cascades National Park. So let's give the highway its proper name — the North Cascades Logging Road. Here, perhaps, is the classic case of skiers being offered something they won't get in any event, and their good name being misappropriated by the Loggers to enlarge the realms of the chainsaw. Help stamp out decadent and dangerous old trees.

The Forest Service is also said to be studying Tiffany Mountain, east of the Methow, which is nearly as far from a population center as it is possible to get in Washington, and would take millions to develop and still have maritime snow; I can only assume some Okanogan ranger has gone stir-crazy.

Another interesting suggestion is Harts Pass; when our family drives there in summer to go hiking, as we do every year, I allow 7-8 hours on the road from Seattle, not counting gas stations and drive-ins. If anybody wanted to promote a ski resort, the most practical approach would be a tunnel from Puget Sound, which could be blasted for something like the cost of World War II plus putting a man on the moon.

Three areas have been suggested that

would destroy major wilderness values for the sake of minor skiing values. Again, professional boomers rate all three far below the line of economic feasibility: Teebone Ridge, north of the Cascade River; Snowfield-Colonial, above Diablo Dam; and Hagen Peak, above the Baker River. In each case the potential slopes are limited, they lie a vertical mile above the valley bottom, largely on permanent snowfields or glaciers, the valley walls are too steep for skiing, and access would be formidably expensive.

The original proposers of these sites were motivated by the desire to find new skiing that would extend into June and July, and even through August and October. Their splendid conception of an all-year resort in the Cascades can best be analyzed later, in connection with Mt. Hinman: note for now that because these three sites lie on lands proposed for protection by a national park and/or a national wilderness area, they are being used as leverage to panic uninformed skiers onto the anti-wilderness bandwagon.

Snowking Mountain, south of the Cascade River, is tough. The skiing might be superb, and might be year-round on neve, and despite the expense of access roads, and despite a drop of only 30,00 feet, is close enough to the people that investment might be practical someday. Balanced

'We must not destroy our first-rate wilderness areas for the sake of second-rate skiing . . .'

against these possible skiing values are incalculably important wilderness values — and protected values, since Snowking lies within the Glacier Peak Wilderness Area.

Preservationists would hate to lose Snowking, and never will give it up without much discussion. But preservationists who have toured there in winter on skis, and in summer on climbing boots, concede the balance of values might someday be pretty even. Not now, though, and not for a long, long time.

Milmanco rates Snowking as No. 5 on its list of potential areas ready and waiting for immediate development, but before Snowking is economic the federal government would have to spend far more dollars for roads than it did for Crystal Mountain. Then a group of private investors would have to put up the money for hill development. In 1984 the interest in Snowking might be sufficient to consider removing the mountain from the Glacier Peak Wilderness Area.

What preservationists say is this: let's wait as long as we can; it may be humankind is not rich enough or good enough to achieve salvation, but let's remain in Heaven as long as we can. Cynical multiple-users say: You can't fight progress, we're all going to Hell in a hurry anyway so why put it off. let's burn, baby, burn.

Two new areas have been suggested for Mt. Baker. One is on the north, above Kulsan Cabin on Heliotrope Ridge adjacent to the Coleman Glacier, reached from the town of Glacier on the highway to the existing Mt. Baker Ski Area at Heather Meadows. The other is on the south side of the mountain, in the vicinity of Boulder Creek and Blue Lake, with access up the Baker River from the town of Concrete.

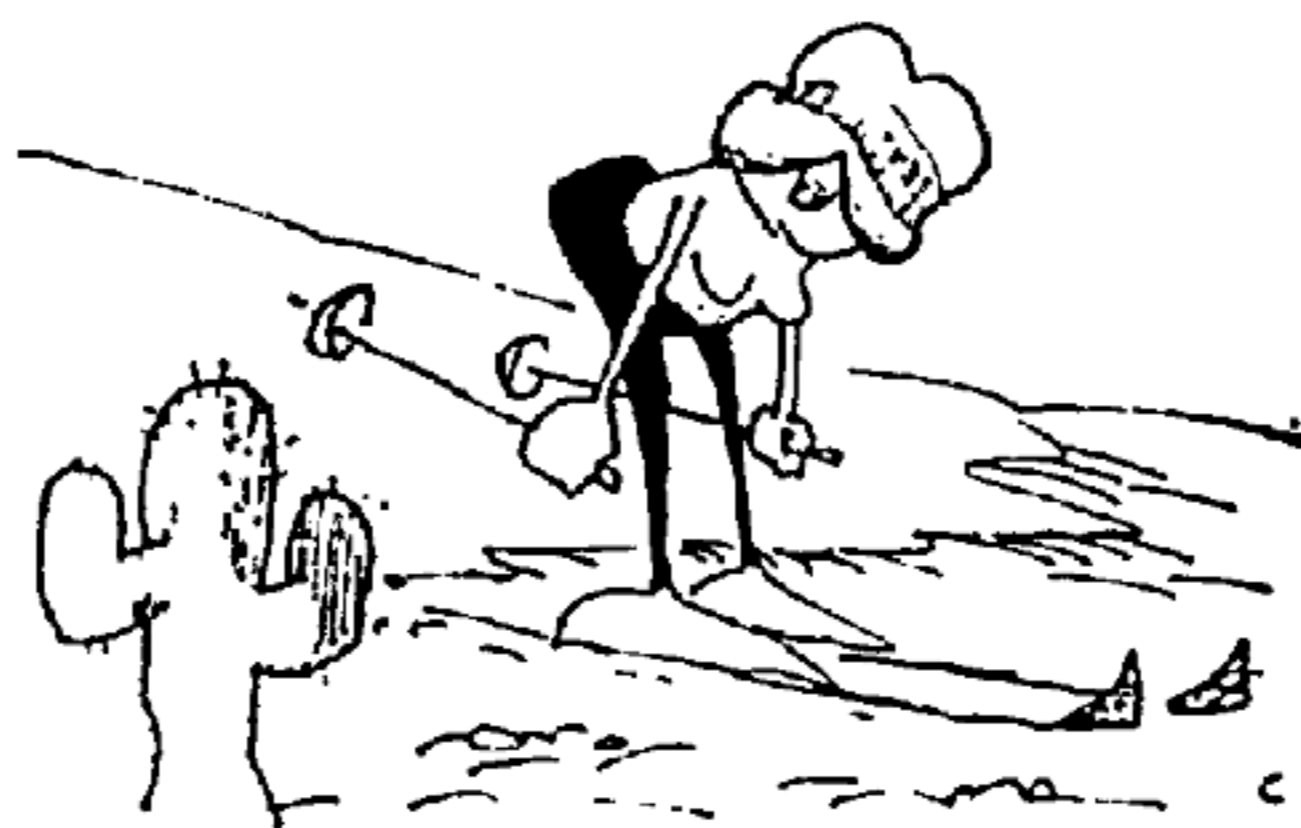
The values for wildland recreation are attractive, and preservationists want Mt. Baker included in the North Cascades National Park because the meadows and parkland skirting this superb volcano are perfect for wilderness - threshold experiences, short and easy hikes by people too small or too weak or too inexperienced to walk very far very fast. The Forest Service is rapidly eliminating the recreation

potential, stripping Baker clean of virgin greenery, and has even logged within the Mt. Baker Recreation Area.

What about the skiing? Heliotrope is magnificent, and Boulder might also be good, but again the proposals are made by the Forest Service in the hopes of hanging onto Mt. Baker so it can finish off the trees.

First, as Heather Meadows skiers know, the snow is consistently the deepest of any resort in the state — probably the nation. Baker is the blizzard capital of the Cascades, a thick bowl of milk most of the winter; except for the scenery, Heather Meadows is a third-class ski area, enjoyed best by springtime wanderers to Shuksan Arm and Herman's Saddle

Second, as a parking lot check of license plates makes a bundantly clear, Heather Meadows is a Canadian resort. Even with highway improvements of recent years, Baker is too distant from Seattle for day skiing, and a bit far even for a weekend, particularly with the probability of a whiteout. I suspect investors would be skeptical about a first-class resort with dependable skiing only in spring, when mob skiers have quit for the year. The Canadian trade, and the spring-touring trade, are not enough to support another area on Baker, not for a long time.



Twin Sisters Mountain, another proposed site immediately west of Baker, falls in the same category. Personally, the way Canadians are ravaging their own wilderness — 19th century morality equipped with 20th century machinery — I'm not about to sacrifice any stateside wilderness to provide ski rinks for my good friends in Vancouver, B.C.

Several miscellaneous proposals may be noted briefly. The Curry Gap area, between the South Fork of the Sauk River and the North Fork of the Skykomish River, is another Forest Service attempt to justify a logging road, but since the road is nearly complete the wilderness controversy there is already dead. At best the slopes seem to offer a ski rink too far from the crowds to be practical.

Cady Pass, on the Cascade crest north of Stevens Pass, is also scheduled to have a road — and one that conservationists have suggested for national park recreation, but under Forest Service auspices the logging will come first and recreation last. The ski potential might be good to moderate, and the damage to wilderness (once the logging road is built) minimal.

Squire Creek, south of Darrington, appears on some lists: the valley is important as part of a future Whitehorse Wilderness Area, and has nothing visible to offer skiers. The Darrington vicinity would be excellent for skiing if the right slopes could be found, but I think the most promising place is the headwaters basin of the North Fork of the Stillaguamish River, to the north of Mt. Higgins. The Forest Service has no motive for looking there, since full-scale logging is under way and no wil-

derness or park proposal is involved that needs to be headed off with an appeal to skier support.

Periodically operators of tourist facilities in the old mining town of Monte Cristo hatch a scheme to run lifts into Glacier Basin, a pocket of isolated meadow 1 mile from the road. This would be a tragedy too terrible to be suffered, but it won't happen because the basin is an avalanche trap totally lacking in skiable slopes; weird fantasies are abroad about what constitutes a practical ski area.

In the more northerly Cascades proposals for ski resorts are concentrated in lands under consideration for inclusion in wilderness areas or national parks. Many are not honest proposals, are not even valid dreams, but are tools in a rearguard attempt to save the entire world for multiple-use.

The region proposed for an Alpine Lakes Wilderness Area is similarly dotted; here, though, most sites deserve to be taken seriously. Still, if all those mentioned were deleted from the wilderness, only a few scrawny patches of wildlands would be left, and that's precisely what some people have in mind.

The Alpine Lakes decisions will be difficult. Population centers are close and thus the skiing economics are favorable for any reasonably good slopes. But the closeness to population is equally significant for wilderness recreation: this is Seattle's backyard, and Yakima's too, ideal for weekend backpacks and Sunday hikes and after-work walks on summer evenings.

Wilderness is of several kinds. There is the rough, tough, and remote country of the far North Cascades. There are the wilderness thresholds of Commonwealth Basin, Mt. Baker meadows, trails of Rainier National Park. Transitional between these is the gentle wilderness of the Alpine Lakes, good trail hiking and good cross-country rambling for Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, high-lake fishermen, family groups of parents and little kids.

Such friendly wilderness must not be traded away to the multiple-users who say we have all the wilderness we need farther north in the Cascades — it's not the same kind of wilderness, not for the same kind of people.

Those who oppose a meaningful Alpine Lakes Wilderness Area (and this includes the Forest Service, which wants to substitute two separate scraps of "wilderness-on-the-rocks") would eliminate ALL the sites proposed for skiing on the grounds some might someday prove practical. They say once the land is "locked up" it is lost to skiers forever.

As preservationists know to their sorrow, a wilderness area or a national park is never finally and absolutely created for once and all. What Congress does in 1967 it can undo in 1984 or 1999. The continuing battles over boundaries of Olympic National Park, over the Grand Canyon, are examples that each generation has an opportunity to review and revise the public-lands decisions of its predecessors. But "locking up" wilderness does leave future generations genuine options, and that is why preservationists want a large Alpine Lakes Wilderness, even though it may include slopes that must later be deleted to allow mechanized skiing.

Not all the suggested sites will be needed or wanted; between now and 2000, perhaps only half a dozen new alpine resorts, plus twice that many rinks, will satisfy the demand. Better let our children decide in 1980 or 2000 how much wilderness is enough, how much skiing room is required.

Big Snow Mountain, above the Middle Fork of the Snoqualmie River, seems to have quite good terrain for wandering, for running, and perhaps for rink skiing. Expansive road improvements and new construction would be required, but the site is about as close to Seattle as Snoqualmie Pass. The wilderness values are so great, however, that Big Snow must be kept wild for now.

Not for many years would development

be economic, and in the interim other sites might be found downriver on the Middle Fork, closer to the lowlands, less costly to exploit, outside the proposed wilderness, and offering equal runs.

Over to the east, up the Cle Elum River, lies the Fortune Creek-Mt Hawkins area. The terrain is open, seems to have superb slopes, and lies on the good-weather side of the Cascades. The driving time from Seattle would be about 3 hours, on the margin of feasibility. The Forest Service is booming the area to help justify cutting through the middle of the wilderness with a corridor of maximum logging along a new road from the Cle Elum River to the Icicle River. The ski area is no justification: it sits near the edge of the preservationist-proposed wilderness and could be deleted 10-25 years from now, if needed, with insignificant damage compared to what the Forest Service has on the drawing boards.

The most interesting proposal, for a number of reasons, is Mt Hinman, on the Cascade crest near the northern edge of the Alpine Lakes Wilderness. Rising to a 7,500-foot summit, with glaciers and permanent snow fields offering summer skiing, located about 75 miles from Seattle via the Stevens Pass Highway, and requiring only 56 miles of new road construction

valley wall is so steep it can only be negotiated at present by expert ski-mountaineers. Safe trails might be cut through the timber, but maybe not. Further, the valley wall is channelized into gullies and spurs, liberally scattered with cliffs. The gullies are swept by avalanches; the spurs, when logged, would also be subject to slides.

One hoped-for advantage of Hinman is the 5,000-foot run from summit to valley. It might be more reasonable to expect an upper area with 2,000 feet of drop excellent in good weather for intermediate and expert skiers, and much possible for beginners. The remaining 3,000 feet of drop—the timbered portion usable in bad weather—might be strictly for experts and daring intermediates, and might be frequently closed by extreme avalanche danger.

If it does not prove to have a 5,000-foot run, Hinman mainly shines as a glorious place to ski on neve in May, June, July, and even August, September, and October. Are there enough skiers active in those months to support a commercial operation? One would hope so, but the evidence is negative.

The season of 1966-67 got off to a slow start. Still, mobs were out in January and February, stopping around in the rain on thin and poor snow. In March the winter gathered momentum and gave it hell in

live soon we can forget wilderness) only the very best possibilities—whether as ski rinks or as alpine resorts—will warrant exploitation, and too little is now known to judge which are the best.

An official of the Pacific Northwest Ski Association has demanded that no wilderness of any kind be set aside because someday skiers will want to ride by helicopter to every slope, wherever located. Such flights of fancy are being used to justify inaction—that is, the status quo, which isn't a status quo at all because the chainsaws continue to whine.

As an example of how little is known about our mountains and their ski potential by most of the self-appointed skier spokesmen, one of the finest prospects so far found doesn't appear on their lists, but was discovered by skier-preservationists.

Wildhorse Basin is the place, 6-7 miles southeast of Stevens Pass as the crow flies, close enough to the Cascade crest to get ample snow (and thus not be embarrassed by bare dirt, like the new Mission Ridge Ski Area, farther east) yet lying within the sunshine zone. If roads existed to Wildhorse Basin (the nearest is now some 5 or so trail miles away), the driving distance would be about 15-18 miles beyond Stevens Pass.

The top elevations are Peak 8,600 and 8,000-foot Snowgrass Mountain in the Chiwaukum Mountains, intermediate skiers could approach quite near these summits. Frosty Pass, at the head of the basin, is 7,400 feet. A resort might be based in the valley bottom somewhere between 3,000 and 4,000 feet. The vertical drops might be as much as 5,000 feet, and probably not less than 4,000. The winter weather is much better than at Stevens and the season much longer.

The high slopes, many of broad, gentle contours are limitless. The wanderer could take off for hours and days of touring. The runner could choose among dozens of trails ranging from easy to expert. The whiteouts would come, of course, but not as often as on the Cascade crest, and plentiful bad-weather action would be available in the forests. Because of huge burns in the last century, placing runs around and through old trees that escaped the fires and younger trees grown up since would require little cutting.

Preliminary surveys must confirm all these impressions before any proposal can come down to earth, but those who have scouted both areas think Wildhorse Basin much more likely to prove feasible than Mt. Hinman. They feel nearby Mt. Cashmere also deserves investigation.

Let it not be thought a ski area is being touted here that nobody wants for anything else. Wildhorse Basin is inside the proposed Alpine Lakes Wilderness Area, and many hikers consider the surrounding larch- and pine parkland, green with alpine meadows and spotted with rock-shored lakes, among the supreme glories of the region. The skier-preservationists who have been exploring Wildhorse Basin are doubly determined that (1) good wilderness not be sacrificed for bad skiing, and (2) good skiing be found.

There is no split between the advocates of wilderness protection and the advocates of additional mechanized ski area—except insofar as Outdoors Unlimited and Georgia-Pacific and the Forest Service can make one. The anti-wilderness gang would like skiers to believe wilderness proponents are the natural enemies of skiing; sadly, too many uninformed skiers and journalists have been led down the garden path. And because anyone who calls himself a "skier spokesman" is accepted at face value in Olympia and in Washington, D.C., public officials who should know better have also been conned.

Yes, somebody is trying to steal our wilderness away, and they say they're doing it for the skiers. But the skier who doesn't enjoy being duped should listen closely to his "spokesmen." And then peep behind the masks to see who's really talking.

'You can't fight progress, so burn, baby, burn . . .'

up the Foss River, Hinman has impressed a number of observers as conceivably having a unique potential—close to the people, year-round snow, and a 5,000-foot drop from summit to valley bottom.

The Milmanco experts put Hinman No. 1 on their hit parade and Outdoors Unlimited instantly picked the lovely mountain as its major cudgel for assaulting and battling the Alpine Lakes Wilderness proposal, wilderness in general, and preservationists in particular.

What these loud-mouthed friends of the skiers don't know or would rather forget is that over a year ago two of the original investigators of Hinman, Alan Robert Grant and James W. Whittaker, met with representatives of The Mountaineers and the North Cascades Conservation Council to present the Hinman case.

Grant and Whittaker hikers and climbers and wilderness buffs themselves, made it clear they were not certain Hinman was as good as it looked on preliminary inspection and would never ask for it to be deleted from wilderness until a full study proved out the ski potential. The preservation leaders made it equally clear that if the potential could be demonstrated, they would reconsider their boundary proposals.

The preservation leaders said they would not give up first-rate wilderness for second-rate skiing. The Hinman enthusiasts said they wouldn't either. This meeting of minds exemplifies the spirit of cooperation and compromise in which preservationists and honest skiers are working together, but because the consensus doesn't serve the purposes of Outdoors Unlimited, Georgia-Pacific and the Rev. Riley it has never been publicized among the skiing public.

Subsequent to emergence of the Hinman idea other skiers have visited the slopes in winter and spring. They agree the neve fields offer intermediate running and touring of the first order and comment that intermediate slopes are rare in the sharp-sided North Cascades which mostly favor the expert and the beginner.

However, this upper snow is in the whiteout zone, unskiable in a tempest—and tempests surely come or there wouldn't be glaciers. Every first-rate resort has a whiteout zone, but in addition has forest runs for the bad days. What about Hinman? The prospect is discouraging. The



April and May. However, storms mostly struck in mid-week, leaving sunny weekends. The snow was fantastic, memorable for the Cascades, but the crowds vanished and the toys shut down and the finest runs of the year were molested only by scattered fanatics.

What is it with skiers? Do the crowds which make resorts feasible tire of the sport after a few months? Or do they run out of money after a succession of \$50-100 weekends? Or haven't they been educated yet about when and where to ski?

The answer remains to be found, but meanwhile commercial operators are sadly aware that Cascades skiing is, so far, a winter sport. A few mad spirits keep Mt. Baker lifts going sporadically through June. Is there a demand for a high-expense resort whose principal virtue is July skiing? I would hope so, and there ought to be, but I can't see any evidence that would make me invest money, if I had any money. The idealists who propose neve skiing want empty slopes—a prospect that strikes terror into the hearts of entrepreneurs.

Hinman is an exciting dream that is, as yet, a far piece from reality. However, if all the problems can be solved, plus those of a slot-like valley floor with no obvious spot for a safe parking lot or a row of condominiums, preservationists likely would sacrifice the wilderness values of Hinman for the skiing values of Hinman.

The dozens of sites mentioned here are only a few of those in the Cascades and Olympics that might offer good skiing. Assuming there must be an ultimate limit to the number of people and thus skiers (and if population controls don't become effec-