



October 5, 2020

Chip Jenkins, Superintendent
Mount Rainier National Park
55210 328th Avenue East
Ashford, WA 98304

RE: Visitor Use Management Plan for the Nisqually to Paradise Road Corridor

Dear Superintendent Jenkins,

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in Mt. Rainier National Park's Nisqually Corridor planning process. We appreciate the Park's public engagement process and the opportunity to provide comments during the first phase of the planning process. Our 14,000 members regularly engage in active outdoor recreation in Mt. Rainier National Park (the "Park" or "MNRP") and other public lands throughout the Pacific Northwest.

The Mountaineers, based in Seattle, Washington and founded in 1906, is a nonprofit outdoor education, conservation, and recreation organization whose mission is "to enrich the community by helping people explore, conserve, learn about and enjoy the lands and waters of the Pacific Northwest and beyond." The Mountaineers Books publishing division expands the mission internationally through award-winning publications including instructional guides, adventure narratives, and conservation photography. 1,600 skilled volunteers lead 3,200 outdoor education trips and courses annually for 14,000 members. Our youth programs provide over 10,000 opportunities each year for children to get outside. We are a passionate, engaged, and knowledgeable community that cares about the outdoors, and protects the outdoor experience for current and future generations.

For over 100 years, Mountaineers members have cherished the natural beauty and challenges offered by the Mt. Rainer landscape. We value our long history of partnership and engagement with the Park. As you know, The Mountaineers helped build the original Wonderland Trail and made the first trek around the mountain in 1915. We advocated for setting aside wilderness areas within the park and fought proposals in the 1950s to heavily develop the Paradise area. Mountaineers Books has published a number of books on Mt. Rainier National Park, including the popular *Day Hiking: Mount Rainier*, *Hiking the Wonderland Trail*, and *Mount Rainier: A Climbing Guide*.

The Mountaineers consider the Park one of the most significant gems of the Pacific Northwest and greatly values its world-class opportunities for backcountry recreation. We are also grateful for our



longstanding, strong relationships with Park staff and leadership. Thank you again for the opportunity to share details on how our community uses Mt. Rainier National Park through outdoor education courses and trips.

What experiences in the Nisqually Corridor do you find most important?

Over the last two years, The Mountaineers has conducted over 230 trips to destinations along the Nisqually Corridor, involving over 2,000 participants. These trips include field trips for our scrambling, snowshoeing, climbing, backcountry skiing, and day hiking courses; youth activities like outdoor clubs and outreach programs; and member-organized activities like day hikes and scrambling trips. Our members use the Park year round. The top three months for Mountaineers trips are March (66), December (47), and July (40). Popular destinations include Paradise and Camp Muir; peaks in the Tatoosh Range such as Pinnacle, The Castle, and Lane; and climbing routes such as the Disappointment Cleaver route. Trip leaders obtain Special Use Permits (SUP), mountaineering training permits, and climbing permits in accordance with Park rules.

Although there are significant natural and recreational resources throughout the Nisqually Corridor, the Paradise area in particular is a tremendous and unparalleled outdoor education resource for The Mountaineers. The opportunities for high altitude climbing, snow skills practice like crevasse rescue and avalanche training, and winter activities like snowshoeing and backcountry skiing are unique and highly valued by our members. It would be difficult to find suitable alternatives for these activities without reliable access to the Paradise area and environs.

Our members especially value the opportunity for year-round access to the Nisqually Corridor. Winter and shoulder season access enables Mountaineers to enjoy snow activities and skills practice. This benefits not only seasoned backcountry adventurers, but also allows youth from underserved backgrounds to experience snow and activities like snowshoeing for the first time. We are grateful for the Park's diligent work to plow roads, open gates, and ensure the safety of winter recreationists.

What issues most interfere with your desired park experience within the Nisqually to Paradise Corridor?

The biggest issue reported by our volunteer leaders is crowding. This is primarily an issue during the peak summer months, but can also be a concern during clear winter weekends. Members reported impacts of crowding on trails, lack of parking, and entrance lines. Some people attempt to manage those issues through arriving early to beat the crowds and carpooling. Other issues raised by volunteer leaders



include the loss of access to the west side of the Park through the Westside Road and lack of campground availability during busy times of the year.

Although we appreciate the Park's dedication to maintaining year-round access to the Nisqually Corridor, the inconsistency of plowing and gate opening times during the winter months creates barriers to access for winter recreation. Although those issues are often understandably out of the Park's control, late notice of gate closures or delayed openings are inconvenient for members traveling long distances to recreate at Paradise, and may require trips to be cancelled or held at other less desirable locations. Members also reported challenges with gate closure times during the winter months. Hurrying to get back to the parking lot before the gate closes can be stressful and unsafe, especially if there are unforeseen delays or changes in conditions.

What strategies would you like the planning team to consider when brainstorming transportation and visitor experience solutions for the Nisqually Corridor?

We recognize the challenges inherent in improving recreational access to the Park while also maintaining Wilderness character and protecting valuable natural and cultural resources. We support both ensuring access and protecting Wilderness, and appreciate the Park's approach to balancing these needs. There are no easy answers, but we encourage the Park not to decrease opportunities for visitors to access MRNP. The Mountaineers has the following comments about potential transportation and visitor experience solutions:

- **Shuttle System and Off-Site Parking Lot:** A shuttle system could be an effective solution to peak season parking and road congestion. Many visitors may prefer to bypass long wait times at the park entrance and avoid parking challenges by taking a shuttle to their destination. Such a system provides a good way to transport people directly to popular destinations such as Paradise, and would improve congestion in the Paradise parking area. A shuttle during the winter season provides an opportunity for visitors who cannot or prefer not to drive the road to Paradise to enjoy winter activities. We also encourage the Park to consider ways to connect a shuttle system with public transit opportunities, to further reduce the carbon footprint of passenger vehicle traffic and increase equitable access for underserved communities.

The Mountaineers believes that such a shuttle system should not entirely replace the option for passenger vehicle parking within the Nisqually Corridor. Many of our trips arrive at the Park in the early morning hours when a shuttle system would most likely not be running. Weary climbers descending from Mount Rainier generally prefer to go directly to their cars rather than waiting in line for a shuttle. During the winter, it is even more important to preserve the option



for passenger vehicle parking at Paradise. The majority of visitors leave at about the same time, creating a logistical challenge that would probably leave crowds of wet, tired people waiting to descend to Longmire.

- **Parking:** We encourage the Park to improve parking and access at under-utilized areas of the Nisqually Corridor and where appropriate. While it may not be feasible due to geohazards and cost, increasing access via the Westside Road would help disperse use throughout the Corridor and provide valuable access for hiking and scrambling. We also encourage the Park to consider increasing parking capacity at Cougar Rock Campground and where practicable.
- **Camping:** With the loss of the Sunshine Point Campground, camping opportunities within the Nisqually Corridor are limited. We encourage the Park to consider ways to increase camping capacity, including off-peak season camping opportunities. In addition to providing a valuable recreation experience, increasing camping capacity would also reduce some of the pressure on day-use visitation.
- **Winter Access:** The Mountaineers encourages the Park to improve shoulder season and winter access. The majority of our use occurs during these periods, and we highly value year round access to the Nisqually Corridor. We would appreciate earlier notice of gate openings, increased investment in plowing and winter staffing, and longer winter hours when practicable. We also encourage the Park to pursue strategies to reduce user conflict during the winter months, such as signing snowshoe routes and encouraging separation of snowshoe and backcountry ski/snowboard use.

What is the park doing well to manage these issues that you would like to see continue?

As detailed previously, The Mountaineers is grateful for our longstanding, strong relationship with MRNP staff and leadership. We appreciate your interest in improving the visitor experience and access to the Park's iconic natural resources. Despite limited resources, MRNP staff keep trails well-maintained, help ensure the safety of hikers and climbers, and help educate and inform the public. We greatly value year-round access to the Park and appreciate your dedication to ensure winter access through plowing and facilitation of winter recreation.

Additional Comments

While this planning process addresses the Nisqually Corridor, we encourage the Park to consider visitor experiences throughout Mount Rainier National Park. Addressing visitor needs and challenges in other



areas of the Park will help reduce visitation pressure on the Nisqually Corridor. For example, improving access in the Carbon River and Mowich Lake areas, considering earlier openings of the White River/Sunrise entrance, and creating additional camping opportunities could help spread out visitation throughout the Park. We realize many of these proposals require additional resources. The Mountaineers is committed to advocating for robust funding for park maintenance and improvements, like the recently passed Great American Outdoors Act.

Finally, we realize that many of these comments are informed by anecdotal information and we do not have the benefit of visitor use data. We encourage the park to share this data with stakeholders to better inform the planning process. We are also interested in whether the Park has established a framework for visitor capacity, both in the Nisqually Corridor and other areas of the Park.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment, and for your service on behalf of the outdoor community.

Sincerely,

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