

## Imagine summer in Stehekin without park rangers

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Lady of the Lake II docks along the south shore of Lake Chelan after a day of ferrying passengers between Chelan and Stehekin. (Mike Siegel / The Seattle Times, 2017)

By Phil Fenner and Carolyn McConnell

*Special to The Seattle Times*

This summer, thousands of visitors will take ferries up 55-mile-long Lake Chelan and land at the tiny community of Stehekin, where they will be surrounded by spectacular scenery. The magnificent mountains, forests and river is what

led Congress in 1968 to set this place aside as part of the North Cascades National Park complex.

One thing they won't find in this gateway to the park: The National Park Service.

North Cascades National Park staff members have told park advocates rangers will not be working in Stehekin, which is part of the Lake Chelan National Recreation Area, this summer. Information will continue to be posted online and on bulletin boards in the area.

For the first time since the park's founding, there will be no rangers in gray and green to greet or give directions. No one to point out trailheads, issue permits for camping, explain the type of bears to look out for, name the surrounding mountains or even direct visitors to the bathrooms. People who make their way uphill to the Golden West Visitor Center from the boat landing won't be able to view information on local wildlife or look at art exhibits. The center will be locked and dark.

In the first decades since the North Cascades National Park's founding, the visitor center in Stehekin was well-staffed with interpretive rangers who offered expert advice on hikes, whether for an afternoon or a week. They handed out national park stamps, coloring books and junior ranger badges to kids. They gave ranger talks on the natural forces that created the Stehekin Valley, its flora and fauna and local human history. They drove vans full of visitors up the narrow valley to trailheads. They made sure that visitors knew that dogs aren't allowed on park trails and that they shouldn't leave food around to tempt bears. Rangers also provided search-and-rescue services and emergency medical care.

But in recent years, even as visitors increasingly flocked to this park, the Park Service has steadily cut back on services in the North Cascades. In the past decade, visitation jumped 40%, while park staffing fell by more than 50%. Years ago, the park ceased providing van service staffed by rangers in Stehekin. Ranger talks grew rare. But this year marks a sudden decision by federal authorities simply to give up on Stehekin.

The North Cascades National Park complex encompasses not only the glaciated climax of the Cascades range, but also two massive fjordlike lakes (Ross Lake and Lake Chelan,

the third deepest lake in North America). It is one of the wildest of America's national parks, yet it is just a few hours' drive from the booming Seattle metropolitan area. It includes the unique Stehekin Valley — inaccessible by road and, thanks to Congress' set-aside, a rare lowland valley with an unsullied wild river and more trout, bear and deer than buildings.

The decision by the National Park Service to abandon Stehekin is a betrayal of Congress' intent in assigning Stehekin to the care of the Park Service. "There is nothing so American as our national parks," President Franklin D. Roosevelt said. "The fundamental idea behind the parks ... is that the country belongs to the people."

The North Cascades National Park, like all national parks, comes under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of the Interior. The North Cascades Conservation Council and others ask Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland and National Park Service Director Charles F. Sams III to fully staff Stehekin with rangers this summer, keep the Golden West Visitor Center open and commit to providing these services as the park has done for the last 55 years.

***Phil Fenner and Carolyn McConnell*** *Phil Fenner is president and Carolyn McConnell is vice president of the North Cascades Conservation Council.*

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