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Conservation victory: 7,000 acres along Hoh River permanently protected

After nearly 10 years of work, some 7,000 acres along the Hoh River are permanently protected, creating a conservation corridor from the Olympic National Park boundary to the Pacific.

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Mike Hagen, right, director of land management for the Hoh River Trust, is leading a long-term restoration effort to thin industrial plantations so trees eventually can grow huge. Here, he explores the riverside with Phil Davis, executive director of the trust.

After nearly 10 years of work and more than \$11 million, one of the largest single conservation efforts in Washington has permanently protected some 7,000 acres of land along the Hoh River. Taken together, the lands purchased, plus those already protected within Olympic National Park, conserve nearly the entire length of the Hoh.

As the outdoor-recreation season gets under way, a whole new playground beckons, along miles of the Hoh secured as a sanctuary for salmon, wildlife — and humans.

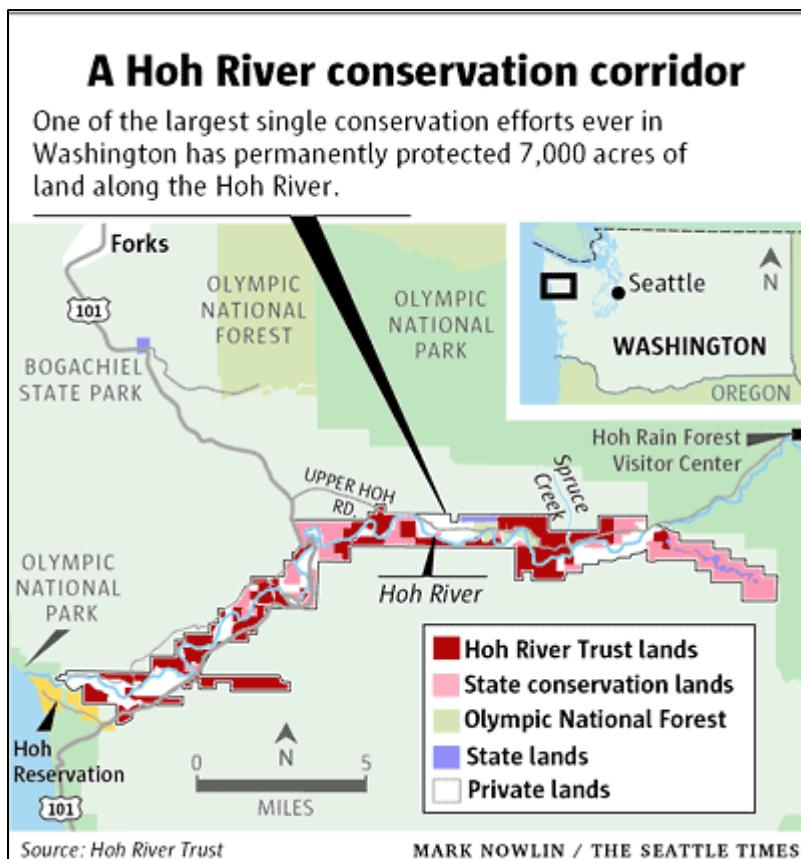
Camping, fishing, hiking and hunting are allowed. Bring the kids, the dog, build a fire on the gravel bars of the river as the stars come out and watch the Hoh sluice by, wearing its glacial meltwater colors.

The lands are open without charge or permit to all users, except motorized recreation, taking of timber or commercial harvest of mushrooms, berries or greens.

The effort, begun in 2001, was funded by a combination of federal, state and private money, totaling more than \$11 million. It was the work of many hands, started and led by the Western Rivers Conservancy and Wild Salmon Center, nonprofit-conservation groups based in Portland.

They created the Hoh River Trust in Seattle in 2004, a nonprofit rather than a government entity, to steward and take title to the protected lands.

The groups still are seeking to acquire lands along another prime salmon tributary of the Hoh. But the core mission of protecting large swaths of private land along the river was attained this winter, with final purchase of about 2,000 acres from the Fruit Growers Supply Co.



Preservation of the landscape — mostly former industrial timberlands — provides a critical connection between lands in the upper river and the beach already within Olympic National Park.

"The park has the high country and the beach," said Phil Davis, executive director of the Hoh River Trust. "We are connecting the dots in between."

Standing on the banks of the Hoh near Spruce Creek, he gestured at the lush forestland and a delicious hideaway of a camp site, its fire ring beckoning. "That could have been nice private houses, with no-trespassing signs and no access," Davis said. "Not now."

The effort nearly foundered at first. "It was very controversial," said Gary Peterson, a board member of the Hoh River Trust and resident of the Hoh Valley, where his family homesteaded in the 1900s.

"The problem was the locals had this real feeling the government was here to 'save' them," Peterson said. "There was a lot of feeling that what had been protected for the community by way of access would be eroded. I didn't want that for the future of the Hoh."

The Peterson clan still farms lands homesteaded by his family and runs outfitting businesses on the Hoh. To him, preserving this land, and public access to it, was only natural, continuing a heritage of providing access to the backcountry, kept alive in his family for generations.

With acquisition of the main conservation corridor complete, what lies ahead now is patient restoration of lands hard used for industrial timber harvest for decades.

Some 30 percent of the forestland acquired by the trust is quite young, including freshly bladed clear cuts. An additional 20 percent of the timber is from 30 to 65 years old, and at least 50 percent is within the channel-migration zone of the Hoh, which is forever changing course, mowing down anything in its path.

Only about 1 percent to 2 percent of the forest land purchased is old growth.

Yet the value of what has been protected will only grow with time, as the trust, using donations and grants from private foundations and government sources, works to heal the land.



Hoh River Trust executive director Phil Davis, left, and director of land management Mike Hagen tour property along the Olympic Peninsula stream. The conservation effort, begun in 2001, was funded by a combination of federal, state and private money, totaling more than \$11 million.

Mike Hagen, land manager for the trust and a Port Angeles resident, is leading a long-term restoration effort. The trust is working to thin industrial plantations so the trees eventually can grow huge.

Hagen pointed at haystacks of ripped-out blackberry and ivy, part of the ongoing battle against invasive weeds, and groaned at the job of hand-pulling of Scotch broom, an invasive shrub. The trust also is planting homesteaders' pastures to native plants and tearing out old road culverts that block fish passage.

As he rattled off a heroic to-do list, Hagen took a minute to tip his head back and appreciate the top of a giant cedar hulking on the bank, just back from the river that shines like stained glass between the massive branches.

He saw not only a remnant of old-growth forest, but the future.

"This," Hagen said, "is what it will all be like someday."

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