

## Enchanted Valley Chalet, A Time for Common Sense

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Winter storms and record-setting March rains have caused the East Fork Quinault River to undercut the bank below historic Enchanted Valley Chalet in Olympic National Park. By April, the building was overhanging the by four feet.

Constructed before the creation of the park, the chalet was part of a system of commercial lodges, shelter camps and an across-the-Olympics highway proposed for Olympic National Forest. In fact, aggressive development schemes such as these were a significant factor driving the creation of Olympic National Park.

The Quinault, for its part, is among the wildest of Olympic's rivers. Throughout the four decades I've hiked, camped and worked alongside it, it has eroded its banks relentlessly, taking out sections of old-growth forest, roads, trails, culverts and bridges overnight. With a couple hundred inches of precipitation visited upon its headwaters each year, the river's appetite is voracious.

Like all wild rivers, the Quinault has its own priorities, set by geomorphology, Pacific storm fronts and a shifting climate. It may not be this year or the next one, but the fate of Enchanted Valley Chalet appears to be sealed.

There's no question that the rustic lodge is scenic and well loved. My memories of the chalet go back to the 1970s, when it served as a free backcountry hotel for hikers. In the '80s, it offered welcome respite from rain and snow for early-season trail crews as we cleared trails in the upper valley.

But destruction and renewal are an old story in the Olympic Mountains. Studies conducted on the nearby Queets River found old-growth forests growing on the floodplain atop even older logjams that were felled and deposited by the river centuries earlier. There is evidence that the Queets has entirely shifted from north to south valley walls in less than 1,000 years.

Somehow, the rich biological diversity and beauty we experience in the wilderness valleys of the Olympics evolved among these dynamic conditions. Some would say because of them. Add windstorms, wildfires, avalanches, and glacier advances and retreats, and we have a landscape sculpted and polished by natural disturbance.

To me, these processes lie at the heart of the wild majesty that is Olympic National Park. The designation of 95 percent of the park as wilderness 25 years ago expressed an increased understanding of these processes and a desire to allow natural rather than human forces to continue to shape and renew the land.

For many, though, the old lodge defines the valley, and some have called for the Park Service to take extraordinary measures to save it. But I fear that the suggested fixes -- whether they involve moving the structure to another spot on the unconsolidated floodplain, armoring the river bank with logs or rocks, or attempting to re-channel the mighty Quinault River itself -- are all destined to fail.

The chalet is an artifact of an earlier time in Western history, when parks and natural areas were the "pleasuring grounds" of urban elites who could afford catered pack trips and rustic hunting lodges. We've come to a more egalitarian view of our public wildlands since then. We can now value our wilderness national parks for the gems of biodiversity, beauty and natural process that they have always been.

I don't know what the Park Service will decide after it assesses its options for the chalet. I know there aren't many. But I hope that agency managers will respect the natural processes they are charged to protect and take to heart the mandates of the Wilderness Act.

There is a time when humility must join with common sense to let nature take its course. That time has come for the old chalet.

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