

The Dosewallips River Road: A Case for Going It Afoot

by Tim McNulty

The Dosewallips River is one of the most ecologically rich and strikingly beautiful natural areas in the Northwest and a prime recreation destination. When the Dosewallips River Road washed out in the winter of 2002, I expected an easy and timely repair. The road provided motorized access to the Elkhorn Campground in Olympic National Forest, popular Dosewallips Campground in Olympic National Park, and to the Dosewallips and Constance Lake trailheads.

But it soon became obvious that the usual riprap-and-fill road repair wouldn't work here. The river now surges through the site of the old roadbed, and the steep cutbank provides an important source of spawning gravel for threatened Puget Sound Chinook salmon.

As an alternative, the Forest Service surveyed a nearly mile-long route up and over the washout. That seemed logical. But when I hiked the proposed route for the new road, I was shocked. The route climbed an excessively steep side-hill (think roots for hand-holds), then plowed through one of the most beautiful old-growth forest stands I've seen in the east Olympics. Douglas-firs and cedars up to six feet in diameter covered a mountain slope ribboned with streams. The survey markers and ribbons staked through the grove left me in stunned disbelief.

The Forest Service and the Park Service insist that restoring motor vehicle access to upstream campgrounds and trailheads is their highest priority. But in doing so the agencies forego a rare recreational opportunity. They can easily convert the old road above the washout to an all-season, hiking, biking and equestrian trail along a spectacular wilderness river. For many, it already is.

In the years since the washout, thousands have rediscovered the middle Dosewallips valley. The upper road attracts day-hikers, bikers, backpackers and equestrians of all ages. Families with small children looking for a "starter" backpacking experience find Elkhorn campground a one-of-a-kind destination an easy mile from the car. Cyclists peddle modest grades through a forested river valley. Day-hikers enjoy intimate encounters with thundering Dosewallips Falls that are impossible from behind the wheel. And backpackers find Dosewallips Campground one of the most beautiful riverside camps in the east Olympics—without the noise, dust and pollution of passing cars.

The Forest Service and the Park Service have a singular opportunity to look at future recreational use for the whole Dosewallips valley: trail conversion, new trailhead, parking and stock-loading facilities, perhaps an all-accessible loop trail and downstream campground. But, as of September 2010, the Forest Service is willing to commit up to \$4 million strictly to build a road for motorized use. All else is off the table.

At a time when fossil fuels are becoming scarce and recreational demands are changing, the Forest Service seems stuck in its road-building past.

The Dosewallips valley has something for everyone. But rather than taking my word for it, visit the Dosewallips yourself. Walk the upper road and enjoy a beautiful, all-season hike in a stunning wilderness valley. Then decide what's right for the Dosewallips.

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