

Sno-Parks rely on permit revenues for operation, maintenance

Continued from M1

how the Sno-Park system operates and why it's important for trail users to support its continuance through purchase of permits.

A little history

Before the Sno-Park program, winter-sports enthusiasts parked their cars in areas cleared by the State Department of Transportation and school districts for bus turnarounds. These cleared areas became so popular that the agencies could no longer afford to remove the snow for recreational users. As a result, members of The Mountaineers went before state lawmakers in 1975 and convinced them to start the Sno-Park program.

These users told lawmakers that they would pay the cost of removing the snow, using primarily parking permit fees. As a result, no state tax money funds the Sno-Parks.

While there may not be a safety net from state coffers, the program is immune from the ups and downs of the state budget process. Any unallocated money left over from one year is carried over to the next year.

Sno-Park program

The program operates on an annual budget of about \$450,000. Some 25 percent pays for grooming 300 miles of trails and 22 percent for snow removal and sanitation. The rest pays for equipment, enforcement, signs, mapping, and administration. When available, money is also set aside for a reserve fund for emergency snow removal and equipment replacement.

In its early years, Sno-Parks were no more than cleared parking areas and miles of backcountry trails. Trail grooming didn't take shape fully until 1985, thus providing cross-country skiers with tracks and skate lanes. Today, more than half of the non-motorized trails are groomed, leaving the remaining trails to skiers who prefer a more rustic experience.

But skiers aren't the only groups that flock to Sno-Parks. Many residents venture to the mountains to play in the snow and at least two Sno-Parks have designated tubing hills. Snowshoers and dogsledders are also frequent visitors who are growing in numbers. As a result, an effort is under way to groom existing trails for dog sledding and skijoring – being pulled on skis by a dog.

When compared to commercial winter recreation areas, Sno-Parks are economical. Vehicle daily permits are \$8 and seasonal

Where to buy permits

Sno-Park Permits and Special Groomed Trails Permits are usually available for purchase by late October. Mountaineers can either purchase these permits at outdoor gear retailers such as REI or at The Mountaineers Bookstore, 300 Third Ave. W. in Seattle

permits, \$20. Seven Sno-Parks – Cabin Creek, Lake Easton State Park, Hyak, Crystal Springs, Lake Wenatchee State Park, Chiwawa Loop and Mt. Spokane – require the daily permit or another \$20 permit (the Special Groomed Trails Permit) to be affixed to the seasonal permit.

Special Groomed Trails Permit

Begun in 1999, the Special Groomed Trails Permit helps pay for the big machines that groom these seven Sno-Parks. This special permit also represents a compromise.

Because of rising costs, the Sno-Park program had been losing money for several years. Permit sales were not keeping up with the expense to maintain and replace the machines.

One option was to return to grooming with a snowmobile dragging box springs or other devices. However, since 1988, users of Lake Easton, Lake Wenatchee and Mt. Spokane State Parks had gotten used to the proficiency of the bigger machines. They didn't want to give them up.

Two options were considered: Increase the Sno-Park fee across the board or introduce a special groomed-trail permit.

Sno-Park Permit users statewide were asked their druthers. Seventy percent of them said they would be willing to pay for what they use, but not for something they were not going to use.

Reciprocity agreements with Oregon and Idaho

Those who purchase the seasonal Sno-Park Permit in Washington receive an added value, the ability to use it in Idaho and Oregon.

State parks entered into reciprocity agreements so that residents may travel to neighboring state-operated winter playgrounds without paying additional parking fees. Residents from all three states may park freely at each other's Sno-Parks using their respective seasonal permits, with one nuance. Washington imposes a car license plate restriction while the other two states do not. Idaho and Oregon permits are valid in Washington only when used in cars with plates from their home states.

NW Forest Pass/other passes

The Sno-Park Permit cannot be substituted by other passes and permits, such as the Northwest Forest Pass which is issued by the National Forest Service. While most Sno-Parks are located in national forests, the Sno-Park program does not receive money from the National Forest Service. Those revenues pay for amenities and services provided from spring to fall. Only the Sno-Park Permit raises money for winter activities.

How Sno-Park fees are allocated

Every year, an advisory committee, made up of winter-sports enthusiasts across the state, reviews applications requesting Sno-Park funds for trail grooming, new Sno-Parks, or other services such as a vault toilet and law enforcement. Applications come from all sectors – cities, counties, government agencies such as the USDA Forest Service, local ski clubs, and other winter sports related organizations. Because the funds are reallocated yearly, applicants must submit their project requests each time. Typically, funds are set aside for ongoing projects first; the remaining balance goes toward new projects that are ranked by the committee.

During lean years – when permit sales are down and funding is limited – allocations for all projects may be reduced so that all Sno-Parks may stay open. As the funding available fluctuates from year to year, the project funding and number of projects supported will vary accordingly.

2005-06 allocations

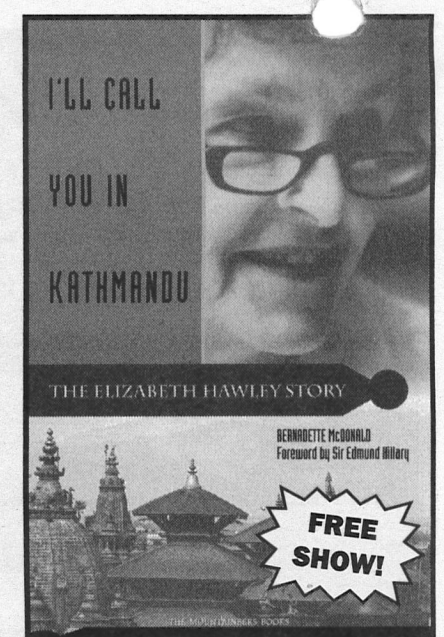
For the coming winter season, the committee approved all resubmitted applications. It also okayed a new Sno-Park at Frater Lake, located east of Colville, a new vault toilet at Pineside Sno-Park and a new snowmobile to groom trails at Salmon La Sac Sno-Park. The committee also agreed that more trail grooming is needed at Souty Summit, Geophysical and Deer Creek Sno-Parks. Additionally, it determined that enforcement efforts need to be strengthened at several I-90 and Naches area Sno-Parks.

More information

Information about the Sno-Park program – trail grooming reports, maps and online permit sales – can be accessed at www.parks.wa.gov/winter.

If you would like to contact any of the six regional advisory committee members directly, you can access the list of members through the website listed above. You can also contact Colleen Maguire, Winter Recreation Administration, through the website.

Ken Guza, an avid backcountry skier, is the Region 4 member of the Winter Recreation Advisory Committee.



Bernadette MacDonald

VP, Mountain Culture at The Banff Centre
and author of "I'll Call You In Kathmandu"

Thursday, Nov. 17 - 7 p.m.
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