

“Solitary Confinement: The regulations that would lock up Mount Hood are misguided”

Guest essay by Lloyd Athearn

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The sky was clear, the winds were light, and in only a few hours the snow would be softening for a great ski descent. Lured the night before by a forecast for sunshine, I hit one of the elusive early season climbing days on Oregon’s Mount Hood.

I was alone, my senses alive. I was totally immersed in the metronomic rhythm of my breathing, pole plants, and footsteps. Though I encountered several other groups on the popular South Climb route, I took little notice. Rime-iced rock walls loomed above me, and the nauseating sulfur fumes swirled from a steam vent nearby. At the bergschrund I dropped my skis, donned crampons, and attacked the final 600-foot slope through the Pearly Gates to the summit.

A few parties were already on top when I arrived. We exchanged pleasantries, and I had a quick bite to eat. Minutes later I was skiing down, making turns in hero snow. It was a perfect day on the mountain that has become an enduring presence in my life.

Sadly, new regulations proposed in January threaten to make spur-of-the-moment climbs like this all but impossible. The Mount Hood Wilderness Protection Environmental Assessment, produced by the U.S. Forest Service, proposes harsh limits on climbing, hiking, and backcountry skiing. Seasonal use of the entire wilderness will be reduced by as much as 50 percent, and climbing use of the standard South Climb route will be cut by almost 90 percent on popular weekends.

The Forest Service contends that too many people are recreating in the Mount Hood Wilderness. Consequently, all day and overnight users would have to register in advance, pay a permit fee, and obey stringent rules to go only where their tag allows. If you haven’t already booked reservations for, say, a June day climb to the summit, you won’t be allowed on the mountain that day—or you will be fined if caught.

If you think these user limits are designed to protect the physical environment from overuse, think again. The Mount Hood Wilderness plan is not about preserving the land; it is about imposing a completely arbitrary and uniform sense of “solitude” on the wilderness.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 defines wilderness as areas having “opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation.” The Forest Service wants to guarantee “solitude” in all parts of the wilderness by limiting the number of human encounters one can have on a given climbing route or trail. If their plan is implemented, access to current high-use areas will be severely limited, and users will be displaced to current low-use areas or to areas outside of wilderness.

Don't get me wrong, solitude is a great thing. I would love it if on every trip, I got a parking space at the trailhead, a campsite with the best view, and a wide open route to the summit. But this isn't realistic for all front-country wilderness areas—especially as more and more people look to the mountains for recreation and personal challenge.

Located a mere 50 miles from the Portland/Vancouver metropolitan area of 1.5 million inhabitants, the Mount Hood Wilderness is the first major stopping-off point for urban refugees. Miles of hiking trails lace the dense Douglas Fir forest, which provides a welcome reprieve on hot summer days. Perennial glaciers fuel lowland waterfalls. And countless Portlanders gaze at the mountain during cloud breaks and mutter, "I've got to climb that thing one of these days."

The easiest and most popular route to the summit, the South Climb, runs through designated wilderness, yet it can hardly be considered a true wilderness experience. The route begins at 6000 feet on the mountain's south flank at the paved, plowed parking lot for Timberline Lodge. For more than two miles it ascends through the Timberline Ski Area, then at approximately 9300 feet crosses the invisible wilderness boundary. The last 1900 vertical feet to the summit are all in designated wilderness, but most of the way the lodge and ski-lift towers are visible. Since the ski resort operates year-round, it is not uncommon to be spewed by exhaust from snow-grooming vehicles in the early dawn and then feel like a slalom gate on the descent as skiers and snowboarders whip past.

On an average weekend during the peak climbing months of April, May, and June, more than 200 people per day summit Mount Hood via the South Climb route. Sometimes over 400 attempt the summit when the weather and climbing conditions are good. While these numbers may seem high, the Forest Service, in fact, reports that Mount Hood has seen no appreciable growth in climber numbers since the turn of the century.

Despite this flat growth, the "preferred option" of the management plan seeks to limit the South Climb to only 25 climbers per day, with one-third of this number reserved for guided parties. (A second option would continue existing management policies, while the third, the "South Side Exception," would cap use at 185 people per day.) Similar Draconian limits would be placed on many of the lowland hiking trails. The number of hikers allowed on the 2.5-mile trail to scenic Ramona Falls, for example, would be cut from an average of 190 per day on peak-season weekends to 22.

The problems with managing wilderness by a purely statistical standard such as human encounters are many. What is an acceptable number of encounters in a day? Should one expect solitude on every trip to the wilderness—even on peak-season weekends and holidays and in the most popular and accessible areas? And should wilderness areas near major cities have the same level of solitude as wilderness in remote areas like Alaska and Montana?

The most frustrating parts of the Forest Service's regulations are their rigidity and uniformity. Solitude already exists on most of Mount Hood's climbing routes. Only the

South Climb sees an average of more than 10 climbers per weekend day; most routes see only two climbers. Even the South Climb and the most spectacular scenic areas have solitude midweek. What's more, most users questioned during the Wilderness Plan's creation said they would rather accept more human encounters than a restrictive permit system.

Let's be clear about another point: These user limits are not designed to help protect the physical wilderness resource. The Forest Service acknowledges that environmental degradation from climbing is not an issue and is not anticipated to become one in the future. However, the day-use limits could actually harm the wilderness area as a whole.

Caps on high-use trails will disperse more hikers to quieter wilderness trails. Researchers at the Forest Service's Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute have found that moving people from high-use to low-use areas actually causes more physical damage to the resource. Current high-use areas have already been trampled, so each visitor's impacts are less. Whereas turning low-use areas into high-use results in rapid trampling of virgin terrain. Because of this, the researchers believe it may be preferable to allow high use in some popular areas (and try to limit resource damage there through regulations such as the "blue bag" human-waste program, where climbers pack out their waste in sturdy bags to conveniently located barrels.) Low-use areas can then be preserved in their pristine conditions. In addition, the researchers suggest developing more recreation areas outside of wilderness.

Managing the South Climb for solitude may also increase the number of accidents and rescues on Mount Hood. Rescue officials fear the limited permit system may push people to attempt the South Climb in inclement weather because they have a permit for that day only. Alternately, inexperienced climbers may opt to climb another, more technical route (for which they are unprepared) if the few permits for the South Climb are already taken.

Sadly, Mount Hood is only the edge of the knife. The Alpine Lakes Wilderness in Washington, home to classic alpine rock routes on Mount Stuart, Dragontail Peak, and Prusik Peak, may soon have quotas on hiking trails that would limit day climbs of these peaks, too. Other wilderness managers throughout the country are meeting to consider similar measures for their federal lands.

In managing our wilderness areas, it would be well if the Forest Service sought to understand why people come to the wilderness, rather than simply counting how many. The only way we can keep these areas free for weekend adventures is to speak up. Send your comments about the Mount Hood Wilderness Protection Environmental Assessment to:

Kathleen Walker at the Zigzag Ranger Station
70220 E. Highway 26
Zigzag, OR 97049

(the wilderness is on the web at <http://www.fs.fed.us/r6/mthood/wildea.htm>). If you live in another part of the country, find out whether your local wilderness area is considering similar solitude restrictions. Lastly, advocate for more wilderness. Lack of solitude is symptomatic of too many people wanting to recreate in insufficient wilderness. Climbers first led the charge to establish wilderness; now is the time to push for more.