



## The Oregonian

### Purple mountain

**Transform the mothballed Coldwater Ridge visitor center into a camp, and Mount St. Helens into a national park**

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There's nothing humble about an active volcano. Yet there's something sadly diminished about the experience of visiting Mount St. Helens this summer.

It's becoming a monument to mismanagement.

Striped with snow, the peak itself is as spectacular as ever. As you hike out the Boundary Trail toward Spirit Lake, the purple lupine, running parallel to the path and even perpendicular at points, surrounds you with royal embroidery.

Yet the green paper bracelets hikers must wear to show they've paid their \$8 fee at the Johnson Ridge Observatory feel vaguely demeaning. (Are we hiking in an awesome wilderness here, or have we just been admitted to a hospital ward?)

Even if you don't really begrudge the perennially shortchanged Forest Service the money, the jumble of fees and passes it now requires are so confusing that the agency actually offers a "decision tool" on its Web site to help you bushwhack through the underbrush of charges.

That may be a trivial matter. But the huge question looming over the monument now is how to elevate it, once again, to its rightful stature. Last fall, the Forest Service dealt the region a terrible blow when it mothballed the striking Coldwater Ridge Visitor Center.

To be sure, the Forest Service has more urgent financial priorities, such as fighting fires, and it always will. But it's maddening to see a unique national treasure -- one of the most important natural areas in the world -- treated like a low-rent, third-rate roadside attraction.

This year, an advisory group has been meeting to figure out how to transform the monument into magnet for visitors again. One idea that the group, and the Washington congressional delegation, is at least exploring is promoting Mount St. Helens into a national park. That way, it would be run by the National Park Service, the agency that specializes in overseeing our most astonishing places -- 58 parks, at last count.

And, yes, there is magic in the designation alone. Or at least that's what many people in South Carolina would tell you. After the Congaree Swamp National Monument became a national park in 2003, visitors shot up by nearly 50 percent and came from all over the world, says park ranger and naturalist Fran Rametta. "It has helped tremendously," he said Thursday. "It has . . . raised the prestige of the park."

As an active volcano in the lower 48, Mount St. Helens is already well known. But elevating it into a national park would attract many new visitors, and dollars, both private and public. The Coldwater Ridge Visitor Center could be turned into a lodge for a campground, with tent cabins like those in Yosemite National Park's Curry Village.

There are other "nominees" vying for promotion to park status, of course. And they're in a hurry because,

just eight years from now, the National Park Service will mark its centennial. In celebration, it plans to invest millions of dollars of upgrades into the park system, from a blend of federal and private funds. Whether there's still time for Mount St. Helens to compete or qualify is hard to know. But there's no question that any new park stands to benefit from the spotlight the birthday will shine on the system.

The creation of the national parks has been called the best idea America ever had. For Mount St. Helens to be crowned the 59th or 60th in this royal line, in time for the park centennial, could be hailed in years to come as the best idea the Washington delegation ever had.

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