Pay to play

Permits, passes, licenses, fees — enjoying the great outdoors now has its costs

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EAST WENATCHEE — Brothers Larry and Steve Frazier were pumped last week about launching Larry’s new fishing boat from the ramp here at Kirby Billingsley Hydro Park.

Nice boat, calm weather, good company and, best of all, they said, no user fees or annual passes required. Recreation at the Columbia River park, owned by the Chelan County PUD, comes mostly free.

Not so on state and federal lands, and to prove the point, Larry whipped out a leather pouch where he’s carried up to a dozen documents — Discover Pass, state vehicle permits, fishing license, salmon tag, boat license, boater’s education card, trailer license, a couple of expired day permits, Northwest Forest Pass and more. He fanned them out on his truck’s tailgate.

“All the passes, all the licenses, all the fees — they’re necessary up to a point,” said Larry, of Moses Lake. “But then they start to add up. Really, isn’t enough enough?”

That’s the cry across North Central Washington — make that across the entire state — as sportsmen and recreationists wrestle with the growing costs and complexity of having fun in the great outdoors.

With budgets slashed, agencies that oversee hunting, fishing, camping, boating, hiking, skiing, snowmobiling and just about every other outdoor activity on government lands have turned to their customers — the users — to fund the difference through recreation passes, licenses and varied fees.

“We’re getting sick of it”

Frustrations arise, said state officials and recreation leaders, when multiple agencies present consumers with long lists of required permits, some with add-on costs.

“It gets confusing,” said Wenatchee resident Steve Frazier, “when we’re not exactly sure if what we buy is what we need. Or if what we buy is right for where we want to go. It all seems to kind of overlap, and sometimes we’re not always sure what we’re paying for.”

Kelsey Hilderbrand, owner of High Mountain Hunting Supply in Wenatchee, put it more bluntly. “We’re getting sick of it. Every time you turn around, some other agency has their hand out. We’re seeing continued increases in the cost of recreation and continued decreases in services provided.”

Hilderbrand argued that the total cost of recreational licenses and permits has priced some enthusiasts out of some sports. For instance, a Washington hunting license for all species runs about $300, he said, and not everyone can afford it. A similar license in Pennsylvania, he added, is about $65.

“Fishing’s a little more affordable, but the problem’s the same,” he said. “For some people, they’ve spent their fishing money before they even launch the boat or wet a line.”

Funds for fun

It’s all a matter of tight state budgets due to slipping revenues, said Tom Ernsberger, a State Parks field operations manager. Consumers are being asked to pay for more and more, and, in the case of state parks, he said, users have been asked to pay for just about the whole shebang.

“Look, I’ve been working for State Parks long enough to remember when most everything was free,” said Ernsberger, a 38-year veteran of the state park system who’s now based in East Wenatchee. He oversees 16 state parks in Eastern Washington north of Interstate 90.

“Now the legislature has asked us to be self-sufficient,” he said. “Can we do it? We’ll see.”
With a 2011-13 budget of nearly $150 million — $100 million of that from fees — State Parks has bet for now on the Discover Pass, a tri-agency permit costing $30 a year or $10 a day that allows buyers access to parks, state forests and other recreational lands.

State Parks gets 84 percent of proceeds from every pass sold, while the state departments of Natural Resources and Fish & Wildlife split the remaining 16 percent.

But Discover Pass sales have been disappointing. In its first 10 months, which ended in April, sales of the pass totalled $11.3 million, far behind annual projections of $32 million.

To boost sales, a public relations firm was hired last week to step up marketing and, in June, the trial use of electronic Discover Pass dispensers that accept credit cards will begin in high-use areas.

Beginning this year the state park system saw over 150 layoffs as part of an $11 million cut in its two-year budget. Layoffs included, for instance, a cut in full-time rangers at Lincoln Rock State Park from three to one.

In August, said Ernsberger, state park officials will issue a special report to the Governor and Legislature on the validity of becoming self-sufficient. “We’ll have a better picture then about whether or not this can work.”

‘Fees are the new reality’

The funding problem is mirrored on federal lands, where a handful of recreation permits are offered by the Forest Service for its many trailheads and entrance-fee sites. This includes the Northwest Forest Pass, an annual permit costing $30 a year or $5 a day, and the Interagency Annual Pass, $80, honored at all Forest Service, national park and other federal sites charging user fees.

“It’s a (fee) program that helps maintain what everybody loves about our national forests,” said Roland Giller, a spokesman for the Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest.

Last year, users bought about $1.14 million worth of recreation passes for the Okanogan-Wenatchee forest. Ninety-five percent of that money stayed right here to pay for local forest projects, Giller said.

For instance, he said, in the past year user fees have funded maintenance at 66 campgrounds and 84 trailheads, paid wages for campground hosts and seasonal employees, helped pay for vault toilets and camp area water systems and funded volunteer trail work groups.

“Recreation fees are the new reality,” said Susan Elderkind, communication and outreach director for the Washington Trails Association in Seattle. “Yes, it can be confusing to outdoors people, but the fact remains that without, say, the Discover Pass, many of our state parks would already be shut down.”

Nine years ago, State Parks tried imposing a $5 day-use parking fee but dropped it after three seasons when visitor counts declined at some parks by 30 percent or more. The Northwest Forest Pass was launched in 1998.

The WTA has taken steps — online and in live presentations — to explain the use of recreation passes, said Elderkind, “but confusion is still rampant.”

At trailheads, she said, the mix-up becomes obvious simply by the number of wrong recreation passes displayed on the dashboards of parked cars. “We see state passes on Forest Service land, and federal passes on state lands. Many users aren’t clear about jurisdictions.”

The bright spot in all this, said Elderkind, is that recreation users seem to realize that the fees are necessary to keep trails and facilities open.

In a 2011 survey of Northwest hikers, the WTA found that 69 percent supported the Discover Pass to keep state lands open. Seventeen percent opposed the fee and 14 percent had no opinion.

The WTA also surveyed the cost of user fees in states across the nation. “In terms of price, Washington lands just about in the middle,” said Elderkind. About a dozen states charge nothing for people to access state lands and parks, but Arizona charges the nation’s highest fee — $205 annually — for a permit similar to the Discover Pass.

“The bottom line — and it’s all about the bottom line — is that recreation fees are here to stay,” said Elderkind. “Without a huge turnaround in the economy, we’ll all be paying some kind of fee to use public lands. It’s become a fact of life.”

At State Parks, Ernsberger agreed. “I wish I could say these fees would be here for a short while and then go away, but I don’t see that sort of change coming. Seems like they’re here to stay.”

Ernsberger paused. “To say anything more definite about the future of fees in this state ... well, for that I’d need a crystal ball.”

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