
Stehekin — Fifty Years into the Future

Kevin Herrick



Kevin Herrick
—Penny Manning photo

No matter the state of the weather— driving rain, blustery wind or calm morning fog, my daily commute never caused me to regret my job location. The 4-mile bike ride down the Stehekin Valley to the landing in Lake Chelan National Recreation Area proved to be a gift rather than a chore. The tenor of Rainbow Falls told the tale of the region's recent precipitation. A sharp eye was often rewarded with the sight of a bear pawing for ants and grubs. Does and their fawns bounding across the road were the only cause to apply the brakes unless particularly good morning light necessitated a picture stop of mountains reflected in the lake. Once down at the landing the view back upvalley took in the towering ridges converging into glaciated peaks of Buckner, Booker, Boston and Sahale.

From the perspective of the early morning commuter, the Stehekin Valley appears quite tranquil and well taken care of. Thus, I reacted with a little annoyance when I first read the late Grant McConnell's book *Stehekin: A Valley in Time*. Grant likened the growing pressures of development to "a poisonous fog" that "had crept up the twisting canyon of Lake Chelan." Compared to the rate that most Americans are accustomed to development — miles of wheat fields turned into cement and chem-lawn suburbs in a half-decade — Stehekin has not been heavily assaulted. However, a look about the valley with some historical perspective bears out Grant's words.

Stehekin's first "building boom" arrived in the 1880s in the form of homesteaders, miners, and associated tourism developers. Parts of the valley were logged to supply timber for mines, homes, and to power steamboats plying Lake Chelan. In 1927, construction of a small dam at the outlet of the lake flooded the wetlands at the head of the lake at Stehekin. By the end of that decade, homesteading and tourism had played out and the valley's small mining boom had gone bust. Stehekin's population settled into an average of 25-50 residents, and the valley began to recover.

Unfortunately the recovery has been interrupted. The last 30 years have proven that Stehekin is not immune to civilizing pressures despite being shielded by lack of a connecting road to any other roads. Wetlands have been filled and houses built on the delicate Stehekin River delta. Forty acres of forest have been clearcut to provide a landing strip for a few private pilots. The homesteaded lands have been subdivided into tiny parcels. Chainsaws cutting firewood for an expanding local population continue to punch holes in the valley's forest. National Park Service gravel pits have left scars upon the valley floor. Development has restricted public access from most of the head of the lake and the mouth of the Stehekin River. The number of private homes has more than doubled and will double again if no action is taken.

But what about the National Park Service? Did not designation of the Lake Chelan National Recreation Area bring greater protection to this region? Well, yes and no. The National Park Service has preempted some development via purchase of approximately 1,200 acres of land. However, the National Park Service lacks the power to regulate ongoing development except by outright purchase of land. Chelan County holds day-to-day regulatory power.

~~Chelan county politicians have used Stehekin as an ideological chest beating ground to promote their own agendas at the expense of Stehekin's nationally recognized natural resources. The county flaunts its own regulations that could protect the valley. Recently, it permitted the building of a home and septic system on a tiny piece of property that is regularly flooded by the Stehekin River. In another location, the county ignored state regulations when it allowed a property owner to install a bulkhead wall and rip-rap in the otherwise pristine river. In the latter case, NCCC was forced to go to court to protect the Stehekin River.~~

Unfortunately, the forces that have degraded the valley over the past 30 years appear to be increasing rather than abating. The 1988 Park Service General Management Plan estimated that 200 to 250 more residential units could be built in the valley under existing laws. The chance of this happening is very real. Across the nation, rural areas are being bought up and developed. Just around the corner from Lake Chelan, the once sleepy Entiat Valley has been struck by development fever. Land has been subdivided. First and second homes and cabins are being built for city-dwelling folks trying to buy a piece of the American West. In Stehekin itself, a new resident who happens to have a successful history as a realtor, claims that "The easiest part of my job is the demand for property exceeds the supply. The market is brisk for property that is available." (*Stehekin Choice*, 12-93.)



Houses on landfill, Stehekin River delta
—Grant McConnell photo

The cumulative impacts of the 1988 NPS General Management Plan and associated plans prompted the NCCC to file a law suit in 1990. That suit led to a consent decree which requires the NPS to write a new General Management Plan (GMP) and associated plans, such as the Firewood Management Plan, for the Lake Chelan National Recreation Area. The Park Service is also completing an Environmental Impact Statement to assess the cumulative impacts of the plans. The final GMP will be the blueprint for management of the area for the next 20 years. It will decide the fate of the Stehekin Valley.

National Park Service research shows what many people have felt for some time — that the Stehekin Valley is a valuable and fragile place. The valley supports 138 terrestrial vertebrate species, including osprey, spotted owl, black bear, and martin. The great range of species in such a small valley is largely due to the terrific variation of habitat types (37) spread across the valley floor. Since animal populations are already small due to the size of the rich lower valley (less than 8 square miles), habitat reductions can push populations to unsustainable levels. The 460 acres of private land, NPS developed areas, the airfield, gravel pits, roads, and public infrastructure facilities in total displace or severely degrade over 1 square mile of valley habitat.

The degradation of critical habitat is not only a loss for the valley, it is a loss that affects the entire region. With its mix of cottonwood, alder, Douglas fir, ponderosa pine, yellow cedar and western red cedar, Stehekin is a rare low-elevation eastside valley caught in the jumble of North Cascades peaks, ridges and hanging valleys. No eastside valley with the richness of Stehekin's penetrates as deeply into the heart of the North Cascades ecosystem. To allow the Stehekin Valley to continue to be fragmented by development, private or NPS, is to allow the loss of one of the North Cascades' most valuable and scarce resources. There are plenty of pristine high peaks. There are very few pristine valleys.

In my commutes up and down valley I often wondered whether I will see the Stehekin Valley sustained and its sensitive parts restored. Or, will the opposite occur? Will the NPS fail to purchase critical private lands and will it fail to limit its own development? Will development continue to fragment habitat and drive the wildlife out as it has in countless places across the United States? Will the National Park Service continue to allow the forest to be logged for firewood? Will aircraft continue to land on a gash in the valley floor that ought to be carpeted with towering trees? Will 200 new residents and a camp or lodging facility permanently turn the valley into an urban enclave with a wilderness backyard? In 50 years will we wring our hands and wonder, "Why didn't *someone* do *something* back in the early 1990s?" just as we today wring our hands and wonder why *someone* didn't do *something* 50 years ago to save Yosemite Valley and Lake Tahoe?