Upper Skagit Watershed
Recreational Needs Assessment

Skagit Environmental Endowment Commission (SEEC)
29 September 2005
Executive summary

The SEEC commissioned this needs assessment of the recreation use of the Skagit River watershed above Ross Dam and the surrounding areas that bear upon activities in the watershed. The study area was defined to include portions of Skagit and Dewdney Provincial Forests, Skagit Valley Provincial Park, Cascade Recreation Area, and E.C. Manning Provincial Park in British Columbia; and North Cascades National Park, Ross Lake National Recreation Area, Pasayten Wilderness, and Okanogan National Forest in the US.

The specific objectives of this assessment were to inventory existing facilities, project population and demographic trends, identify key issues, and delineate strategic options.

The SEEC Board and staff oversaw this recreation needs assessment process. The process included an extensive survey of all agencies, user and interest groups, and facility operators in the service region. Participant workshops were also conducted on each side of the border to allow direct discussion among SEEC staff, consultants, and interested parties.

The facts and proposals contained within this document are based on investigations supplemented by information obtaining during the above events.

Inventory implications

The following implications are drawn from the effort to compile and complete the inventory information listed in this assessment.

- **Gaps in inventory** – there are significant information gaps in information regarding facilities in the Upper Skagit River Watershed study area. The facility data that is maintained and updated periodically by the agencies is not consistent between agencies or on both sides of the border. Some of this information may be available, but has not been recorded on digital maps or in park brochures. Some of this information may only be compiled through field investigations. A comprehensive and accurate inventory must be developed and maintained of existing facilities along with up to date assessments of conditions and utilization.
• **Undefined facility carrying capacities** – apart from anecdotal comments, there are no documented determinations of the environmental carrying capacity of some of the watershed’s most sensitive facilities and environments. Such information will be critical to avoid environmental degradations due to overuse. Park management plans should account for carrying capacity limits and develop databases with which to determine the usage of all facilities between agencies on both sides of the border.

• **Incomplete historical/cultural information** – there are significant gaps in information and on maps, guidebooks, CDs, and websites of the watershed area concerning historical and cultural attributes of interest to visitors of the watershed area. SEEC and other parties have funded a number of detailed cultural and historical inventories of the watershed area. However, these attributes are not identified on maps, guidebooks, CDs, or websites that are distributed to the public. Given the increasing interest in this aspect of natural history, this oversight needs to be corrected. Watershed visitors will likely support preservation efforts if they are aware and informed of the value of the attributes to be protected.

• **Incomplete wildlife habitat area information** – there are significant gaps in information and on maps, guidebooks, CDs, and websites of the watershed area concerning wildlife habitat information of interest to visitors of the watershed area. SEEC and other parties have funded a number of detailed wildlife inventories and assessments in the watershed area. However, like the cultural inventories described above, wildlife habitats are not identified on maps, guidebooks, CDs, or websites that are distributed to the public. Given the increasing interest in this aspect of the environment, this oversight needs to be corrected. Like cultural attributes, watershed visitors will more likely support wildlife habitat conservation efforts if they are aware and informed of the value of the habitat to be protected.

**Recreational demand qualifications and implications**
The following qualifications and implications pertain to the demand forecasts made in this assessment.

• Under the recreation demand capture scenarios described in this report, the volume of recreational activity will increase significantly for all activities in the Upper Skagit Valley watershed due partially to increased population growth within the recreational service areas.

• The volume of recreational activity demand could increase beyond the scenarios in the Upper Skagit Valley watershed if no more facilities are developed or available elsewhere in the region to meet the increased demands forecast for the type of activities that are most unique to the watershed.

• The volume of recreational activity demand could increase beyond the scenario forecast for backcountry activities – if it is assumed that there is a limited supply of this type of opportunity. The volume may actually increase beyond what is forecast if a greater percent of all users and the volume of activity is focused on the Upper Skagit due to scarcity elsewhere.

**Analytical implications**
The following implications are drawn from the analytical effort to determine and project recreational demands for the watershed study area in this assessment.
• **Incomplete facility utilization information** – there is no consistent or current information about facility use volumes, patterns, or trends within the watershed study area. The information available is dated for all but backcountry permitting. An accurate database needs to be developed and maintained of the utilization of all facilities between all agencies on both sides of the border.

• **Incomplete and irregular survey user behavior and attitudes** – user surveys are old and may not reflect current use patterns or opinions. The 2005 survey of SR-20 highway users will provide useful information – but should be replicated to collect similar information from users throughout the watershed study area on a more frequent basis than has been done in the past. In addition, future surveys should include questions about possible policy issues including backcountry access permitting, facility developments, pricing and use allowances, and other options. A systematic survey approach needs to be developed and funded that measures user opinions and reactions to conditions and policy issues on both sides of the border on a regular basis.

• **Undetermined facility carrying capacities** – there are no documented determinations of the environmental carrying capacity of some of the watershed’s most sensitive facilities and environments. Such information will be critical in order to determine what levels of use or development can be sustained before environmental degradations occur. A method of defining and monitoring maximum environmental carrying capacity needs to be determined appropriate to some of the most sensitive backcountry sites that may be incorporated into park management plans and control facility development proposals.

• **Undetermined user capacity preferences** – there is no documented user survey or other data with which to determine acceptable use volumes on backcountry or fringe development sites and facilities. Such information will be critical in order to determine what levels of use are acceptable to watershed visitors. A method of determining user preferences and/or the limits at which user satisfaction and policy support begins to decline needs to be determined and conducted on a regular basis.

**Workshop implications**

The following implications are drawn from the anecdotal comments elicited from the surveys and workshops documented in this assessment.

• **Interpretive programs at points of interest** – that are delivered at park entrances, visitor centers, shelters, and other fixed or static displays are currently or at risk of being under funded in future park budgets. Given the changing information available on the watershed, and the possibility of incorporating user input and policy information, these interpretive programs must be kept current, timely, and informative to the user.

• **Interpretive programs in the field** – that are delivered during hands-on interpretive experiences to youth, adult, or special populations at important sites or features within the watershed parks are not likely to be funded in future park budgets. Volunteer or non-profit assistance will be needed to supplement the operation of controlled excursions that increase the potential number of people who enjoy the watershed, and learn and begin to value the experience, while protecting sensitive areas.

• **Youth camps** – that deliver extended recreational and interpretive experiences to young populations are not likely to be funded with limited and
declining park agency budgets. Volunteer or non-profit assistance will be needed to supplement agency staff in the operation of youth camps that increase the percentage of visitors under controlled, least impact conditions to the environment and other users, and build public support for conservation and management efforts.

- **Adult camps** – can deliver the same experiences youth are availed to the larger adult populations, particularly the increasingly active older adult age groups. Like youth camps, adult programs can control the park experience and impact, and generate considerable public support and volunteerism. In fact, adult camps have been found to be effective in motivating and training volunteers who can conduct or guide other youth and adult camp programs. Volunteer or non-profit assistance will be needed to supplement agency staff in the organization, scheduling, housing, and other assistance.

- **Corporate camps** – can deliver the same experiences youth are availed to a controlled corporate camp or retreat experience. Like youth camps, corporate camp programs can provide a facility for management retreats, control the park experience and impact, and generate considerable corporate support and volunteerism. In fact, corporate camps have been found to be effective in motivating and harnessing corporate resources in a variety of ways ranging from maintenance and construction projects to the development of marketing and management procedures – often charging the corporation a fee for the facility and retreat experience in the process.

- **Volunteer maintenance efforts** – will be needed whereby organizations or group work parties provide backlogged renovation and repair projects that will not be accomplished otherwise or are not high priority items for agency staff. Volunteer projects could be an adjunct to youth and adult group camp programs, or part of extended day-tripper events, or special excursions scheduled and conducted by trail, fish, or other organizations. Park agencies will need help to define, schedule, and organize maintenance programs that are effective, manageable, and productive to agency staff and user interests alike.

- **Volunteer guides or ranger efforts** – will be needed whereby organizations or individuals provide interpretive programs, tours, or excursions that would not be accomplished otherwise or are not high priority items for agency staff. Volunteer guides and staff could help conduct youth and adult group camp programs, or extended day-tripper events, or special excursions scheduled and conducted by trail, fish, or other organizations. Park agencies will need help to define, schedule, and organize guide and ranger programs that are effective, manageable, and productive to agency staff and user interests alike.

**Strategic alternatives**

Three alternative strategies were identified that could respond to the recreational demand pressures expected on the Upper Skagit Valley watershed along with recommendations for action.

- **Alternative 1: increase facility capacity** – would expand existing and develop new facilities to meet increased recreational demands throughout the Upper Skagit Valley watershed. The purpose of the watershed-wide expansion program would be to attract a larger volume and wider range of visitors and interests.
The watershed-wide development program could improve and/or increase the capacity of many existing facilities including trails and campsites in the backcountry areas, boat facilities and campgrounds along the waterfronts, and visitor centers and lodging accommodations along the scenic highways.

- **Alternative 2: limit recreation use** - would contain existing facility developments and limit the future use and development of additional park facilities and programs within the Upper Skagit Valley watershed.

A use containment program could limit development of and access to every facility including trails and campsites in the backcountry areas, boating facilities and campgrounds along the waterfronts, and visitor centers and lodging accommodations along the scenic highways.

- **Alternative 3: manage facility capacity and increase group outreach** - would improve or expand selective existing and develop selective new facilities to meet increased recreational interest in the Upper Skagit Valley watershed. A strategic development program could increase facilities and programs that serve the interests of a large segment of the population that are easiest and least intrusive to accommodate at the fringes of the watershed.

For example, a strategic development approach might expand and develop visitor centers and lodging accommodations at the gateways along the scenic highways. A strategic program approach might also operate more group camps and outings as a way of increasing public use and exposure but under controlled impacts and schedules. The approach could also include more involvement of user groups in programming and park management activities.

At the same time, a strategic effort could be undertaken to contain existing facility developments and limit usage of selective park facilities and programs in the most fragile backcountry areas of the Upper Skagit Valley watershed. A strategic use containment program could limit development of and access to fragile backcountry trails and campsites to levels consistent with environmental and user carrying capacities.

For example, a strategic containment approach might allocate backcountry access on a reservation basis rather than first-come-first-serve as a means of equalizing availability and equity. A strategic containment program approach might also favor access for more group outings as a way of controlling impacts and schedules.

**Recommendations**

For the reasons listed in chapter 5, this assessment recommends the SEEC pursue Alternative 3’s strategic approach. This assessment recommends SEEC help facilitate and implement the actions described in the preceding pages of this summary plus:

- **Expand visitor centers and exhibits including virtual** – whereby visitors can experience an increasing array of on-site or in-park experiences using interactive videos, websites, and center exhibitions. According to the survey information, most users have been and may continue to be day-trippers who drive through or intermittently stop at roadside attractions. More interactive exhibits, virtual or otherwise, could provide a more effective and satisfying introduction for the day-tripper increasing their support for park preservation efforts in the process, yet
containing their impacts to controlled locations. Based on anecdotal comments, such exhibits are not likely to be funded with limited and declining budgets.

- **Support development of clustered activity centers and facilities** – outside watershed park boundaries at Newhalem and Winthrop, Sunshine Village and Manning that increase use capacity at locations that can be effectively contained and buffered. The watershed can not be made off-limits for the recreational needs of the increasing surrounding area populations and remain viable. Contained activity clusters, whether public and/or private, could increase user volumes in a contained or controlled manner, especially if managed under a reservation access system, that would be more effective and increase public support for the preservation of backcountry areas.

- **Selectively improve frontcountry facilities** – in environmentally capable frontcountry areas that increase use capacity and variety at locations that can be effectively contained and managed. Upgrade existing campgrounds and sites, to provide recreational vehicle hook-ups and group camp facilities, and consider expanding retreat and resort cabin facilities. Expand campsites that serve day-use and possibly some limited overnight group camps to support interpretive tours or excursions into appropriate backcountry areas as a means of increasing public exposure to the backcountry without overloading sensitive sites or trails.

- **Selectively improve backcountry facilities** – in environmentally capable backcountry areas that increase use capacity and variety at locations that can be effectively contained and managed. Upgrade backcountry trails, for example, that serve a wide variety of interests including anglers, day hikers, backpackers, and horse and pack animal trail users. *Where appropriate, expand trail networks to provide access northwest of Ross Lake and in BC backcountry watershed areas, rock and alpine climbing locations, cultural and historical sites, wildlife viewing areas, and unique vistas.*

**SEEC role and responsibilities**

A strategic approach will require SEEC to continue to perform the following:

- **Involvement** - SEEC must continue to participate in planning efforts with other public and private agencies on both sides of the border if SEEC is to be aware of and have impact on selective facility and program development efforts.
- **Planning** - SEEC should support efforts to analyze long-range recreation demands and needs, and existing and projected park conditions in order to recognize and be prepared to act on opportunities.
- **Priorities** - SEEC must refine policies and outline actions to undertake should strategic opportunities arise that cannot be readily addressed by the agencies.
- **Commitment** - SEEC must continue to provide or help fund appropriate staff expertise and budgets with which to implement strategic planning programs and projects when no other agency can or is able within a strategic time schedule.

As outlined in the recommended actions in the preceding pages of this summary, SEEC should continue to perform a strategic role helping to facilitate or fund selective program and facility developments by:

- **Performing as a facilitator** - where unique acquisition or development or program operation opportunities may occur that could eventually be implemented or operated by other public, nonprofit or private agencies.
- **Funding facilities and programs** - on an emergency or as needed basis that no other agency can or is willing to provide.