

Q&A: What's Wrong with Relocating/Killing Mountain Goats in the Olympic Wilderness in Washington State?

In October 2017, Wilderness Watch opposed the preferred alternative in the National Park Service's Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) to remove non-native mountain goats from the Olympic Wilderness in Washington State. In August 2018, Wilderness Watch filed a formal Objection to the Forest Service's draft Record of Decision/EIS. The following Questions and Answers help explain our reasoning.

• Is the purpose of the Wilderness Act to maintain or restore a certain ecological condition in a Wilderness?

No, the purpose of the Wilderness Act is to preserve the wilderness character of areas designated as Wilderness. Wilderness is more about preserving ecological processes determined by nature, rather than a desired endpoint, such as a creating or maintaining a particular ecological condition. In preserving the wild character of an area, untrammelled ecological conditions are often preserved.

Mountain goats have been present in the Olympics for a century now. The damage to wilderness character, as proposed by the Park Service's plan to remove mountain goats with hundreds of helicopter flights in order to restore the perceived ecological conditions present around 1900, is not worth the cost in the degradation of the area's wildness.

• Shouldn't we try to restore or return native ecosystem conditions in Wilderness?

What might be right ecologically is not necessarily right for Wilderness if those conditions are not being restored naturally. Ecosystems are constantly changing, especially now with climate change, and it's never clear to what point in time an action is seeking to restore conditions. Wilderness is meant to be a place where ecosystem conditions are determined by nature, rather than by direct human action (no natural systems are completely free of indirect human influence), where humans must use restraint in "managing." Howard Zahniser, the author of the 1964 Wilderness Act, stated this concept simply and eloquently: "With regards to areas of wilderness we should be Guardians not Gardeners."

While it may be a good idea to try to restore damaged areas in Wilderness, restoration should only be considered if the unmanipulated, untrammelled wild character of the Wilderness wouldn't be damaged. For example, natural recovery is always preferable when it comes to restoring a native species not currently present in Wilderness, especially considering the federal agencies' increasing reliance on

helicopters and other motorized intrusions in Wilderness (something the Wilderness Act rightly prohibits.)

Mountain goats have been present in the Olympics for a century now. This raises the question of how “native” is defined and how long a time period is needed in order for a species to be considered “native.”

It’s fair to say it would have been best to not put the goats in the Olympics in the first place. But the Park Service’s proposed methods of removal—which include hundreds of helicopter landings in the Olympics to capture goats and then more landings to relocate goats elsewhere in other Wildernesses—are very objectionable from a wilderness perspective. It’s a case of the cure being worse than the disease, the damage to Wilderness worse than allowing the mountain goats to continue to live there.

• How many years or decades does it take for a non-native species to be considered a part of the wilderness ecosystem?

With the ongoing progression of climate change, many species will be migrating out of Wildernesses across the country and some will move into Wildernesses they previously did not inhabit. Climate adaptation by wildlife raises the question of whether we should manipulate Wildernesses to keep migrants out or natives in. Rather than chase a constantly moving target in pursuit of a desired outcome that would eliminate truly wild places, we should allow nature to call the shots as the Wilderness Act intends.

Though it’s unfortunate that humans introduced mountain goats to the Olympics a century ago, they have nonetheless lived there for the past 100 years. Removing them now via helicopters and motorized means would cause significant damage to the area’s wilderness character year after year, with no guarantee that this damage to Wilderness could ever remove all of the mountain goats.

• Aren’t mountain goats non-native and shouldn’t they be removed from the Olympics?

In general, Wilderness Watch supports restoration of extirpated native species and the removal of non-native species in designated Wilderness, but only if those actions can be accomplished without damaging the wild, unmanipulated character of these Wildernesses.

Minority opinion aside, mountain goats are probably not native in the Olympics. Wilderness Watch’s issue with the National Park Service’s proposal is that the method of removal, via helicopter, motorized equipment, and other trammeling, violates Wilderness and manipulates the environment to our desired end, rather

than nature's end. It's worth noting that even the most aggressive alternative proposed by the park Service would not remove all goats from the Wilderness, so it's likely goat removal would be a years-long process of wilderness intrusions. (Helicopter capture may remove only 40-50 percent of the goats, and even combining capture with helicopter gunning would still leave 10 percent of the goats in the Olympics.)

• Would WW consider an alternative to remove the goats that does not involve helicopter use and extensive motorization?

Yes, Wilderness Watch would consider such an alternative and has encouraged the Park Service to analyze additional alternatives that don't involve extensive helicopter use and motorization.

The National Park Service has also proposed shooting mountain goats from the ground. This also constitutes a trammeling of the Olympic Wilderness and raises other concerns as well, but would likely not do as much damage to Wilderness as the proposed helicopters and motorized intrusions.