

Passive-Use, a Thin Green Line

Now that we've marched down the aisle and pledged our eternal and undying love for Seattle parks, one question remains. Will we love our parks to death?

Seattle is changing fast. Our population is exploding, neighborhoods are densifying, traffic is just plain nuts. We've come up in the world, which is wonderful. But, city life takes its toll and we'll need greenspaces to keep us healthy and happy. We'll also need careful planning so we don't ruin the very nature we value so highly. Seattle only has 15% of park land that remains natural—one of the lowest percentages among American cities. The other 85% has been developed for active sports or landscaped.

The Seattle Nature Alliance is deeply concerned that Parks is managing natural areas to satisfy *recreational* desires rather than for ecological health and for our deep, human need to connect with nature. The Natural Resources Division—not the Recreation Division—should manage natural areas using urban ecology standards, not shifting recreational trends. The use should fit the resource, not the other way around.

Traditionally, Seattle park natural areas have been managed for wildlife habitat, passive recreation and natural beauty. *Passive recreation* means reserved for the general population: the non-motorized, non-mechanized, unhelmeted majority. Passive use is the central idea behind our national Wilderness system—conceived to protect nature for wildlife and the nature-experience for all people. Today, passive use is a thin green line between the remnant wild and the effects of development, over-use and ecological degradation. Without it, paradise would have been paved—or trampled—long ago.



[An ancient Bigleaf Maple in Discovery Park](#)

The Parks Department is moving toward *multi-use*: slicing up natural areas like a pie and serving pieces to specialized user-groups. It's been happening quietly—not as part of a stated policy change, but rather through specific project proposals. Two years ago West Seattle was stunned to learn a commercial canopy zipline was planned for Lincoln Park's mature forest. Recently, many Beacon Hill residents were upset to learn Cheasty Greenspace—one of Seattle's last undeveloped natural areas—is proposed for a mountain bike skills course, with concept maps showing jumps, drops, and free-ride zones throughout the maturing forest. Now, there are vigorous protests and deep community divides.

Multi-use threatens to turn natural areas into community battlegrounds, with everyone scrambling for their own slice of the pie. Specialized user-groups are often supported by well-organized, well-funded, nationwide groups or even corporate sponsors with financial stakes in the specialized-use itself, giving user-groups an outsized voice. The general population is left unrepresented, an easy target written off as NIMBY, grumpy neighbor, anti-bike, anti-sports, or anti-fun.

And, trying to accommodate multiple user-groups into a greenspace can easily exceed the limits of what nature can handle.

But, when park natural areas are reserved for the general population, every person has equal access. It is the fairest, most democratic way to manage our most precious remnant wild. It ensures nature remains accessible for all people while protecting wildlife habitat from over-use and ecological degradation.

Nature is not merely a setting to recreate in. Natural areas are living systems, and all people deserve an opportunity to explore and find wonder there. By spending quality time in nature and getting to know our fellow living creatures, we find our own place in the world. This is essential to human health and well-being.

Perhaps it's time to split the Parks Department in two, as proposed for Bellevue parks by their former director Lee Springgate. We'd have a Seattle Department of Recreation Parks, and a Seattle Department of Natural Parks.

Seattle Nature Alliance enthusiastically supports that idea. It's time.

Be our Ally! Drop by our [Facebook Page](#) and give us a "like"

Signed,

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with Mark Ahlness and Trileigh Tucker
for the [Seattle Nature Alliance](#)

Sources and References:

- [Seattle Parks and Recreation data, as supplied to the Trust for Public Land, City Park Facts,](#)
- [2014 Cheasty Mountain Bike Project Concept Plan](#)
- [Lee Springgate Open Letter](#)
- [Best Practices for Natural Areas, Seattle Parks and Recreation](#)