

Climbing Safety Program Shows Results at North Cascades

By Bill Lester

The 674,000 acres of the combination of North Cascades National Park Service Complex and Lake Chelan and Ross Lake National Recreation Areas (NOCA) extend south from the Canadian Border into the north central portion of Washington state. The park contains nearly 100 named peaks over 7,000 feet and 1/3 of all glaciers in the lower 48 states. Large portions are without trails, and access to major climbing areas is difficult and time consuming. Two of North America's 50 classic climbs are found here, Forbidden Peak and Price Glacier.

The names given to many of the peaks tell much of the story about the first attempts at challenging this rugged landscape: Damnation, Despair, Forbidden, Challenger, Fury, Phantom, Inspiration, Terror and Torment, to name a few.

Until recent times only a few mountaineers ever ventured into the North Cascades. The first ascent of the Pickett Range was not until 1931. Not until the '50s, when logging roads made access easier, was much interest paid to this isolated range.

At the time NOCA was established, 1968, it was estimated that about 1,000 climbers annually were using the area. Ten years later there were still only about 1,300 per year. Many were the same cadre of climbers returning year after year to attempt a variety of peaks. From 1978 to 1983 the accident rate was about 1 serious accident per 323 climbers and 1 death per 1,086. The average accident rate for 1984 through 1986 is one accident per 660 climbers and one death per 8,250.

In 1978 a series of climbing guides began to be published. By 1981, three volumes of *Cascade Alpine Guides* covering the Cascade range from the Columbia River to the Fraser River in Canada, were available. By 1982, climbing activity in the North Cascades had doubled and has increased at an average of 18 percent per year since. In 1986 there were more than 6,500 climbers.

The climbing boom had begun. Climbers were arriving at the backcountry office with guide books in hand asking for directions to the trailhead. Climbing was not part of the park operation other than an occasional climb. What climbing information we did get came from rangers climbing on their days off. We had little or no credibility with the climbing community.

In the spring of 1983 a strategy was developed to get a handle on backcountry safety problems, both for the visitor and the staff.

The first step was to assign one backcountry Ranger position to full time climbing and crosscountry patrol duties. The lead technician also spent about 50 percent of his time climbing. The park now had a half-time climbing team.

A Backcountry Safety Action Plan, quickly dubbed SAP, was part of the strategy. Each member of the backcountry staff was required to document all safety problems in his assigned area. The plan required identifying safety problems, a statement of what corrective action was required and who was responsible for the corrective action. All SAP reports were given to the entire staff. Serious problems or hazards were

radioed to the Backcountry Center to be immediately available to the visitor. All pertinent items were posted on the trails conditions board and on the "Climbing Notes" board.

The third part of the strategy was to have park Rangers climb and become familiar with the more popular routes. Climbers were contacted at base camps and on the routes. Safety and minimum impact techniques were the main topics. They were informed that most of the accidents were happening to experienced climbers who failed to take basic precautions, including failure to rope up, inadequate protection, and over extending themselves.

In 1984 a second climbing Ranger position was added, giving North Cascades a full time climbing team. Our credibility with climbers improved as we added to our knowledge of routes and climbs. Our overall knowledge of safety problems and hazards in the backcountry increased exponentially. Climbing rangers were assigned duty in the Backcountry

Center on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings (when most climbers come through) to answer climbers' questions and to encourage good safe climbing practices. *Climbing Notes*, a climbing newsletter describing climbing route conditions and safety measures, was started. Every opportunity to talk with climbing groups was taken. All members of the backcountry staff were expected to become involved in the safety of themselves and the visitors.

By the end of the 1986 season we are enjoying good credibility with climbers. Rangers are asked for by name for information about routes and conditions. The climbing accident rate is at its lowest level ever and knowledge of safety problems and how to prevent injuries and death is better than it has ever been. Climbing in North Cascades remains a hazardous sport.

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Accident Frequency Rates

Years	# Climbers	# Accid.	# Fatal.	Freq. Accid.	Freq. Fatal.
1978-1980	4,110	15	7	1 per 274	1 per 685
1981-1983	7,842	22	4	1 per 356	1 per 1,960
1984-1986	16,500	23	2*	1 per 717	1 per 8,250

*One climber killed by a falling rock while on route into the climbing area.