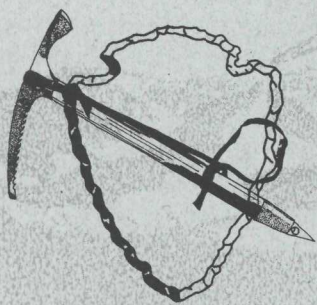




Climbing Notes

1998 Season

North Cascades National Park/Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest

1997 Accidents

The 1997 mountaineering season at North Cascades National Park was consistent with the last several years in producing far fewer serious accidents than the park saw in the early 1990s. While climbing activity has consistently increased since that time, according to permit and climbing register records, fewer serious accidents occurred in 1995-1997 combined than in either of 1990 or 1991 alone.

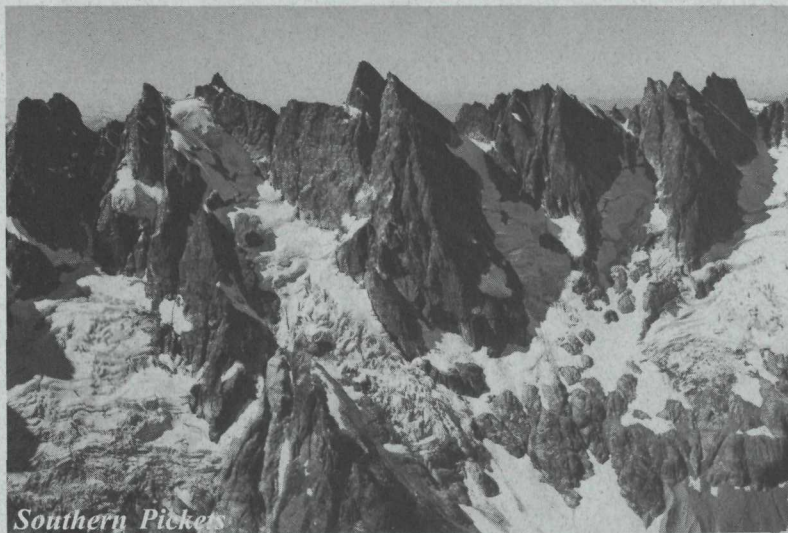
The Mt. Baker Ranger District of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest had fewer accidents overall in 1997 as well, but several serious incidents did occur on Mt. Baker, including one fatality. These 1997 incidents and a look at the past five years of mountaineering accidents in the National Park are described here. Review these accident summaries to learn what got climbing parties out of — or deeper into — trouble in the North Cascades.

Ptarmigan Ridge, Mt. Baker - April 14

Four ski mountaineers set out on a planned two-day trip to the Coleman Pinnacle. A search ensued when they were overdue at work. While a storm battered the mountain with snow, wind, and minimal visibility, the group stayed put in one spot, waiting for a break in visibility to head out. Searchers found the group two days after their intended return date in good shape for the descent. The group was well-prepared for the extended days. They resisted a panic to be out on time and waited for the weather to bring safer conditions.

Coleman Glacier, Mt. Baker - June 21

A climbing party of four was descending from an attempt at Mt. Baker that was thwarted by deteriorating weather. One climber was glissading the snowfield west of the Hogsback after the party had un-roped. He was unaware of a moat, where snow was melting away from a rock wall and waterfall at approximately 5,400 feet. The climber free-fell 35 feet and died instantly from a massive skull fracture. Several incidents involving climbers glissading blindly, unable to see the complete run-out, have occurred at this same location in the last four seasons.



Cache Col, Ptarmigan traverse - August 8

One member of a party beginning this alpine traverse suffered a deep gouge in his leg during a fall in the Cache Col. After over-nighting at the site, he was unable to hike further on his own and was evacuated by helicopter.

In the 1997 season, this climber was the only person evacuated from within the North Cascades National Park after sustaining an injury. Rangers were involved with six searches involving overdue, lost, or stranded climbers.

Coleman Glacier, Mt. Baker - November 11

Three climbers were camped on the Coleman Glacier route when an avalanche buried their tent during the night. They had attempted the summit the day before and turned back due to difficult conditions. One climber was injured, but the three were able to dig out of the snow and descend 800 feet below their camp to a safer spot. The un-injured two were able to treat the third and prepare a helispot where they were evacuated at daylight by military helicopter.

An analysis of 22 significant climbing incidents occurring at North Cascades National Park between 1992 and 1997 reveals

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CLIMBING VIDEO AVAILABLE:

Climbing clubs and organizations are encouraged to check out a video made by the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, National Outdoor Leadership School, and North Cascades National Park. The 20 minute video focuses on climbing safety (with emphasis on mixed-terrain NW mountaineering) and Leave No Trace techniques pertinent to the alpine setting. Most of the video was shot on Mt. Baker and includes aerial footage of the Picket Range. The video can be viewed at the Wilderness Information Center in Marblemount. For more information on using the video (free of charge) call (360) 856-5700, ext. 225.

Blue Bags in the North Cascades?

Many northwest climbers are familiar with the blue bags dispensed at Mt. Rainier National Park for the transport of their own waste to collection sites. As impacts to water resources and aesthetic values mount from human waste accumulation, the list of pack-it-out programs grows at climbing destinations across the West. Climbers are at least "advised" to pack out their waste on Mts. Hood, Shasta, Olympus, and Whitney. Many land managers expect to implement mandatory carry-out programs in the future and products to do this sanitarily are now on the market.

On Mt. Baker the outfitter guides and other commercial groups are now required by the USFS to pack out waste on many of their climbs. Composting toilets exist only along the Railroad Grade approach to the Easton Glacier route in the Mt. Baker Recreation Area, but these are taxed with over-use and environmental factors that challenge the success of the toilets. Private parties on this and other Mt. Baker routes are encouraged to follow suit with commercial groups and consider packing out waste.

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Protecting Wilderness from Climbing Impacts

The Wilderness District of North Cascades National Park began an inventory of cross-country impacts in 1993. In 1997 the park was able to accelerate the documentation of climbers trails and camps with the assistance of a grant from the Skagit Environmental Endowment Commission. Thirteen of the 66 cross-country zones were inventoried for all climbers' trails and camps as well as other signs of human impact. These impacts are primarily from accessing and camping on climbing trips.

The North Cascades' Wilderness Committee is currently discussing options to address the problem of human impacts in off-trail areas. Action plans discussed so far include:

1. *Further restricting use.* Backcountry use has been restricted to some degree by a permit system, which limits the numbers of parties per night allowed in most zones, since the park was created. Through the permit statistics areas of impact can be correlated with amount of use.

2. *Restoration of cross-county impacts.* Three years ago the

1997 Accidents, from front page

the following: (For this purpose, a significant climbing incident involves a party undertaking a technical climb or lengthy alpine traverse in which one or more members is evacuated for injuries that require immediate medical attention.)

Rock: Only **one** of these accidents occurred during a belayed-pitch of the **planned** technical rock route. This was an incident of leader-induced rock fall. There were no accidents while rappelling rock sections.

Falls on Snow: Falls on steep snow and glaciers caused seven of the injuries and resulting evacuations. These included falls on the approach (while still carrying a full pack) and several involving roped glacier travel in which one member pulls others off their feet. In these seven incidents, five resulted in leg fractures and one in head and multiple injuries. The other involved two climbers spending a prolonged period in a crevasse, their party unable to extricate them. They were hospitalized with severe hypothermia.

Weather/Behind Schedule: Six of the accidents occurred after the parties had either become disoriented in poor weather, were off-route, or significantly behind their planned climbing schedule. In each of these, it was clear that the unexpected (such as deteriorating weather, slow progress on a climb, or being lost) contributed to poor judgment and unsafe practices, such as scrambling un-roped. Instead of retreating short of the summit or stopping upon becoming lost or exhausted, these parties suffered a serious injury.

Rescuers from the National Park Service and Mountain Rescue units from Skagit and Whatcom counties are not quick to offer theories on the recent years' relatively low accident trend. Hopefully the many climbing clubs, classes, and mountain safety groups are successfully conveying practices that would have averted the above injured parties:

**Keep your guard up during the approaches (before and after the actual "climb").*

**The North Cascades are known for good, sound rock, but much inherent danger lies in the prevalence of snow and ice. Learn to travel it safely and practice crevasse rescue.*

**Be prepared to deal with the unexpected in your planning and in your mindset. Turning back has saved many climbers an ordeal. Spending an extra night out and being a day late to work is better than spending the week in the hospital.*

park began its first restoration project of a seriously gutted climbers trail in the Eldorado Basin cross-country zone. If funding and policy challenges are met, this type of effort might be expanded to other areas of resource damage.

3. *Expand efforts to promote Leave No Trace principles.*

While impacts to wilderness resources are often correlated to amount of use, it is recognized that the type of use plays a dramatic difference also. North Cascades is highly invested in the LNT message through education and enforcement. Wide practice of LNT could minimize the need for further restrictions. The key LNT considerations for preventing climbing camp impacts are camping on rock or snow, small party sizes, and appropriate waste management.

If you are interested in learning more about the park's efforts to inventory and address resource impacts in the climbing areas, please ask a ranger at the Wilderness Information Center. We are interested in your ideas. The park is already beginning with options 2 and 3, and all climbers can help!

Blue Bags?, from front page

Rangers at the Wilderness Information Center in Marblemount often discuss with climbers the appropriate methods for waste disposal. Many climbers indicate they plan to pack it and this is encouraged particularly in climbing camps on snow and rock where "catholing" is not feasible and no toilet exists. Climbers interested in trying this method of waste management can ask for a sample blue bag system (with instructions!) when obtaining a backcountry permit at the Wilderness Information Center.

A number of subalpine and climbing camps at North Cascades have composting toilets. These systems are maintenance intensive (i.e., to assist the biological break down, rangers must stir the poop!) Climbers can support this effort to preserve conditions at camps by doing two simple things:

- 1) Make an effort in cross-country areas to camp within reasonable distance to the toilet - i.e., use the toilet!
- 2) Follow the guidelines that are posted on each one.

All wilderness users are asked to consider and take the appropriate actions with their waste with respect to the local environment of the camp. Ask at the Wilderness Information Center if you are unsure what options exist for your destination.



Mount Shuksan Composting Toilet

In the late fall of 1997, a new composting toilet was situated at the heavily used camp area of the Sulphide Glacier route on Mount Shuksan's south side. It is located at approximately 6,200 feet, just below and east of the commonly used snow and rock sites below the glacier. Climbers are asked to look for and use this facility in order to reduce the amount of waste typically found amongst the rocks and snow of this camp.