



Saddle Rock Photo: Tom Williams

# The Coalition

A grand and practical compromise

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## A grand and practical compromise

The Washington Wildlife and Recreation Coalition was initiated by 10 founding directors in 1989, a year that witnessed a swirl of events on many fronts, representing a sea of changes internationally, domestically, and in Washington State. A wave of revolutions swept the Eastern Bloc in Europe, and the Cold War was coming to an end as the Soviet Union dissolved amidst perestroika. In the United States, eight years of the Reagan era ended with continued stimulus of real estate development, and George H.W. Bush became the 41st President. In Washington State, protections and restrictions under the federal Endangered Species Act led to the spotted owl “timber wars” and salmon species listings. Forests were increasingly converted to suburban housing, and building booms captured headlines all across the state in Seattle, Tacoma, Everett, Yakima, Wenatchee, Spokane, and Clark County.

Amidst global turmoil and national environmental controversy, we brought a community together in Washington uniting rural and urban, enviros and hunters and fishers, labor and business and agriculture, even Democrats and Republicans, all in one room.

Not surprisingly, at some point in the discussion we were stuck. At a weekend retreat on a Puget Sound shoreline where we gathered to develop a brand new program for funding new parks and trails and wildlife habitat, we had reached nearly complete agreement for our legislative proposal but ran into total log jams on two aspects. The representatives for agriculture were important to the process and they were totally opposed to the ordinary use of eminent domain (condemnation authority) to buy conservation lands, even at fair market appraised values. Our environmental advocates were equally insistent: how could we all assure taxpayers and the public we were buying only the best of the best habitat lands, if we could not insist on which lands were to be purchased? As the discussion went back and forth, it became apparent this issue was important to farmers, ranchers, and timberland owners as well. We had worked hard to get them all in the room and participating in the coalition – it was crucial that we find some common ground.

Sometimes when theories and strong feelings collide, a little empirical data can help. So I asked the agency officials at State Parks, DNR, and State Fish and Wildlife, “How often do you use eminent domain authority in practice to make sure you buy the right land?” The answer was quick and definitive. “Oh, we never actually use it. Too much of a political hot button. It can be useful in getting a negotiation to move along to closure.” “Never?” I asked. “Never,” came the reply. Well OK then. We revised our legislative proposal, after some further discussion, to prohibit use of eminent domain authority on lands to be acquired under this program. If it was never actually going to be used, we decided to make it a selling point with landowners and simply promise not to.



Mountains to Sound Greenway Trek Photo: Viles-Muzzey

A similar question arose around local control. As in many states, there is some apprehension in rural areas about choices made in the state capital. Representatives in Eastern Washington proposed a local veto for projects in their county or legislative district. Again, enviro-advocates were concerned this might well hamper key habitat projects ... after all, a key aspect of effective habitat is connectedness, and so fragmentation of habitats from differences among landowners seemed a recipe for not reaching the key goals in habitat protection. Less practical experience was available to draw upon, but as a group we decided to take the risk on a compromise—the proposal was revised to insist on faithful adherence to the ranked priority list based on habitat and recreation expertise and public input, and no lands could be added to the list by the political legislative

process once formed and ranked ... but if a local legislative representative requested the withdrawal of a specific project from the ranked list, we would require the state programs to honor that request and simply move onto the next priority project on the list. The process always requires a willing landowner – if the landowner does not want to sell or does not want to sell at a market value price, there could be no project anyway. So we were willing to take the risk that most elected representatives would not want to prevent a willing seller's transaction, especially when the merits of the projects were presented by citizen advocates. We have lost a few projects over the years through this mechanism, but only a few – versus the 1,400 projects we have given priority ranking and succeeded in funding. It has proven to be a valuable relief valve for the most controversial projects, and ended up as an overall benefit for the program.

### The idea

The Coalition offered a grand and practical compromise that met the long-standing, deep-seated desire for more parks, shoreline access, and trails to benefit people directly, coupled with the growing need to protect critical habitat for fish and wildlife, including game species and endangered species. While environmental regulation would remain a powerful tool for future administrations, the Coalition proposal for enhanced funding would for the first time allow the public to make substantial, forward-



Wenatchee Foothills Photo: Tom Williams

looking public investments in valued recreational and conservation lands. If the habitat or park opportunity was truly the highest quality, rated as “the best of the best,” enhanced funding would allow state or local government simply to buy it. This would allow the public to preserve and attain the public values of the land to be protected while offering the private landowner fair market value without fear of

condemnation. The Washington legislature wisely enacted the proposal, now known as the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program (WWRP).

### The Coalition's purpose and vision

The Coalition's mission is to ensure robust funding for Washington State's great outdoors by unifying disparate voices from east and west of the Cascades, urban and rural, through education and advocacy. The Coalition works to protect Washington's natural world for the benefit of the people and wildlife who live here. The Coalition's vision is a world where Washington State has sufficient parks, shoreline access sites, and trails available within reach of all communities, and that threatened and endangered species, as well as game species, all have critical habitat adequate to endure and thrive.

### Bipartisan approach/early leadership

1989 was also the year the Coalition's Board of Directors invited leadership from two honorary co-chairs to join the charge: popular Republican Dan Evans, formerly Governor and U.S. Senator, and firebrand five-term Congressman Mike Lowry, a Democrat, who three years hence was elected governor. The board similarly recruited fellow board members in this bipartisan mold, seeking members who collectively are broadly representative of business and industry, environmental organizations, hunters and anglers, labor, ranchers, and farmers. Governors Evans and Lowry served as honorary co-chairs for 28 years until Governor Lowry's passing in 2017. With a lifetime spent in the outdoors and a federal wilderness area named after him in Olympic National Park, Governor Evans continues as honorary chair and remains engaged in the Coalition's work.

Also instrumental in setting the bar high for success were State Representative Gary Locke and State Senator Dan McDonald. Gary was Chair of the House of Representatives Appropriations Committee in the early years, and was elected Governor from 1997-2005 (and then appointed by President Obama as Secretary of Commerce and then Ambassador to China). Republican Dan McDonald served for years as the State Senate Ways and Means Committee Chair, as well as being an energetic member of the Coalition's Board of Directors.

Early leadership also came from The Nature Conservancy (TNC) and The Trust for Public Land

(TPL), as well as Boeing, Weyerhaeuser, and REI. Business participation provided continued financial support and instant credibility on the Republican side of the aisle. TPL and TNC executives and staff provided major support and constant energy throughout, bringing significant credibility based on their records for green achievement on a national scale. Both TNC and TPL were represented for many years by the extraordinarily effective executives who had founded the regional chapters of their organizations.

### Record of achievement

The Coalition enabled Washington to increase its annual investment in these conservation and recreation investments. The baseline in the 1980s provided only a few Washington communities with six-figure grants while the rest went empty-handed. The Coalition's efforts led to funding roughly 100 projects each biennium; in short, from less than \$2 million per biennium to \$80 million+ per biennium in the most recent decade. Most recently, the legislature appropriated \$85 million for the Washington Wildlife and Recreation Program in the 2019-20 capital budget. In a manner uniquely successful among the 50 states, the Coalition's efforts and support over the last 30 years has led to the state legislature appropriating \$1.5 billion for 1,400 projects for habitat preservation and outdoor recreation, including 162 trail projects, 400 local parks projects, and 373 wildlife/habitat projects.



Pritchard Park Photo: Darcy Kiefel

Given the surreal magnitude of the recent stimulus funding, it can be hard to appreciate just how much funding WWRP has facilitated for individual parks and wildlife habitat projects. One reasonable comparison is to look at the federal program funding captured under the LWCF banner, particularly the most recent appropriations under the Great American Outdoors Act.

In the State of Washington over last 30 years since inception, state funding thru WWRP has more than tripled the amount available from federal LWCF funding to Washington during that period. And this is true despite Washington State, by all anecdotal accounts, competing quite favorably in some of these federal programs (e.g., Forest Legacy, Section 6 Fish and Wildlife funds).

Even compared to the conservation community's great success this past month with the Great American Outdoors Act, Washington's share of these federal funds would amount to 10-20 percent of recent state WWRP appropriations. If more states were to adopt programs along the lines of WWRP, it's reasonable to hope the funding available for land conservation could rise 5-10 times in those states—a contribution to land conservation that would make a difference!

### Response to community demand—and legislator proposals

The Coalition has helped the State of Washington respond consistently and systematically to requests from cities and counties, land trusts and outdoor sports groups for help in conserving land for parks, trails, shoreline access, and fish and wildlife habitat. Significantly, in partnership with each new decade of legislative leaders in Olympia, the Coalition has worked to amend the enabling statutes, program categories, and funding formulas to respond to changing priorities and needs in land conservation and recreation. In the early 2000s, a first set of reforms put greater emphasis on active recreation facilities with ballfields and more habitat projects for endangered fish species and stocks, and created an entirely new category to help preserve productive farmlands faced with increased regulation and development pressures to convert to commercial or residential properties. Working closely with legislative leadership, the Coalition amended its programs again recently to increase conservation of riparian areas, support conservation of working forests, and provide trails specifically for hiking as well as bicycling, all with a mission of increasing access for people to enjoy the outdoors and preserving Washington's abundant natural resources. Most recently, the statutory changes have allowed reduced match requirements for communities in need, to more equitably distribute the funding and increase public access to parks in those communities.

## Process unique to Washington

The WWRP's process for grant application and approval is unique to Washington State. Most states don't have funding mechanisms for land conservation of this magnitude. Several states have excellent alternatives—Oregon, Colorado, California, Vermont, and Florida come to mind—but other states have not consistently funded land conservation and recreation infrastructure at this level of appropriation.

## The Coalition's priority is process integrity

The Coalition's achievements over its first 30 years are the strong foundation on which we build our future and tackle new challenges in the years to come. The Coalition has distinguished itself by assuming responsibility for protecting the integrity of the project selection and grant approval process as a singular priority above all else. In practice, this has meant resisting the natural tendencies for influential organizations within the Coalition to promote one particularly exigent project at the expense of another, as well as resisting the inevitable pulls from legislators vested with funding authority. There is a natural inclination in the legislative appropriations process to trade dollars for program changes that might seem small in the short run but erode trust with the public or, in the long run, among local governments hoping for objectively administered grant funding.

A broad-based coalition is both fragile and rare, and impressive precisely because it is hard to hold such a disparate group together. The effort to do so requires constant care and endless energy to hold such a diverse group of strong advocates under one tent.

The WWRP is the right program because it is competitive, fair, and open. It is administered by a respected state agency with a board appointed by the governor. Criteria are constantly reviewed to assure they are keeping up with the times. Decisions are made with major public input and science and expertise, all to assure the most "bang for the public buck."



Bailey Farm Photo Credit: Tom Marks

Efforts are made to assure that smaller, underserved communities can compete side by side with the big cities and counties. And we recognize that while not all jurisdictions have the same economic ability to provide staff or matching resources, their citizens have the same need for walking paths and kiddie spray parks as the affluent communities do. All those factors make this program incredibly effective and Washington State the envy of its peers.

## Process hallmarks

Significantly, the 40-fold increase in investment has come with greater scrutiny and rigor in assuring that only those projects with highest quality and public need are funded. As in most states, Washington's prior process had been an "earmark" process, where only a few communities, perhaps blessed with an influential committee chair in the legislature or a particularly persuasive urban advocate/lobbyist, would receive approval for funds. Moreover, even the best intentions by overworked legislators and their staff could not assure thorough vetting of proposed projects with respect to ecosystem benefits, recreational facilities, local support, connectivity to other projects in the area, and preparation for obtaining permits. By contrast, the WWRP process subjects each proposed project to a rigorous review with input from resource experts and the public—and vetted all through dedicated staff and citizen advisory committees. The thorough WWRP process assures much sounder protection of the public investment dollar than is possible in an earmark process that would, in some state legislatures, result in some "pork barrel" proposals. Integrity, fairness, and a thorough vetting of proposed projects are the hallmarks for the grant award process.



Hike at Cougar Mountain Photo: Ray Lapine

## Responsive to a changing world

Much work remains to be done, especially as we confront new environmental and social challenges:

- Climate change is causing more prevalent and intense droughts, wildfires, and storms that impact public lands, wildlife habitat, urban centers, and outdoor recreation, and have increased the need for connectivity in habitats.
- The nature of childhood has changed. There is less nature in it. Children are spending just four to seven minutes a day in outdoor unstructured activities and seven hours a day indoors in front of electronic media. Unstructured play in nature needs nearby space.
- Changing climate and economic turbulence have disproportionately affected Washington's minority and other underserved communities.

## Communicating Coalition priorities

We enjoy strong legislative champions, but must work vigilantly to explain the benefits to new legislators, as well as to explain the program to people who take it for granted and to hold the different influencers in the Coalition together. When people enjoy their favorite public park, not many then wonder how it came to be. We acknowledge that during difficult economic times, people tend to look at these programs as less immediately necessary, assuming that parks and wildlife can wait.

We firmly believe that public spaces remain equally, or even more, essential to quality of life in the short run and in the long run. One striking feature of the public reaction to COVID-19 is people taking to parks and bicycles and trails for respite in a time of pandemic—not because the need for nature is urgent but because it is intrinsically essential. Studies have confirmed both the economic importance of outdoor recreation and the crucial contribution to improvement of environmental quality and mitigation of climate change emanating from conservation lands. The mission of the Coalition is to continue to explain these many benefits to decision-makers, opinion influencers, the public, and elected officials, reminding them during good economic times and bad.



Rattlesnake Ledge Photo: Elyse Leyenberger

In these polarized times, where differences among groups of Americans tend to be emphasized rather than areas of common ground, the staunchly bipartisan approach of the Coalition has become ever more distinctive. The Washington legislature has rewarded this approach over three decades now—through Democratic majorities, through Republican majority caucuses, and even through a tie in the House resulting in a period with Co-Speakers of the House of Representatives. With a transcendent cause and constantly communicated effort and a record for success in providing funding for projects that communities ask for and want, the Coalition has continued to work effectively with both houses in the legislature, and both parties, to conserve land, parks, and critical habitat.

## What is the recipe?

What exactly are the key components that have enabled the WWRP's unique success? The secret is in the detailed criteria, which include:

1. The grant application process is open to all, and it is promoted to encourage widespread participation by communities across the state.
2. Projects are spread geographically to benefit people across the state.
3. Broad mix of categories— from recreation to conservation projects that benefit people and wildlife.
4. Broad support across party lines, state geography, business and labor, environmentalist and outdoor sports enthusiasts, hunters, fishers, and the general public.
5. Competitive process is fair and well-vetted and helps assure that the highest quality projects are funded.
6. Program and allocation of funds are designed and administered with integrity.
7. There is a strong record in practice. The Governor and legislative leaders have sustained a pronounced and clear absence of favoritism and partisanship, with no earmarks and no additions, while legislators and the Governor can remove projects if disagreements arise for whatever reason.
8. Properties are purchased only from willing sellers, at negotiated fair market value. The use of WWRP funds in eminent domain action is prohibited by statute.
9. Statutory selection criteria include connectivity, species need, and public support, among key objective criteria.
10. Every community must have skin in the game, with matching resources required by statute. Flexible match requirements encourage participation from otherwise underserved communities.
11. Program responds to public demand, and to changing public demands, from local government needs and land trusts and natural resource agencies with expertise.

public and legislative support. Work is done regularly with applicants and the public to improve the grant approval and funding process, and to keep the program at the leading edge of land conservation and recreation science and policy. The Coalition continues to initiate, nurture, and sustain this grand partnership between the private sector, the nonprofit community, and government.

These criteria have engendered a program of conservation and recreation grants that have achieved a remarkable 30-year record in meeting community demands for recreation and conservation infrastructure. These criteria have helped assure a record for fairness, integrity, and effectiveness in responding to community demands for more conservation-based recreation that has reinforced

## FOOTNOTES

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Author Bill Chapman was a founding board member and has served on the Board of Directors for the Coalition for more than 30 years. He also served under three different Governors on the Washington State Recreation and Conservation Funding Board, including serving as Chair 2008-2013, which Board approves all grants under this program. During his nine-year tenure on the Board, the Legislature appropriated and the Board funded \$454 million for 1502 wildlife and recreation projects.

The Trust for Public Land creates parks and protects land for people, ensuring healthy, livable communities for generations to come.

The logo for The Trust for Public Land, featuring the text "THE TRUST FOR PUBLIC LAND" in white, stacked vertically on a green rectangular background.

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