

# Upper Nooksack River

## RECREATION PLAN



March 2015



# Purpose and Scope

## *Vision:*

*The Nooksack River watershed is valued for its outstanding natural resources and recreation opportunities. As recreation use and the demand on resources continue to grow, the Upper Nooksack River Recreation Plan Advisory Committee seeks to protect the waters and riparian habitats of the river while ensuring that high quality recreational experiences continue to be available now and for future generations.*

Flowing from the North Cascades mountains through the forests and farmlands of Whatcom and Skagit Counties, the Nooksack River system is a unique watershed that provides important habitat for native fish and wildlife species. It is also a regional outdoor recreation haven, providing local residents and area visitors with fishing opportunities, scenic trails, idyllic riverside campsites, world-class whitewater boating, a rich assortment of wildlife viewing opportunities, and incredible winter sports including snowshoeing, snowboarding, and all forms of skiing: cross country, back-country, and downhill.

The purpose of the Upper Nooksack River Recreation Plan (Plan) is to provide guidance and recommendations for managing non-motorized recreation use in the river corridors of the upper Nooksack River system.

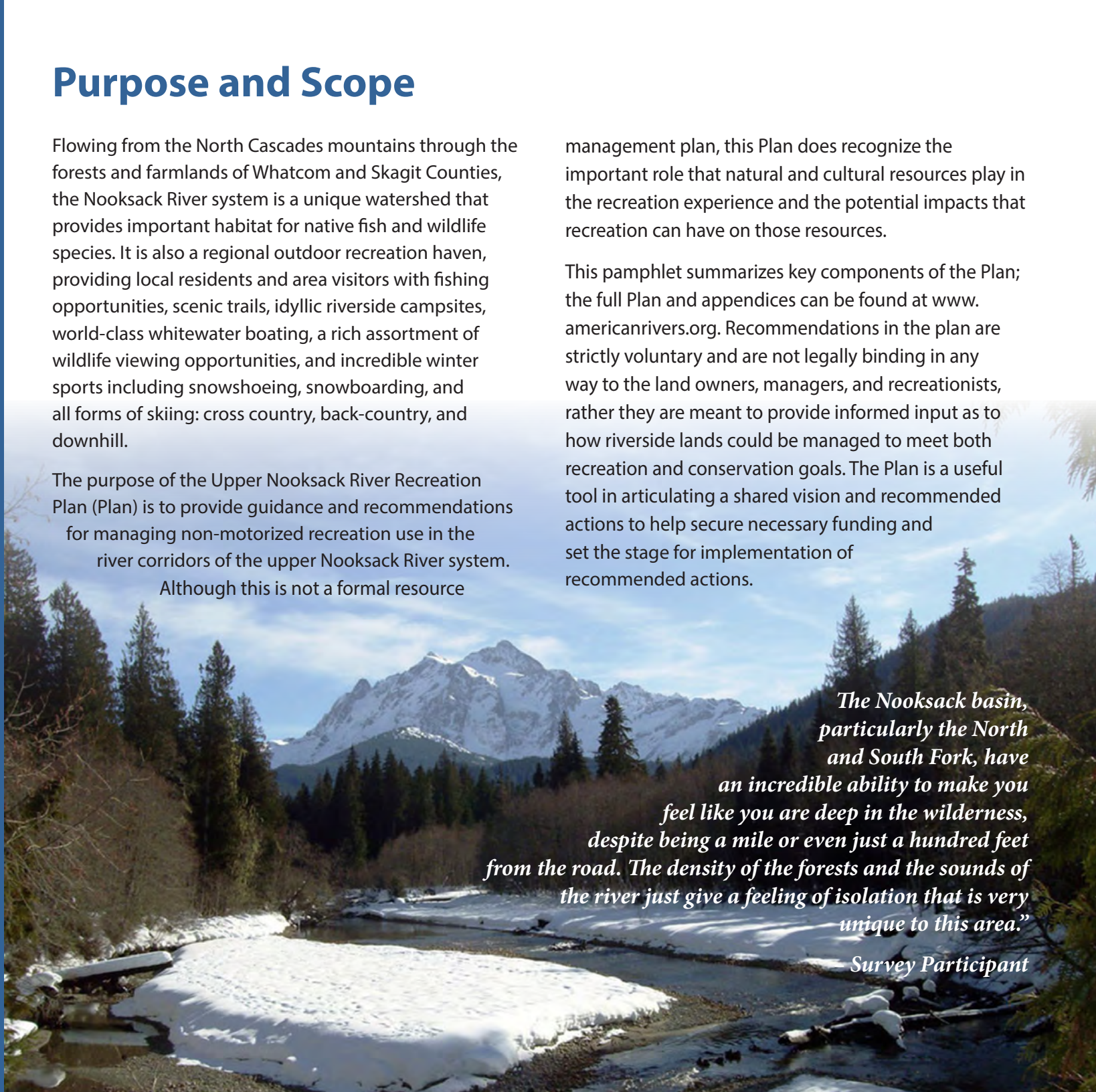
Although this is not a formal resource

management plan, this Plan does recognize the important role that natural and cultural resources play in the recreation experience and the potential impacts that recreation can have on those resources.

This pamphlet summarizes key components of the Plan; the full Plan and appendices can be found at [www.americanrivers.org](http://www.americanrivers.org). Recommendations in the plan are strictly voluntary and are not legally binding in any way to the land owners, managers, and recreationists, rather they are meant to provide informed input as to how riverside lands could be managed to meet both recreation and conservation goals. The Plan is a useful tool in articulating a shared vision and recommended actions to help secure necessary funding and set the stage for implementation of recommended actions.

*The Nooksack basin, particularly the North and South Fork, have an incredible ability to make you feel like you are deep in the wilderness, despite being a mile or even just a hundred feet from the road. The density of the forests and the sounds of the river just give a feeling of isolation that is very unique to this area.”*

*Survey Participant*





# The Scope of the Plan

The geographic scope of the Upper Nooksack River Recreation Plan covers the river corridors and lands within one-quarter of a mile on either side of the river within the following river segments:

## North Fork Nooksack

*(headwaters to Maple Falls)*

The North Fork Nooksack River headwaters begin at the base of snowy Mt. Shuksan. The braided, wood strewn river meanders through a forested valley and the small towns of Glacier and Maple Falls, and the Mt. Baker Scenic Byway runs parallel to the river in much of this reach. Striking views of the northern-most Cascade Range peaks, majestic tall trees, and a glacier-green river winding through the valley draw thousands of people to the area each year. There are abundant multisensory opportunities to enjoy nature and wildlife through hiking, trail riding, bicycling, skiing, snowshoeing, snowboarding, whitewater boating, fishing, hunting, camping and exploring.



## Middle Fork Nooksack

*(headwaters to confluence with the North Fork)*

The Middle Fork Nooksack runs from the base of the Deming Glacier on Mt. Baker and flows through a picturesque, steep, wooded canyon to a broad alluvial floodplain where farms and rural residences speckle the landscape. The dynamic nature of the river and the rugged roads limit access to all but the most adventurous recreation users. Extreme whitewater kayaking in the Middle Fork Canyon and Clearwater Creek, fishing, snowshoeing, hunting, mountain biking, hiking, and horseback riding are among the most common recreational activities.



## South Fork Nooksack

*(headwaters to Saxon Bridge)*

The Upper South Fork reach begins on the eastern slopes of the Twin Sisters and Loomis Mountains, flows through steep, heavily forested terrain, while the lower portion of this reach is characterized by a broad, gently sloping river valley. The views along the river are exceedingly picturesque as it rolls lazily through a picturesque rural landscape. This reach is a focus for salmon habitat restoration and conservation efforts. Public access is limited and involves lengthy travel times. Horseback riding, whitewater boating, hiking, gold panning, hunting, and mountain biking are all popular recreation activities in the area.



# Planning Process and Timeline

The Plan was developed through a collaborative planning process led by American Rivers and a diverse stakeholder Advisory Committee that was formed to guide the process. Technical assistance was provided by the National Park Service through a grant from the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance Program.

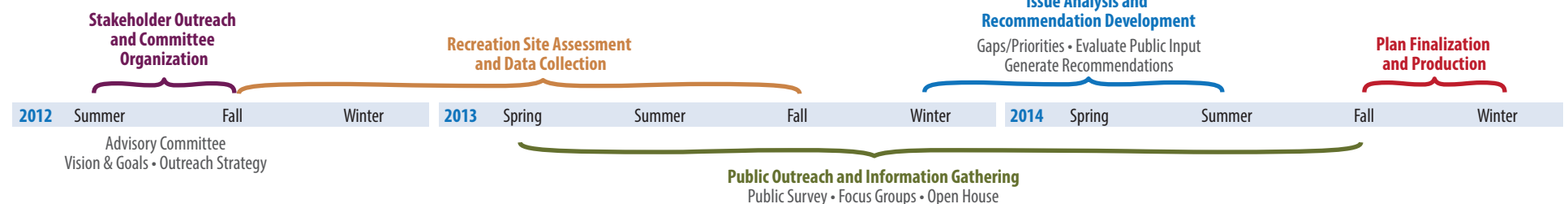


A shared vision was developed for recreation management in the upper Nooksack River basin. To better understand existing conditions, an inventory and assessment of sites used by recreationists was conducted with assistance from Western Washington University's Huxley College of the Environment faculty and students.

Engaging the public throughout the planning process allowed the Advisory Committee to identify issues and develop management recommendations that are meaningful, useful, and likely to have a greater chance of success. Overall, the Advisory Committee worked to create a plan that accurately describes the community's needs and elicits its support. Efforts to engage the public in the planning process included focus group workshops, an online recreational use survey, field tours, and an open house.



## The key components of the planning process included:





# Benefits of Recreation

Outdoor recreation provides multiple benefits to our health and wellbeing. It is also an important part of the economy.

Recreation not only provides diversion and refreshment from the often exhausting pace of our complex lives but also enriches our mental and physical health. Access to recreation areas in natural settings has been shown to significantly reduce stress and increase physical activity.

Easy access to parks, trails, and open spaces is strongly correlated with lower rates of obesity, diabetes, and other diseases; and creates opportunities for all residents to include exercise as a key element of their lifestyles. Opportunities to surround ourselves in nature are

absolutely essential for a high quality of life. Outdoor recreation also fosters a sense of place, cultivates environmental stewardship, and enables us to become involved and feel part of the community.

Rivers and river recreation are a key part of the tourism and travel industry, both locally and throughout the Pacific Northwest. Outdoor recreation opportunities are important to quality of life as well as economic growth in Whatcom County and across the state. Washingtonians on average spend 56 days a year recreating outdoors. Of

the 446 million participation days per year spent outdoors, 101,701 days, or 23%, are spent recreating on public waters. Outdoor recreation sales and services contribute \$21.6 billion annually to Washington's economy and the recreation industry provides nearly 200,000 jobs in the state. Tourism and recreation businesses provide an estimated 18% of the jobs in Whatcom County and 17% in Skagit. Based on visits in the North Fork Nooksack alone, it is estimated that recreationists invest two to three million annually in the economy.



*“The upper Nooksack provides in many aspects a way for me to balance my mind and life. It is one of the largest sources of enjoyment I find in my life. I intend to raise my family with this natural resource as a cornerstone.”*

*– Survey Participant*

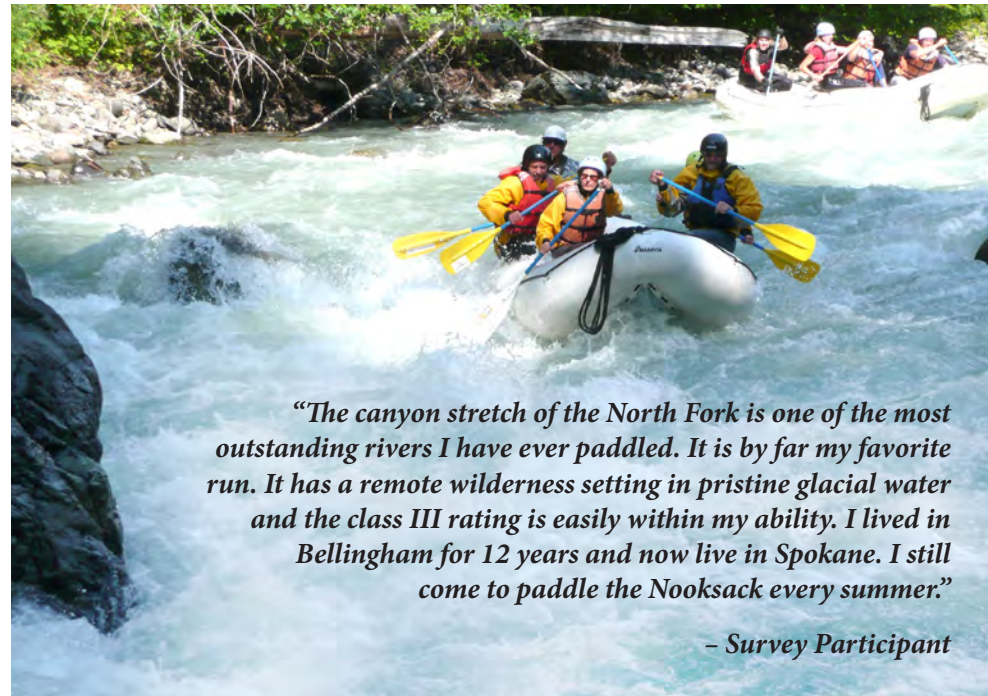






*“I love the natural setting of the upper Nooksack – beautiful rivers and streams surrounded by dense forests and towering peaks. The number of outdoor activities one can participate in within the upper Nooksack watershed - from whitewater kayaking to mountain biking to skiing, hiking and watching wildlife – is truly outstanding and is one of the major reasons why I choose to live in this part of the state.”*

*– Survey Participant*



***“The canyon stretch of the North Fork is one of the most outstanding rivers I have ever paddled. It is by far my favorite run. It has a remote wilderness setting in pristine glacial water and the class III rating is easily within my ability. I lived in Bellingham for 12 years and now live in Spokane. I still come to paddle the Nooksack every summer.”***

*– Survey Participant*





*“The Salmon Ridge trail system is the only groomed cross-country ski area in NW WA. The scenic views from White Salmon Road of the mountains are unmatched in other Snow-Parks in the state.” – Survey participant*

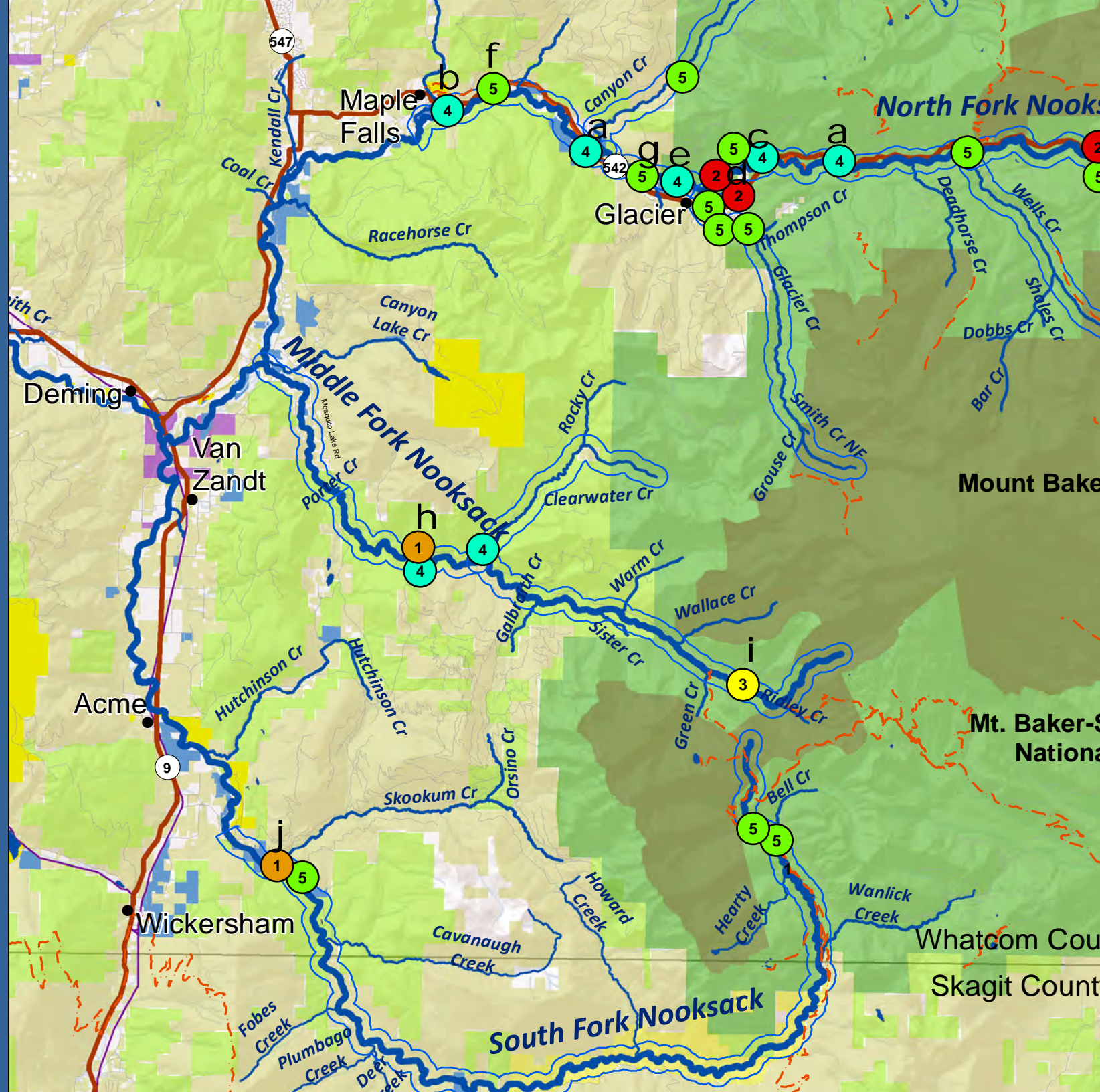
*“I’m constantly amazed that, living in a fairly densely populated area, we can, within an hour, hike in relative solitude with both microcosmic and macrocosmic views that are some of the most beautiful in the world. We are lucky to have had the foresight to take care of these areas.” – Survey Participant*





## Early Implementation Actions:

- a. Improve recreation access and management at three public sites along the upper North Fork River and Mt. Baker Highway
- b. Create a river access site near Maple Falls
- c. Extend the length of time the Douglas Fir Campground is open in the fall and spring seasons
- d. Expand interpretation and education programming and signage
- e. Formalize the existing Gallup Creek take-out by defining parking and installing signage
- f. Support the development of the Maple Creek Park Trailhead
- g. Develop a water trail/blue trail and river guide for the North Fork Nooksack River
- h. Remove the Middle Fork Dam and design access for boaters at the newly restored site
- i. Determine the feasibility of creating a bridge for hikers and equestrians along the Middle Fork Trail
- j. Strengthen suction dredging regulations and enforcement
- k. Promote safer off-highway alternatives in the upper North Fork Nooksack River reach.







# Goals and Recommendations

Five goals emerged as a result of the planning process. Below is a description of each goal and the broad recommendations supporting them. Recommendations for specific sites are highlighted on the map.

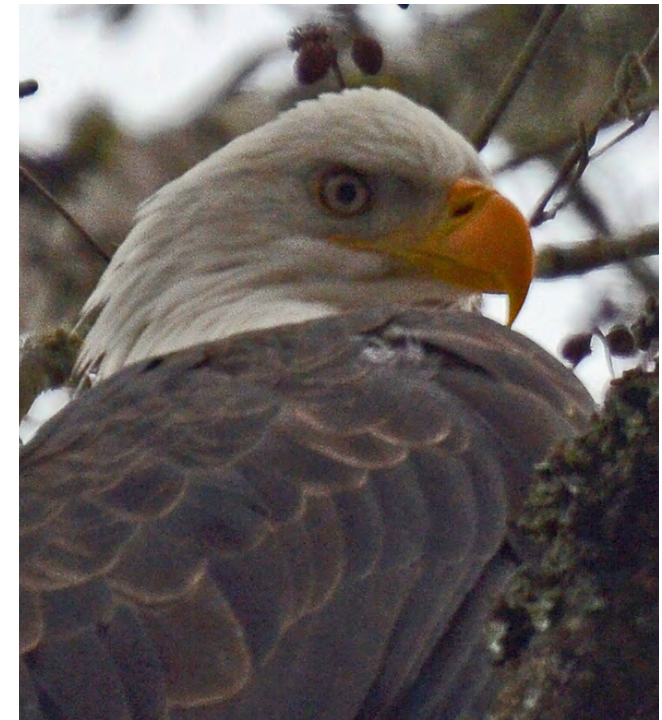
## Goal 1: Enhance Coordination of Recreation Management with Protection and Recovery of Natural and Cultural Resources

When land and natural resource managers work cooperatively with recreation user groups, everyone benefits from a shared vision of protection and use of resources. The upper Nooksack River basin is highly valued by the community as a unique, intact river ecosystem. It is imperative that recreation activities are conducted consistent with protecting and restoring the area's natural and cultural resources. Recreation management can help protect and assist with restoration of natural and cultural resources by directing users to appropriate sites that can accommodate use and are away from sensitive resources.

- Support efforts to manage the river to ensure that the outstandingly remarkable values identified in Wild and Scenic River studies are protected and enhanced.
- Continue and expand opportunities for partnerships and collaboration on recreation management amongst agencies, the tribes, and nonprofit organizations.

### General Recommendations:

- Support on-going and increased restoration work for salmon habitat and land management decisions that enable habitat processes to recover.
- Protect the river from new dam development.
- Expand opportunities for volunteer and citizen scientist engagement to support data collection for fish and wildlife species while also fostering stewardship amongst recreationists and visitors in the area.





## The Seven Leave No Trace Principles:

1. *Plan Ahead and Be Prepared*
2. *Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces*
3. *Dispose of Waste Properly*
4. *Leave What You Find*
5. *Minimize Campfire Impacts*
6. *Respect Wildlife*
7. *Be Considerate of Others*



## Goal 2: Provide Quality Public Information and Education Opportunities

Information and education can enrich the experiences of visitors and foster a sense of stewardship. Recreation user education and stewardship ethics have been shown to greatly reduce resource impacts. Implementing stewardship messages such as Leave No Trace Principles can help protect the natural environment. Visitor education programs recognize that most impacts are not from malevolent acts, and instead result from inattentiveness to the outcomes of one's actions or lack of knowledge of appropriate low-impact behaviors. Interpretive and environmental education can be part of the solution for educating recreationists and the next generations of visitors to come.

### General Recommendations:

- Enhance information on recreation areas and appropriate recreational behavior through signage, brochures, seasonal information booths, and websites. Post the Leave No Trace Principles to spur stewardship and responsible recreation user behavior.
- Create, support, and expand interpretive and stewardship programs about natural resources.





### Goal 3: Maintain and Protect Current Recreation Diversity and Access

Protecting and maintaining current access is necessary for the continued enjoyment of the stunning scenery, fascinating wildlife, and diverse recreation opportunities the Nooksack River watershed provides. Yet maintaining access roads to trailheads and other recreational sites is becoming more difficult here in the Pacific Northwest. Shifting hydrologic regimes have increased the rates of flooding, landslides, and road wash-outs. Limited budgets force land managers to prioritize which roads to maintain and which to close. Adequately maintaining these roads to a level that prevents sediment from entering waterways is critical to fishery resources as well.



*“Views of Mt Baker are unique! Eagle watching! Cold water swimming! Nothing like it anywhere else on the west side of the Cascades. Snow comes earlier and leaves later; total snowfall higher; makes for awesome waterfalls and ponds and the salmon! The mushrooms, and of course, pikas, marmots, birds!”*

*– Survey Participant*

#### General Recommendations:

- Retain roads and trails that provide critical access to outdoor recreation and ensure they are both safe to travel and adequately maintained to prevent damage to aquatic resources and provide enjoyment by the recreating public.
- Collaborate with public agencies on travel management plans to ensure recreation values and access issues in the Nooksack River basin are addressed.
- Encourage more partnerships with volunteer and user groups for road and trail maintenance. Streamline the process to become a volunteer so that it is easier and more user friendly.





*“I love the fact that the river is always changing, so the exploration is always new and fresh. Every visit is like the first visit.” – Survey Participant*

*“The Nooksack River is really one of Washington’s gems. Nestled at the base of the North Cascades mountain range, this beautiful river supports all five species of Pacific salmon, in addition to steelhead and cutthroat trout.*

*There aren’t too many places where you can see all five species of salmon, and it is amazing to me that they all live right here in my backyard! The hiking in the watershed is spectacular, as is the whitewater rafting. The river corridor also provides a lot of fantastic campsites and just really tremendous scenery all around. Tall green trees, waterfalls, eagles, and salmon - this is what I want to see when I get out in nature and the Nooksack watershed has it all.” – Survey Participant*

*“The Nooksack provides year round whitewater kayaking, which is very rare to find. Also it provides access to all skill levels, beginning to expert!” – Survey Participant*

## Goal 4: Coordinate, Design, and Formalize Safe River Access

Safe access to water recreation has been identified as a top need by the residents of Whatcom and Skagit Counties. The upper Nooksack River basin provides three distinct, dynamic river systems, and recreationists are drawn to these waters for whitewater boating, fishing, wildlife watching, picnicking, camping, relaxing, and connecting with nature. Better management and designation of access sites can direct users to appropriate sites and away from sensitive resources. This can help protect resources and improve the safety and experience of recreation users.

### General Recommendations:

- Collaborate with public, non-profit organizations, business owners, timber companies, and willing private partners to provide more walk-in river access sites for anglers, wildlife watchers, and boaters.
- Designate appropriate river access sites with defined parking, signage, and sanitation facilities that are designed to meet low impact facility standards.





## Goal 5: Plan and Create Sustainable Trail Opportunities and Trail Connectivity

Trails provide opportunities for walking, enjoying views, jogging, hiking, snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, bicycling, horseback riding, access for fishers and more. Trails also provide alternatives to roads and vehicle travel, thereby providing added value of safety while decreasing traffic congestion and pollution. Trails provide exercise for recreationists while at the same time provide a more intimate appreciation of nature. Trails should link recreation resources and communities, when possible, thus allowing people to easily access and experience the upper Nooksack Basin.

### General Recommendations:

- Coordinate, plan, and create new opportunities for sustainable trail development and enhance existing facilities.
- Locate new trails away from riparian area and wetlands to the greatest extent possible to avoid impacts to riparian and aquatic resources
- Enhance existing trail systems and address sanitation concerns by providing restrooms at popular trailheads.
- Promote safer off-highway trail alternatives in the Upper North Fork River Reach.

*“The tranquility and relative ease to get away from the population will always rank highest in my experience rating. The terrain is impossible to replicate and the views are amazing.” – Survey Participant*







*Youth crews work on relocating the Nooksack Flats trail away from the river to a more sustainable location. Volunteers, user groups, and youth crews are powerful resources and partners in building trails and access sites.*



## Implementation

Over eighty recommendations were identified to help meet conservation and recreation goals. These actions are intended to improve visitor experience, minimize conflict, protect natural and cultural resources, and enhance awareness of the river and its recreation resources.

**IMPLEMENTATION** of the Plan's recommendations is contingent on voluntary actions, planning, and funding availability. It is envisioned that recreationists, non-profits, conservation groups, and agency

and resource managers will all work together to help implement the Plan and seek out funding sources.

The eleven early implementation actions highlighted below are intended to be initiated and even completed within one to five years. More detail on these recommended actions and other recommendations can be found in the plan document.

- a. Improve recreation access and management at three public sites along the upper North Fork River and Mt. Baker Highway including:
  - i. Add educational signage and create barriers to limit vehicular access to the bed and bank of the river near Razorhone Road
  - ii. Create an accessible trail and better launch area at the Upper Horseshoe Bend River Access site
  - iii. Improve the Warnick Bridge River Access Site by creating a defined parking area and signage
- b. Create a river access site near Maple Falls
- c. Extend the length of time the Douglas Fir Campground is open in the fall and spring seasons
- d. Expand interpretation and education programming and signage

- e. Formalize the existing Gallup Creek kayak access site by defining parking and installing signage
- f. Support the development of the Maple Creek Park Trailhead
- g. Develop a water trail/blue trail and river guide for the North Fork Nooksack River
- h. Remove the Middle Fork Dam and design access for boaters at the newly restored site
- i. Develop a feasibility plan for bridging the Middle Fork for hikers and equestrians to restore access to the Elbow Lake and Ridley Creek Trails
- j. Strengthen suction dredging regulations and enforcement for salmon protection
- k. Promote safer off-highway trail alternatives in the upper North Fork Nooksack River reach



*The USFS manages a put-in site for boats near Douglas Fir Campground, but a public take-out is not currently available. One of the early action items is to create a take-out site near Maple Falls.*





## Acknowledgments

Special thanks to our Advisory Committee members and supporters.



the Nooksack Tribe



## Photo Credits

- 1 – Rafting along the North Fork Nooksack River – Wild and Scenic River Tours
- 2 – North Fork Nooksack River and Mt. Shuksan – Bonnie Rice
- 3 – North, Middle, South Forks Nooksack – Wendy McDermott
- 4 – Focus Group Workshop – Wendy McDermott
- 5 – Hiking – Rich Bowers
- 5 – Fishing – Scott Willison
- 6 – Nooksack Falls – Rich Bowers
- 6 – Rafting the Canyon Run – Bonnie Rice
- 6 – Ruth Creek – Rich Bowers
- 6 – Sylide Ridge Trail – Rich Bowers
- 7 – Horseback Riding – Rich Ruhl
- 7 – Mt. Baker – Rich Bowers
- 7 – Snowshoeing – Rich Bowers
- 9 – Bald Eagle – Rich Bowers
- 10 – Interpretation Programming – Nooksack Salmon Enhancement Association
- 10 – Salmon – Rich Bowers
- 11 – Fishing – Scott Willison
- 11 – Fishing – Scott Willison
- 12 – Horseshoe Bend Put-in – Thomas O’Keefe
- 13 – Salmon Ridge Trail System – Bud Hardwick
- 13 – Hiking – Todd Elsworth
- 14 – Maple Falls – National Park Service
- 14 – Horseshoe Bend – Thomas O’Keefe
- 15 – North Fork Nooksack – Wendy McDermott
- 16 – North Fork Nooksack River – Thomas O’Keefe





The Upper Nooksack River Recreation Plan and appendices can be downloaded at [www.americanrivers.org](http://www.americanrivers.org).