

THE BATTLE OF SNOQUALMIE FALLS, PART II - Seattle Times, The (WA) - September 19, 1991 - page A15

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IN THE 1990s, three private industries which own the land on and around **Snoqualmie Falls** have plans to carve up the landscape and eat it like a Thanksgiving turkey. If they have their way, in five years only the "bare bones" of the **falls** will remain to remind us of what once was. The true beauty and power of the **falls** will never be known by our future generations

How have we come to this? For hundreds of years before the coming of European settlers, **Snoqualmie Falls** was revered by Northwest native people as a sacred place. The **falls** is an integral part of the identity of the first people of this region; it is the setting for **Snoqualmie** creation stories. To this day, members of the **Snoqualmie tribe** find spiritual solace and renewal at the **falls**, in much the same way that Christians find spiritual solace in churches and cathedrals.

Snoqualmie Falls is a "stolen jewel." In 1866, **Snoqualmie Falls** was removed from the care of the **Snoqualmie** people. Back in those days, all that you needed to acquire choice land was the right ethnic origin and the right piece of paper in your hand. The new custodians of the **falls** brought different ideas of stewardship of natural resources.

In 1898, they blasted away the face of the **falls** and constructed a power plant in the rock below. The protests of the **Snoqualmie** people were ignored. Who cared what a bunch of Indians thought? Over the years, owners of the site have built additional structures and altered the **falls'** landscape - all done in the name of "progress." Piece by piece, the **falls** are being consumed. A regional treasure may soon all but disappear.

Snoqualmie Falls currently faces serious threats. Puget Sound Power and Light Co., in its request for a 40-year license renewal, is asking the federal government for 60 percent more water for its hydroelectric generators. If this request is granted, the dynamic character of **Snoqualmie Falls**, already greatly lessened, will be even further diminished. The **falls** will more closely resemble a fountain in a business park, with constant, regulated flows 290 days of the year. Additional structures proposed for the site sound innocuous enough - "interpretive center," "museum" - but each will require that another piece of this sacred landscape is cut away.

Weyerhaeuser, for its part, plans to convert its land holdings around the **falls** into exclusive residences and a golf course.

Current plans call for 2,000 housing units, and how many more for the future? Puget Western, a subsidiary of Puget Power, is also exploring its development options.

These proposed "improvements" to the **falls** do not enhance its natural beauty. To the contrary, they destroy it. For thousands of years, people have been drawn to the **falls** simply for what it is in itself: an awe-inspiring work of nature, a gift from God.

The question is: Should private companies, whose ultimate concern is profits for their shareholders, manage a community resource such as **Snoqualmie Falls**? Simply put, "Should the fox guard the hen house?" History suggests that if left in private hands, the **falls** will be exploited, not for the good of the community, but for the short-term profits of shareholders. Private industry does not owe its allegiance to the community, but rather to its owners, regardless of its public posturing.

Puget Power has used **Snoqualmie Falls** as more than just a source of electricity. Indeed, the **falls** generate less than 1 percent of the electric power sold by them. The power company has yet to acknowledge to the public the greater value of **Snoqualmie Falls** as a public-relations tool. How many private utilities in the country own a major tourist site, visited by 1.5 million people a year? How many private companies in the U.S. can boast of such a PR windfall? Puget Power's assertion that they are "objectively balancing the competing interests" of usage of the site, without acknowledging their own primary self-interest as a for-profit company, exhibits a fundamental lack of integrity. Regardless of the appearance of sincerity, it just ain't so.

Yet, this golden egg may hatch into an ugly duckling; Puget Power may be known in five years as the company that destroyed a shrine, so that its shareholders could receive larger dividends for a few years. Weyerhaeuser, "the tree-growing company," may become notorious for the inappropriate conversion of its huge timber holdings into fancy residential developments.

It may surprise many people that **Snoqualmie Falls**, the second-most-visited attraction in Washington state, is not on public lands. It is time for Puget Power, Weyerhaeuser, and Puget Western to return to the people of this region the "stolen jewel" of **Snoqualmie Falls**, before they destroy it. The **falls** should belong to all the people of this region, a living symbol of that we truly value.

In 1987, leaders of mainline Christian denominations pledged to help native people recover sacred sites. This Saturday, at the time of the autumnal equinox, the time when light and dark are balanced, Christian leaders will join with **Snoqualmie** and other Native people at **Snoqualmie Falls** to bless and pray for the preservation of this natural cathedral. We pray as well that the private owners of this sacred landscape will acknowledge the transcending value and power of **Snoqualmie Falls**, and balance their compulsion to earn profits with their duty to return to the region this sacred site.

There are few places left in our world where our souls can soar, where natural conditions help us to look within ourselves.

Snoqualmie Falls is one of those places - certainly the most accessible to the people of this region. We owe it to ourselves and our children to preserve it.

Spirit Gathering II at **Snoqualmie Falls** will take place noon to 2 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 21. To reach the **falls**, take I-90 east to the **Snoqualmie Falls** exit (Exit 27), from there, follow the signs.

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