The Edge of Autumn
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Founded in 1980, Friends of the Columbia Gorge is the only conservation organization entirely dedicated to protecting, preserving, and stewarding the Columbia Gorge for future generations.

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Cover: Sunset in the Gorge. Photo: Brandi Delfosse
Sometimes, as I go about my days, weeks, months, and years, if I don’t lift my head, I miss the subtle changes going on around me. A great example came as I reviewed Friends’ 2022 Gorge Opinion Survey that we recently conducted with members and the general public (see page 10).

Friends of the Columbia Gorge has conducted surveys and polls for decades, asking a variety of questions over the years, but every survey we’ve done in the past quarter century has asked whether people support the federal protections of the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Act.

When I joined Friends in 1998, the National Scenic Area was just 12 years old, and Gorge protection was still not a given. Citizen groups were still working to undo the National Scenic Area designation, and the new framework of rules and regulations was going through active growing pains. At my first public hearing, our conservation director Michael Lang (see page 11) and I were referred to as “criminals who have not yet been brought to justice.” Fewer than half of Gorge residents supported the Scenic Area then, and while support was stronger in the Portland area, that support was highly partisan. That’s when Friends began working to shed its Portland-centric reputation.

We opened our first Gorge field office in 2000, and a few years later, another survey showed that just over half of Gorge residents now supported the National Scenic Area—a positive trend that coincided with large development proposals threatening the Gorge, which most Gorge residents opposed.

Little by little, the Scenic Area legislation was being viewed as a shield not only to protect the Gorge, but also to protect Gorge communities, and we kept doing our work.

Going deeper into our survey earlier this year, an impressive 96 percent of respondents support the National Scenic Area now—a broader level of support than ever. And in addition to 96 percent of Gorge residents supporting National Scenic Area protections, 89 percent of self-identified conservative respondents also do. Support is roughly equal in Washington and Oregon. The National Scenic Area is widely supported today no matter where you live or how you vote.

With so much media today focused on conflict and disagreement, positive indicators can seem hard to find. Seeing firsthand the steady growth of support for Gorge protection gives me hope that maybe our divided world is not so divided after all.

Kevin Gorman, Executive Director
Reflecting on seminal moments in our lives, we often only recognize their full significance months or even years later. Five years ago, though, as I sat at home watching a livestream of the Eagle Creek fire racing through our beloved Gorge forests, I knew right away that this event would shake the core of how we thought about the Gorge and how Friends would operate for years to come.

**September 2, 2017**

The origin of the Eagle Creek fire reads like a Hollywood screenplay. Saturday, September 2, 2017, fell on Labor Day weekend. It was hot and dry, and the Gorge hadn’t seen rain for nearly two months. Not everyone grasped what the weather conditions meant in the forests, but late-summer crowds flocked to the Gorge for respite from the heat. Hundreds hiked two miles up the Eagle Creek trail to cool off at Punchbowl Falls.

Late that afternoon, a small group of teenagers about halfway up to Punchbowl decided to throw fireworks down into Eagle Creek Canyon. Sparks ignited a fast-spread brushfire that quickly blocked the trail, preventing 150 people up at the falls from escaping back to the trailhead. As evening approached, this unprepared group of strangers began hiking up the canyon together toward Wahtum Lake, 10 miles away. They didn’t know that another fire deep in the Mount Hood Wilderness was also moving in that direction.

**Finding our role**

Media reporters and television stations breathlessly covered the fire and the plight of those hikers, as webcams across the Columbia River documented the harrowing blaze around the clock. Sunday morning, a few of Friends’ staff convened to discuss what we could do. The public wanted to know two things: what was happening and how they could help. We made a special public fundraising appeal and directed all donations we received in response to the fire to Hood River County Sheriff’s Search and Rescue Unit. And we started sharing all the reliable information we had about the fire via social media, press releases, and emails.

Those steps made our organization a trusted resource for information on the fire, and our Facebook following doubled in one week. During that same period, we raised
more than $50,000 for Hood River Search and Rescue, which played a major role in finally rescuing the trapped hikers and in other urgent actions during the fire. A wave of ongoing public support provided funding to launch a public land stewardship program to educate and coordinate volunteers to assist in the natural recovery of the public lands burned in the fire. That program continues today.

The follow-up data
As terrifying as the Eagle Creek fire was, some amazing data emerged: The fire burned only one home and three structures. No lives were lost in the 48,000-acre blaze. By comparison, the 2018 Paradise fire in California killed 85, destroyed 18,000 structures, and burned 153,000 acres.

The relatively small losses in the Gorge are a direct result of the land use rules of the National Scenic Area that limit residential development in forested areas and concentrate development in urban areas. As a result, firefighters were able to build walls of protection around towns like Cascade Locks, rather than risking their lives and resources to save isolated cabins on five- and 10-acre properties in the woods. Controlled backburns around the urban areas and to the west from Starvation Ridge kept the fire from reaching Gorge communities. Those efforts, helped by reduced winds and some much-needed rain three weeks into the fire, brought those most urgent dangers to a halt.

What did we learn?
With the Eagle Creek fire five years in the rearview mirror, here are some of the biggest takeaways:

• **The Eagle Creek fire was ecologically beneficial.** Weeks following the fire, a team of Oregon State University fire ecologists flew over the burned area. Based on their survey, they felt the fire’s varying levels of burn severity left more ecological benefit than harm. Today, plant and wildlife species in the burn areas appear to be surviving, and some are thriving.

• **Landslides may continue in the burn areas for several years.** Soon after the fire had subsided, Scott Burns, professor emeritus of geology at Portland State University, discussed with me the danger of landslides in burned areas. He emphasized that landslides typically occur three to eight years after burns, as dead root systems begin to rot, destabilizing slopes. We’re still midway through the threat of landslides from the Eagle Creek fire.

• **The Eagle Creek fire inspired thousands to dedicate themselves to the Columbia Gorge.** In those early weeks, a new Friends member said, “I knew I cared about the Gorge—I just didn’t realize how much.” Thousands signed up to volunteer to rebuild trails and restore natural areas. One volunteer, Mika Barrett, joined our staff to lead our post-fire stewardship work. Today Mika runs our Gorge Accessibility Project.

• **Communication among agencies, communities, and land managers has never been better.** The fire kickstarted efforts to better coordinate work around reactive and proactive fire issues and recreation congestion. These improved communications proved invaluable in 2020, when a fire reached our Lyle Cherry Orchard preserve. This teamwork throughout the Gorge may be the most positive outcome of the fire.

• **Closing trails on red-flag days is important.** In July 2021, Washington Department of Natural Resources took the extraordinary action of temporarily closing all its recreation sites in eastern Washington due to drought and high fire danger. As climate change persists, fires will continue to threaten the Gorge, and Gorge agencies should take specific, direct steps when needed, to protect people and the land.

Today, when I stand at places like the Beacon Rock Day Use Area and look south across the river, I can’t help but feel sadness over the burnt landscapes. Yet that sadness is about memories of the aesthetic experience, overlooking the remarkable ecological recovery already underway.

Hiking in Eagle Creek this past spring, I saw the landscape filling with wildflowers and fresh new vegetation. Dead trees are providing nutrients for young alders, vine maple saplings, and Douglas firs. The forests in the Gorge continue, and their recovery will unfold on their own schedule, not ours.
Blair’s connections to both Russell and the Gorge were far from over when he left Friends late in 1988 to join the Trust for Public Land, where he played a leadership role for 21 years. TPL had received a no-interest loan from Russell and her husband, Bruce, in 1987, to buy 16 lots on Cape Horn, Washington, that were slated for development. That purchase ensured eventual conveyance of the land into public ownership by the U.S. Forest Service.

At TPL, Blair helped acquire key Gorge landscapes at Rowena, Oregon, on Miller Island, and also at Cape Horn, near the scenic overlook later named in Russell’s honor. After leaving TPL in 2010, he served for nearly a decade on the Columbia River Gorge Commission.

In addition to researching Russell’s life and career, as Blair became closer to her before her death in 2008, he learned more about her personal background. “I was surprised by the obstacles Nancy faced when she was young,” he said. “As a girl, the Great Depression uprooted her family. When she was a young mother, her child Hardy died as a toddler. Early in her life, Nancy needed the strength and resilience that would later define her.”

View additional photos, read an expanded Q&A with author Bowen Blair, and order Nancy Russell: A Force for Nature at gorgefriends.org/nancyrussel.
In May, Congressman Earl Blumenauer (OR) introduced the Mt. Hood and Columbia River Gorge Recreation Enhancement and Conservation Act. The sweeping legislation proposes to:

- Expand Wilderness Areas and designated Wild and Scenic Rivers,
- Enhance sustainable recreation,
- Modernize transportation and transit,
- Improve public safety,
- Support wildfire mitigation, and
- Honor tribal treaty rights.

In the Columbia Gorge, the bill (H.R. 7665) would address recreation congestion and provide direction and funding to the U.S. Forest Service to create a vital sustainable recreation plan with comprehensive trail systems that could alleviate pressure along more congested trails. It directs the Forest Service to study the development of interconnected trails, specifically between Mosier and The Dalles. This would be a strong step forward for our Gorge Towns to Trails vision to create a loop trail around the Gorge that connects communities together.

The comprehensive legislation also works to bring piecemeal transportation projects in the Gorge under a unified Columbia River Gorge Access Committee, and would provide funding to support coordinated, reliable, and user-friendly transportation options, as well as improvements for recreation access and public safety.

Further, the bill includes authorized appropriations to ensure that these priorities and projects do not become unfunded mandates for the Forest Service. It will improve search and rescue and other emergency response by creating a pathway for reimbursement of local public agencies who perform these essential services on federal public land.

Finally, the legislation calls for a section of the Mark O. Hatfield Wilderness Area to be redesignated as the Nancy Russell Wilderness, in honor of Friends of the Columbia Gorge’s founder, making it one of just a few wilderness areas in the country named for a woman.

The Blumenauer legislation is currently moving through committee in the House of Representatives. A Senate version of the legislation will be introduced once the House bill is finalized.
Inclusion and Accessibility Enhance Gorge Experience

Mika Barrett, Accessibility Project Manager

One morning last fall, as the soft light of sunrise tinted the Gorge, I loaded a 15-passenger van with water bottles and event handouts for a community hike and listening session. It was a perfect morning for a tour designed to spark imaginations and possibilities for new accessible recreation options on our land trust properties in the Columbia Gorge.

Since completing critical land acquisitions at Cape Horn and Catherine Creek in 2020, Friends of the Columbia Gorge has been investing in community partnerships to improve accessibility and inclusion at these new locations. Unlike many of the steep and rugged lands our acquisitions have protected in the past, the Cape Horn and Catherine Creek preserves feature other attributes: expansive views of the Gorge and relatively level terrain, as well as adjacent public trail systems. These sites do not require navigating narrow switchbacks or climbing rocky scree slopes to experience the grandeur of the Gorge. They have the potential to be more accessible to people of varying abilities.

The Gorge Accessibility Project
In early 2021, as we shifted our focus toward creating a long-term vision for the properties, we began to imagine how these spaces could become accessible for people of varying abilities, ages, and cultural backgrounds to connect with nature in the Gorge. Our conversations brought to life a vision of a Columbia Gorge “open to all.” Those discussions were the catalyst of Friends’ recreation enhancement initiative, called the Gorge Accessibility Project.

Our approach to the Gorge Accessibility Project has been grounded in a commitment to include those who are affected by the “barriers” of accessibility in the Gorge. Those barriers can vary greatly from person to person. Some can be physical (like a narrow dirt trail), cultural (language, race, or ethnicity), or even economic (the privilege of owning a vehicle). To ensure that diverse voices and their concerns were heard, Friends assembled a steering committee that included external partners whose input and expertise could help inform our shared visions for potential recreation enhancements at Cape Horn and Catherine Creek land trust preserves.

A vision team
For more than a year, the steering committee worked through a visioning and planning process to develop conceptual designs for inclusive, accessible spaces. Since both land trust properties are adjacent to public trails, we were fortunate to have U.S. Forest Service as
a key partner in the planning process. Equally fortuitous, Mayer/Reed, Inc., a noted Portland-based landscape architecture firm, generously donated their expertise to bring the committee’s imagination onto paper. It was an outstanding team effort.

This team organized visioning sessions with members of the public, professionals, and specialists. These sessions included a series of topical planning meetings and focused community listening sessions. While the topical sessions focused on design considerations such as transportation and accessible gathering spaces, the community listening sessions engaged participants of varying abilities and backgrounds. People with disabilities, families with young children, Indigenous and Latinx Gorge communities, and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color from the Portland tricounty area participated, along with local trail groups.

**Widening access to nature**

As the concepts and visions congealed, these sessions were critical in helping the steering committee understand what people value when spending time in natural places, and what they experience as barriers to Gorge access. Emergent themes included the value of designing for a range of experiences and abilities, considering the diverse languages spoken in the Gorge, and the importance of protecting and restoring natural habitats.

Concurrently, we undertook assessments and surveys to ensure that potential recreation development is carefully planned so it doesn’t harm natural or cultural resources. To meet those criteria, botanical and wildlife surveys identified “avoidance zones” that would apply to recreation development.

Through 2022, conversations and listening sessions produced ideas and diagrams and eventually led to conceptual designs. Our hope is that the land trust preserves will provide accessible hiking trails, picnicking and gathering spaces, educational features, ecological restoration, and viewpoints of the Gorge.

**Moving toward the goal**

In June, the steering committee endorsed specific concepts for the Catherine Creek and Cape Horn preserves, striking a balance between developed recreational amenities and restored natural habitats. They include bathrooms and parking, but also new oak groves and wildflower meadows.

Upon completion, the sites will have the potential to enhance the Gorge experience for communities of color, families with young children, individuals with disabilities, and older adults.

We’re still a long way from securing this vision, but we know that the Gorge Accessibility Project has already moved us a few steps closer to ensuring that the Columbia Gorge is “open to all.”

Left: Participants in a BIPOC visioning session at the Cape Horn Preserve. Photo: Alyssa Hoyt
Top right: A disabilities community field visit at the Catherine Creek Preserve. Photo: Sharon Mitchell
This past March, Friends conducted an online survey to gauge current public priorities and the public’s views on conservation opportunities and challenges facing the Gorge. Our goal was to capture a combined picture from both the general public and from our members, volunteers, and activists. More than 1,300 respondents completed the survey, with the majority (95 percent) from Oregon and Washington and roughly 20 percent of those either residing in the Scenic Area or visiting the Gorge daily.

**Picturing 1,000 words**

To develop a literal picture of people’s thoughts about the Gorge and the challenges it faces, the survey asked a pair of open-ended questions on the first word respondents think of related to the Gorge and the biggest challenges it faces over the next five years.

The top three words used to describe the Gorge were: “Beauty/Beautiful,” “Gorgeous,” and “Home.” There also was strong agreement on the biggest challenges facing the Gorge, with “Development,” “Climate Change,” and “Overuse” receiving the most mentions, by far.

We also asked respondents the first word that comes to mind when they think about Friends of the Columbia Gorge. “Protectors/Protection,” “Gorge,” and “Conservation” topped the list. In follow-up questions about our work, a strong majority agreed that Friends has a clear mission (84 percent) and that our work centers values reflecting their own (87 percent).

**Gorge protection widely favored**

The item that saw the strongest support was the federal protection provided by the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area Act. An overwhelming 96 percent of respondents favor (90 percent strongly, 6 percent somewhat) “federal protections from development that would harm the Gorge’s natural scenic beauty and recreation opportunities.”

At a time when Americans seem divided on a host of major policy issues, it’s inspiring to see a wide and deep base of support for the protections for the Scenic Area enjoys today—a testament to the decades of hard work invested by Friends’ staff, board, members, and community partners.

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Above: An autumn view south from Memaloose hills. Photo: Meagan Currier

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The Scenic Area Registers
Strong Public Support

Burt Edwards, Communications Director

These graphics reflect public responses regarding the Gorge itself, left, and Friends of the Columbia Gorge, right. Analysis and graphics: Ashley Moore
Early this summer, we said goodbye to Friends’ longtime conservation director, Michael Lang. Michael has been a tireless fighter for Gorge protection for more than 28 years.

Michael joined Friends’ staff in 1993, reviewing and commenting on proposed timber sales within the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area. Later, he was promoted to conservation director, where he spent the next two decades overseeing our advocacy and legal efforts. During that time, he was instrumental in stopping major development threats in the Gorge and was adept at aggressively advocating for Gorge protection, memorably going toe-to-toe with the late Senator John McCain in 2006 at a Senate hearing in Washington, D.C.

Michael played a key role in our coalition work to block the development of more than a dozen proposed coal and oil terminals in the Pacific Northwest. That multi-year effort not only stopped a huge proliferation of coal and oil trains traversing the Gorge, its success was likely the biggest step taken to date in the Pacific Northwest to address greenhouse gases and combat climate change. We wish Michael well as he moves on to new ventures.

Paige Unangst, Finance Director

Friends welcomed D’na Walela Chase in the spring as a trustee on our land trust board. A citizen of the Cherokee Nation, D’na grew up in Hood River and currently splits her time between Portland and Camas, across the river, where she co-owns and operates Tin Cantina, a traveling vintage bar housed in a classic 1965 Airstream, catering private events and weddings.

D’na previously worked in marketing for radio, newspaper, and Camp Fire USA. Bringing people, and especially children, together through the wonder of nature has become her passion and is an important part of how she keeps her Native heritage alive and relevant.

D’na Walela Chase. Photo: Gritchelle Fallesgon
“Ooh! We’re getting the fancy buses this time!” A cheer went up from the middle school students that May morning when charter buses pulled to the curb in front of St. Andrew Nativity School in Portland. The seventh-grade students from Catherine Hopkins’ science classes eagerly boarded the buses that would take them on an all-day adventure in the Columbia River Gorge.

After an extended pause on Friends of the Columbia Gorge’s youth education programs due to the pandemic, finally the kids would be able to spend a full school day learning outside the classroom.

For more than a decade, Friends has worked with St. Andrew’s staff to provide special one-day educational field trips as part of our Great Gorge Wahoo! program. Ordinarily, seventh grade students visit the eastern Gorge in fall and eighth graders tour western Gorge sites in spring. Our goal is to instill a sense of wonder and curiosity in the students and encourage them to become caretakers and advocates for the Gorge as they grow up.

After two years of virtual classes, social distancing, and limited outdoor access, Friends’ staff were determined to give these students a much-needed day in nature. Last autumn, a late-summer regional surge of COVID-19 made our traditional fall trip too risky, but a window of opportunity in May provided a chance for all 54 of the kids to spend a day of exploration and adventure in the Columbia Gorge.

A day in the eastern Gorge
First up, the St. Andrew seventh graders visited the eastern Gorge for insider tours of two Friends land trust preserves. Our Catherine Creek property was just one of many surprises that day. Frances Fischer, Friends’ land trust coordinator, spoke about conservation efforts taking place on the preserve, and during the tour, she pointed out some baby birds hatching close by. Students leaned over the railings to snap photos of the hatchlings and their friends, framed by the Columbia River.

At the second stop, the kids rushed out of the buses to see the views at our Dancing Rock preserve. Here they were free to roam the rocky, geologically rich terrain on a bright, windy eastern Gorge day. Everyone was happy to be outdoors in the warm sun, taking in the grandeur of the rugged landscape. After time for self-directed exploration, Friends Executive Director Kevin Gorman led a hike through the property, stopping frequently to share history and enjoy the panoramic Gorge vistas. The kids listened wide-eyed to the story of the land as Kevin pointed out visible evidence of the Ice Age floods on the landscape. It was a magical day.
A hike in the western Gorge

The following week was the eighth graders’ turn, and they visited the lush western Gorge with Friends board member Kevin Price. A retired Oregon State Parks manager, Kevin led a private tour for the students through the passageways of the Vista House, sharing Gorge history and lore. He related the story of the Historic Columbia River Highway and talked about his career in the field with Oregon State Parks. Later, the kids loved hiking at Latourell Falls, watching the water plunge nearly 250 feet to a pool below, and playing educational games. Rikeem Sholes, a fish biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, met up with the group in Cascade Locks, where they wrapped up the day learning about Gorge fisheries and salmon conservation efforts.

Keeping the magic alive

Our goal is to inspire love and curiosity about the outdoors, but personal connection to nature rarely occurs in just one day. That’s why we also aim to ensure young people can return to the Gorge time and again. This year we gifted each student with a one-year Oregon State Parks parking permit, so they can visit the Gorge with their families and share what they’ve learned.

Our Great Gorge Wahoo! program is made possible by ongoing support from Friends donors Carrie Nobles and the Winthrop Family. Their continuing generosity and enthusiasm are the bedrock of our youth education partnership with St. Andrew Nativity School, and words can’t say how much the programs are appreciated.
A Legacy of Beauty and Gorge Protection

Pam Davee, Director of Philanthropy

Sherri Irish and Larry Keister know they’re very fortunate to live in the Columbia Gorge. In 1987, while looking for a home to buy, Sherri fell in love with the beautiful pastures above the river in Washington, just across from Crown Point and the Vista House. Since then, every day for them has been a gift, a chance to enjoy local wildlife and appreciate the Gorge’s beauty and tranquility.

The property the couple purchased in Washougal provides refuge for bears, cougars, bobcats, coyotes, and deer. Sherri says, “Our goal is to ensure the animals have a safe habitat to live in, away from traffic, poachers, and human conflict.” They also enjoy nearby Steigerwald Lake National Wildlife Refuge with its diversity of animals and plants.

Friends’ legal work has been a major interest to Sherri and Larry since they joined Friends as members in 1996, and they have been consistently involved in critical land-use issues. After meeting Friends’ Senior Staff Attorney Nathan Baker at a land-use hearing to fight a development proposed for the land next to hers, Sherri and her neighbors joined forces with Friends and won their case.

Living at the west end of the Gorge for 36 years now, Sherri and Larry have been strong voices for Gorge protection, learning that vigilance is vital to ensure that the rules upholding Gorge protections are not weakened, skirted, or overlooked. They’ve seen climate change firsthand in the warmer, drier months, less snow in winter, and fewer ice storms. On their property, Douglas fir trees are dying at an alarming rate and their mountain ash trees are showing signs of distress. To offset the ravages of climate change, the couple have proactively planted sequoia and Oregon white oak to increase climate resilience on their land.

Sherri and Larry recently made plans for a legacy gift to Friends to support protection efforts for the Gorge they love and call home. “It is a truly unique and diverse landscape, and well worth protection,” said Larry. “Our hope is that our great grandkids will appreciate that Friends worked to make sure the Gorge is awe-inspiring for the future.”

We hope they do, too, Sherri and Larry. And we couldn’t do this work without you!
IN HONOR
In honor of Gail Anderson
Nicholas and Sandra Snell
In honor of Debbie Asakawa
Jean and Rob Wilson
In honor of Pleschette Fontenet
Ann Bates
In honor of Angelina Keepers
Butch Keepers II
In honor of Annie Munch
Camille Douglas
Ann and Tom Usher
In honor of Bob Stacey
Donald and Shirley Clark
In honor of Jerry Swedeen
Bob and Pam Davee
In honor of Patricia Wall
Holly Wall
In honor of Charles White
Donald and Shirley Clark

IN MEMORY
In memory of Worth Caldwell
Sally Farnes
In memory of Oliver Dalton
Sandi and Thomas Rousseau
In memory of Maria Durando
Patrizia Caposio-Nelson and
Jay Nelson
Jeanine Henderson
Wendy Henderson
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Donald and Shirley Clark
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Sandi and Thomas Rousseau
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Meredith Savery
Duane and Gisela Ray
In memory of Marie Elizabeth Winston
Diane and Richard Hohl
In memory of Matthew Winthrop
Joan Ercolini
Michael and Sheila Giordano
John La Vallee

Starvation Creek in autumn. Photo: Karen Reeves
BOWEN BLAIR
WITH
KEVIN GORMAN

Thursday, Oct. 20 | 7:00 pm

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