

# Interpretive Themes for Mount Rainier National Park

All parks have a variety of stories to tell, and interpretation is the art of telling those stories. *Interpretive themes* are short statements that can be used to talk about a park. *Primary* interpretive themes, however, are closely linked to a park's national significance. When communications about the park focus on these primary themes, audiences better understand why the park is a national treasure included in the National Park System.

You may wish to use Mount Rainier National Park's primary interpretive themes when speaking to visitors about the park. These themes can be used as talking points during informal interactions, or they can be used as the basis for more formal presentations and programs.

The following primary interpretive themes are from Mount Rainier National Park's [Long-Range Interpretive Plan](#):

## **PHYSICAL PROCESSES**

Mount Rainier is created by volcanism and transformed by water and ice in dynamic processes that may impact individual organisms or whole ecosystems.

Subthemes:

1. Mount Rainier is an active volcano that shapes the landscape and influences processes both within and beyond the park boundary. Mount Rainier is a product of past and continuing volcanic forces. The mountain's constructive and destructive forces pose significant hazards to human and natural communities and cultural resources in and around the park.
2. Water is one of the primary forces of change at Mount Rainier. The abundance of surface water and loose rock debris makes Mount Rainier an ideal setting for the initiation of lahars and debris flows. Numerous large floods and debris flows have occurred on the slopes of Mount Rainier throughout its history. Hydrological disturbances are a perpetual force of change to Mount Rainier's ecosystems.
3. Mount Rainier distinguishes itself from other Cascade volcanoes by its immense size and extensive glacial system. Mount Rainier's glaciers are dynamic forces of change to the mountain's form and appearance. The unique attributes of glacier-fed rivers produce distinctive landscapes and ecosystems. Glaciers are continuous sources of water for downstream communities and ecosystems. Changes in glacier size can demonstrate dramatic and discernible responses to significant climate variations.
4. Mount Rainier influences the climate of landscapes and ecosystems within and beyond the park boundary. Mount Rainier is an impediment to eastbound weather systems, and forces moisture to rise, cool, and fall as precipitation. Mount Rainier's presence increases precipitation in some localities and blocks it in others, causing distinctive microclimates and ecosystems. Long-term climate change can cause continual transformation of Mount Rainier's structure, glaciers, rivers,

and other ecosystem components.

## **ECOSYSTEMS**

Mount Rainier creates and supports a diverse ecosystem that ranges from snowfields and glaciers to alpine tundra and low elevation forest.

Subthemes:

1. Although vulnerable to human-caused damage, the plants and animals in alpine and subalpine communities are well adapted to meet the challenges posed by harsh environmental conditions.
2. Mount Rainier's old-growth forests support a rich diversity of flora and fauna, comprising one of the densest biomasses on Earth. The prime stands of old-growth forests on Mount Rainier's lower slopes are a valuable remnant of those once occupying much of the Pacific Northwest.
3. National parks in the Pacific Northwest have become islands, as external influences threaten their natural qualities. Threats such as atmospheric pollution, global climate change, and the spread of non-native plant species know no boundaries, and directly affect park values.

## **HUMAN CULTURES**

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2. Subthemes:
3. American Indians camped on the mountain's slopes to hunt and gather plant resources. Modern tribal members have a living connection with the mountain, characterized by respect and a lively interest in the continued use and preservation of its resources.
4. As Euro-American explorers, pioneers, and settlers moved into the surrounding region, many were drawn by the beauty, challenges, and opportunities the mountain afforded. Concern for the mountain's future ultimately led to the establishment of Mount Rainier as a national park.
5. Mount Rainier has offered, and continues to offer, a multitude of recreational opportunities from the earliest climbing and camping to modern hiking and sightseeing. The mountain has been a Mecca for recreational climbing since early times, and still attracts thousands of climbers each year.

## **STEWARDSHIP**

The mountain inspires stewardship. People have contributed to the protection of its natural and cultural resources in a variety of ways, from advocating for its legal protection to volunteerism.

## Subthemes:

1. Mount Rainier's natural and cultural resources have been protected through an array of legislation over time. The diverse designations demonstrate the importance of both government and individual actions in resource stewardship.
2. Mount Rainier's pristine wilderness has ecological, social, scientific, educational, recreational, and cultural value. That value increases exponentially as areas outside the park are developed and open space is lost. By law, Mount Rainier wilderness is managed to retain its primeval character for people to examine their relationship to the world. The park's management of natural resources over the past century mirrors American society's changing understanding and appreciation of wilderness values. Mount Rainier wilderness is a source of inspiration, providing boundless opportunities for exploration, solitude, contemplation, and physical and mental challenge. The survival of the park's wilderness depends on individual and societal commitment to the idea of wilderness, a stewardship ethic, and appropriate visitor behavior in wilderness areas.
3. Using local materials and designs to harmonize with the natural setting, some of Mount Rainier National Park's architecture exemplifies the best of the Rustic style. Park buildings, along with roads, trails, and bridges, now comprise a national historic landmark district, which represents the best of early national park planning
4. Preservation and study of Mount Rainier's ecosystems lead to public understanding of natural forces affecting the Pacific Northwest, the nation, and the world. Mount Rainier, with its mantle of glaciers, subalpine meadows, and alpine communities is an ideal laboratory to study the effects of climate change. The mountain can serve as an icon to impart an understanding of the dimensions of this issue and inspire people to take action to address it.
5. Volunteering in the park strengthens the public's understanding of and support for the National Park Service mission.