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Opinion

Protecting more of the Olympic Peninsula would be a win for public lands and the economy

By [Derek Kilmer](#) and [Roy Nott](#)

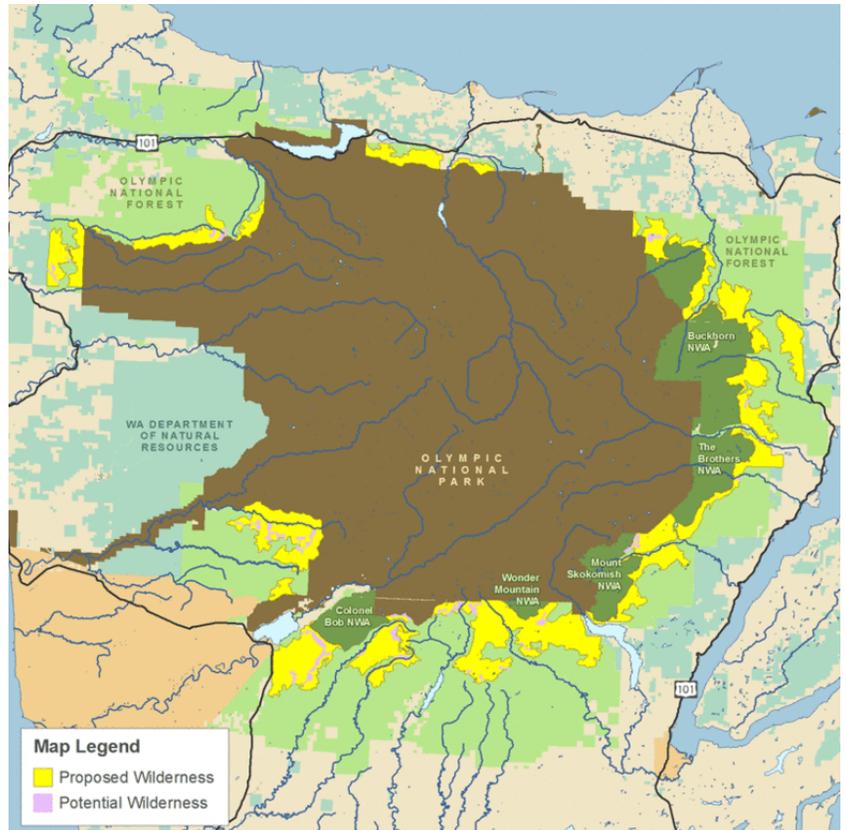
Special to The Times

Both of us grew up on the Olympic Peninsula learning from an early age just how special our region is and how our incredible public lands contribute to the very fabric of who we are. Not only do they provide the hiking, fishing and outdoor recreational activities that we have enjoyed since we were both young, they provided jobs for our families, our friends and our neighbors. We were raised to know that our public lands are essential parts of our local economies, too — and that there was work to do to protect both the land and the economies that rely on them.

In Washington, we know that millions of people travel to our neck of the woods to enjoy our parks and forests, contributing an estimated [\\$22 billion in economic impact](#) and supporting 200,000 jobs in Washington's outdoor economy. Our public lands have provided local entrepreneurs with opportunities to start restaurants, tour companies, hotels, outdoors stores and other small businesses.

That's why we are proud to see the U.S. House of Representatives pass the [Wild Olympics Wilderness and Wild and Scenic Rivers Act](#) this month with bipartisan support. This bill would permanently protect some of the most environmentally sensitive areas on the Olympic Peninsula — designating more than 126,000 acres of public land as wilderness, and 19 rivers and their major tributaries as Wild and Scenic Rivers. Old growth timber lines the Church Creek Trail in the southern portion of Olympic National Forest. (Wild Olympics Campaign)

Since the legislation was first introduced, stakeholders from across the region, including tribes, conservation groups, timber communities, shellfish growers, small business owners and everyone in between have weighed in — and the extensive engagement produced a bill that's truly a win-win for our region.



Based on input from local and regional leaders, significant changes have been made over the years to make sure it worked for everyone. Thousands of acres were removed from the initial proposal to ensure the legislation would have no impact on the harvestable timber base in the Olympic National Forest.

Additional revisions were made to ensure that this bill will not close, decommission, or otherwise restrict access to any existing forest service roads or trail heads and will not affect any private property rights. Finally, new provisions were added to ensure that the proposal will have no impact on how the Washington Department of Natural Resources manages state-owned lands.

Kayakers and waterfall on East Fork Humptulips Proposed Wild & Scenic River, Olympic National Forest. (Wild Olympics Campaign)

All of these changes are a testament to the folks in our region who reached out and shared their input. Because of that public dialogue and the collaborative process, the bill gained [formal support of more than 800 community leaders](#), including Democrats and Republicans, business owners and outdoor enthusiasts, local mayors and tribal leaders.

The federal lands and waters that we aim to protect with this proposal will play a critical role in benefiting our local economies for generations to come. These new designations will protect the clean water and pristine spawning habitat necessary to support our local fishing and shellfish industries. They will help us draw people from all around the world (and their pocketbooks) to enjoy hiking, hunting and fishing opportunities.

They will create new opportunities for small business in the recreation and tourism industries. They will draw new companies and entrepreneurs to our region. It's clear that protecting these resources is a key step toward revitalizing the economy of the Olympic Peninsula.

Our region's character is defined by its natural beauty, and its future depends on a strong, diversified economy. This bill helps ensure that we can keep both.

Earlier this month, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell noted that protecting our public lands was one of the three areas he thinks the Senate could make progress on in 2020. And with Sen. Patty Murray leading the way on this bill in the Senate, we agree. The Wild Olympics Act is a good place to start — and will protect the environment and grow jobs on the Olympic Peninsula.

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