

VIEWPOINT | Old growth presents new park challenges

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By **SUE ELLEN WHITE**

I am a fourth-generation Pacific Northwesterner.

My earliest and strongest memories are tied to our family place at Welches, Oregon along the Salmon River in the shadow of Wy'East (Mt. Hood). It is where our extended family gathered summers, holidays and weekends amid the primeval forest with the woodland floor of moss, nurse logs, ferns and berries and with towering trees above.

Our playground as kids was this old-growth forest and the river bank. We were what is now termed “free-range” children who came back to the rambling cabin when we got hungry.

A year or so after I moved to the island in 1970 I discovered South Whidbey State Park.

It was different from the woods I'd roamed here. The trees were huge and the trail and camp area reminded me of the forest of my youth.

Later, I was one of those who worked to stop the clearcutting of the 255-acre forest, known as Classic U, in 1977. The campaign continued for 15 years, culminating in the addition of this forest to South Whidbey State Park. More than a thousand local folks got involved in one way or another. The groundswell of our community was heard all the way to Olympia. Along the way, the expanded park lodged itself into the collective soul of the community.

The forest at Classic U was unlike any other place on South Whidbey with the smells, sounds and particular light of my childhood, resonating deep in my bones.

Several years ago, in response to the Legislature's decision to shrink tax support to our state parks, the Friends of South Whidbey State Park was formed. I became a member.

The nonprofit's mission is to support the park and the much-reduced park staff with work parties, summer programs and events.

Our volunteers have enjoyed the remarkable diversity of South Whidbey State Park with its lush woods, scenic trails, spacious campgrounds, magnificent wetlands, expansive beach and all else that it has to offer. And, we've had darn good times at our numerous work parties and events.

With the closure of the campground this year new challenges face the Friends — and the community.

Based on the presence of diseases and declining old-growth tree health in the campground, a long-range planning process was begun by state parks to identify the best options for managing the future use of the park. Should the old-growth trees be left standing, or should they be removed to allow the campground to be re-opened? Are there better alternatives that should be considered? These are just a few of the choices to be made. The eventual plan will direct what happens at the park for the next generation.

South Whidbey State Park is the jewel of our community and everyone is invited, indeed encouraged, to participate.

Washington State Parks has held one community meeting and all the information from it is online at <http://bit.ly/sowhidbey>

parkplan. There are links where you can read about the diseased trees, how the process will work and how to participate. Send your ideas and comments to randy.kline@parks.wa.gov. The next meeting will be in January after all your comments have been gathered.

Please join the Friends of South Whidbey State Park at www.foswsp.org; find us on Facebook or send an email to foswsp@gmail.com.

See you on the trails.

Editor's note: Sue Ellen White is the president of the Friends of South Whidbey State Park

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