

## **Social equity beyond the city limits: Gold Creek Pond and access to the National Forest for all people**

*Kittitas Conservation Trust and government agencies are planning to fill Gold Creek Pond.*

If you come with me to Gold Creek Pond, you'll be treated to a view deep into the Alpine Lakes Wilderness, iconic peaks rising above the forest, their image doubled in the Pond's reflection.

But here the wildland not the main event. From my perspective, Gold Creek Pond is one of the very few places that citizens of any background can easily come face to face with the best of their National Forest lands.

Last March, I met two young moms at the Pond who had pushed their toddlers in strollers a half mile across the snow from the Sno-Park. That same day, other moms and dads were teaching their kids the basics of snowshoeing and cross-country skiing.

Last July I had a conversation with a husky middle-aged man who spoke as little English as I spoke Spanish. As he loaded an elderly gentleman into a wheelchair, I finally understood that he brought his dad to the Pond as a respite from chronic dialysis.



In August I met two veteran hikers of advanced age who were so pleased to continue to be able to enjoy the mountains, water and flowers on the mile of paved trail around the Pond. The next day, I met a grown daughter with her elderly parents from Romania.

And I met a grandmother walking the trail with her family in a brilliant sari, other women in headscarves, Asian grandparents conversing with me through their grandchildren, construction workers driving to the Pond in pickup trucks, international visitors making the Grand Tour with their families in rented campers, locals from the Pass or North Bend who visit the Pond frequently, and those returning past the Pond with their full packs, dusty boots and unshaven faces from Alaska Lake or the Pacific Crest Trail. The mix of backgrounds, races, languages and ethnicities you'll find at the Pond continues at all seasons.

A Black American speaking at a Forterra event several years ago added another important point. He said that preserving our wildlands depends on the support of a citizens of color as they come to represent an increasing proportion of our population. To defend the public lands we love against exploitation, we need to introduce our wildlands to people of all backgrounds, ages, and abilities --- and to make them readily accessible.

The Okanogan-Wenatchee National Forest includes over 4 million acres, the greatest proportion of which is inaccessible to the majority of citizens. Yet tens of thousands take pleasure and inspiration from the 23-acre Pond each year. Many are too inexperienced, too young, too old, too infirm, or too ill-equipped to visit the backcountry. But they can and do make it to Gold Creek Pond. And from this special place they can view and experience a small proportion of the public lands that are their joy and their birthright. This land does not belong to agencies, contractors or special interests. It belongs to each of us.

Social equity extends beyond the city limits.

Bob Mecklenburg, Friends of Gold Creek Pond