

Field Notes: The Columbia River Gorge

The Columbia River Gorge is both a natural and political border. It divides the rolling hills, low valleys, and temperate rainforests of Washington and Oregon. The river canyon carves its own personal path through the Cascade Mountains, bestowed by a glacier melt from the end of the last ice age. Situated just along the river, a rough and tall cliff follows the water's edge, created from a series of basalt flows, tens of millions of years old, holding history within each descriptive layer. Highlights of the Columbia Gorge include; impressive yet intimidating cliffs, threatening and damaged volcanoes, and dramatic and eye-catching waterfalls. The area is a home for the wildlife and the citizens, the industry and the tourists, the natives, the historians, and the geologists. Passing through it, the transformation of the rainy, mossy, and populated area west of the Cascades to the dry, sunny, and desolate area of the east is astonishing and almost immediate. The Columbia River Gorge is an 80 mile adventure full of landscape, history, and culture.

The Columbia River is historically known as Lewis and Clark's greatest achievement; their passage to the Pacific Ocean, and the United States' ticket to a successful new frontier. Driving along the river over 200 years later, I still see a passage, a corridor of transportation. The river was and is used for the transportation of goods on the backs of barges, which lug up and down river between ports. The railroad tracks on either side of the river, running parallel too and wedged between the water edge and the highway pavement, carry also goods but sometimes people back and forth through the various cities of the Pacific Northwest. The highways, (Washington's State Route 14, and Oregon's Interstate 84) carrying site-seers and commuters in their four-door-sedans, truck drivers with semi-trucks stocked with inventory from Frito-Lay and Hostess, and loggers with wood for the lumber yards and the Camas paper mill. An airport,

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along the Oregon side, built to carry travelers to destinations farther away from the Gorge, with different landscapes. And all the bridges between the two states, crossing the natural and political boundaries, connecting the people and the industries on either side of the river.

The Columbia Gorge that Lewis and Clark saw is unlike the system that flows today. The many hydroelectric dams along the river halted the fast paced rapids that once flowed towards the Pacific. The Celilo Falls, a traditional fishing area for the Yakima tribe, was completely drowned in 1957 by construction of The Dalles Dam, causing devastation for the native people. For this, among other reasons, the dams have posed a controversial debate about its so-called sustainability. In an attempt to learn from the past, a more sustainable source of electricity has been searched for. This was evident as I journeyed away from the river and north into the hills and hills of windmills, towering over the gorge and glaring down the river towards the dams. They stand as a hopeful icon next to a river of mistakes, proving to my generation that society is beginning to move progressively into the future, attempting to live with nature instead of only overpowering it.

The Gorge is a recreational corner for the adventures of the Pacific Northwest. The river provides a cool getaway from the summer heat for local teens and families, who enjoy swimming in the shallower areas and lying in the sun along the shoreline. During those summer months, the river is sprinkled with sailboats, as well as motorboats towing inner tubes and wakeboards along behind them. During the fishing season, many people pack their freezer full of fresh sturgeon and salmon, which they enjoy long after the season ends. And the steep basalt cliffs are inviting to rock climbers who enjoy the obstacle.

The Columbia River Gorge is a striking, handsome, and scenic landscape. The area and river that sculpted this canyon has become a source of respect and pride of the Pacific Northwest

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and its residents. It is important to preserve this place, and its history, and its culture, and its diverse landscape, for the visual enjoyment, recreation and industry of future generations.