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Oregon Recreation History

Oregon is blessed with some of the most striking natural wonders in the nation. The state's stunning coastline, Cascade Mountain Range and abundant rivers form a unique geography that has captivated Oregonians for generations. Few aspects of Oregon's past express this enduring relationship quite so well as the state's history of outdoor recreation. This essay traces key aspects of that history.

Part One

Hunting, fishing, boating, rodeo...

Part Two

State parks, national parks, bicycling...

Part Three

Hiking, winter sports, water sports...



Olof Rodegard jumps off a snow cornice on Mt. Hood circa 1937. (Oregon State Archives Photo)

About the Writer

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Oregon Recreation History: Part One

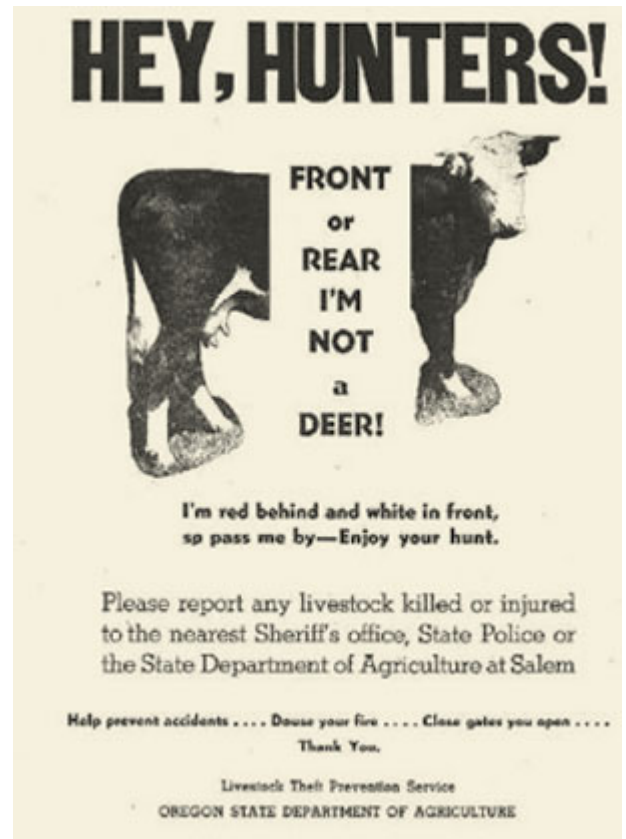
Oregon has some of the most striking natural wonders in the nation. The state's stunning coastline, Cascade Mountain Range and abundant rivers form a unique geography that has captivated Oregonians for generations. Few aspects of Oregon's past express this enduring relationship quite so well as the state's history of outdoor recreation.

Popular pastimes such as gathering plants, hunting, fishing and animal husbandry arose out of the traditions of the state's earliest inhabitants and remain important symbols of Oregon's rich, natural heritage. As Oregon has grown, its outdoor culture has grown alongside it, and activities like biking, running and winter sports have made the state a mecca for outdoor recreation. Meanwhile, conservation efforts like the development of the state parks system, ensure the preservation of the state's natural resources. Over time, Oregon's history of outdoor recreation has given it a distinct identity, rooted in a deep appreciation for the state's natural beauty and an active commitment to its preservation.

Some of Oregon's most popular recreation activities such as hunting and fishing, have been crucial to life in Oregon for centuries. Native tribes of the Pacific Northwest have long placed economic and cultural importance on fishing. Centuries before the arrival of Europeans in Oregon, fishing sites such as Celilo Falls supported enormous intertribal trading centers which attracted as many as 5,000 people.¹ Although the construction of The Dalles Dam in 1957 submerged this area,² these early fishing traditions established fishing as a key element of Oregon's cultural identity. As the region developed, the commercial importance of fishing continued to grow as evidenced by the production of 450,000 cases of canned salmon in 1878³ — only 11 years after the opening of the state's first cannery.⁴

Protecting Oregon's Natural Resources

Oregon's population eventually placed undue pressure on fishing and game stocks and, in response, Oregonians looked to balance commercial and recreational demands on natural resources. Oregon founded its first fishing commission in 1878 to address this issue and protect the state's marine habitats. Later, in 1893, this commission was expanded to create a combined fish and game commission. Under director Hollister McGuire, the commission limited the game bird season for the first time and began marking salmon in order to monitor the population and make recommendations to the Legislature.



This Oregon Department of Agriculture poster from 1960 encourages hunters to discriminate between cattle and deer. (Oregon State Archives Photo)

Oregon created its first official Game Board in 1899 and further restricted hunting and fishing in the state by instituting a closed season on beaver hunting and requiring fishing licenses for the first time in the state's history.

The next few decades saw significant milestones in wildlife management. In 1911, the state established 1.5 million acres of wildlife refuges, and, in 1938, Oregon State University graduated its first class of fish and wildlife students. By 1975, the newly formed Department of Fish and Wildlife managed 766,000 anglers and 390,000 hunters who spent \$190,000,000 each year,⁵ and according to the most recent economic survey in 2008, Oregonians and visitors spent \$2.5 billion annually on fish and wildlife recreational activities.⁶ Oregon's Department of Fish and Wildlife uses these funds to regulate outdoor recreation in Oregon and assist with long-term conservation strategies. Most of the state's wildlife use now comes from sport fishing. Through outdoor recreation, salmon and steelhead still play an important role in Oregon's outdoor culture. The Deschutes, Rogue and McKenzie Rivers are internationally known as blue ribbon fly-fishing destinations.

The boating that takes place on these rivers also has deep roots in Oregon's history. In the 1890s when much of the state was still remote wilderness, the Rogue River was used to deliver mail to surrounding communities.⁷ Navigation of the Rogue and McKenzie Rivers also inspired the development of the drift boat and river dory. These new designs were created to help river guides maneuver river rapids as recreational boating became more popular at the turn of the century.⁸ Since 1958, Oregon's Marine Board has kept the state's waterways safe and clean by overseeing boater registration, safety education and law enforcement.⁹ Today, Oregon's contributions to river travel and efforts to protect its natural areas have made it a popular area for boating and rafting.

Rodeo

Rodeo is a sport whose history is intimately linked with Oregon's heritage. This highly competitive sport combines events such as barrel racing, bull riding and calf roping designed to demonstrate each participant's horsemanship skills. Several Oregon rodeo competitions have become well known in the rodeo community over the course of their long history. The first Pendleton show in 1910 was intended to be an exhibition of frontier life. That year, it attracted a crowd of 7,000 and has exploded in popularity over the years. High community involvement and enthusiasm made the four-day show a success. Today, over 60,000 attendees descend annually on Pendleton for the rodeo.^{10,11}

Other rodeos in Oregon have become part of Oregon's storied history of outdoor recreation. Just three years after the founding of the Pendleton Round-up, the Molalla Buckeroo was established, making it only the third organized rodeo in the state's history. Originally planned to celebrate the town's first railroad in 1913, the rodeo as we know it today soon became an annual tradition.¹² For decades now, the Molalla Buckeroo has been held each year during the week of



A cowboy rides a bucking bronco during the 1956 Pendleton Round-Up. (Oregon State Archives Photo)

July 4th and incorporates a large community parade in addition to the rodeo. The Saint Paul Rodeo in Marion County is also a long-running fourth of July tradition. Since 1935, the rodeo in Saint Paul has been a community cornerstone and is considered one of the best rodeo exhibitions in the nation. It also incorporates the entire community through parades and cook-offs.¹³ Rodeos such as these aim to foster a stronger sense of community and keep Oregon's rich frontier traditions alive. Oregon's many rodeos serve as a testament to its agricultural heritage and multifaceted culture.

Parks System

Although traditions like fishing, boating and rodeo have contributed to Oregon's unique identity, perhaps the oldest and most iconic symbol of recreation in Oregon is the beauty of the land itself. Oregon has become well known for its devotion to protect and share this land with the public through the parks system. The seeds of the public parks system originated with efforts towards highway beautification around the turn of the century. With the development of the automobile, tourism within the state grew, as did public demand for scenic preservation. In his Biennial Report in 1919–1920, State Highway Attorney J. M. Devers wrote that state highways might be improved if the State Highway Commission had some mechanism to acquire nearby land for public use.¹⁴

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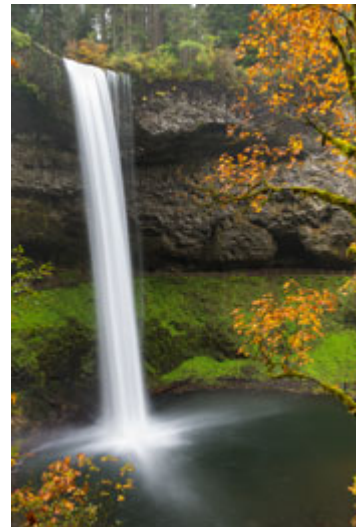
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Oregon Recreation History: Part Two

Governor Ben Olcott addressed the 1921 Oregon State Legislature on the importance of conserving scenic beauty in Oregon and noted the urgent demands for conservation that recreational tourism had placed on the state. He remarked, “All of the things we have been striving for, the development of tourist travel; the urge to make and keep our state the most livable in the Union; the desire to keep our children in God’s own environment, surrounded by the beauties to which they are the true heirs, all of these will be surrendered and lost unless we act and act promptly.”¹

Subsequent action by the Legislature made it possible for the State Highway Commission to acquire wayside land for beautification, and, as tourism increased, more communities requested public lands for recreation. This arrangement was especially influenced by the nature of the early Model T automobile that most families used for camping outings. Because these vehicles traveled only 30 miles an hour, families had to be strategic about the distance of their trips, and many families simply stopped along the highway where water was accessible.²

The growing need for overnight accommodations prompted the State Highway Commission to take further measures to acquire lands outside the highway right of way. Revisions to the 1921 Highway law widened the scope of the law and allowed the State Highway Commission to develop additional land. Expansion of the State Highway Commission’s land management program created the foundation for the state parks system and gifts of land soon followed. By 1929, the area managed by the commission was large enough that a State Parks Commission was founded to oversee further management of these areas. Railroad engineer and homesteader Samuel H. Boardman managed the newly formed State Parks Commission. During his tenure from 1929 to 1950, Boardman proved to be skilled at persuading local donors to support the parks effort, and, under his direction, park acreage grew from 4,000 to 66,000.



Silver Falls State Park is a crown jewel in the state system that includes dozens of parks. (Oregon State Archives Photo)



Beginning in 1933, these efforts were aided by members of the Civilian Conservation Corps. Oregon was a major site for CCC projects during the Great Depression, and the group employed thousands of young people across the state. CCC projects focused on forestry, fire protection, flood control and other land management tasks. Groups constructed trails and campgrounds still used today. Silver Creek Falls camp east of Salem and Multnomah’s Eagle Creek campground are results of CCC efforts.

Brilliant blue water and ample recreational opportunities attract visitors from around the world to Crater Lake National Park. (Oregon State Archives Photo)

Oregon is home to four national parks: Crater Lake, John Day Fossil Beds, Nez Perce National Historic Park and the Lewis & Clark National Historic Trail. These parks provide habitats for 11 endangered species while drawing over \$81 million in tourism revenue. Oregon's robust state parks

system includes 193 parks covering 86,000 acres of land. Oregon's Department of Parks and Recreation oversees state park lands and protects these "outstanding natural, scenic, cultural, historic and recreational sites for the enjoyment and education of present and future generations."³ This includes not only managing state parks but also providing conservation grants and organizing historic preservation efforts.

Two-wheeled transportation has also had a significant effect on outdoor recreation since long before the development of the automobile. As early as the 1880s, Salem and Portland residents can be seen riding "penny-farthing bicycles" in archival photos. With the transition from these large front-wheeled "penny-farthing" bicycles to modern designs, the bicycling craze exploded in popularity, and advertisements for bicycles ran in the Salem *Daily Capital Journal* and other Oregon newspapers. The trend even inspired early "celebrity athlete" endorsements for various products as cycling grew from a novelty into a more common form of transportation and recreation.⁴

However, with the advent of auto transportation, cycling mostly fell out of favor until late in the 20th Century. It was around this time that Oregon was heavily involved with reigniting interest in cycling. Portland unveiled a Bicycle Master Plan in 1973, which improved riding and parking accommodations for bikes and organized promotional programs.

Further improvements put additional biking infrastructure in place and integrated bike use with public transport systems. Today, Oregon's largest city is consistently ranked as one of the bike-friendliest cities in the country, with 7.2% of commuters travelling by bike compared to 0.5% nationwide.⁵



Cyclists, such as these in front of Portland's City Bicycle Hospital in 1910, were part of a bicycling craze in the early 1900s. (Oregon State Archives Photo)

Rural Oregon also provides ample opportunity for recreational cycling in the form of scenic bikeways throughout the state. Oregon's 15 state designated scenic bikeways showcase the best road biking routes in the state with options available for riders of all skill levels. Trails range from the casual 17-mile Covered Bridges Scenic Bikeway along the Row River Trail to the rugged 108-mile Blue Mountain Scenic Bikeway in Heppner. Every September, Heppner's Blue Mountain Bikeway hosts a challenging ride which leads riders through the Umatilla National Forest to Highway 395 up a nearly 4,000-foot climb.⁶ Other popular rides, such as Cycle Oregon, attract cyclists from around the world. Ashland innkeeper Jim Beaver originally proposed the ride in 1987, as a coastal ride between sister cities Astoria and Ashland. With support from the Oregon Department of Transportation and the local Chamber of Commerce, the inaugural Cycle Oregon ride took place in September 1988. In this 320-mile ride, 1,006 riders from 20 states traveled from Salem to Brookings, generating \$360,000 for local communities along the way. Cycle Oregon is still going strong with over 2,000 participants each year.⁷

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Oregon Recreation History: Part Three

Though automobiles and bikes have played a large role in outdoor recreation history, some of Oregon's rich scenery is best experienced on foot. With trails through cities and scenic natural areas, Oregon's outdoors is loved by hikers and runners alike. Events like Oregon's popular Hood to Coast Relay race allow long-distance runners to experience Oregon's natural areas while enjoying a difficult and unique run. Each August, Hood to Coast attracts thousands of runners for the 198-mile run from the base of Mount Hood to Seaside. Experienced marathoner Bob Foote organized the first race in 1982 with eight teams of 10 members each. Since then, the relay has expanded considerably and filled its team limit on Opening Day for the past 18 years. Race organizers have also added a Portland to Coast Walk event and High School Challenge.¹ The popularity of running in the state has even lead to considerable athletic success. Dubbed "Tracktown, USA," Eugene is the only site to host three consecutive Olympic track and field trials, which has happened there twice, first in 1972, 1976 and 1980, and again in 2008, 2012 and 2016.



A backpacker takes a break to admire the coastline of Curry County in 1938. (Oregon State Archives Photo)

For the more hiking inclined, Oregon's state parks offer hundreds of hiking opportunities from day trips conveniently located near city centers to backpacking adventures in more remote regions. The state's incredible wealth of trails includes pristine coastal areas, old growth forests, high desert expanses and world-class mountain views.

Cascade Range

Oregon's Cascade Range is one of the state's most dominant geographical features, and many consider it the backbone of local outdoor recreation. Organized hiking and climbing groups have a long history in Oregon beginning with the founding of the Mazama Club in 1894. For over a century, outdoor groups like the Mazama Club have explored Oregon's natural resources and created international impact in backpacking and mountaineering. The earliest origins of the well-known Pacific Crest Trail can be traced back to a conversation between outdoors woman and educator Catherine Montgomery and a member of the Seattle offshoot of the Mazama Club, the Mountaineers. At the close of their 1926 meeting, Montgomery wondered aloud, "Why do not you Mountaineers do something big for Western America. . . . A high winding trail down the heights of our western mountains with mile markers and shelter huts – like these pictures I'll show you of the 'Long Trail of the Appalachians' – from the Canadian Border to

the Mexican Boundary Line!”² Two years later, this idea was presented at a meeting of the Seattle-based Mountaineers Club attended by Clinton C. Clarke, another hiker who would eventually become famous for his efforts to promote the trail. The project was later completed with the help of a diverse group of local organizations, including the Sierra Club, YMCA, Boy Scouts and Civilian Conservation Corps.³ Today, the Pacific Crest Trail is one of the most famous and enduring icons of outdoor recreation on the West Coast and stretches 2,659 miles from the Mexican border just south of Campo, California, to the Canadian border at Manning Park, British Columbia. The Oregon leg of the trail carries thousands of visitors each year over the Cascade Range from Southern Oregon’s Siskiyou Mountains summit to the Washington state border at the Bridge of the Gods. The trail features spectacular views of Crater Lake and the entire Cascade Range, including Mount McLoughlin, Diamond Peak, the Three Sisters, Mount Washington, Three Fingered Jack, Mount Jefferson and Mount Hood.⁴



A skier gets airborne on Mt. Hood in 1937. Ski resorts grew rapidly in Oregon in the mid 1900s. (Oregon State Archives Photo)

It’s not only hikers that enjoy Oregon’s Cascade Range. In winter, Oregon is a mountaineer’s paradise and an international skiing and snowboarding destination. During the 1920s, Scandinavian immigrants brought skiing and ski jumping experience to the region and founded ski clubs like the Bend Skyliners and the Cascade Ski Club. These clubs laid the foundation for the establishment of ski areas in Oregon.⁵ After lumber workers founded the Bend Skyliners Mountaineering club in 1928 and created a ski jump 11 miles west of Bend, winter sports began growing in the state. In 1958, Bill Healy, a U.S. Army 10th Mountain Division veteran opened Mount Bachelor—Oregon’s largest ski area. The mountaineering expertise Healy gained during his service in this elite group of ski-troopers inspired him to create a ski resort at Bachelor Butte. Mount Bachelor now

caters to nearly 500,000 visitors each year.⁶

About the same time, Loop Road was completed around the base of Mount Hood allowing more recreational access. A year later, the area was designated a public recreation area by the federal government. In 1928, Cascade Ski Club was founded and a ski jumping tournament was started at Multipor in January 1929. The group expanded in the following years and competed with local groups at Mount Hood and even had some competitors from as far off as Seattle and Vancouver, B.C.⁷

Timberline Lodge

Soon, Mount Hood’s popularity created a demand for overnight facilities, and plans were created for a lodge at the site. With the nation in the grip of the Great Depression, Timberline Lodge was seen as an ideal project for the Works Progress Administration (WPA), and, after three proposals, the project was scheduled for completion in 1938. In September 1937, President Franklin Roosevelt dedicated the site and remarked that “thousands and thousands of visitors in the coming years” would be impressed with Oregon’s ranching, farming and forestry as “important elements of northwestern prosperity.” He also spoke of the recreational value of the region. In a speech at the historic hotel, he remarked that “those who follow us to Timberline Lodge on their holidays and vacations will represent the enjoyment of new opportunities for play in every season of the year. . . . I look forward to the day when many, many people

from this region of the Nation are going to come here for skiing and tobogganing and various other forms of winter sports.” Today, the lodge has fulfilled Roosevelt’s vision. With two million visitors annually, Timberline Lodge is a testament to the popularity of winter sports in the state and the recreation value of the Cascade Range as a whole.⁸

Oregon Coast

No discussion of outdoor recreation in Oregon is complete without mentioning its scenic coastline. Oregon’s beaches were declared a public highway by Governor Oswald West in 1911 in order to protect the beaches from private encroachment. Later, the passage of the Beach Bill in 1967 solidified public claims to Oregon’s beaches and ensured access for growing numbers of beachgoers. Oregon’s 363 miles of coastline are used today for swimming, horse-riding, windsurfing and more.

Outdoor sports like windsurfing benefit from natural resources in other locations as well. The state’s famous Columbia River Gorge acts as a funnel for wind and offers an ideal environment for water sports. Small towns like Hood River have become popular spots for windsurfers of every skill level to enjoy the sport. During the summer, the Gorge hosts both serious athletic competitions like the Gorge Cup and friendly celebrations like the annual King of the Hook.⁹ Windsurfing in the state is widely known as a fun and colorful spectator sport showcasing Oregon’s natural treasures.



Water recreation, such as windsurfing, brings crowds to the riverfront area of Hood River when the wind is right on the Columbia River. (Oregon State Archives Photo)

Oregon’s rich natural beauty has also created a home for many nationally renowned golf courses. Since 1904, the Oregon Golf Association has assisted with tournaments and promoted golf in the state through its network of 45,000 members.¹⁰ Fortunately, the state has no shortage of quality courses for Oregon’s golfers. Some of the sport’s most well-known architects such as Bob Cupp, Arnold Palmer and David McLay Kidd have been drawn to Oregon’s natural beauty. Public courses in Central Oregon like the Pronghorn Club, Crosswater at Sunriver, and Tetherow are all nationally ranked.¹¹ The southern Oregon coast’s Bandon Dunes resort also offers world-class golf. The course regularly stages major national tournaments and has been ranked the best public golf course in America after Pebble Beach.¹²

Outdoor activities like these have become beloved traditions for many Oregonians and a source of state pride. In 1941, Oregon’s first state parks superintendent Samuel Boardman wrote in a letter to Newton Drury, National Park Service Director, that he felt Oregon’s citizens had been given a “recreational kingdom” at their disposal. Indeed, Oregon’s vast and varied geography has provided opportunities for outdoor recreation of every kind throughout the years. From fishing to skiing and countless other pursuits, Oregon remains a remarkable outdoor paradise and “recreational kingdom,” just as it was nearly a century ago.

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