National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Olympic National Park
Washington

Olympic

Explore Olympic

Waves boom along wilderness beaches and mix with snow-fed rivers. Ancient trees shelter wildlife. Rugged peaks embrace glaciers and subalpine meadows. Coast, forest, and mountain ecosystems combine to create this spectacular wilderness park. The Olympic Peninsula is home to eight American Indian tribes that developed complex hunter-gatherer societies and continue to keep their traditions alive. European explorers who ventured here in the late 1700s heralded the way for homesteaders. The Olympics were set aside as a national monument in 1909 and further protected as Olympic National Park in 1938. Today the park is internationally recognized as a Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Site, testimony to its rich resources. Explore Olympic—a gift to the future.

Coast Tides control the rhythm of life along this biologically diverse coastline. Twice-daily intertidal animals face pounding surf and drying winds. Coastal rivers serve as highways for migrating fish, and downed trees along riverbanks protect young salmon journeying from mountains to sea. When the adults return and swim upstream to spawn, their flesh carries a special form of nitrogen gathered during their years at sea. Most salmon die after spawning, but their death brings life. Bears, eagles, insects, and other animals feed on salmon carcasses, then deposit nutrients in rivers and forests. Marine nitrogen nourishes forest soils—a gift from the salmon.

Forests Olympic National Park protects the largest old-growth forest in the Pacific Northwest. Its unique character begins with ancient trees that took root 200 to 1,000 years ago. In these forests multi-layered canopies, standing snags, and fallen trunks provide habitat for myriad animals. Differences in moisture (from 40 to 240 inches annually), and changes in elevation (from sea-level to 7,980 feet) create a mosaic of forests in the park. Temperate rain forests grow along the coast and in ocean-facing valleys. Lowland, montane, and subalpine forests cloak other park areas. Olympic supports complex forest communities—a gift from the past.

Mountains A world of landscapes unfolds here: glaciers chisel U-shaped valleys, and brilliantly colored wildflowers blanket subalpine meadows. Geologists still debate the origins of the Olympics. Some 50 million years ago lava gushed from underwater rips in the edge of the continent, hardening into miles-thick layers of basalt. Later an immense submerged delta of sandstone and shale formed farther out in the ocean. These layered rocks slowly rode back to the continent and jammed beneath the basalts, forcing the Olympics to rise from the sea 10 to 20 million years ago. Ice-age glaciers helped carve the Strait of Juan de Fuca and Puget Sound, separating the Olympics from nearby lands. Years of isolation nurtured the rich biodiversity of the Peninsula, where over 20 plants and animals are found nowhere else on Earth. The rugged Olympic Mountains—a gift from the sea.

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