

Gorge left scarred by summer fire

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JONATHAN SANCHEZ
THE CLACKAMAS PRINT

Many people have been greeted with a "closed" sign and a fence as they walk towards Multnomah Falls since last spring, many of which looked forward to a day of hiking.

It has been nearly seven months since the Eagle Creek fire tore through the Columbia River Gorge. Firefighters were finally able to contain it 100 percent on Nov. 30, 2017. The fire lasted nearly three months burning almost 50,000 acres according to InciWeb.

As a result, popular hiking trails in the Gorge were closed due to hazards caused by the fires. Many people were left devastated and some even had to evacuate their homes to escape the blaze. In the months following, people throughout the Portland metro area were impacted as roads were closed and smoke filled the air setting the mood for many sad and frustrated Oregonians.

Lindsay Curletto, a CCC admissions advisor from Troutdale, recounts how she had to help her friends parents evacuate from the fire.

"We heard news that my roommate's parents, who live in Springdale, were in level 1 evacuation (get ready to leave)," Curletto said. "We later got the call that his parents were suddenly from Level 1 to level 3 (Get Out!)" We immediately drove from Troutdale to Corbett where his mom was. She was calm. She didn't believe that the fire was that close. By 5 a.m., the local police came by and said the fire was 250 feet away from their doorstep. We ran around packing everything in the house... picking out what looked most important. I then helped my roommate's mom pack her room and decide what was staying and what was going. Eventually we both stopped and looked at each other, and finally she broke down crying and felt real fear."

Few people were unaffected by the fire. Eighteen-year-old Rachel Dickinson, born and raised in Oregon said, "I was so upset. After just hearing there was a fire, I was so worried my favorite places would be destroyed beyond repair, or closed forever. I know it's going to take a long time to grow back everything that once was there, and it's possible it won't return to the way it was in my lifetime... it's just so sad."

Other people like Steve Schwindt, a nature photographer here in the Northwest, was left without words.

"It's an incredible area that many people have grown up hiking and loving over the years," Schwindt said. "I've spent countless weekends in there photographing the waterfalls and all of a sudden it's gone and



Multnomah Falls, a popular tourist stop in the Columbia River Gorge, was one of the areas affected by last year's forest fires. Though the Falls were saved from the fires, many of the surrounding hiking areas were badly damaged and are still closed to the public.

closed off. People in Oregon have a sense of shared ownership for natural areas. So many people feel that it was stolen."

Many of the popular trails are still closed. Places like Eagle Creek, which has a total of 10 trails, have been closed off and have yet to open. Firefighters were able to save most of Multnomah Falls from being burned, but it is still closed off to the public. Some areas in the Multnomah Falls hike are still too dangerous to be used by the public.

"The Columbia River Gorge is beautiful, easily accessible and a strong representation of the entire state," said Oregon native Eric Muhr, founder of Oregon Explored, the well known Instagram page with more than 354,000 followers.

"Spectacular canyons, cliffs, and overlooks," Muhr said. "It's a playground, a parkland, an important commercial thoroughfare, a destination and a way of life. We should be cautious but not fearful. The Gorge is a resource: economic, aesthetic, social, recreational (and maybe also spiritual). We should pay attention to the best science we have in order to find a balance between human access so everyone can enjoy what we have and environment quality so it is protected for years to come."

Most of the hikes that have been closed are anticipated to open this summer, but be prepared for any changes. If you are planning to go hiking for spring break, visit www.fs.usda.gov/crgnsa for more information on closures.

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