

FROM LAKES TO LOCKS - NEW WATER TRAIL MEANS - Seattle Post-Intelligencer (WA) - August 17, 2000 - page 8

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The state's newest trail is blue, includes two big lakes and a little one, a lazy river and a ship canal, and passes through boat locks before joining the briny tides of Puget Sound.

Furthermore, it cuts through the heart of the biggest urban area north of San Francisco and south of Vancouver, B.C., even passing Bill Gates' high-tech megamansion on Lake Washington, if you want it to.

The Lakes-to-Locks Water Trail, like the state's two other official "blue trails" - the Cascadia on Puget Sound and the Willapa Bay Trail - is as much a concept as a classic, linear path. It includes more than 100 miles of shoreline to explore on lakes Sammamish, Washington and Union, the Sammamish River, the Ballard Locks and the Ship Canal in Seattle, and about 100 spots, such as parks, where you're free to launch or land a canoe, kayak or rowboat.

The Lakes-to-Locks Trail is an official designation used by cities along the route, Washington State Parks, the Department of Fish and Wildlife, King County, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the Port of Seattle.

The trail was designed specifically to provide access to local waterways for small, non-motorized craft and connect people physically and spiritually to the place in which they live. It was created by members of the non-profit Washington Water Trails Association, working with the National Park Service's River and Trails Program.

WWT A members had discovered that finding access for paddle craft to local waters was not as easy as one might think.

In fact, the Seattle Parks Department until recently prohibited small boaters from landing or launching at city parks, an old rule apparently designed to prohibit partying boaters from running up to the neighborhood grocery for libations, according to longtime WWT A member Roger Johnston of Kirkland.

"The Lakes-to-Locks Trail doubles our inventory of recreational possibilities in this area," Johnston says. "There are all the people who do things on foot and wheels. If we add things you can do on the water, there's no limit. There is room for hours and days of enjoyment for outdoor recreation and the only weak link is how to get your boat on the water."

The trail's Seattle sites are now exempt from the old no-landing, no-launching regulation.

The Lakes-to-Locks is a day-use trail, lacking the campsites offered by the Cascadia and Willapa saltwater trails. The Lakes-to-Locks includes launch and landing sites in the cities of Issaquah, Redmond, Woodinville, Bothell, Kirkland, Bellevue, Mercer Island, Renton and Seattle.

These sites allow kayakers and canoe paddlers to launch near and explore special places such as Lake Sammamish's spooky sunken old-growth forest, the wildlife-rich natural areas of Juanita and Yarrow bays on Lake Washington, Mercer Slough in Bellevue, and the junglelike tunnels of the Washington Park Arboretum in Seattle.

Or you can do an urban paddle, browsing among houseboats on Lake Union, viewing fishing boats at Shilshole or running the locks in Ballard - kayakers hang on to a floating wall in the small locks while the water level is raised or lowered.

“Paddling the locks is one of my favorites,” Johnston says. “I’ve taken friends from out of town. It’s pretty neat. You get into the locks in a kayak and all of a sudden you’re a celebrity.”

Recently, we joined about 20 other paddlers for a trip from Lake Sammamish State Park at the lake's south end - probably the largest undeveloped piece of Sammamish left - north to tiny Timberlake Park. One of several events this summer celebrating and publicizing the trail, it was a leisurely paddle of about 1 1/2 miles each way, past opulent waterfront homes and into the sunken forest off Greenwood Point.

Looming up from the depths of the latter are dozens of old-growth tree trunks poking above the lake's surface at odd angles, apparently waterlogged testament to what scientists believe was an earthquake and resulting landslide about 1,100 years ago, which also created sunken forests in Lake Washington. Paddling among these algae-covered timbers, I wondered if any of the original inhabitants happened to have been on the lake in their dugout canoes when the quake jolted their world. And what they must have thought.

Not far beyond the forest we found the pocket beach of Timberlake Park, which, like the state park, is an official trail site. Timberlake, however, is designated for water access only, since parking is limited at its land side along Lake Sammamish Parkway. Here we beached the kayaks and canoes and ate lunch, before heading back to the state park in a light but steady head wind.

Sue Abbott, who works for the park service's Rivers and Trails Program, noted how different an urban area looks from the water.

“This trail is important because we all live here, it's a very special place and we need places where we can access the water,” she says. “Seeing an area from the water provides a whole new perspective.”

Barb Sherrill, a WWT A member and owner of Klub Kayak, a rental and guide service, says she believes the Lakes-to-Locks Trail will become the most popular of the state's three water trails.

“It's really exciting to see the trail become a reality,” she says. “You have families that have canoes and kayaks and want to go on little two-hour jaunts. We need more places for people to access and get out on the water. But not many people know how to get access. They try to go to boat launches, but there are so many motorboats.”

The trail also provides suitable spots for paddlers not prepared to take on the currents, tides, frequent winds and other dangers common on the saltchuck.

"This is a perfect trail for those of us, maybe with families, who want to get out in a less intimidating environment," says Margaret Laliberte of Clyde Hill, a WWT A member who helped research trail sites.

The WWT A is encouraging the cities and other government agencies that manage the sites along the trail to seek funding and ultimately provide facilities such as locking canoe and kayak racks, so paddlers can get out and explore shops, restaurants and trails, as well as posting signs marking designated sites.

The group and the park service have published a trail brochure and are in the process of publishing three detailed maps, due out this fall. One will cover the Seattle section, another the Lake Washington section outside of Seattle, and the third Lake Sammamish and the Sammamish River.

The official "ribbon-cutting" for the Lakes-to-Locks Trail is on Aug. 26 at South Lake Union Park (at Terry Avenue North and Valley Street), beginning at 9:30 a.m. It will feature a lakeshore tour with a naturalist and an on-the-water scavenger hunt.

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Special spots on the L-to-L

Arboretum - Closest thing to the bayou in the Seattle area, with dense tunnels of vegetation to paddle through. Rent a canoe at the University of Washington Waterfront Activities Center, or launch your kayak on Lake Union and a paddle through the Montlake Cut.

Juanita Bay - Paddle in the morning or evening and you might see muskrats, beavers, turtles, bullfrogs, herons, eagles. A line of buoys prohibits motorboats from going near shoreline habitat, and paddlers should keep some distance, too. Launch at King County's Juanita Beach Park, off Juanita Drive.

Mercer Slough - Paddle from Lake Washington under Interstate 90 and into the swampy heart of Bellevue. See ducks, geese, herons, hawks and, in fall, salmon. Launch at Enetai Beach Park directly under the freeway, off 108th Ave. S.E. in Bellevue.

Sunken Forest - Maybe the only old-growth forest where you can paddle through the treetops. Definitely intriguing, a place pioneers thought haunted, now surrounded by shoreside opulence. Launch at Sammamish State Park off Northwest Sammamish Road and follow the western shore. Just beyond the forest, beach at Timberlake Park for lunch.

North end of Lake Sammamish - Poke the bow of your canoe or kayak into paths among the lily pads on the lake's north shore, part of Marymoor Park, an especially fine place for bird-watching. Launch at Redmond's Idlewood Park on West Lake Sammamish Parkway and head north toward the lake's outlet.

L-to-L contact

The Washington Water Trails Association (206-545-9161) provides brochures on the Lakes-to-Locks Water Trail, and information also is available on its Web site at www.wwta.org.

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