

Heading down an ice age trail

Ice Age Floods Institute envisions a trail the details the cataclysmic impact of ancient floods

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BOOMER & SENIOR NEWS

If you've already traveled the Pacific Coast Trail and the Oregon Trail, get ready for a trail to knock your socks off.

The nonprofit Ice Age Floods Institute is one of many key entities working to establish a trail from Montana to the Pacific Ocean. Known as the Ice Age Floods National Geologic Trail, they envision a network of trails that details the cataclysmic impact of the floods and the beauty it left behind.

We don't often notice the impact of the massive, ice-age glacial floods in the Northwest, but they're all around us from gravel deposits stretching from Portland to Rocky Butte, and even the shaping of waterfalls in the Columbia River Gorge.

Now, local, state and federal groups are working to raise greater public awareness about how these ancient floods affected the region's geography, and the way we now live and travel.

Rick Thompson is a charter member and president of the Ice Age Institute's Lower Columbia chapter, which covers a large area — not as big as the floods — but from the mouth of the Gorge to the Oregon Coast, north to Longview, Wash., and south to Eugene.

Watching the trail come to fruition is a dream come true for Thompson, a retired greeting card artist.

His interest in the floods was sparked two decades ago and led to writing "Gigaflood," a book about the effects of the largest Lake Missoula. This flood "propelled over 500 cubic

miles of water, ice, rock and mud across eastern Washington, further cut the Columbia River Gorge, covered the Willamette Valley with up to 400 feet of water and left gravel bars miles long and hundreds of feet high." He writes on a blog he runs with his wife, Sylvia.

"I can't tell you how exciting it is," Thompson says of the trail's establishment. "This is a story that needs to be told. For me, it's an interest that became a hobby that became an obsession. Now, it's a life career."

In fact, the Thompsons frequently visit schools, community groups and service organizations to share information about the Institute. They also lead field trips that highlight visible signs of the flooding.

Six years ago, the National Park Service received permission to establish a national geologic trail. It was a major milestone, but it came without funding because of the federal budget crisis.

However, the park service spearheaded a plan showing a trail route through Montana, Idaho, Washington and Oregon, with "hubs" that will feature interpretive signs and locations to access the trails. The plan also outlines a marketing strategy.

While park service funds are available for trail maps, brochures and some signage, Thompson says federal support is slow to materialize. Therefore, the project largely will be implemented through partnerships between various federal, state and local governments, private organizations and companies, museums and other institutions utilizing existing trails, waterways and other infrastructure.



Ron Crowl photo

Rick Thompson ((right), charter member and president of the Ice Age Floods Institute's Lower Columbia chapter, points to erratics--rocks far from their source, by floodwaters or icebergs.

For example, Washington's Dry-Falls, which at one time was the earth's largest waterfall created by floods from ancient Glacial Lake Missoula, already features flood information. Also, the Tualatin Heritage Center, operated by the Tualatin Historical Society and owned by the city of Tualatin, has on permanent display a tusk and molar from a mastodon unearthed nearby whose skeleton location was connected to the floods. Erratics — rocks found in the area, far from their source, brought by floodwaters or icebergs — also are on view at the center.

Tualatin, in fact, has long embraced the ice age floods story, with both public and private entities featuring information about the ancient events. The city library displays a mastodon skeleton, mounted in front of an etched-

glass mastodon image, and the Ice Age Floods Institute meets in the city.

Also, a three-quarter-of-3-mile segment that will fill a gap in the Tualatin River Greenway Trail is under construction. When open later this winter, it will interpret flood facts. Among other things, the trail segment will feature what Paul Hennon, the city's community services director, calls a walk through geologic time, focusing on such things as the ice age floods, ancient peoples and megafauna.

The trail segment, part of a larger trail system in the area and an adjunct to the national trail, is an example of a project that connects people with nature while tapping into Tualatin's history to create a "sense of community and community pride," Hennon says.

Yvonne Addington, past president of the Tualatin Historical Society who recently assumed that role again for 2016, says efforts in Tualatin to incorporate ancient flood information and interpretive features into public spaces is "very exciting to me"

Addington, who also served as Tualatin's first city manager, has been helping to raise public awareness about the ancient floods' impact and influence on the area after learning more about this aspect of Northwest history several years ago. "I found it fascinating," she says. "I do think people are showing more interest in this."

Thompson said the national trail's development will reach another milestone this year, when the park service makes the project a part of the agency's 100-year celebration.

The Ice Age Floods Institute, with 11 chapters and 765 members, has worked for two decades to bring the trail to fruition. Thompson says the scale of the floods continues to astound him. The information he shares with groups and individuals including that Glacial Lake Missoula at its largest held as much water as Lake Erie and Lake Ontario combined often elicits stunned looks and comments such as. "I had no idea."

Thompson notes that the research of the late geologist J Harlen Bretz plays a pivotal role in the current understanding of the floods. He proposed in the early 1900s only a sudden, cataclysmic flood could have resulted in the Columbia Basin's huge and unique landforms. Fellow geologists scoffed at Bretz' notion, but eventually his idea was born out by his and others' research.



This map shows the tentative trail the Ice Age Floods Institute would like to have marked. The trail starts in Montana and winds its way west through Idaho and along the Oregon/Washington border, before dropping down along the Interstate-5 corridor.

The institute notes on its website that between 18,000 and 13,000 years ago, an ice sheet moved into the Idaho panhandle near what is now Lake Pend Oreille, creating Glacial Lake Missoula. The ice dam failed repeatedly, and when it did, tremendous amounts of water and ice raced across Idaho, Washington and Oregon.

Today, some things still remain up for debate, such as the number of large floods that occurred in the Northwest, Thompson notes. Regardless of the number, he likes to quote his wife's take on the geologic events: "Destruction, but what became of it is beauty."

"In five to 10 years, it will be a recognized national trail, like the Lewis and Clark trail, Thompson says. "We are part of the beginning of something." ■