

History of Martha Lake Airport Community Park and “Big Rock”

By David C. McConnell, Snohomish County Parks Department
3-8-2012

Martha Lake Airfield Community Park was developed on the site of the former Martha Lake Airport. The Martha Lake Airport was constructed by the Howe family so that Mr. Howe could commute by plane to his job in Seattle. The airport had a reputation of being a difficult airport to land in, causing an occasional pilot to end up landing in Martha Lake itself. The airport was later purchased by Snohomish County and converted in to a community park between 2000 and 2010. At the time the county took over the airport site, the airport and an adjoining parcel were purchased to create the park.



Location of Big Rock at the park site

The airport portion of the site still had some infrastructure on it while the adjoining site was a mixture of open mowed grass fields, mature Puget Sound lowland forest, and red alder successional growth in the former airport ‘clear zone’. The site was also dotted with palustrine forested and emergent wetlands. (Source: Martha Lake Airport Community Park Master Plan, 12-20-2002.)

The most prominent natural feature on the site is a large rock, or glacial erratic, located in the north eastern portion of the park. This natural history feature was preserved when the park was converted into a community park.

So what is a glacial erratic? A glacial erratic is a piece of rock that differs from the size and type of rock native to the area in which it rests. The term "erratic" comes from the Latin word “errare”, and refers to something that behaves erratically or in an unexpected way. Glacial erratics can range in size from pebbles to large boulders. The largest erratics are over 17,000 tons and can be larger than a single family home. Glacial erratics formed by erosion as glacial ice expands across the landscape. Glaciers then transport erratics by several different methods from their original locations to where they are later found. (Source: Used various references from the bottom of this source http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glacial_erratic#cite_note-Evans2005-5.)

Cleaning “Big Rock”

The glacial erratic at Martha Lake Airfield Community Park has long been used as a local youth hangout, has been tagged by graffiti and used for a climbing rock. By the time the park opened in 2010, it was apparent that “Big Rock”, as it is often referred to, would need ongoing care and cleanup to control graffiti.



Big Rock before cleaning.

David McConnell, a planning intern in the Snohomish County Parks Department, took on the assignment of researching graffiti removal methods, developing a plan for cleaning Big Rock in the least damaging way possible, and developing an interpretive sign for the site. Correctly identifying the type of stone substrate that Big Rock came from was the first step. Kirk Bailey, an Engineering Geologist with Snohomish County, volunteered to classify the stone type and make recommendations on how to conduct the cleaning. The research for the project involved researching methods of graffiti prevention and removal, testing different methods, and making recommendations to the Ranger and Planning Sections. Research was conducted in the fall and early winter.



Park Ranger Jack Davidson cleaning Big Rock with pressure washer



Park Ranger Nick Gero treating stubborn sports with graffiti treatment

After a variety of methods were evaluated, the best method appeared to be using a pressure washer combined with a graffiti remover for oil based paints. Cleaning for Big Rock was completed over two days in late February 2012. Park Rangers John Tucker, Jack Davidson, and Nick Gero tested cleanup methods and completed the cleanup. The cleanup was a challenge because the material which Big Rock is made of, called greenstone, is actually a matrix or mixture of different kinds of stone with different harnesses and porosity. The graffiti in some portions of the erratic was especially difficult to remove and required repeated treatments.

The interpretive sign was provided by a grant from Wendy Becker and the Economic Development Department. Planning intern David McConnell conducted the research for the sign and created a draft of the sign which was then rendered into the final design by Snohomish County graphic design staff. Mike Ohlsen, Chuck Hagen and David then installed the finished sign at the site.



Mike Ohlsen and Chuck Hagen installing the sign



The installation is complete. Thanks, Mike and Chuck!



Park Ranger Jack Davidson, Park Dept. Director Tom Teigen, and Planning Intern David McConnell at the sign dedication

Special Thanks go to: Jack Davidson, John Tucker, Nick Gero, Mike Ohlsen, Chuck Hagen, Wendy Becker, Kirk and Dianne Bailey, Russ Bosanko