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# Reimagining the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center: Needs Assessment Report for the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center in Ferndale, WA

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Western Washington University

Reimagining the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center  
Needs Assessment Report for the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center in Ferndale, WA

Kaitlyn Boyd  
Honors Senior Project  
2018

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Lake Interpretive Center in Ferndale, Washington

By: Kaitlyn Boyd

## **INTRODUCTION**

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### *Abstract*

This project focuses on the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center that has been closed due to budget cuts since 2008. Whatcom County Parks (WCP), who owns the facility, is planning on remodeling the interior of the interpretive center to make the building more rentable as a facility, but plans on keeping some educational materials (J. Jacoby, interview, June 3, 2018). The purpose of this project is to explore the needs of potential stakeholders who would benefit from the re-opening of the interpretive center as an environmental education site, including local school districts and community members. Additionally, this project's goal is to assess the feasibility of re-opening the center and to document the history of the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center site, which has not been done comprehensively to date.

As both an under-utilized facility and a cherished historical community landmark, the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center has a lot to offer. However, there are many steps that must be taken if it is re-opened, and a lot of connections that must be made for it to be as successful as it once was, or even more so. These needs were analyzed by conducting a series of interviews with key community members who were involved with the site, are potential stakeholders to the site, or have a background with similar environmental education programs. What these interviews have shown is that there is a need for interactive environmental education opportunities within Whatcom county, but opening the center would require a commitment to supporting environmental education on behalf of Whatcom County Parks, a revised budgeting plan, and a

collaboration between WCP and local school districts to ensure that the needs of the teachers would be adequately met by the curriculum.

### History of Tennant Lake

Tennant Lake is located in Ferndale, Washington adjacent to Hovander Park. It is an 80-acre, shallow, peat-bog lake that was originally utilized by native peoples to harvest food, particularly waterfowl (Friends of Tennant Lake and Hovander Park, n.d.). It was originally called *Sil-ats-its* by the Lummi Tribe and its shores became the property of John Tennant in 1859, who was an Arkansas pioneer married to a woman named Clara, the daughter of Lummi Chief Chowitzit (Moles, 2014). John Tennant was one of the earliest non-native settlers in the area and the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center and Fragrance Garden serve as preservation to one of the earliest settled land in the area of Ferndale (Moles, 2014). When Tennant died in 1893, the land was sold to the Nielsen family, who used the land to farm (Friends of Tennant Lake and Hovander Park, n.d.). In 1974, Tennant Lake and the surrounding land was purchased by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW), while the Nielsen House was acquired by Whatcom County Parks (WCP) and later utilized as the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center (TLIC) (Friends of Tennant Lake and Hovander Park, n.d.). This land was and continues to be co-managed by both WCP and WDFW (J. Edwards, interview, May 29, 2018). Originally, the Tennant Lake Unit of the designated Whatcom Wildlife Area was acquired for waterfowl and deer hunting, wildlife viewing, and environmental education through funding by the Interagency Committee for Outdoor Recreation (IAC) (Edwards, 2007).

### History of the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center

The Tennant Lake Interpretive Center was established in 1978, a few years after the facility was acquired by WCP in 1974 (Edwards, 2007). Its initial goals were focused on drawing people into the area to make them curious about the natural history of the unique landscape of Tennant Lake, and its curriculum was focused around the importance of wetlands and their positive effects on water quality (R. Edwards, interview, May 24, 2018). At this time, the boardwalk and Fragrance Garden were not yet developed and Whatcom County Parks funded the position of a full-time interpreter at the center to develop the exhibits and curriculum (R. Edwards, interview, May 24, 2018). Due to budget cuts, the interpretive center was closed for the first time in 1980, but WCP worked with the private contractual company Nature Northwest, developed by the previous interpreter for the center, for continued environmental education programming (R. Edwards, interview, May 24, 2018). Work done with Nature Northwest included having the interpretive center open to the public on weekends, environmental education and natural history programs, internships, and exhibit development mainly in the spring and summer seasons (R. Edwards, interview, May 24, 2018). Funding was revitalized for the interpretive facility due to the generosity of Harriet Spanel, a former Washington state legislator, Marty Daniels, Kelli Linville, and others, who lobbied for funding for the interpretive center through WDFW (J. Edwards, interview, May 29, 2018). In 1985, there was also curriculum development for grades K-6 and teacher training was conducted under contract with the Ferndale School District (R. Edwards, interview, May 24, 2018).

By the late '90s, the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center was well-established and was opened for full-time operation in 1997 (Edwards, 1999). During this time, the interpretive center offered an array on environmental education opportunities including school outreach programs,

field trip groups, and on-site programs (Edwards, 1999). Between September 1, 1998 and August 31, 1999, the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center provided programs for 8,222 people and the income from program fees totaled \$28,118.10 (Edwards, 1999). At this time, the center was staffed by two full time employees that included naturalist Jim Edwards and assistant-naturalist Kym Fedale, who were responsible for all facets of operation for the interpretive center (J. Edwards, interview, May 29, 2018). Funding for Edwards' position was through a "line item" in Washington States' budget, while the assistant naturalist position was funded through the Whatcom Parks and Recreation Foundation (WPRF), which acted as a conduit to manage funds made by the education program (J. Edwards, interview, May 29, 2018). However, other staffing support was given from the non-profit Friends of Tennant Lake organization, the WPRF, and other volunteers (Edwards, 1999). Additionally, Huxley College within Western Washington University provided interns for the program, most of which were studying Environmental Education (Edwards, 1999). Other staffing included two workers from the Northwest Washington Private Industry Council in the summer (Edwards, 1999). According to the year-end report for 1998-99, the staffing situation at the interpretive center was only possible due to fundraising efforts from the WPRF to make up a budget shortfall (Edwards, 1999). The WPRF was a charitable IRS 501 (C) 3 non-profit organization that committed to raise funds for Tennant Lake in this year (Edwards, 1999).

By 2007, the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center remained operated by a partnership between the WDFW, WCP, WPRF, and the Friends of Tennant Lake organization, now named the Friends of Tennant Lake and Hovander Park (FTLHP) (Edwards, 2007). WCP and WDFW managed the facility and the two non-profit agencies sponsored programs and provided support for the natural, historical and cultural preservation of the park and program development

(Edwards, 2007). By 2007, the education program at the interpretive center grew to include the Tennant Lake Nature Day Camps, Young Naturalists summer camps, and Family Programs in addition to their previous outreach programs and organized field trips from local schools (J. Edwards, interview, May 29, 2018). Each year from 1998 to 2007, the year-end reports show that anticipated inflows and outflows for budget were roughly equal to each other, with around \$2,000 a year surplus adding up to an accrued \$44,423.29 in the Tennant Lake account of the WPRF by 2007 (Edwards, 2007). Although this program was able to self-sustain over these years into the late 2000s, budget cuts once again closed the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center in 2008 (J. Edwards, interview, May 29, 2018). The non-profit Friends of Tennant Lake and Hovander Park continued to support the goals of the interpretive center by conducting letter-writing to state legislators as well as fundraising events such as a silent auction in an attempt to find funds for the interpretive center (J. Edwards, interview, May 29, 2018). However, the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center has not opened since its closure, and community involvement has diminished. FTLH still presently continues to provide volunteers to support the Tennant Lake and Hovander Parks (L. Friend and S. Frank, interview, May 27, 2018).

Currently, Whatcom County Parks and Recreation uses the historical Nielsen home as a facility rental, usually accommodating meetings for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. WCP is planning on renovating the interior of the building that the interpretive center and materials are still located in by year 2019 or 2020, in order to make it more rent-able as a facility (J. Jacoby, interview, June 3, 2018). They plan on retaining some environmental education materials in the center, but no finalized plans have been made yet (J. Jacoby, interview, June 3, 2018).



## **DATA COLLECTION**

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### *Methods*

The interviewees were selected based on their experience with the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center, involvement in similar environmental education programs, and/or connections to local school districts. Many interviewees also suggested other people to contact, so selection of interview candidates was mainly by word of mouth and previous connections. For instance, prior to knowing that she was the first interpreter to work at the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center, Rae Edwards was my internship supervisor when I was a restoration intern with the City of Bellingham Parks and Recreation.

Interviewing community members who were previously connected to the interpretive center provided me with an understanding of how the interpretive center was organized, as well as the challenges that it may have faced when it was open. Other people connected to environmental education programs were beneficial to this project because they could provide outside perspectives on the Tennant Lake program and give suggestions on what they have done to overcome similar challenges to those that the interpretive center had faced. Additionally, interviews with people who work with local school districts were essential to this project, since the schools are potential stakeholders if the environmental education program is available to them as an educational opportunity. Their perspective on the curriculum is also invaluable, as many environmental programs tend to cater to the state requirements for public schools, such as the national Next Generation Science Standards (NGSS).

The interviews with community members lasted anywhere from 30 minutes to 3 hours and the interview questions were designed to be specific to their prior experience. However, all questions revolved around why environmental education is important, if they believe that re-

opening the interpretive center would be beneficial to the community, schools, and/or Whatcom County Parks, and what aspect of environmental education they believed was the most important.

### People Interviewed

- Rae Edwards (Original TLIC Interpreter)
- Jim Edwards (Previous TLIC Interpreter)
- Dennis Connor (Previous WCP Lead Ranger)
- Holly Roger (Previous TLIC Assistant Interpreter; Founder of Wild Whatcom)
- Wendy Walker (WWU Professor for Interpretive Education)
- Jill Jacoby (Current WCP West Region Ranger)
- Lisa Friend (Friends of Tennant Lake and Hovander Park)
- Stephen Frank (Friends of Tennant Lake and Hovander Park)
- Sarah Walker (Bellingham School District)
- Don Burgess (WWU Professor of Science Education/Director at NCI)
- Jan Mason (WCP Fragrance Gardener)
- Courtney Strehlow (WCP Historical Program staff)
- Naomi Liebhold (LEAD Co-Director)

### Limitations

While I was able to interview many key community members, there were two parties who were not able to meet with me. This includes the WCP Operations Manager and the WCP Director, as well as people involved with other successful interpretive centers. I initially contacted both of these parties, but being that spring is the busiest season for each, they were not

available to meet for questions. However, if a complete needs assessment report is to be written, both of these parties are essential perspectives that need to be explored further.

Firstly, the operations manager and director of Whatcom County Parks are behind the logistics of getting the interpretive program running again or not, and are in charge of deciding to what extent the environmental education materials will be preserved at the center. Additionally, they are likely to have prior experience with the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center and the decision-making that was behind the second closure of the interpretive center in 2008. Therefore, they may be able to shed some light on the interpretive center's history and why it has been unable to be re-opened since its operation was halted.

Successful environmental education programs similar to the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center would be an essential perspective for assessing what it takes to keep these programs running and where they draw their support from. A model may be able to be based off of their organization and similar strategies may be able to be applied to Tennant Lake.

A third party that I did not contact but that would also be an asset to a needs assessment for the interpretive center would be the Whatcom Parks and Recreation Foundation (WPRF), who played a key role as a conduit of funds that the center raised. When developing this process, I did not know that this non-profit organization had been so involved in the budgeting of the center, which was one of the major challenges towards its success. Therefore, this organization should be contacted in the future to gain another perspective on improvements that could be made.

## **ANALYSIS**

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As a qualitative needs assessment with no survey work or polling, this project did not require any statistical analysis. Instead, the information that I gained through the interviews was condensed and organized into individual documents that contributed to this report. These interview details were used to form a comprehensive history of the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center site and programming, suggestions for improvement, and feedback on environmental education aspects that may be missing within the Whatcom County area.

Because my own background is moreso focused on environmental science and ecological restoration rather than interpretation, environmental education, or budgeting, I do not possess the adequate qualifications to formally analyze all of the information that I collected. However, this needs assessment report serves as a resource to fill in the gaps of the history of the interpretive center, and also compiles various perspectives that are important to the next planning stages of developing a budget plan and curriculum. There are currently no other sources of a comprehensive history of the Tennant Lake site that include the history of the interpretive center, nor have the perspectives of these key community members been revisited since the center's operation was shut down in 2008.

## **RESULTS**

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### *School Connections*

After documenting the history of the interpretive center's involvement with local school districts and after discussion with interviewees, it became clear that the connection between school districts and the TLIC was integral to both the success of the programs and the schools. Firstly, the interpretive center gave local schools opportunity for outdoor learning and connecting class lessons to the real world with experiential and hands-on learning. Because the

Ferndale school district was involved with curriculum development, it ensured that the lesson plans of the interpretive center were focused on satisfying learning requirements and Washington state teaching standards. Additionally, the interpretive center and its programs provided opportunity for continuous environmental education opportunities, so students were able to learn about grade-specific topics and revisit the site year after year to explore different concepts. When the interpretive center was previously opened, the Ferndale school district specifically sent 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders to the center for this type of learning program (J. Edwards, interview, May 29, 2018). This idea of continuous learning and environmental site re-visitation is a model that is currently being developed and adopted by the Bellingham School District in connection to the Gordon Carter Environmental Learning Center (S. Walker, interview, June 1, 2018). The goals of this site are to integrate lesson plans that encourage students to discover and develop a passion for environmental education, and prepare for a wide range of educational and vocational options (Bellingham Public Schools, 2018). Similar to the TLIC, the Gordon Carter site was an underused facility that used to have an already established program and is being revitalized for the purposes of environmental education. Because this learning model is currently being adopted by local school districts, it shows that there is always a need for more environmental education opportunities to include in this continuous education model, and implies that the TLIC could be involved in these programs.

The main challenge associated with these school connections, however, is transportation to and from the site. When I asked what steps schools usually took to overcome this challenge, many ideas that were discussed included fundraising efforts, specifically fundraising through the school's PTAs. However, another solution is to bring the TLIC educational materials to the classroom instead of the other way around, and this was exemplified in the school outreach

program that the interpretive center was previously involved in. However, while this outreach eliminated the need for transportation, it still required schools to pay a fee in order to have this connection. This was not a topic that I was able to explore further, and should be taken into consideration for future programming.

In addition to helping connect schools to environmental learning opportunities, the program fees that school outreach programs and school field trips brought revenue to the TLIC and helped to support the self-sustainable business model that the TLIC had adopted. This revenue allowed the TLIC to continue to support these school groups and make more developments to the curriculum and learning plans that the interpretive center offered.

#### *Why Environmental Education is Important*

During these interviews, I was able to explore the idea of why environmental education is so important to these potential stakeholders of TLIC and to Whatcom county as a whole. The answer that interviewees gave me most often was that they valued environmental education programs because they give students experiential learning opportunities. Through hands-on curriculum and application of classroom lessons to the outdoors, it gives students a better understanding of their natural environment, and solidifies the concepts they previously explore in a classroom setting. In addition, it was valuable to many people that these programs encourage a fascination and respect for nature at an early age, so that children can better realize their own environmental impact and learn about steps they can take to protect the natural world.

Specifically, the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center is important to environmental education because it provided these learning opportunities within the community to both school districts and the public. Family events as well as school events were always promoted in order to build community connections between community members and their local environment.

Additionally, Tennant Lake was a site of historical importance to the city of Ferndale and the surrounding area, as it was among the first settled lands. The early settlers who lived on this land were also key members in establishing the Ferndale community, and the land itself provided the foundation for that. Tennant Lake, being part of a wetland, plays a significant environmental role in water filtration and upholding water quality that the community depends on for clean water. Tennant Lake is also located within the floodplain of the nearby Nooksack River, which provided the fertile soil that the strong agricultural foundation of the town was based on. Because this site has such historical and environmental significance to the community, it allows an even stronger connection to be made for the local people in addition to an educational opportunity.

#### *Budgeting and Organization Solutions*

In order to analyze budgeting and organizational strategies that the interpretive center may be able to utilize in the future, I incorporated previous strategies used by the center in addition to suggestions made by interviewees involved in other environmental education programs.

Firstly, after discussing the logistics of the historical program that the Whatcom County Parks currently runs, I was able to find a potential working model that could be applied to future Tennant Lake programs. The historical program has one part-time, year-round staff member whose responsibilities include curriculum development, overseeing interns and volunteers, and organizing tours at the historic Hovander Home and Roeder Home (C. Strehlow, interview, May 10, 2018). Although I was not able to explore where the funding for this staff position comes from, this may be a model that could be utilized at the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center initially, since this model is already adopted by WCP. However, it would be ideal to have a staff member at Tennant Lake who would be full-time rather than part-time, both for a strong initial program

development and because a full-time position would promote a more continuous leadership (D. Conner, interview, June 5, 2018). If the position was kept part-time, there is the possibility of a high turn-over rate for the position, causing a discontinuity that would not be ideal for a program that is re-establishing its foundation. Also, according to the year-end reports from 1998-2007 for the interpretive center, the main recommendations that the previous interpreter made to the WCP was for there to be at least two full-time staff positions available due to the amount of job responsibilities that they were expected to accomplish (Edwards, 2007).

Another idea that was brought up is contracting out the interpretive center to an already established environmental education program in the area. By doing this, it would decrease the amount of responsibility on WCP to employ their own staff members and to develop a new curriculum. This may be a more cost-effective option that could help establish the program initially, and even be incorporated full-time. This model was one that was previously used when the interpretive program initially closed in 1980 (R. Edwards, interview, May 24, 2018). By going through this contracted organization, as well as finding additional funding from private donors and legislation appeal, the interpretive program was successful in overcoming this financial struggle.

As far as budgeting, there are many ideas for the redirection of current funds gained by WCP as well as using strategies that were successful in finding funding for the center in the past. Firstly, the funding for previous program was found through a variety of sources, including private donors, grants, and the state budget. These are all areas that should be explored again, and the Whatcom Parks and Rec. Foundation should also be contacted, since they played a key role in previous fund dispersal at the interpretive center. I was unable to connect with this non-



profit organization during this project's time frame, so this previous collaboration should be followed up on in the future.

A second idea for a budget solution would be to redirect funds that the Whatcom County Parks is already gaining from the Tennant Lake building. The bottom floor of the Neilson house is currently used as a rental facility for meetings and events. Additionally, the top floor of the house is rented out to tenants for housing, as it was previously converted to a living space when the TLIC was previously running. Because both of these fund sources are directly related to the building of the interpretive center, the profits made from them may be able to be directed towards the re-establishment of the interpretive program. I was not able to find out where these funds are currently being applied, so this should be examined if this model is used. This model would also be ideal for the WCP to adopt because the current historical program is run in a similar way. The historic Roeder Home is a dual-purpose space, providing tours for historical education of Whatcom County, as well as a popular rental facility for weddings, parties, meetings, and other events. This contributes to the self-sustainability of the historical program, and could also be adopted by the interpretive center in the future by having the Nielsen house adopt a similar dual-purpose.

#### Areas of Improvement

When interviewing people who had previously been involved in the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center, I asked what aspects of the previous program they would improve for the future. I also asked interviewees who were involved in similar environmental programs what the most important factors were for the success of these programs. There were three main themes of responses to these questions, which included accessibility, curriculum, and support and collaboration.

Firstly, accessibility was the number one thing that people discussed with me for this topic. This includes accessibility for people of all abilities as well as accessibility for all school groups, including the Lummi Tribal School. The area surrounding the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center, which includes the watch tower, Fragrance Garden, and boardwalk, was designed specifically to cater to people of all abilities. The Fragrance Garden was initially designed to be a space for the visually impaired, where they could experience a garden that was focused on tactile plants and strongly scented flowers in order to appeal to senses other than sight. The watch tower, which has a series of stairs leading to a viewing platform, accommodates people without the ability to climb the stairs by providing a viewing screen at the base of the tower, with a movable camera so that the view from the tower can be seen from all angles. Lastly, the boardwalk has a portion that is designed for wheelchair access, with rails on the sides of the usually rail-less boardwalk design. In order to match this theme of accessibility, it was often recommended that the same values be applied to the interpretive center design as well.

The second type of accessibility that many people discussed was ensuring that there were not only connections between the local public school districts, but also between the education program and the Lummi Tribal School. According to people that worked at the interpretive center previously, there were prior programs set up with the Lummi people to connect the natural history of the landscape with their culture (H. Roger, interview, May 24, 2018). The interpreters started this program by conducting the lessons themselves, but after time the lessons were conducted by the Lummi teachers (H. Roger, interview, May 24, 2018). Additionally, accessibility can be applied to the lessons taught about the indigenous history as well, so that it is an experience that everyone who visits the center has. Especially because the land surrounding Tennant Lake was once part of the Lummi tribe's traditional hunting and foraging grounds,

having lessons that tie in the indigenous history of the area is important, and should be included in future programming.

The second theme that many of the interviewees expressed a need for was a definite collaboration between the schools and the interpretive program. As aforementioned in a previous section, this connection ensured that the lesson plans for school groups were aligned with the state standards that teachers are expected to meet. Therefore, this should be a key focus in moving forward with the interpretive program development.

The third theme that people expressed a need for was support and collaboration between WCP, volunteer groups, the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, as well as the community. One idea that many expressed the need for was a specific collaboration between WCP and WDFW, since they currently co-manage the lands surrounding Tennant Lake. WDFW was also previously connected to the interpretive programs at the center, as seen by the budget cuts in 2008 where WDFW took over the program after the WCP budget cuts (J. Edwards, interview, May 29, 2018). However, WDFW also lost funding that year and was unable to support the program further (J. Edwards, interview, May 29, 2018).

A second important suggestion for connection that many interviewees made was between WCP and the non-profit organizations that used to support a lot of the program efforts, such as the Friends of Tennant Lake and Hovander Park, who contributed volunteers towards staffing, curriculum, and fundraising. The organization Friends of Tennant Lake and Hovander Park is still involved with many WCP events and still continue to volunteer time docenting at Tennant Lake to provide some education at the site (L. Friend and S. Frank, interview, May 27, 2018). However, they expressed frustration at the lack of support from WCP in recent years, especially since they often do not have access to the center when they are doing their docent volunteering

(L. Friend and S. Frank, interview, May 27, 2018). Because this organization is still so passionate about the TLIC and its objectives, even after the interpretive center has been closed for 10 years, it shows that there is still the possibility of involving them in the program once again.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR ACTION**

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After documenting the history of the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center and interviewing potential stakeholders in future environmental programming, actions that should be taken for the revitalization of the center's efforts include reconnecting with the local school districts and collaborating with them for curriculum development. Additionally, funding for the center needs to be found using current incomes such as the facility rentals and tenant rentals for the center, or through legislative appeal to get a line item in the state budget for a full-time interpreter as was previously done. Although fundraising efforts have been able to bring in other revenue for the interpretive center in the past, a more consistent and solidified option for a budget plan needs to be developed. Thirdly, the connections between WCP and previous organizations that have been involved in the center, such as Friends of Tennant Lake and Hovander Park and the Whatcom Parks and Rec. Foundation need to be established so that support for the center is reinstated for future volunteers and fund conduits.

### **CONCLUSION**

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Through this project, I was able to learn so much about the logistics of interpretation programs and their design. It was really astonishing to see how many people contribute to the success of these environmental education programs, and the amount of support and funding they need. However, despite these challenges, it is clear that environmental education is important to include in school curriculums due to the valuable connections that it establishes between students

and their community. I am excited to see what the future of the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center holds, and hope that I may one day see it open. The hope of this project is to provide documentation for the history, organization, and curriculum of the TLIC, but also to gain the perspectives of the people that have played a key role in the Tennant Lake Interpretive Center and similar programs. These are key to the formation of a new interpretive program, as the community members are going to be the ones who are invested in this community landmark. This needs assessment report as well as compiled documents and interview notes will all be submitted to Whatcom County Parks as well as the Friends of Tennant Lake and Hovander Park to potentially be used in future programming and the development of environmental education at Tennant Lake once again.

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