

# THREE FINGERS LOOKOUT: A SOCIAL MEDIA CASE STUDY

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As participation in outdoor recreation in the United States continues to rise, with over 175.8 million people reporting recreating outside in 2024 according to the Outdoor Industry Association,<sup>1</sup> the recreational use of fire lookouts is increasing as well. Lookouts available for rental are often booked solid months in advance and popular day-use lookouts can see dozens of visitors per day during the peak season. Data for overnight visitation to first-come, first-serve lookouts is more difficult to obtain. However, for certain lookouts – like *Three Fingers Lookout* in the Boulder River Wilderness of the Mt. Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest in Washington, and the *Hidden Lake* and *Winchester Mountain Lookouts* also on the MB-SNF, the increase in recent years is indisputable. This lookout can be framed as a composite for recreational overuse as it applies to lookouts as well as in wild spaces more broadly.

The use of lookouts for recreation has many positive impacts. It can increase awareness of the role fire lookouts play in the stewardship of our public lands through interpretive materials or personnel at the lookout, provide opportunities for experiential learning when the lookout is still equipped with a fire finder, and create advocates for their preservation as historic structures. But when usage increases to levels that stress the lookout structure itself, negatively impact the experience for visitors, and impact the ecosystem surrounding the lookout, it can create dilemmas

1 "2024 Outdoor Participation Trends Report," Outdoor Foundation, 2024, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://outdoorindustry.org/article/2024-outdoor-participation-trends-report/>.

for public land management agencies and ethical concerns for users and the broader outdoor recreation community.

As a volunteer-maintained lookout without an official reservation system (most lookouts available for overnight stays are managed through *recreation.gov* or state agencies), the Three Fingers Lookout has historically operated on a first-come, first-serve basis. For decades, this seemed to be sufficient. The challenging hike and remote location prevented the lookout from regularly reaching maximum capacity. As the population of Seattle, the closest metropolitan area, grew there was a boom in outdoor recreation. A 2018 article in the Seattle Times cited data that showed:

*“the increase in the number of hikers is seven times greater than our [Seattle] population growth over the past decade.”*<sup>2</sup>

Visits to the *Three Fingers Lookout* began to rise dramatically as well, despite access becoming more challenging due to road washouts. Once the lookout – arguably one of the most photogenic and stunning in the Northwest, if not the nation – gained popularity on social media in the early 2020s and went “viral” the amount of visitation increased to an unprecedented level. The connection to social media and increased use was also noted by the Seattle Times:

*“Nielsen [polling] data show that people who hike are 43 percent more likely than average to have used Instagram in the past 30 days.”*<sup>3</sup>

The Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics noted in 2018 that social media, such as Instagram, has effects on public lands:

*“There is little question that social media plays a role in the promotion of various outdoor locations, and in some cases, has led to significant resource and social impacts.”*<sup>4</sup>

At *Three Fingers Lookout*, it is estimated that visitation has tripled within the last decade, with more than 500 persons likely having spent the night in 2023.<sup>5</sup> A volunteer with Friends of *Three Fingers Lookout* reported seeing 12 persons spending the night at one time; a maximum occupancy of 8 is listed by

2 Gene Balk, “Instagram Effect? Number of Seattle-Area Hikers Has Doubled in Less Than 10 Years, Data Show,” *The Seattle Times*, April 2, 2018, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/data/instagram-effect-number-of-seattle-area-hikers-has-doubled-in-less-than-10-years-data-show/>.

3 Ibid.

4 “Leave No Trace and Social Media,” Leave No Trace Center for Outdoor Ethics, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://lnt.org/sites/default/files/Leave%20No%20Trace%20and%20Social%20Media.pdf>.

5 Michael Holmquist, telephone interview by author, July 19, 2024.

the Mountaineers (a Seattle-based nonprofit that assists with restoration efforts) on their trip planning webpage for *Three Fingers Lookout*.<sup>6</sup>

For lookouts on national forest lands that are part of the rental program, overnight reservations are managed via *recreation.gov* portal and capacity is limited. While this results in popular lookout being booked out months in advance, it largely eliminates user conflicts and prevents the amount of use from exceeding the available infrastructure, such as trailhead parking and toilet facilities. As frustrating as this system can be for those wishing for the ability for a spontaneous visit, it is undoubtedly an effective way of managing overnight use at popular lookouts.

Despite heavy recreational use, *Three Fingers Lookout* is not part of the rental program and instead relies on the first-come, first-serve model. In recent years, users of the *AllTrails* app have begun trying to extend first-come, first-serve into the digital world. Those intending to visit the lookout for an overnight stay have created an unofficial, ineffective, and confusing system by publicly posting their anticipated timeframe for hiking into *Three Fingers Lookout*. This elucidates a lack of official infrastructure that meets the demands of recreationists, the lookout structure itself, and the ecological zone surrounding the lookout. Some unofficial reservations read as such: “Confirmed group of 3 staying at the top July 10th” read one entry; “Confirmed trip overnight July 26-27 (group of 4)” stated another. There were dozens of similar posts before hiking season for the North Cascades had begun. Some of these posts were for dates that were logistically unfeasible and much too early in the season given the lookout’s location and which demonstrated a profound degree of ignorance of the effort it would take to reach the historic fire lookout – perched at 6,854 feet, requiring a round-trip of 38-miles, and with snowpack persisting into early July and requiring crampons and ice axes. Several posts overlapped with dates previously posted.

Other comments expressed a frustration at this unofficial system to try and secure a spot at this iconic structure.

*“For everyone using all trails as a reservation system, I’m going to go up the day before your reservation. I don’t know*

<sup>6</sup> “Three Fingers Trip Planning.” The Mountaineers, accessed February 24, 2026, <https://www.mountaineers.org/locations-lodges/everett-branch/committees/everett-lookout-trail-maintenance-committee/web-pages/three-fingers-trip-planning>.

*which one but one of y'all for sure getting scooped. [...] Owen and Wiley can't wait to see you guys up there July 10th!!! Any chance I could borrow or share a sleeping bag? I won't have room for mine because of the speaker I'll be carrying. Hope you guys like Pitbull!"*

This impromptu reservation system may feel innocuous or well-intentioned at first, but it actually raises complicated ethical questions about the tradition of first-come-first-serve accommodations at singular destinations like *Three Fingers Lookout*. When I brought up this topic with Mark Sundeen, associate professor of Environmental Studies at the University of Montana, he said:

*"It sounds like rubbish to me. I mean, people can make imaginary reservations all they want but [...] they mean nothing if someone else shows up who doesn't pay any attention to AllTrails."*<sup>7</sup>

While most understand that the lookout is a shared resource, it is unavoidable that user conflicts could emerge after having spent so much effort to reach the lookout only to find it occupied by others.

The lack of oversight also makes the jobs of lookout volunteers and non-profits more challenging. Michael Holmquist, a volunteer with Friends of *Three Fingers Lookout*, also believed that users posting about their intentions to stay overnight on *AllTrails* was problematic to the structural integrity of the lookout. *"I think it absolutely confuses things,"* said Holmquist. *"You cannot tell me with a straight face you're not claiming the lookout."*<sup>8</sup> Holmquist said that while overnight use of the *Three Fingers Lookout* has increased substantially in the last decade, volunteer recruitment remains a challenge for the group who coordinates maintenance projects. Situated in a topographical and climatologically extreme environment, the weather alone creates significant maintenance challenges. Combined with the cumulative impact of hundreds of visitors using the lookout — even seemingly mundane actions like opening the door repeatedly and raising and lowering the shutters add up in terms of wear-and-tear — the Friends of *Three Fingers Lookout* represent the intersection of increased recreational demand catalyzed by social media proliferation and the lack of official oversight in wild spaces.

<sup>7</sup> Email conversation, July 19, 2024.

<sup>8</sup> Michael Holmquist, telephone interview by author, July 19, 2024.

As this topic was first being researched in the summer of 2024, many of the comments posting about staying specific nights had been deleted. When asked, none of the several users who were contacted had deleted the comments themselves and *AllTrails* did not respond to multiple requests for comment about why they were deleted. Similar comments have reappeared by different users, creating a confusing situation, and as of fall 2025 there does not appear to be any moderation by *AllTrails* of comments related to future overnight stays. At the present time, it seems apparent that social media fame, like it has with numerous other locations in designated wilderness, has created more problems than it has solved for *Three Fingers Lookout* and those who manage and maintain it.

Its location in the Boulder River Wilderness area of the Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest creates several management challenges for the lookout. Camden Bruner, District Ranger of the Darrington Ranger District where the lookout is located, said that maintaining wilderness characteristics, such as opportunities for solitude, can be challenging when areas become more popular. “*There’s no way around it; Three Fingers Lookout is Instagram famous*”<sup>9</sup> he said. “*The quality and the quantity of the social media content is incredible.*”<sup>10</sup> Some of the social media content has been filmed using drones, which are prohibited in federally designated wilderness areas. This further elucidates the difficulty of maintaining historic legislation like the Wilderness Act of 1964 as technology becomes more advanced and difficult to moderate. The act of flying drones is shown to be inextricably linked to intangible spaces like social media, which are increasingly demonstrating their ability to have adverse impacts on tangible spaces like the Boulder River Wilderness where *Three Fingers Lookout* is located.

Despite highlighting this illegal act, drone videos remain on Instagram and other social media platforms where they remain outside of the legal authority of the Wilderness Act. While there are currently no plans to add the lookout to a permit or reservation system, Bruner said that it is imperative for those visiting *Three Fingers Lookout* to use it responsibly, to practice Leave No Trace, and make sure they are capable of completing the challenging hike to reach the lookout. This, as previously

9 Camden Bruner, District Ranger, Darrington Ranger District, Mount Baker-Snoqualmie National Forest, interview by author, August 14, 2024.

10 Ibid.

stated, becomes a complicated question of environmental ethics, wilderness management and how humans interface with physical spaces in the age of virtual platforms like *AllTrails*, Instagram, and other social media.

While the challenges facing *Three Fingers Lookout* and the role played by social media in negative impacts is clear, there do not seem to be readily apparent solutions aside from restrictions on use, which have profound downsides as well.

What is perhaps most concerning is the possibility for other first-come, first-served lookouts in the backcountry – and specifically in designated wilderness areas – to find themselves on a similar trajectory. Those closest to major population centers and most photogenic seem to be those most at risk, but *Three Fingers Lookout* illustrates that distance from the trailhead does not meaningfully discourage visitation. While most visitors to *Three Fingers Lookout* likely live in Washington or adjacent states, there many accounts of people traveling across the country as well as internationally for the specific purpose of spending the night in the lookout after being inspired by online content. This is not problematic in itself, but can lead to varying degrees of preparedness<sup>11</sup> and an amplified degree of “summit fever” where making it to the destination after traveling so far takes priority over prudent backcountry risk management.

Unfortunately, relative obscurity and a remote location do not guarantee responsible use or prevent lookouts in wilderness areas from being damaged. The *Little Snowy Top Lookout* in the Salmo-Priest Wilderness of northeast Washington and northwest Idaho saw relatively few visitors given its distance from major population centers and the approximately nine-mile hike required to reach it. It was tragically destroyed by a fire in 2016, likely the result of misuse of the woodstove. This is especially concerning because once wilderness lookouts are destroyed, especially ones retired from active duty, they are often gone for good. This makes determining the right balance of management for lookouts, which inevitably hinges on the degree and methods to which they are accessible by the public, a particularly daunting challenge.

11 A rescue in June 2023 involved out-of-state hikers and occurred when significant snowpack was present. “Three Hikers Rescued from Three Fingers Mountain by Search and Rescue,” *Lynnwood Times*, June 22, 2023, accessed February 8, 2026, <https://lynnwoodtimes.com/2023/06/22/three-fingers-mountain-230622/>.

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