

Wilderness Report

A non-profit organization dedicated to protecting wilderness values

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Mr. John Allen
Forest Supervisor
Deschutes National Forest
Bend, OR

Mr. Allen,

During last week's Objector's meeting, I heard spokespeople from several groups suggest that members of their group should be treated differently than other members of the public. Generally, they suggested this was a logical course of action because their group used the wilderness differently than other groups and the impact of their actions were negligible. While I doubt that this is true I believe that is a lack of empirical data to support either side in such a discussion.

I suggest that the impacts on wilderness associated with different user groups needs additional study in order to identify such impacts and determine if it is necessary/possible to mitigate them. Anecdotally, hunters tend to set up large camps and build large warming fires. Equestrian groups have been said to be extremely hard on trails, meadows and campsites. Until empirical data is available to support such a decision, no user group should be awarded any access advantage over another i.e., unless supported by hard data all users should/must be treated equally.

On another note; I have suggested that the agency move slowly and explore alternatives to implementation of a limited-entry permit system. I have suggested reductions in party size, the calculation of party size based on the number of "feet-on-the 'ground'", allowing trails to return to a more primitive state, increasing wilderness buffer areas through road closures, deferring/reversing decisions to close/eliminate trails in/near these wilderness areas and encouraging Wilderness Rangers to host volunteer trail maintenance/restoration activities in/near high use areas. I have also endorsed additional user education. However, after our recent meeting a more focused user education approach came to mind.

Some areas, Denali NP and Grand Canyon NP for example, require that wilderness users participate in an orientation program before starting their trip. The Middle Fork of the Salmon also requires an orientation before launching. A modification of this approach might be appropriate for the Oregon wilderness areas addressed by the Cascade Wilderness Strategies Project. I suggest implementation of a mandatory self-directed wilderness education program in which all users would participate before being issued a wilderness travel permit.

Such a self-directed wilderness education program could offer users a variety of options to learn about no-trace wilderness travel: on-line videos, on-line literature, or agency print materials. After reviewing this information at their convenience users would demonstrate their wilderness travel competency by completing an on-line Wilderness Travel Competency Questionnaire. (It is suggested that all users would be required to demonstrate competency, not just a trip leader.) Upon successfully demonstrating their Wilderness Travel Competency, the user would be granted an annual, no-fee permit for unlimited wilderness travel. Under this proposal all user groups, including hunters and through-hikers would be treated equally.



Each user's Wilderness Travel Competency would be reassessed annually; ideally, with increasingly sophisticated education materials and new Competency Questionnaires designed to foster the continued development of each user's no-trace wilderness travel skills. Annual competency questionnaires would allow the regular implementation of new materials with focus areas defined by ongoing need assessments and would support the Forest's preferred adaptive management approach. Different materials and different assessment tests could/should also be developed for each user group focused on the wilderness impacts (as addressed in paragraph two) studies have shown to be associated with that group i.e., hikers with dogs, equestrian users, hunters and fisherpeople, climbers, day hikers, through hikers etc.

In my opinion the implementation of the proposed wilderness-wide, fee-based, limited-entry permit system should be placed on hold until it is determined if this user-education approach would mitigate the impacts that the Cascade Wilderness Strategies Plan attempts to address.

Sincerely,

Arthur Pope
Director
Wilderness Report