

# Wilderness Recreation Strategy

## Problem Statement

The Forest Service has evolved a long-standing wilderness management paradigm that opportunities for solitude are mandated by the 1964 Wilderness Act, and that every wilderness visitor can expect to be able to experience solitude, even in the most spectacular and easily reached parts of a wilderness. This desire to provide outstanding opportunities for solitude on every acre of every wilderness is reflected in the social standards developed for most wilderness areas in forest plans. The need to comply with these social standards is driving proposals to limit recreational access to high use destinations. Two primary problems have been identified: 1) Much of the public is critical of use limits based on social standards alone, in high use destinations areas, and 2) When use limits are implemented in high use areas, visitors are displaced to the more pristine and sensitive areas that have received very low use in the past.

## Background

Many, if not most, high use portions of wilderness are out of compliance with the social and biophysical standards in forest plans, and have been since implementation of the plans. The degree to which the social standards have been exceeded is of particular concern.

There has been a general lack of public support for limiting use in order to bring high use areas into compliance with social standards. This lack of support is due, in part, to the drastic use reductions that have been proposed, in some cases reductions of up to 50-75 percent of current use levels. Another factor may be that people visiting these high use areas are tolerant of seeing many other visitors. They will accept less than their ideal for wilderness, rather than be told they can't go to the areas at all.

In 1997, Ira Spring, a prominent wilderness advocate and guidebook author from Seattle, contacted his U.S. Senator, Slade Gorton, to complain about the Forest Service's proposal to limit use in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness. Use limits were proposed to bring high use destinations into compliance with social and biophysical standards in the Alpine Lakes Wilderness Plan. In a few high use areas, some biophysical conditions such as litter, proliferation of social trails, and the size of some lake shore sites, have actually improved over the years, due to successful site management. However, social indicators show consistent increase, moving further out of compliance with forest plan standards.

In response to Mr. Spring's concern, Slade Gorton, Chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee, added committee report language to the FY 1998 Interior Appropriations Bill stating the committee's concern over the Forest Service's "attempt to control the concept of solitude in wilderness within our National Forests." The committee expressed concerns that social standards are "subjective and artificially set numbers of allowable encounters per day between human beings." They strongly recommended "that the Forest Service consider the on-the-ground impacts such as trampled vegetation, human waste, uncontrolled fire pits, and soil erosion, with a view to protecting the resource and mitigating damage."

Added to public and congressional reactions are research findings by FS wilderness research scientists, David Cole and Alan Watson of the Aldo Leopold Wilderness Research Institute, which conclude that

the benefits from reducing use to protect solitude at high use areas may not justify the costs in terms of denying people access to the wilderness that they love. For example, in some high use destinations, a 70% cut in use (affecting literally thousands of people a season) would result in encountering another group every 6 minutes instead of every 3 minutes. Managers are hard pressed to conclude that this gain is worth the cost. Recent research has also confirmed that many of the people visiting high use areas feel that wilderness is extremely important to them and they would normally seek out very pristine wilderness. These "experienced" wilderness visitors indicate that their visits to the high use areas are valuable and enjoyable to them. They go to high use areas knowing and accepting that they will not find outstanding opportunities for solitude. They often do not support limits to use at these areas to reduce crowding, because they feel there is so much else to gain from the experience.

Within the FS, experienced and respected wilderness managers and line officers have voiced heart-felt reservations about social standards that seem to put the agency in the position of determining, for visitors, when they have had a quality wilderness experience. In addition, there have been unanticipated adverse affects to pristine wilderness from some management actions. For example, in some places that have implemented use limits or other restrictions, displacement of visitors from high use areas to lightly used areas has occurred, either within the same wilderness or to other wilderness areas that were not experiencing high use. This (along with growing recreation use in general) has resulted in new impacts to previously lightly used areas.

## **Proposed Actions**

National and regional wilderness program leaders realized that a close look at the strategies being used or proposed to manage recreation use in wilderness was needed. They concluded that change was needed in how wilderness recreation use is managed. Alternatives considered are detailed in the enclosed document entitled "New Directions For Recreation Management in Wilderness" by David Cole.

The following is a detailed account of the selected course of action.

**Proposed Action #1.** Create and/or market opportunities for high quality wildland recreation experiences outside wilderness on and off National Forest lands .

### **Implementation**

- Complete inventory of backcountry recreation opportunities outside Wilderness.
- Maintain existing trails; strongly reconsider closing any existing trails outside wilderness.
- In Forest plan revisions, evaluate potential alternative locations than wilderness to help meet the demand for non-motorized recreation.
- Analyze backcountry opportunities when reviewing road policy and road management decisions.
- Review all semi-primitive backcountry opportunities for suitability of motorized versus non-motorized recreation.
- Explore ideas, with partners, for marketing backcountry recreation opportunities outside National Forest boundaries, i.e. State and County Parks.

**Proposed Action #2.** Make it a priority to commit enough resources and protection to low use wilderness lands to ensure nondegradation of their outstanding opportunities for solitude and near pristine conditions.

### **Implementation**

- Develop standards where they don't already exist.
- Establish base line inventory needs and monitor trends.
- Assure protection of lightly used areas before placing use restrictions at high use areas if the restrictions have the potential of displacing the use.

**Proposed Action #3.** In high use areas, develop and implement social standards with public input, and implement management actions to ensure that impacts to physical and biological resources are contained within standards established in the forest plan. Recognize that high use destinations may be a source of inspiration and connection to wilderness for some users.

### **Implementation**

1. Identify and delineate destinations with high use so they do not increase in number or size over time.
2. Develop standards where they don't already exist. Monitor conditions so that wilderness character and conditions are not degraded.
3. Establish or continue use limits where needed.
4. Consider more intensive management of current levels of use in heavily used areas if the displacement of visitors would cause additional impacts to other less used areas of the wilderness.
5. Avoid establishing use limits when the resulting benefit to the wilderness resource is negligible and the resulting impact to users is high.
6. Increase wilderness ranger presence to emphasize information, education, inspiration, and connection with wilderness.
7. Focus intensive site management on restoration of damaged sites and confinement of impacts, not with the goal of allowing for increased use.
8. Pursue partnerships with wilderness support organizations to explore new approaches for management of high use areas and to seek assistance with stewardship presence.