

Visitor Use Management in Wilderness

National Park Service Management Policies 2006

(Selected sections)

1 – The Foundation

1.5 Appropriate Use of the Parks

The National Park Service embraces appropriate use of the parks because these uses are key to the enjoyment of the parks and the appreciation and inspiration derived from the resources. Park resources have profound effects on those who experience them through appropriate park uses. An “appropriate use” is a use that is suitable, proper, or fitting for a particular park, or to a particular location within a park. Not all uses are appropriate or allowable in units of the national park system, and what is appropriate may vary from one park to another and from one location to another within a park.

In its role as steward of park resources, the National Park Service must ensure that park uses that are allowed would not cause impairment of, or unacceptable impacts on, park resources and values. When proposed park uses and the protection of park resources and values come into conflict, the protection of resources and values must be predominant. A new form of park use may be allowed within a park only after a determination has been made in the professional judgment of the superintendent that it will not result in unacceptable impacts. The National Park Service will always consider allowing activities that are appropriate to the parks, although conditions may preclude certain activities or require that limitations be placed on them. Park superintendents must continually monitor all park uses to prevent unanticipated and unacceptable impacts. If unanticipated and unacceptable impacts emerge, the superintendent must engage in a thoughtful, deliberate process to further manage or constrain the use, or discontinue it.

Appropriate visitor enjoyment is often associated with the inspirational qualities of the parks. As a general matter, preferred forms of enjoyment are those that are uniquely suited to the superlative natural and cultural resources found in the parks and that (1) foster an understanding of and appreciation for park resources and values, or (2) promote enjoyment through a direct association with, interaction with, or relation to park resources.

These preferred forms of use contribute to the personal growth and well-being of visitors by taking advantage of the inherent educational value of parks. Equally important, many appropriate uses also contribute to the health and personal fitness of park visitors. These are the types of uses that the Service will actively promote, in accordance with the Organic Act. Other forms of park uses may be allowed within a park in accordance with the policies found in chapter 8.

6 – Wilderness Preservation and Management

6.3.10.2 Trails in Wilderness

Trails will be permitted within wilderness when they are determined to be necessary for resource protection and/or for providing for visitor use for the purposes of wilderness. The identification and inventory of the wilderness trail system will be included as an integral part of the wilderness management plan or other appropriate planning document. Trails will be maintained at levels and conditions identified within the approved wilderness management plan or other planning document. Trail maintenance structures (such as water bars, gabions) may be provided, under minimum requirement protocols, where they are essential for resource preservation or where significant safety hazards exist during normal use periods. Historic and/or prehistoric trails will be administered in keeping with approved cultural resource and wilderness management plan requirements.

Borrow pits are not permitted in wilderness areas, with the exception of small-quantity use of borrow material for trails, which must be in accordance with an approved minimum requirements analysis.

6.3.10.3 Shelters and Campsites

The construction of new shelters for public use will generally not be allowed, in keeping with the values and character of wilderness. An existing shelter may be maintained or reconstructed only if the facility is necessary to achieve specific wilderness management objectives as identified in the park's wilderness and cultural resources management plans. The construction, use, and occupancy of cabins and other structures in wilderness areas in Alaska are governed by applicable provisions of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act and by NPS regulations in 36 CFR Part 13; such structures may be permitted only under conditions prescribed in the park's wilderness management plan.

Although the development of facilities to serve visitors will generally be avoided, campsites may be designated when essential for resource protection and preservation or to meet other specific wilderness management objectives. In keeping with the terms of the park's wilderness management plan, campsite facilities may include a site marker, fire rings, tent sites, food storage devices, and toilets if these are determined by the superintendent to be the minimum facilities necessary for the health and safety of wilderness users or for the preservation of wilderness resources and values. Toilets will be placed only in locations where their presence and use will resolve health and sanitation problems or prevent serious resource impacts, especially where reducing or dispersing visitor use is impractical or has failed to alleviate the problems. Picnic tables will not be allowed in wilderness except in those limited circumstances when they are necessary for resource protection and when documented and approved through a minimum requirements analysis.

6.3.10.4 Signs

Signs detract from the wilderness character of an area and make the imprint of man and management more noticeable. Only those signs necessary for visitor safety or to protect wilderness resources, such as those identifying routes and distances, will be permitted. Where signs are used, they should be compatible with their surroundings and the minimum size possible.

6.4 Wilderness Use Management

The National Park Service will encourage and facilitate those uses of wilderness that are in keeping with the definitions and purposes of wilderness and do not degrade wilderness resources and character. Appropriate restrictions may be imposed on any authorized activity in the interest of preserving wilderness character and resources or to ensure public safety.

When resource impacts or demands for use exceed established thresholds or capacities, superintendents may limit or redirect use. If these actions are determined to be the minimally required level of management, physical alterations, public education, general regulations, special regulations, permit systems, and the local restrictions, public use limits, closures, and designations implemented under the discretionary authority of the superintendent (36 CFR 1.5 and Part 13; 43 CFR Part 36 for Alaska units) may all be used in managing use and protecting wilderness.

6.4.1 General Policy

Park visitors need to accept wilderness on its own unique terms. Accordingly, the National Park Service will promote education programs that encourage wilderness users to understand and be aware of certain risks, including possible dangers arising from wildlife, weather conditions, physical features, and other natural phenomena that are inherent in the various conditions that comprise a wilderness experience and primitive methods of travel. The National Park Service will not modify the wilderness area to eliminate risks that are normally associated with wilderness, but it will strive to provide users with general information concerning possible risks, any recommended precautions, related user responsibilities, and applicable restrictions and regulations, including those associated with ethnographic and cultural resources.

6.4.2 Wilderness Interpretation and Education

In the context of interpretive and educational planning, national park system units with wilderness resources will (1) operate public education programs designed to promote and perpetuate public awareness of and appreciation for wilderness character, resources, and ethics while providing for acceptable use limits; (2) focus on fostering an understanding of the concept of wilderness that includes respect for the resource, willingness to exercise self-restraint in demanding access to it, and an ability to adhere to appropriate, minimum-impact techniques; and (3) encourage the public to use and accept wilderness on its own terms—that is, the acceptance of an undeveloped, primitive environment and the assumption of the potential risks and responsibilities involved in using and enjoying wilderness areas. NPS interpretive plans and programs for wilderness parks will address the primary interpretive themes for wilderness. Education is among the most effective tools for dealing with wilderness use and management problems and should generally be applied before more restrictive management tools.

6.4.3 Recreational Use Management in Wilderness

Recreational uses of NPS wilderness are generally those traditionally associated with wilderness and identified by Congress in the legislative record for the development of the Wilderness Act and in keeping with the language provided by sections 2(a) and 2(c) of the act itself (16 USC 1131(a) and (c)). These recreational uses of wilderness will be of a type and nature that ensures that its use and enjoyment (1) will leave it unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, (2) provides for the protection of the area as

wilderness, and (3) provides for the preservation of wilderness character. Recreational uses in NPS wilderness areas will be of a nature that

- enables the areas to retain their primeval character and influence;
- protects and preserves natural conditions;
- leaves the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable;
- provides outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined types of recreation; and
- preserves wilderness in an unimpaired condition.

6.4.3.1 Recreation Use Evaluation

Recreational uses—particularly new and emerging activities that compromise the stated purposes and definitions of wilderness or unduly impact the wilderness resource or the visitor experience within wilderness—will be evaluated to determine if these uses are appropriate or should be limited or disallowed through use of the superintendent's compendium in 36 CFR 1.5. Evaluation or reevaluation should be accomplished within wilderness management plans or similar implementation plans. Recreational uses that do not meet the purposes and definitions of wilderness should be prohibited in NPS wilderness. Significant changes in patterns or increased levels of use will not be authorized by special permit, administrative discretion, or authorities under the superintendents' compendia, except in cases where sufficient information exists to adequately determine there is no significant impact on wilderness resources and values, including visitor experiences. These increased levels of use and changes in patterns of existing use will normally not qualify for a categorical exclusion under the National Environmental Policy Act. Decisions regarding significant changes in patterns and new levels of use will require environmental analysis and review, including opportunity for public comment, in accordance with the NEPA requirements.

6.4.3.2 Outdoor Skills and Ethics Leave-no-trace principles and practices will be applied to all forms of recreation management within wilderness, including commercial operations. Wilderness users will generally be required to carry out all refuse. Refuse is defined in 36 CFR 1.4.

6.4.4 Commercial Services

Wilderness-oriented commercial services that contribute to public education and visitor enjoyment of wilderness values or provide opportunities for primitive and unconfined types of recreation may be authorized if they meet the "necessary and appropriate" tests of the National Park Service Concessions Management Improvement Act of 1998 and section 4(d)(6) of the Wilderness Act (16 USC 1133(d)(5)), and if they are consistent with the wilderness management objectives contained in the park's wilderness management plan, including the application of the minimum requirement concept. Activities such as guide services for outfitted horseback, hiking, mountain climbing, or river trips and similar activities may be appropriate and may be authorized if conducted under the terms and conditions outlined in the park's wilderness management plan and/or in legislation authorizing these types of commercial uses.

The only structures or facilities used by commercial services that will be allowed in wilderness will be temporary shelters, such as tents, or other specifically approved facilities that may be required within the wilderness management plan for resource protection and the preservation of wilderness values. Temporary facilities will generally be removed from the wilderness after each trip, unless such removal will cause

degradation of the wilderness resources. In Alaska, additional guidance for the management of temporary facilities for hunting and fishing guides is found in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act section 1316 (16 USC 3204). The use of permanent equipment and supply caches by commercial operators is prohibited within wilderness.

Managers will ensure that commercial operators are in compliance with established leave-no-trace protocols.

8 – Use of the Parks

8.2.2 Recreational Activities

The National Park Service will manage recreational activities according to the criteria listed in sections 8.1 and 8.2 (and 6.4 in wilderness areas). Examples of the broad range of recreational activities that take place in parks include, but are not limited to, boating, camping, bicycling, fishing, hiking, horseback riding and packing, outdoor sports, picnicking, scuba diving, cross-country skiing, caving, mountain and rock climbing, earth caching, and swimming. Many of these activities support the federal policy of promoting the health and personal fitness of the general public, as set forth in Executive Order 13266. However, not all of these activities will be appropriate or allowable in all parks; that determination must be made on the basis of park-specific planning.

Service-wide regulations addressing aircraft use, off-road bicycling, hang gliding, off-road vehicle use, personal watercraft, and snowmobiling require that special, park-specific regulations be developed before these uses may be allowed in parks. (The Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act statutory provisions (e.g., section 1110(a)) and regulatory provisions in 36 CFR Part 13 and 43 CFR 36.11(h) apply to snowmobile, motorboat, aircraft, and other means of access in units of the national park system in Alaska.)

The Service will monitor new or changing patterns of use or trends in recreational activities and assess their potential impacts on park resources. A new form of recreational activity will not be allowed within a park until a superintendent has made a determination that it will be appropriate and not cause unacceptable impacts. Restrictions placed on recreational uses that have been found to be appropriate will be limited to the minimum necessary to protect park resources and values and promote visitor safety and enjoyment.

Sounds that visitors encounter affect their recreational and/or educational experience. Many park visitors have certain expectations regarding the sounds they will hear as part of their experience. The type of park unit (for example, national battlefield, national seashore, national recreation area, national park) and its specific features often help shape those expectations. In addition to expectations of muted to loud sounds associated with nature (such as wind rustling leaves, elk bugling, waves crashing on a beach), park visitors also expect sounds reflecting our cultural heritage (such as cannons firing, native drumming, music) and sounds associated with people visiting their parks (such as children laughing, park interpretive talks, motors in cars and motorboats).

Park managers will (1) identify what levels and types of sounds contribute to or hinder visitor enjoyment, and (2) monitor, in and adjacent to parks, noise-generating human activities—including noise caused by mechanical or electronic devices—that adversely

affect visitor opportunities to enjoy park soundscapes. Based on this information, the Service will take action to prevent or minimize those noises that adversely affect the visitor experience or that exceed levels that are acceptable to or appropriate for visitor uses of parks.

8.2.2.1 Management of Recreational Use

Superintendents will develop and implement visitor use management plans and take action, as appropriate, to ensure that recreational uses and activities in the park are consistent with its authorizing legislation or proclamation and do not cause unacceptable impacts on park resources or values. Depending on local park needs and circumstances, these plans may be prepared (1) as coordinated, activity-specific documents (such as a river use plan, a backcountry use plan, a wilderness management plan, an off-road vehicle use plan, a winter use plan); (2) as action-plan components of a resource management plan or general management plan; or (3) as a single integrated plan that addresses a broad spectrum of recreational activities. Regardless of their format or complexity, visitor use management plans will (1) contain specific, measurable management objectives related to the activity or activities being addressed; (2) be periodically reviewed and updated; and (3) be consistent with the carrying capacity decisions made in the general management plan.

The Service will seek consistency in recreation management policies and procedures on both a Service-wide and interagency basis to the extent practicable. However, because of differences in the enabling legislation and resources of individual parks, and differences in the missions of the Service and other federal agencies, an activity that is entirely appropriate when conducted in one location may be inappropriate when conducted in another. The Service will consider a park's purposes and the effects on park resources and visitors when determining the appropriateness of a specific recreational activity.

Superintendents will consider a wide range of techniques in managing recreational use to avoid adverse impacts on park resources and values or desired visitor experiences. Examples of appropriate techniques include visitor information and education programs, separation of conflicting uses by time or location, "hardening" sites, modifying maintenance practices, and permit and reservation systems. Superintendents may also use their discretionary authority to impose local restrictions, public use limits, and closures and designate areas for a specific use or activity (see 36 CFR 1.5). Any restriction of appropriate recreational uses will be limited to what is necessary to protect park resources and values, to promote visitor safety and enjoyment, or to meet park management needs. To the extent practicable, public use limits established by the Service will be based on the results of scientific research and other available support data. However, an activity will be restricted or prohibited when, in the judgment of the superintendent, its occurrence, continuation, or expansion would (1) violate the criteria listed in section 8.2, or (2) conflict with the findings of a carrying capacity analysis with no reasonable alternative that would avoid or satisfactorily mitigate the violation or conflict.

Recreational activities that are proposed as organized events or that involve commercialization, advertising, or publicity on the part of participants or organizers are defined as special events; these events are managed in accordance with the policies in section 8.6.2, regulations in 36 CFR 2.50, and criteria and procedures in Director's Order #53: Special Park Uses.