



BACK COUNTRY
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Superintendent Karen F. Taylor-Goodrich
Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks
Attn: Wilderness Stewardship Plan
47050 Generals Highway
Three Rivers, CA 83271

Dear Superintendent Taylor-Goodrich,

The following comments are submitted jointly on behalf of the Backcountry Horsemen of America and The Wilderness Society. Representatives from our organizations have come together with the goal of pursuing a plan of action to ***“insure that traditional, historical, and responsible pack and saddle stock use in Wilderness Areas is recognized, protected, supported and sustained consistent with the capabilities of the land.”*** Both of our organizations are committed to the long-term sustainable management of Wilderness lands in a way that ensures compatible recreational uses are allowed to occur while preserving wilderness character.

Management and maintenance of trails is important to facilitate the enjoyment of Wilderness by the public, both for stock and other compatible uses. Ensuring that these lands are able to be enjoyed by the public is important, and we believe the National Park Service should do what it can, consistent with the Wilderness Act, to maintain trails. The use of traditional tools and primitive means should be the first alternative when it comes to trail maintenance. However, at times, the minimum requirement might include the limited use of mechanized equipment. ***“Responsibly-maintained trails”*** in special cases may include the use of motorized equipment when it is appropriate and/or necessary to accomplish the purposes of the Act, including assuring that these areas are ***“administered for the use and enjoyment of the American people.”*** (Section 2a, P.L. 88-577) Congress, in House Report 95-540, which accompanied the Endangered American Wilderness Act of 1978, provided guidance as to ***“how the Wilderness Act should now be interpreted as it relates to certain uses and activities.”*** Of special note is the guidance it provided for ***“Trails, Bridges, Trail Signs – Trails, trail signs, and necessary bridges are all permissible when designed in keeping with the wilderness concept. These are often important to the recreational access and use of a wilderness area. Trail construction or maintenance can include the use of mechanical equipment where appropriate and/or necessary.”*** Both the statutory language and your written policy permit a reasonable interpretation that motorized equipment is ***“appropriate and/or necessary”*** under certain circumstances to provide for the ***“use and enjoyment of the American people”*** (S2, P.L. 88-577).

The National Park Service should not look to the use of mechanized equipment in Wilderness as a common method of maintaining trails, and should always follow the minimum viable tool standard

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when it comes to wilderness management. As stated in NPS Wilderness Management Policy 6.3.5, we would expect that use of mechanized equipment would be "determined by the superintendent to be the minimum requirement needed by management to achieve the purposes of the area, including the preservation of wilderness character and values, in accordance with the Wilderness Act." The wilderness stewardship plan should provide clarification as to when, specifically, mechanized equipment will be authorized. Our point here is to suggest there may very well be circumstances where the minimum requirement to complete the job justifiably involves motorized or mechanized use, and that such use is permissible, so long as it is the minimum tool to accomplish the purposes established in the law. These purposes, of course, include administering the area "for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness."

Enjoyment of the wilderness areas for horseback riding and packing has been a historical and traditional pursuit within the Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks since the 1800s. These experiences were inherent social attributes of the "wilderness character" that existed when Congress determined that the areas qualified as wilderness. The example of "wilderness character" that Senator Hubert Humphrey used in his speech introducing the first wilderness bill was a social attribute -- hunting; "Rather than being concerned with any special use or user, this bill relates instead to the character of the areas involved. Hunting, for example, although it is not mentioned in the bill, will continue to be a major recreation within many national forest units of the System and will be prohibited in national parks." It was clear that Congress intended that existing compatible uses be preserved where they existed at the time of designation. He went on to emphasize that "the central concept of this measure, I repeat, is that our present areas of wilderness can be preserved within the existing land-management pattern if the preservation purpose is made a matter of fundamental policy."

In preparing your Wilderness Stewardship Plan, one of the guiding principles should be that horseback riding, packing and hiking are primitive, non-motorized, non-mechanized forms of travel that are appropriate uses of Wilderness Areas in accordance with the purposes and provisions of The Wilderness Act. The plan should ensure that adequate access, appropriate trailhead facilities, reasonable grazing practices for pack and saddle stock that ensure the sustainability of subalpine and alpine vegetation, and responsibly-maintained trails are managed for appropriate recreational uses including pack and saddle stock consistent with the Wilderness Act. It is also important that the ability designated National Park wilderness within SEKI to facilitate such use is not overburdened, and the Park Service should consider how it will ensure historical recreational uses are allowed to continue while simultaneously ensuring protection of wilderness resources within designated Park wilderness.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide comment and look forward to engaging with you in the development of the wilderness stewardship plan for the iconic wilderness of SEKI Parks. Both Back Country Horsemen of America and The Wilderness Society stand ready to assist you in your planning effort.

Sincerely,

Bart Koehler
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