



HIGH SIERRA HIKERS ASSOCIATION

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Court Finds National Park Service in Violation of Wilderness Act

SAN FRANCISCO, CA — A federal court has ruled that the National Park Service violated the Wilderness Act of 1964 when it approved a General Management Plan and adopted permits for commercial pack and saddle stock enterprises that operate within Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. These two magnificent national parks contain Giant Sequoia groves, sublime alpine lake basins, and the highest peaks in the contiguous United States, and are home to threatened wildlife, including most of the remaining bands of endangered Sierra Nevada bighorn sheep. The two parks (managed as a single unit) are considered by many to be the crown jewel of John Muir's "Range of Light."

In 2009, the High Sierra Hikers Association filed a lawsuit in federal district court challenging the General Management Plan (GMP) and certain commercial permits adopted by the National Park Service at Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. High Sierra Hikers Association, a 600-member non-profit organization dedicated to improving management of the federal lands in the Sierra Nevada, was concerned that the GMP and commercial permits allowed excessive and harmful use of fragile park lands by pack and saddle stock animals (i.e., horses & mules).

As early as 1971, the Park Service acknowledged "damage resulting from livestock foraging for food and the resultant trampling of soils, possible pollution of water and conflict with foot travelers" due to unchecked stock use at the parks. More recent studies have shown that the use of stock animals at the parks has resulted in soil erosion, degradation of wildlife habitat, bacterial contamination of water, introduction of invasive weeds, and other harm to park resources—yet the Park Service still has no upper limit on the level of stock use that is allowed.

The Park Service issues permits to numerous private enterprises, known as "packers," to provide saddle horses, pack mules, guides, chefs, and camping gear to their clients in a wilderness setting. The HSHA's lawsuit alleged, in part, that the Park Service violated the Wilderness Act by allowing extensive commercial activities in the parks without first finding that the commercial enterprises were necessary and proper. Today, a federal court agreed, ruling that both the GMP and permits were unlawful. The court will now hold further proceedings to consider what to do about the violations.

“The Park Service has ignored and evaded the requirements of the Wilderness Act for decades,” said Peter Browning, president of the High Sierra Hikers Association. “We hope that this court decision will prompt the Park Service to follow the law by limiting stock use and commercial services in our national parks to those that are truly necessary and not harmful to park resources.”

To view the court’s order, visit: http://www.highsierrahikers.org/resources_index.html

The High Sierra Hikers Association, a registered nonprofit public benefit organization based in Berkeley, CA, has more than 600 members from 28 states. The HSHA seeks to educate its members, public officials, and the public-at-large about issues affecting the High Sierra, and seeks to improve management practices on federal lands in the Sierra Nevada for the public benefit.

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