

FINAL REPORT, 1986 SUMMER SEASON, LE CONTE RANGER STATION

RANDY MORGENSON, 1986 LE CONTE CANYON RANGER

Radio communication this past summer was perhaps the most frustrating I have experienced. I understand the radio shop is aware of the problem. It did not seem to be the Windy Repeater since there were times when offices at Ash Mountain could not understand my transmissions, yet others in the backcountry with portable sets would receive me loud and clear. Another problem which should be fixed is that upper Le Conte Canyon, from a short distance above Big Pete Meadow to Muir Pass, is a radio blind area. This is a heavily traveled section of the Muir Trail and any emergency along that stretch is complicated by the need to go somewhere else in order to communicate. If this can be corrected, it will be a major improvement in the Le Conte area operation.

Only two drift fences were in operation this summer: The Ladder Fence and the Dusy Branch Fence. The Ladder Fence was totally rebuilt, a three day project for one person, so it should be in good condition for a few years. The next time it needs major work consideration should be given to a gate at the rock slide up canyon (below ranger station) and abandonment of the fence. I'm not sure why that fence exists; it doesn't seem to protect any particular meadow. There probably are more fences in the park than are needed.

Major work was done on the Dusy Branch Fence so it too should be in good condition for a few years. The gate was not worked on and is going to need some repair soon. This fence is necessary to keep stock from leaving the canyon altogether and going back to South Lake.

The fence below Big Pete Meadow is buried under downed trees. It was not missed and probably doesn't need to be put up. In 1970 I removed this fence under request of the District Ranger. Soil and Moisture crew put it back up a few years later under orders of George Briggs.

The Stillwater Fence has not been up for several years and my feeling is that if another year or so goes by without it proving necessary, it should be removed. It hasn't been our policy to fence all meadows for stock users, yet in Le Conte Canyon there have been fences for Big Pete, Little Pete, Grouse, and Stillwater-Deer Meadows. (Stillwater fence is another which I removed in 1971.) Perhaps a fence near the Palisade Creek bridge would hold stock in the entire Palisade Creek canyon.

There wasn't a great deal of stock use in Le Conte Canyon this past summer, but by the end Little Pete Meadow looked used. Recognizing the validity of stock use in the mountains, and aside from the question of long-term ecologic damage, it is always sad to see a mountain meadow trampled, the grass grazed to the nub, and piles of manure about. These meadows are places of exceptional beauty (and biological interest) and to look at them as feed for stock users is no more proper than to look at dead and weathered snags as firewood for hikers. The arguments will rage through the years and I hope this element can enter into the next round. The stock users have won this round on two arguments which are a little weak: tradition, and the question of long-term damage. Traditions sometimes have to change. Slavery was once a tradition, as was a male-dominated work force. The question of long-term damage, important as it is, is insufficient by itself. There are other values also at stake.

In my view neither Pete meadow should receive much grazing in any year. Little Pete will continue to be used, and it probably can withstand it better than either Big Pete or Grouse. Both these latter stay wet longer. This year even Little Pete was wet late in the season. Some sections dried but it is difficult to confine stock to these. Imprinting in wet areas, far in excess of the one inch standard, and sometimes resembling trails, resulted. A further problem with Little Pete is that there is no particularly satisfactory campsite for a stock party, it is right beside the Muir Trail, and is a popular destination for hikers. I think most stock groups would rather be more by themselves than is possible at Little Pete Meadow.

Big Pete Meadow was wet all year and I was glad it received no grazing. There still was surface water throughout when the fall storms started. I would think that in all but the driest years it should not be grazed. A fence just below it would attract use and for that reason the fence should not be replaced. Perhaps grazing would work in the dispersed meadows up canyon, and a fence above Big Pete might support this.

Actually, these principal meadows needn't be grazed as often as they are. There is enough grass scattered on drier benches throughout the canyon to support quite a lot of stock use. The challenge is to get stock users to turn their stock there instead of into large, lush meadows, and to exert a little effort to keep them on those benches.

In early September two people with five llamas passed through Le Conte Canyon. They camped on Dusy Bench and at Grouse Meadow. Their practice was to tie each animal on a long rope, and move them frequently. After their departure

the grazed areas simply looked like the grass had been nibbled. There was none of the trampling and sod disturbance so often left by horses and mules. It is my recommendation that the Park Service lead by example and convert to llamas!

Finally, after so much arduous work on a stock use plan, we need to address the question of NPS and commercial stock grazing in meadows before their opening dates. The question arose this year and probably will in the future. Are these opening dates serious?

Bench Lake, Lake Marjorie, and Taboose Pass areas need campsite work and greater ranger presence, and probably always will. I think that too frequently rangers pass through that area quickly, on their way elsewhere. There still seems to be the feeling, both within and without Sierra District, that the work we do is measured by the miles we travel. Rather than creating an impression by passing quickly through the Taboose area and on over Pinchot Pass, it would be better to spend a day or two working on campsites at Striped Mountain Lakes, Bench Lake, and Lake Marjorie. With no ranger stationed in that area, those campsites need attention whenever someone can get to them. It is also important to contact people in those areas, to put in a ranger presence. Hikers I talked to suggested they simply planned on not seeing a ranger between Mather and Pinchot passes. The illegal firesites support this. At the lower Striped Mountain Lake, and where its outlet stream crosses the Taboose Pass trail, firesites are a particular problem.

Stock parties have ridden to that lower lake and tied to trees on the lakeshore, with the famous destructive consequences. This is what turns people against stock use and after years of talking the stock users are still not policing themselves. I think this will continue in areas considered ranger-free, and the only solution is greater ranger presence. With the absence of a Bench Lake Ranger, the Rae Lakes and Le Conte Rangers will have to give greater coverage to the area, and I strongly believe this does not mean hiking over Taboose and Pinchot passes in one day.

In a similar vein, if we could get rangers to do a little more paper work, it would be helpful if we started a tradition of recording, for the benefit of successors, the areas needing work or special patrol attention. As it is, when I come to a new area most of my first season is spent learning use patterns and problem areas. It would be helpful to have the written opinions of my predecessor about these.

A clarification is needed on the rule about camping 25 feet from water in an established site. What constitutes a campsite? Simple flat places where one or two people have slept at some time in the past are common. Are these a campsite, and thus legal?

George and Paige left the Le Conte patrol area, and the cabin, in very good condition. There were almost no firesites in Dusy Basin or Le Conte Canyon above 10,000 feet. Those elsewhere were clean. During the summer I had very little trouble with illegal firesites in Dusy Basin. The upper canyon did get out of control in late summer and I had to spend time in September working all the campsites from Helen Lake to Little Pete Meadow. The firesites along Palisade Creek to the Golden Stairs are larger than they need to be, a project for next year.

The areas that need regular patrol and work are upper Le Conte Canyon and Dusy Basin. In Dusy, the uppermost lake, east of the trail, is perhaps the most popular camp spot.

More kudos: Laurie Church and her trail crew did an outstanding job in the Le Conte area and her supervisors, including the Chief of Maintenance, should know it. They were a very hard working group, and produced some high quality work. They had a full load just to cut all the down trees, but in addition to that they worked all the drains, built stream crossings, replaced switchbacks, ect. Throughout the summer, after they passed through, hikers commented about the amount of work that had obviously been done on the trails.

Medevacs:

- July 29 - H-52 - Sprained ankle from Le Conte R.S. to South Lake.
- August 10 - H-52 - Possible broken foot from Ionian Basin.
- August 11 - H-52 - Heart patient from Le Conte R.S. by 552.
- August 23 - H-52 - HAPE from Dusy Basin to Bishop.
- September 18 - H-52 - Chest pains from Le Conte R.S. to Fresno.

The most interesting wildlife reports were two reported sightings of a mountain lion. The first was on August 23. A hiker I met in Dusy Basin reported that he had encountered, at a distance of about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile, a "cougar" on the ridge between Giraud Peak and the small peak about $\frac{1}{3}$ mile NE of it. That ridge is at about 12,000 feet. The man reported that the animal crouched and began stalking him down through the talus, and that it was about 12 feet long including the tail. I was a bit skeptical of this report. The man: Paul Ficarra, POB 783, Twain Harte, CA 95383.

The second report was on September 9 at Deer Meadow. An older couple told me they saw a mountain lion at Upper Palisade Lake that day at about 12:30. They were by the trail and the lion was on the shoreline sand at the inlet. It walked along the beach, drank from the inlet stream, alerted to something, went into the willows and wasn't seen again. The woman claimed to have seen lions in the wild before (Central Nevada) and thought this was a female as it appeared all golden and she thinks males are more black around the ears and face and on the tail, and have a more massive head. The man had not seen a lion before but said, "You know them when you see them". This seemed like a credible report from credible people, and might lend credence to the earlier report. Carola Hutcherson, 96 Manzanita, Carson City, NV 89701.

There was from time to time a bear in the lower canyon and along Palisade Creek but I received only two reported sightings and no report of one bothering a camp. On October 6 we met at about 35 yards on the trail above Grouse Meadow and the moment the bear saw me it wheeled and bolted up the hill into the Chinquapin. I've seldom seen a bear run so fast. The interesting thing is we may have a genuine wild bear in Le Conte Canyon.

Regarding water pollution, there is a paper at the Le Conte R.S. titled "Giardiasis and Water Purification" by Howard Backer, M.D. A couple of his statements are interesting. He says that an infectious dose can be as few as 10 cysts. Haven't we processed 100 gallons of water to get as few as 2-3 cysts? Does this mean 2-3 won't infect a person?

He also says, regarding cold hardiness, they retain "infectivity more than 2 months in cold water". In the High Sierra they need to withstand cold more than 7 months. To me, this implies there is some winter kill.

I think it would be helpful if these things were clarified. There is considerable public interest in Giardia in backcountry water, since the public bureaus have been spreading concern.

We need to work harder with the State Snow Surveys on removing some of their equipment as they add new automatic devices. Simply taking out one precipitation gauge is not enough. Also, according to Don Neudeck, the structure for the automatic device can be much smaller. He called the one at Charlotte a "Taj Mahal". We should press for this. At some level in the park we need to deal with those people more forcefully, and work to keep the structures in the backcountry to an absolute minimum.

Locally, at the Dusy Basin snow course we should remove the orange sign which is nailed to a tree. There is an adjacent sign on a metal post which marks the end of the course, and two signs are not needed. I think one person would need some help with this job, just getting up the skinny tree to the sign; maybe stand on someone's shoulders.

I had occasion to work with the helicopter pilots more this summer than in recent years; three different pilots. They all agreed we are working with an underpowered machine. At best, even when it can do the work, the motor is overtaxed, putting excessive wear on it and creating a safety concern. What do I know? I'm no helicopter expert, nor do I even know how these contracts are written.

The environmental concern is that with a marginally powered machine, landing spots have to be improved: leveled and enlarged. We shouldn't be cutting trees and moving rocks to save money on the helicopter budget. The resource is mostly what we have little of. One advantage with the helicopter is that it can minimize impact.

Another tipoff to the problem: anyone who has worked in the backcountry and around the helicopter is aware of the tremendous difference between pilots in terms of where and with how much weight the thing will land. This suggests the machine is at its limit and pilot skill is the largest variable. Whatever the nature of the problem, it seems time to solve it.

There are two down trees at the south end of the heliport which should be cut for trails and ranger use in 1987 in order to get them out of the way.

On the NE shore of Hester Lake there is still about enough aircraft aluminum to fill a backpack if it is stomped on. Surely more could be found with a search. The biggest piece is about 3 feet long.

Some notes on 1970's travel:

August 13, 1970, from ranger station to Lake 10,800 and back: 52 hikers, 87 scouts in 7 troops, for total 139 people contacted.

August 14, 1970, Little Pete Meadow, Troop 560 with 36 people, on the North Lake to South Lake Loop.

August 15, 1970, Dusy Basin and return to ranger station, 110 people contacted.

Scout councils in 1970 would group several troops on the same hike for easier transportation to the trailhead, resulting in 35 - 50 people on the same hike. This doesn't happen anymore. Nor do we regularly contact 100 people on a typical August day. This is surely due to the wilderness permit system, work by Sierra District with groups such as BSA, and work with the Forest Service by Our Man on the East Side (OMES).

Some things backcountry travelers still need to learn: Burn toilet paper and bury feces, far from water, and in good soil, not just under a rock; Use existing firesites, don't build new ones, and keep them small; Wash everything far from water; Don't build rock walls; Anything built or rearranged in a camp must be put back where it was when leave: rocks, logs to sit on, rock shelter for the stove -- best, don't rearrange things; The matter of partially burned aluminum foil; And the matter of tents on the grass and beside water: near water is serious; I have some reservations with on the grass, particularly when I've given my best speech, gotten my customer to start dismantling his tent, and up rides Mark Berry, turning six mules loose in the meadow to graze.

Supplies at Le Conte Ranger Station:

New shutters, unpainted.
 1 gallon brown paint.
 3 cans blazo - plenty for 87.
 Plenty large plastic bags.
 Plenty small plastic bags.
 Plenty burlap bags.
 Plenty toilet paper.
 Plenty G.I. paper towels.

Station needs for 1987:

- 1, 6" stove pipe elbow, solid type, not swivel.
- 1, large metal wash pan.
- 1, routed aluminum sign for Little Pete campsite: "No Camping. Rehabilitation Site", on post 1½ feet long beneath sign.
- 3, routed aluminum signs: "No Fires Above 10,000 Feet In Kings Canyon National Park". Replace Bishop Pass and Dusy Rim fires signs with these, and put one on trail at ranger station.

VITALS:

857 people contacted

760 miles patrolled