

1989 Rock Creek End of Season Report

Resources

Use: The majority of backpackers I contacted this season were either en route to Mt. Whitney or concentrated in the Upper Rock Creek Lake area. Miter Basin was also a popular destination. Crabtree Pass gets a significant amount of use -- a trail of sorts had developed on the north side of the pass by the end of the season.

A few large groups (primarily Sierra Club and boyscouts) came through, presenting a problem with available campsites. I feel that a maximum group size of 15 should be considered ^(for trails) -- very few areas can accommodate a larger group and tents end up on vegetation and in marginal areas.

Rock Use: Cottonwood Pack Station (CPS) had eight "all-expense" trips in the Rock Creek area that I was aware of and frequently spotted groups in to Upper RC Lake, Lower RC Lake and Penned-Up Meadow. On Labor Day weekend two groups were spotted in to Penned-Up Meadow for a total of 17 people. Thirty four people were camped in Miter Basin at one time over the weekend... CPS clients constituting 50% of that figure. New Army Pass trail head quotas were full. By not including CPS in trail head quotas, Miter Basin had exceptionally heavy use over Labor Day and I received many comments from disillusioned campers who thought they would find solitude in the cross-country access areas.

I saw five private stock groups this season and heard of a few more. In addition to CPS, Rainbow

Pack Station & Rock Creek Pack Station / Mt. Whitney Pack
Trains passed through the area on longer trips.
There was also miscellaneous NPS use.

Soil and Moisture: The meadows above Nathan's are very wet and boggy by nature and opening dates do not accurately reflect their condition. Due to heavy use by CPS, the Lower RC Lake stringer is in especially poor condition. As of September 1st it was still 20% saturated; however, the opening date was June 20. This meadow is almost 100% affected by mechanical impact: hoof imprints are up to 8-10" deep in some places, sod displacement and large trampled areas are prevalent, and streambank erosion is extensive. Multiple ~~use~~ trails lead to the stringer which have been well developed by stock use. By mid-August the fine herb-grass areas look more like a putting green than a mountain meadow. The scent of horse droppings and urine permeates the air, seriously detracting from a wilderness experience. This area is used almost exclusively by CPS. I feel that impact on the stringer is excessive and may possibly indicate long-term damage. This stringer needs to be closely monitored in the future and considered for closure. Some suggestions to alleviate pressure on it in the meantime are:

① drastically push back opening dates, ② enforce the 2 night limit for grazing in Upper Rock Creek for the entire area not just individual meadows (as is the policy in Evolution Valley... shouldn't we be

consistent in our interpretation of the Stock Management Plan?), ③ encourage CPS to move stock around instead of tying in the same area every time or to keep stock further away from the stringer, to use the main meadow more, and to refrain from "cheeking" the stock because they appear not to wander far when let loose to graze in that manner, and ④ consider limiting the number of grazing nights permitted at this meadow per season. CPS occasionally brings in large numbers of stock for a relatively small group... perhaps we should consider stipulating the number of head permitted per trip dependent upon length of stay and group size instead of a blanket limit twenty head per trip. In addition, I was not notified of CPS being given special permission to have more than 20 head this season but it did occur on a few occasions. Their use of the area is already so heavy that I do not feel it is appropriate to exceed the group limit.

Nathan's meadow is the only area that can withstand early grazing and I feel that the opening dates for the Rock Creek area should be split as they are in Evolution Valley. CPS does not use Nathan's; however, it is the only place that can realistically accommodate them early in the season without excessive impact.

Dennis Winchester complains that it is too far from lakes for clients who fish, yet it is only 1½ miles from his heavily used camp at Lower RC Lake.

I received many unsolicited stock complaints this season and have submitted a 343 with specifics. Perhaps stock complaints are up because ① this is

the third dry year in a row which probably generated a longer season for pack stations and increased use and ② there is nowhere in the Rock Creek area for backpackers to go that is stock free, including trailless areas, except for the highest lakes in Miter Basin. As we adopt a 6 person limit to cross-country group size, I feel that this issue needs to be addressed. Miter Basin, Siberian Outpost, Soldier Lake to the Sierra crest, and Forgotten Canyon are all open to ^{cross-country} stock travel. Certainly 20 head of stock, or even 6 head of stock are a much greater impact than 6 people. How do we justify limiting backpacker numbers to reduce impact without also adjusting our stock policies? All of the above mentioned areas are listed as "non-maintained trails" in the Stock Management Plan but they are actually trail-less, with the exception of Lower Miter Basin. The trail into lower Miter Basin is deeply rutted and reportedly much wider than it was several years ago. This trail needs to either be closed to stock (which accounts for the majority of the impact) or maintained before more damage occurs. I do support limiting cross-country group size; however, to be equitable, I feel that stock travel should be prohibited or severely reduced to only a few head on a special request basis, with the exception of the cross-country travel zones already in existence (i.e. Hockett Plateau, Roaring River, etc.). In stock cross-country travel zones should we be limiting backpacker group size to six? It seems to be contradictory to me.

Grazing ~~has~~ is permitted to the outlet of Primrose

Lake in Miter Basin; however, this area is dominated by fragile alpine meadow, there are no trees to tie a hitch line to, there are no suitable campsites (i.e. bare of vegetation) for a group of any size, and there is no real trail. It has not been grazed this season -- but only one group could cause extensive impact. I propose that this area is closed to grazing before a problem develops. I also feel that Miter Basin should be closed to day use by stock as ~~that~~ the middle and upper parts of the basin are cross-country areas. Without a trail to confine use, signs of stock are spread widely throughout the basin floor. This detracts from the "remote" experience most users expect from travelling into a cross-country area. Stock use in Miter Basin generated a lot of complaints this summer -- 2 complaints were from people who were spotted into the backcountry.

Stock Management Plan: The meadows at the New Army Pass/Siberian Pass jct., at Upper Rock Creek Lake, and at Soldier Lake have not been surveyed and are not on the list of meadow forage areas. However, I was told that they were open to grazing. I was also told that the cross-country route from Upper Rock Creek Lake to Soldier Lake to the Sierra crest was open - yet this is not in the management plan. I feel that the plan should be comprehensive and cover all areas. I was put in the uncomfortable position of telling CPS employees one thing ^(based on information from Sierra District) and then changing

the information later because I was told something different from Sierra District. If all the regulations were written down, the local ranger would have a much easier time dispensing accurate information. It is difficult to gain the respect of pack station employees when we can't give them accurate information.

The drift fence below Rock Creek Meadow #2 was partially reworked by the trail crew. They plan to complete it in the summer of 1990.

Bears: There were no bear incidents or bear sightings in the Rock Creek area this summer. If there had been a bear, there may have been problems with people spotted in by CPS, as they frequently had too much food to either hang or fit in a bear box. CPS has not been diligent in informing people of our food storage policies, nor have they been handing out our MI sheets which cover this regulation. This needs to be strongly emphasized before next season. Also, CPS placed a food drop in the bear box at Lower Rock Creek Crossing this season, something which needs to be specifically addressed in the future. Bear boxes should be for the use of the people who are in the area and have an immediate need for the box.

Backpacker response is overwhelmingly positive to the boxes.

II. Visitor Protection

Law Enforcement: I gave out verbal warnings for improper food storage, messy sites, picking wildflowers, and camping within 25 feet of water. My major law enforcement / minimum impact contact was for camping on vegetation. We need an education blitz on this issue: many conscientious backpackers do not realize that it is inappropriate. Perhaps USFS permit issuers can assist us by emphasizing this in their verbal information or by writing it on the permit. Campsites are getting larger and more trampled every season.

Packers consistently tie stock within 100 feet (sometimes 25 feet) of trails, campsites, and water and the rare individual actually scatters manure. Our NPS employees do not even practice this minimum impact. Concentrated piles of droppings in campsites and visible from trails or close to water generate a lot of complaints. Rock Creek Pack Station / Mt. Whitney Pack Station is extremely conscientious in tying stock well away from sensitive areas and in scattering manure. It can be done. I propose that pack stations be made explicitly aware of our policies in this respect and that all backcountry rangers emphasize these practices in our contacts, using law enforcement measures if necessary.

Medicals/Searches: I had one medivac in Miter Basin for a 17 year old girl with severe tendonitis, and an attempted medivac from Siberian Outpost for a 14 year

old boy with a sprained ankle who hobbled out before we were able to evacuate him (CPS had no extra personnel for a stock evacuation and he had waited 2 1/2 - 3 days). Also, I had an evacuation from the top of Mt. Whitney for a 30 year old male in the early stages of hypothermia.

I had one hasty search in lower Rock Creek, west of the crossing, for an individual separated from his companions while coming down Forgotten Canyon.

Aircraft: I called in two low-flying jets. Most of the aircraft I saw was too difficult to assess the AGL on. Even at 3000 ft. the roar is very obtrusive.

Backcountry Developments

Trails: Work is still needed on the New Army Pass trail, the Siberian Pass trail, and the "Miter Basin trail" as mentioned under Soil and Moisture. The appropriate forms have been submitted.

Cabin: There is a sheet of asbestos in the attic which needs to be removed in a safe manner. The galvanized stock pipe was replaced this season. The old stovepipe had a layer of asbestos around it that was pulled out through the roof, but the fibers were not vacuumed up. I stayed out of the attic as much as possible due to possible safety hazard.

Campsites: Most people tend to congregate at bear boxes and use existing firerings. Most of my campsite maintenance work was geared towards cleaning out and reducing existing pits.

Upper Rock Creek Lake continues to be heavily impacted. I concur with Lo's recommendations of past seasons and will emphasize them once again:

- Close the lake to fires. USFS has closed all lake basins (adjacent to my patrol area) to fires. Many backpackers do not expect to have a fire at this elevation and they will not have a problem with a closure. The few people who do have fires are using up the wood rapidly. The downed wood in the area is primarily foxtail pine.

Dr. Louis Scuderi of Boston University, who I met on the trail this summer, has dated foxtail remnants to be up to 6300 years old. Backcountry visitors are burning up valuable scientific resources (for climate and fire history study) in these high elevation areas. The 11,200 foot fire limit is much too high in the Rock Creek Area. In mid-Miter Basin at 11,100 ft. there are no trees. At Upper RC Lake there is little downed wood and visitors are sawing off limbs both living and dead. I propose a ^{fire} limit of 10,800 ft. in the Kern Drainage, with an exception for Upper Rock Creek Lake (also known as Soldier Lake) because it is just below 10,800. Or, make the limit 10,700 ft. to include Upper Rock Creek Lake (or 10,720 to be consistent with contour lines). USFS no-fire policy is increasing pressure on our area.

- Include spot-trip groups in the daily trailhead quota. Upper RC Lake is a small and fragile area that cannot effectively handle large numbers. Since CPS is outside the quota, there is no control on use. Also, spot trip clients bring more gear and take up more space, hence available campsites, and place a greater pressure on the bear box.

IV. Miscellaneous

Sensitive Plant Species: The population of Hackelia sharasmithii on Mt. Guyot is healthy and abundant.

I noted many specimens between ~11,500 and 11,700 ft on the northeast slope. I didn't observe any other sensitive plants in my area this season.

Radio: If possible, the Rock Creek Ranger should have a USFS frequency next season.

Station needs: A needs list is located on the station inventory.

Submitted by:

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