

BENCH LAKE STATION YEAR END REPORT 1990

by: BOB KENAN

miles hiked: 1400

visitor contacts: 1000

It was a very productive season for Bench Lake Station operations. My goal was to "go for it" relentlessly throughout the season in covering as much territory as possible. As a result, many firerings above 10,000 ft. were destroyed and a large number of park visitors were contacted.

How well are our current management policies and regulations working in "protecting and preserving" the park backcountry? The regulations are working fairly well in helping to minimize back-packer impact. When it comes to our stock management policies, we're doing a very poor job. The focus of this report is to show what problems we're having in the backcountry from stock impact. By taking a close look at some of these problems and potential solutions, hopefully we'll make the needed changes to prevent further damage in the future.

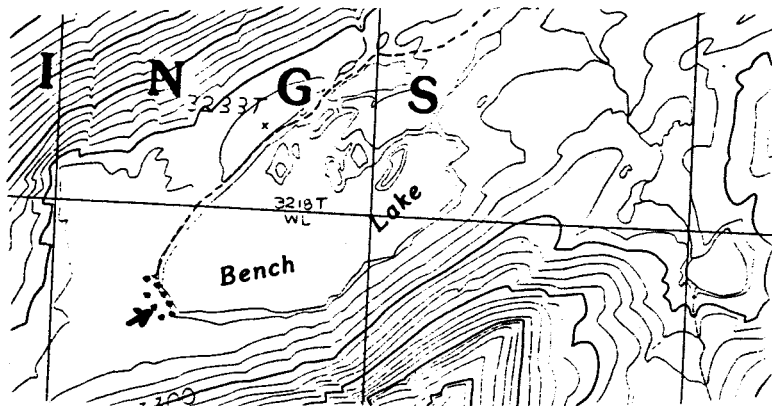
The focus of last seasons report was on the feasibility of requiring stock parties in Kings Canyon backcountry to graze their stock below 10,000 ft. If the reader refers to that report, they will find that this restriction would not change current stock use patterns very much. But this restriction would help prevent alot of stock use damage in the future. When stock graze in areas below the fragile lake basins there is much less damage.

So what is the status of the water quality in the lake basins? Over the years it has been observed that the water quality is seriously deteriorating. Stock grazing in the lake basins are contaminating the lakes and streams with manure. Also, soap and

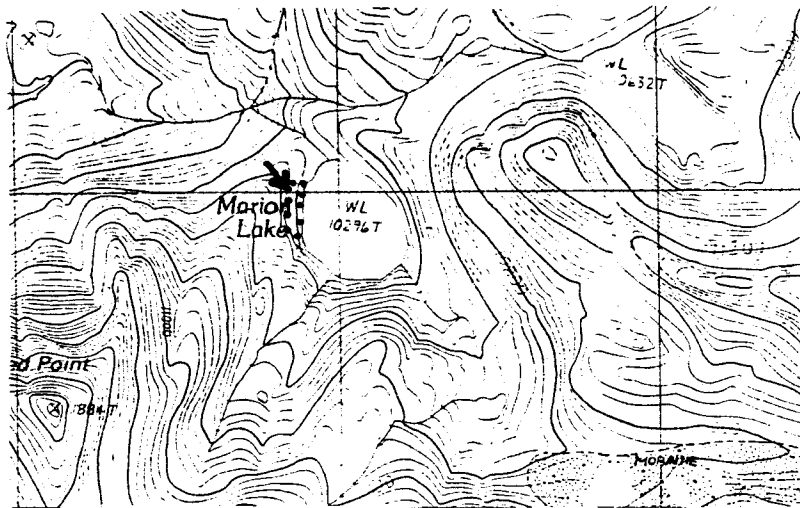
particularly biodegradeable soap use is a real problem. Many park visitors think that it's okay to use directly in the water system. Soap suds is noticeable almost everywhere in the lakes and streams.

In regards to our stock management regulations, there are positive examples where these regulations are working. The lake basins that are closed to stock grazing are protected. Stock parties passing through these areas create only a limited impact. Areas such as Evolution Basin, Dusy Basin and Rae Lakes are examples. But the lake basins that are not closed to grazing are becoming severely and irreversibly damaged.

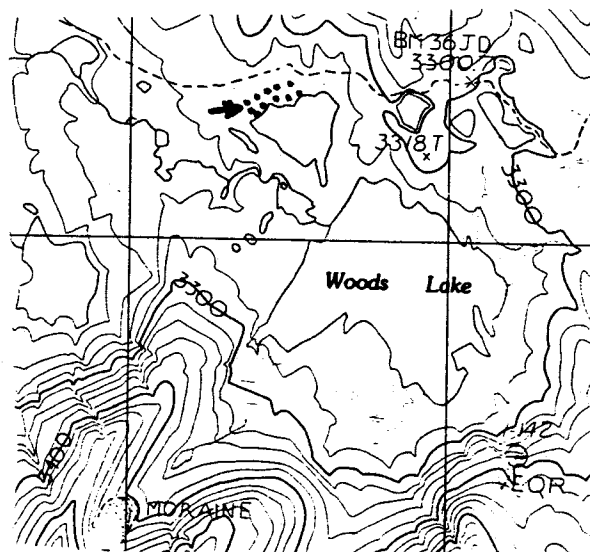
There are numerous examples from this season where the water in the lake basins was contaminated from stock grazing. An example is at Bench Lake. Mid August a stock party with four head of stock camped on the western shore of the lake for a few nights. I was out of the area at the time on patrol, but I received the report from ranger Tom Suc, who contacted the party. They tied their stock up on the shore of the lake and adjacent to an inlet stream. I observed the area after they had gone and found alot of manure on the shore of the lake and in the inlet stream. I did my best to rake the manure away from the edge of the lake and out of the stream.



Another example is at Marion Lake. Cedar Grove Pack Station did a trip into that area mid summer. They "pinned" their stock on the western edge of the lake. I came through that area after they had gone and saw alot of manure and trampling on the shore of the lake. During the winter all of this manure will be washed directly into the lake.



Also, a large quantity of manure was observed on the shore of the lake north west of Woods Lake. The problem is enhanced because frequently in the lake basins the grassy areas are on the shores of the lakes.



There is a significant increase in stock use in the park. Private and commercial use is increasing while administrative use is remaining about the same. What degree of impact to the lake basins would a larger increase in stock use bring? I feel that the impact could be devastating. Significant changes in our stock management need to be made in order to prepare us for the future.

What kind of changes do we need to make to help protect the fragile lake basins? Stock parties should be required to graze their stock below 10,000 ft. Also, how can we continue to let commercial pack stations write their own permits? In order for backcountry rangers to "work with" stock parties, we need to know when and where they will be. Pack stations need to be required to contact Sierra Crest or Sierra District operations prior to bringing a trip into the park. That way the backcountry ranger in the area could be notified as to the stock parties itinerary. This would allow the ranger to be able to check up on the group. If these groups aren't "checked up" on, they are much more inclined to not worry about abiding by the regulations. We need for them to be concerned that at any given moment a ranger could be walking into camp.

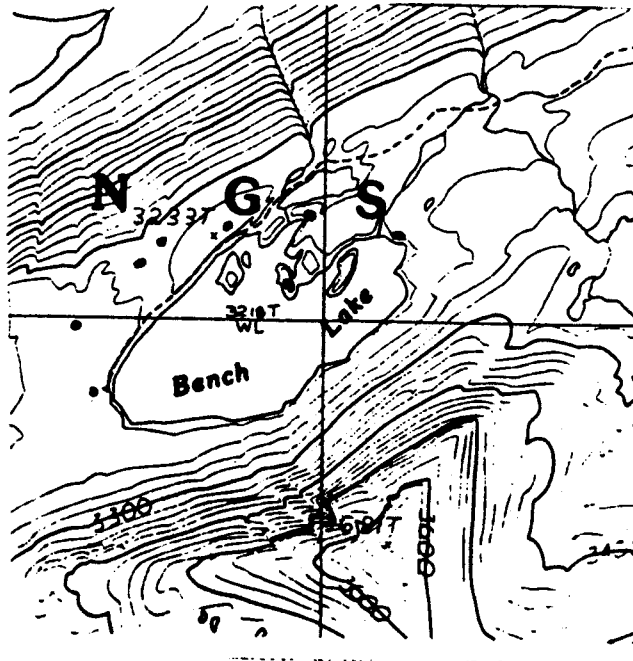
Currently we have no way of knowing which areas are getting heavy use. We don't know where the stock parties are going and how many stock nights individual areas are receiving. In essence, we have an unlimited and uncontrolled stock use in the park.

Campsite Rehab

A lot of firering demolition was done throughout the season. It does appear that visitors will always build firerings above 10,000 ft. But as long as we keep working the basins, we can keep firering accumulation from getting out of control. In the early part of the season I "made the rounds" tearing down firerings above 10,000 ft. in the area. Park visitors are very predictable as to where they will build firerings. This section will be a reference to help future Bench Lake Rangers know where firerings are most likely to be rebuilt in the future.

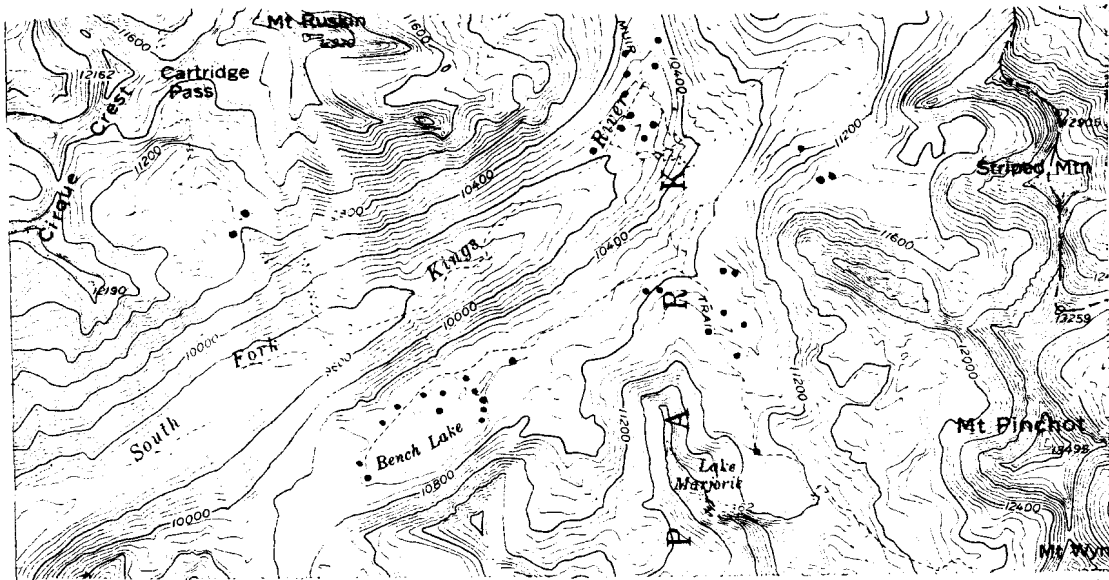
Bench Lake

Park visitors continue to build firerings at Bench Lake. The main areas to work on a regular basis are the places shown on the east and west sides of the lake.



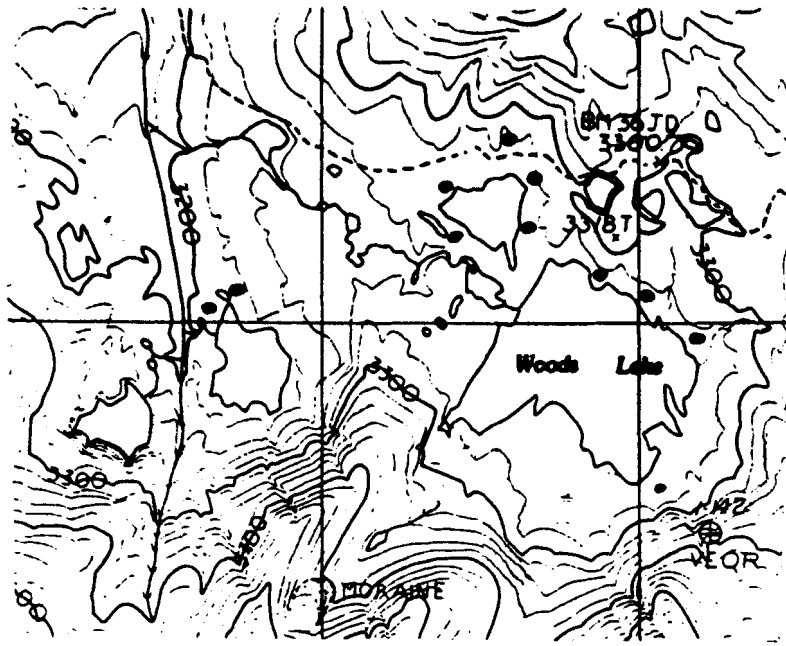
South Fork Crossing

Between Pinchot Pass and Mather Pass the only area at 10,000 ft. along the Muir Trail is at the South Fork Kings River crossing. I allow firerings approximately 1/2 mile north of the crossing. Also shown on the map below is places where visitors are likely to rebuild firerings in the area.



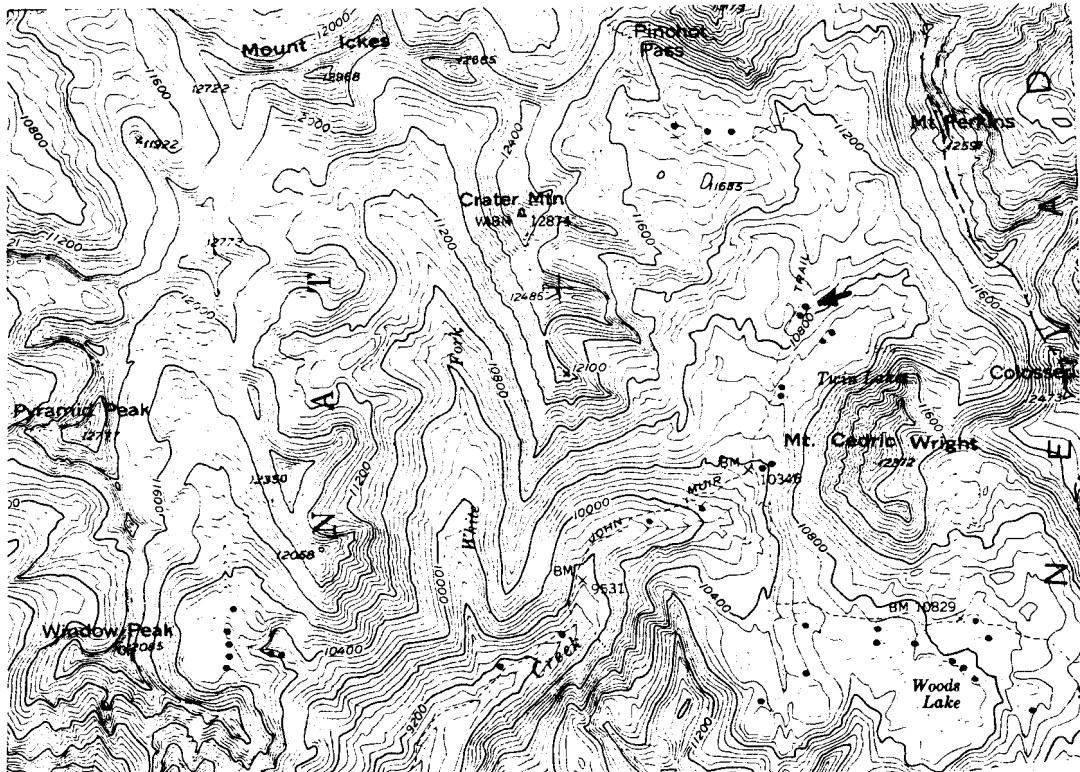
Woods Lake Basin

This area continues to be one of the most abused basins in the area. It is important to work this basin on an ongoing basis throughout the season. I accumulated trash collected here throughout the season in a gunnysack and hid it behind a big rock. At the end of the season the bag of garbage was flown out.



Twin Lakes Area

Firerings were torn down at the upper lake area shown on the map below. Another place to check on a regular basis is the area shown just above 10800 ft. along the Muir Trail.



Basins/Areas worked this season include:

Twin Lakes
Woods Lake
Lake Marjorie
Bench Lake
Palisades Lakes
Horseshoe Lakes
State Lakes
Window Peak Lake
Gardiner Basin

Blue Canyon Basin
Lake 10212
Ruskin Basin
Lake Basin
Marion Lake
Amphitheatre Lake
Upper Basin
South Fork Kings River
Woods Creek

Trail Conditions

Trails in the area are in good shape. This is a result of all the trail work done in the area over the last few years and the mild winters. The Kings Trail Crew worked the area between Pinchot Pass and Mather Pass in the early season.

During the summer the trail crew put in a wire drift fence gate about a mile above Simpson Meadow. This fence is not needed and should be removed. Also, this wire gate is a hazard to the abundant wildlife in the area. It is in a narrow place in the canyon where all of the animals pass through. This wire gate is very difficult for the animals to see at night. If this gate is not removed, it should at least be replaced with a three pole gate so it is more visible.

Wildlife Observations

On July 19 at the inlet stream of Window Peak Lake, I saw a young mountain lion (a yearling). I heard the mom take off through the bushes, but did not see her.

This was a big year for high country rabbits. I saw two snow shoe hare and one white tail jack rabbit. The locations where these rabbits were seen are the following:

- .base of Cartridge Pass on the South Fork Kings River
- .just south of the Bench Lake cutoff along the Muir Trail
- .in Upper Basin about 3 miles south of Mather Pass

Solar Electric Unit

For the last two seasons at Bench Lake Station, I've used a solar electric unit for recharging the park radio battery. The radio shop put the system together and I provided the photovoltaic module. The system worked perfectly and kept my park radio battery charged at all times.

Normally, I would charge the radio battery in the evening about once a week. The charged battery would hold the charge for about a week, as this was sufficient for the most extended period of time that I was on patrol away from the station. As a general rule it would take at least four nonrechargeable batteries to get through a three month season in the backcountry. The solar unit is not only practicle, but it makes good economic sense.