

ROCK CREEK RANGER STATION
YEAR END REPORT --- 1990

SUBMITTED BY: MARY LYNN SCATTAREGIA
SEPTEMBER 21, 1990

INTRODUCTION

Few issues that I raised in my 1989 end-of-season report have been resolved so many of the suggestions and comments herein will echo last seasons report. Upper Rock Creek Lake is now being referred to as Lower Soldier Lake to remain consistent with the Wilderness Press 15 min. Mt. Whitney quad which is in frequent use (and will probably become more popular as USGS 15 min. quads become impossible to obtain). This name makes more sense as Rock Creek drains Miter Basin, not Lower Soldier Lake.

I. Resources

A. Backpacker Use

Backpacker visitation remained moderate this season with the peak levels in August. Fire closure at Lower Soldier Lake tended to decrease camping pressure in that area with New Army/Siberian Pass trail junction and Lower Rock Creek Lake receiving more use than last season. Miter Basin continues to be a popular destination, presenting a great difficulty in finding appropriate (non-vegetated) campsites for groups larger than 4-6. I still support a cross-country group size limit of six and a trail limit of fifteen. In Rock Creek the majority of campsites cannot accommodate more than 15 people. Also, bear boxes (where use is concentrated) are over-stuffed by large groups.

B. Stock Use

Cottonwood Pack Station accounted for the vast majority of stock use in the Rock Creek area with seven all-expense groups that I observed and a few additional all-expense trips that were in while I was out of the area. Cottonwood Pack Station frequently spotted groups into Lower Rock Creek Lake, penned-up Meadow, and the New Army/Siberian Pass trail junction. Due to the fire closure at Lower Soldier Lake, spot trips into that area were infrequent.

Private stock use appeared to have increased from last season. I recorded 18 private trips in Rock Creek this summer, including two llama parties. Rock Creek Pack Station was also through a few times, as was a trip out of the Mineral King Pack Station, and miscellaneous National Park Service use.

One night in mid-August there were more than 66 head of stock grazing between Lower Rock Creek Lake and Lower Rock Creek crossing. It could have easily been higher. I received many backpacker comments about the discrepancy between limiting total numbers of backpackers through trailhead quotas, but not limiting numbers per day or per week of stock for a given area. I feel that this should be addressed, especially if our stock limit per group is raised.

C. Soil and Moisture

The Lower Rock Creek Lake stringer meadow was not as heavily used this year as Cottonwood Pack Station employees grazed animals primarily in the main meadow. The main meadow showed signs of extremely heavy use and I received numerous complaints about trampling, hoof prints, and copious droppings. Pressure has been temporarily reduced on the stringer, but the main meadow is now being over-used. Manny, a Cottonwood Pack Station employee, agreed to take some all-expense groups down to Nathan's Meadow in July, but it never happened. Only one burro party, one walking mule party, and one llama party, to my knowledge, used the meadow other than Cottonwood Pack Station. It seems inappropriate for one group, especially a commercial pack station, to be inflicting 95% + of the damage in one given area. In a normal or wet year impacts would be significantly greater. As discussed last year, and with Mike Neuman, opening dates in Rock Creek are too early, with Nathan's Meadow being the only area coming close to being ready for grazing by June 20 in a dry year. My suggestions for alleviating pressure on Upper Rock Creek area are the same as last year's: 1) drastically push back opening dates and consider splitting the dates within Rock Creek with Nathan's Meadow opening earlier, 2) enforce the two night limit for grazing in Upper Rock Creek for the entire drainage not just individual forage areas. At the very least, this regulation needs to be clarified. Last season I was under the impression that the stock could only graze two nights total within each forage area per trip. This season I was told that the limit means two consecutive nights before the stock needs to be moved; however, it can return within the same trip after being moved for at least one, and up to two nights (if in the Upper Rock Creek area). The latter interpretation of the regulation does little to limit use. When a group such as Cottonwood Pack Station uses the Upper Rock Creek area almost exclusively, I feel we should be more aggressive in limiting their use, and hence, reducing very real impacts to the meadows.

One suggestion is to limit the number of grazing nights permitted at high use meadows (Lower Rock Creek Lake, Penned-Up) per season. Nathan's Meadow is a suitable place for Cottonwood Pack Station use, and if we were to limit grazing in Upper Rock Creek to two nights total, they would be forced to graze further down canyon. An excellent campsite also exists on the north side of Rock Creek up on a granite bench approximately 200 yards below the lower crossing. Lower Rock Creek has good fishing and the area is set away from campsites frequented by backpackers, with beautiful views. It seems to be a suitable alternative to Lower Rock Creek Lake, especially if Miter Basin were closed to stock travel.

Lower Soldier Lake and New Army Pass/Siberian Pass junction meadows are not listed in the Management Plan and should be. Lower Soldier Lake Meadow on the southeast side still has standing water (all season) in this fourth year of drought. I feel that grazing should not be permitted in this area due to poor forage conditions.

Grazing is permitted to the outlet of Primrose Lake in Miter Basin. The nearest trees are half mile to the north or southwest; this area is dominated by fragile alpine meadow. Absolutely no suitable stock camps (or backpacker sites for more than 2-4 people) exist in this area. I have taken a 360o panorama of slides to illustrate this point -- please note attached slides. The only stock group to graze Miter Basin this season was a walking burro group. One private party, camped at Penned-Up Meadow, commented that there was no suitable feed above Penned-Up. Dennis Winchester will not take loaded animals beyond Penned-Up due to dangerous trail conditions. He is the only stock user that I'm aware of (except the burro group) that has taken animals above Penned-Up Meadow on a day use basis for the last two years. I propose that we close Miter Basin above Penned-Up Meadow to both overnight and day stock use. The only people benefitting from day use are Cottonwood Pack Station clients; private stock users walk. No one uses the area for overnight use, but it will only take one group to seriously damage the area.

There is no defined trail above the small meadow approximately one-quarter mile north of Penned-Up Meadow to contain stock use, so essentially Miter Basin is subject to cross-country stock travel in an extremely fragile area. I receive numerous complaints of stock sign in the basin, some of it from stock users.

D. Bears

I had one stretch of bear incidents this season, lasting for a few days in early August. These occurred as high as tree line on the New Army Pass trail.

I had problems earlier in the season with Cottonwood Pack Station clients who had been spotted in having too much food to hang and not being told that someone needs to be in camp 24 hours per day. This regulation should be emphasized to spot trip groups -- we should underline this point in our discussions on permit writing with Cottonwood Pack Station.

II. Visitor Protection

A. Law Enforcement:

My major law enforcement/minimum impact contact continues to concern camping on vegetation. 100% of the backpackers surveyed about giardia had heard of it, but I'd estimate that 70% of the backpackers are unaware that *Carex exerta* is defined as vegetation. Again, we need to emphasize this minimum impact practice. Cottonwood Pack Station should make a point to inform clients of this regulation, as should USFS permit issuers since Inyo minimum impact sheets do not even address it. Other verbal warnings were for litter, improper food storage, trenching, and camping within 25' of water. Two citations for dogs were issued in my area.

I have made some progress this season on Cottonwood Pack Station employees adhering to stock regulations; however, early in the season packers did not tie animals 100' from camp and water, nor did they scatter manure or consistently tie a hitchline. None of the Cottonwood Pack Station employees followed stock regulations unless I had already given them a verbal warning. Although Sierra District personnel talked to pack station owners about Minimum Impact practices in June, these discussions either did not reach or did not stay with the employees.

With private parties I had to consistently ask stock users to re-locate hitchlines or camps away from water, trails, or camps. I did find private users to be very cooperative with me, and most camps were left clean.

Cottonwood Pack Station received complaints from clients this season that I was ~~not~~ picky about regulations (I received this second-hand from Mike Neuman). I feel this problem stems from clients not being informed of specific regulations in advance. Though given the Minimum Impact sheet, few of them take the time to actually read it.

B. Fire Limit

The Lower Soldier lake fire closure has been extremely successful. Only one illegal fire ring was noted there all season, from a party who had come into the area cross-country and were not told of the restriction at the trailhead (regardless of our memo to USFS concerning the closures, few backpackers were informed at the trailhead). The area looks significantly better than last season. However, there is one problem. I feel that the closure should include the entire area, not just the 300 feet from the lakeshore. The forest density and subsequent dead and downed wood is consistent throughout the area; 300 feet is an arbitrary figure. Also, in the case of the rocky benches on the east side of the lake, exceeding 300 feet translates to an increase of elevation, resulting in even less available fuel wood. One site located on the visitor use trail on the east side of Lower Soldier Lake meadow is approximately 600 feet from the lakeshore and open to fires. I left the fire ring there and monitored use. Only one fire was built there all season. Yet, I feel allowing fires there gives the backcountry user a mixed message. They can see very easily that the downed wood available is not greater at that site than at the closed sites. In fact, in some respects there is less wood there, due to heavy use in the past from spot trips. If I were to place the open site on a map stating fires were permitted I'm certain it would be getting heavy use. The majority of campers prefer to stay near the bear box, which is why this site shows so little use. Also, Cottonwood Pack Station is not spotting clients into this area. Since the demand for fires at this site does not exist, and the fuel wood availability is equal to or less than at sites within 300' of the lakeshore, I propose we close it. The regulation could read: CAMPSITES AROUND LOWER SOLDIER LAKE AND ADJACENT MEADOWS ARE CLOSED TO FIRES, or something along those lines.

I still feel that the Kern drainage fire limit is too high, and stand by last year's proposition to lower it to 10,800 feet. Many stock camps exist between 10,400'

and 10,800'; perhaps the higher fire limit would meet with less resistance from the stock users. Regardless, the cold facts indicate that there are very few suitable areas for fires above that elevation. Closing off site-specific areas is difficult to manage and enforce. I've done several fuel inventory plots in the areas which most need closure; however, it is a time consuming process and I learned the system too late in the season for my efforts to be comprehensive. Paul Atkinson will be submitting the fuel inventory information for all the Kern drainage backcountry rangers.

Fuel availability should be closely monitored at Penned-Up meadow. It may require fire closure in the future, unless spot groups can be convinced to keep their wood consumption down.

C. Medicals/Searches

I had one medivac from Lower Rock Creek Lake for a 76 year old man complaining of leg pains, lethargy and with a very high blood pressure reading and a history of a mild stroke.

I initiated a rescue of two people stranded on the cliffs at the mouth of Rock Creek, one had multiple fractures. Lemoore did the rescue. I observed the victims while on patrol in the Kern Canyon---they had started a signal fire.

D. Aircraft

I called in numerous low-flying jets. Low-flying aircraft activity increased after the beginning of the Persian Gulf crisis. Many jets were close to 3000 feet above ground level and difficult to get an accurate elevation on---I suspect a good percentage of these were flying below the legal limit.

III. Backcountry Developments

A. Drift Fence

The drift fence below Rock Creek Meadow #2 still needs to be replaced and brought up to NPS specifications. Currently, it is crudely constructed with wire wrapped around trees without poles as tree protection and it is impossible to drop in the fall without dismantling it, except for the section south of Rock Creek (which has posts and poles around trees.) Total length: 525 feet.

B. Trails

I retook photos of the New Army Pass trail and Siberian Pass trail rehab. Rehab in both of these areas was surprisingly successful considering the elevation and species composition. The Siberian Pass trail rehab results follow: 1) In sandy areas there is no sign of the old trail except where rocks or logs were placed in the trail tread; 2) In dry meadow areas approximately 1 1/2 miles SE of the Rock Creek trail, vegetation is becoming established in the trail tread but some sections of old trail are quite visible; 3) In forested areas the accumulation of ground litter had obliterated the trail except where obvious due to grading for switchbacks above Rock Creek valley floor) and where logs were placed in trail tread; and 4) In the upper stretches of Siberian Outpost where vegetation plugs were used the plants have become established. The old trail is still visible but is much narrower than it was, due to plant growth. The old trail gets very little use from backpackers, especially because it is difficult to follow all the way through to the Rock Creek trail and also because the Pacific Crest Trail totally bypasses Siberian Pass, where the old trail begins.

Rehab work is needed on the Siberian Pass trail between the Pacific Crest Trail and the New Army Pass Junction. This trail has multiple trails, cut switchbacks, and needs extensive drainage work. Photo documentation was done this season.

Approximately 1 1/2 miles up the New Army Pass trail from the junction there is a large granite boulder at the corner of one of the switchbacks which is impossible to clear for a loaded mule. Stock users are cutting the switchback out of necessity and backpackers follow their trail. Tyler, trail crew foreman, told me this boulder requires blasting. Photos have been taken of the boulder and the shortcut.

The unmaintained trail into Miter Basin is in very poor shape due to heavy stock use. The eastern edge of Penned-Up meadow receives severe trampling and causework is needed to prevent further deterioration.

The appropriate forms for the above work have been submitted in past years.

C. Campsites

Most backpackers congregate at bear boxes and use existing fire rings. The majority of campsite maintenance involved cleaning out and reducing firepits. Aluminum foil in fire pits continues to be a major problem. I've noticed that maintenance work is usually greatest at campsites where people have been spotted in. If I do not contact the group before they leave, trash is almost always left in the fire pit, and the rings are built-up with ash accumulation indicative of huge fires. perhaps we should ask Cottonwood Pack Station to tell their clients to 1) not burn aluminum foil, 2) keep fires small, and 3) not enlarge fire rings. Although Cottonwood Pack Station gives their clients the Minimum Impact sheets, they don't emphasize many of the specific regulations. This is a problem inherent in having pack stations issue permits. They don't want to "hassle" clients with a list of do's and don'ts, and they especially don't want to frighten them about bears. Early in the season Cottonwood Pack Station packers were telling clients, when asked about bears, they're "supposed" to counter-balance food but no one has seen any bears. The clients interpret that to mean the don't have to worry about food storage. Packers consistently spot too many people into the site up on the bench in Penned-Up meadow without pointing out suitable campsites, and tents end up on vegetation. Flat, non-vegetated spots exist, but they require dispersing throughout the area between the trail and the low angle rock slabs.

IV. Miscellaneous

A. Sensitive plant species

None were located this summer

B. Aerial snow survey markers

The Siberian outpost marker was flown out this season. The Rock Creek marker is located in the snow survey meadow on the south side of Rock Creek, in front of a large boulder which is 2320 from the concrete base of the marker, located in the SE corner of the meadow.

C. Station Needs

+/- 5 gallons white gas (7 gallons in closet outside cabin door)

20 large plastic bags

1 crescent wrench

20 small plastic bags

Ample supply of paper towels and toilet paper are located in the attic--suspended from the rafters in a gunny sack

Extra gunny sacks located in metal storage box about 100 feet east of cabin

Ample supply of kitchen-type matches in outdoor closet