

Alden
FYI

UPPER BASIN/BENCH 1991 END-SEASON REPORT

by
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VISITOR USE

I contacted around 650 people this summer in the backcountry, nearly all of them hikers. There appear to be two main themes operating in the Upper Basin/Bench Lake area as far as people's trips are concerned. Predominantly the people are "doing the John Muir Trail". Otherwise, a fairly large number encountered are coming straight in over Taboose Pass (which is mildly surprising) and doing some lake basin or fishing trip or perhaps a mountain climb. This struck me as unexpected. On checking the permits we found that the number of hikers entering or exiting the Park via Taboose is between 1300 and 1400 people. The total number of visitor use nights in the zone (including area from Pinchot to Mather Pass and the Bench Lake area) for 1990 was 7845. Perhaps it could be conjectured that the park visitor spends an average of about 2 nights in the area. If this is true, and if this year's use is similar to last year's, that would mean that around one third of the area visitors are coming or going via Taboose. It might be informative to check back a few years to see if these numbers are increasing.

The Bench Lake ranger spends at least half his/her work time roving crosscountry into the lake basins and canyons of the Middle and South Forks of the Kings. This is a shared task with the LeConte and Monarch Divide rangers, all of us occasionally getting into Lake Basin, Cartridge Creek, the eastern basins of the Cirque Crest, Goddard Creek, Enchanted Gorge, Ionian Basin, Tunemah, Blue Canyon, Simpson and Tehipite. We find an ongoing filtering-through of crosscountry hikers in these places, and our main jobs are the rehab and clean-up of past/present firepits and inappropriate camps, seeking out the crosscountry visitors, and keeping watch for changes in use and for abuses, etc.

We notice occasionally that certain areas get suddenly popular for a year or two and then fade back to relative obscurity. This year there seemed to be a surge of interest in the Monarch Divide/Cirque Crest backlands. Blue Canyon seemed a little less visited, as did Tehipite. For the most part there were no big changes in visitor use patterns. Though stock use numbers have shown a gradual increase the last few years, such a trend was not apparent in the Bench/Upper Basin area.

CAMPSITE PROBLEMS, TROUBLE SPOTS, ETC.

I destroyed, cleaned up and/or rehabilitated 85 camp pits or sites. Work was predominantly in the following areas: Bench Lake, Upper Basin, South Fork Crossing, Lower South Fork Kings (between the Crossing and Muro Blanco), Lake Basin, Woods Lake, Twin Lakes, and the Middle Fork Kings.

For a definitive picture of campsite problem spots, refer to previous year-end reports by Bob Kenan. He has documented very well by narrative and map exactly where the trouble spots are and what work is required to deal with them. His work serves as an excellent blueprint for the area ranger to follow.

At the end of the season I did a thorough clean-up of the South Fork Crossing area. A large

proportion of the JMT hikers and stock people traveling through choose to camp at the Crossing, usually for one or two nights. It is the only place on the JMT where fires are allowed between Pinchot and Mather Passes. I had been displeased with the camps here all summer, and the end-season project gave me the impetus to study the impact to the place with a more critical eye. I concluded that the campsites are really misplaced. The main camp is wedged in a triangle bordered by the John Muir Trail (20 feet away), the South Fork Kings River (50 feet away) and a side creek (25 feet away). The other camp showing most use is across the river. It is also close to the JMT and only about 40 feet away from the river. The thing here is that the lay of the land allows for many good campsite possibilities. I propose to shut down the mainly-used camps and put in a few well-placed new sites, one down-river and a couple up-river. This would help to alleviate problems having to do with water quality (drainage of human waste into the river) and aesthetics (campers clustered around the trail crossing). A small sign with map will probably be necessary to communicate the idea to campers. See Figure 1.

A place with obvious camp problems is Bench Lake itself. It is real apparent sometimes that local topography creates its own set of probabilities for the range of human behavior that will come about. Bench Lake, with its numerous coves, peninsulas, private beaches and benchlets, etc., seems to really get people into the encampment and fire-building modes. Even though the no-fire rule is posted, the campers here cannot resist the urge, and there is plenty of wood to be burned. (People seem genuinely baffled here by a rule which defies their senses.) I think a sign out by the Muir Trail, saying **BENCH LAKE 1½ MILES: NO WOOD FIRES ALLOWED**, may be appropriate. Presently there is no sign for the Bench Lake cut-off, though the wood rule is signed about half a mile before the lake. A hand-made wooden sign would fit well with the place.

I found the same problems as described by Kenan in the remote basins of Woods Lake, Striped Mountain Lakes, Marion Lake, Twin Lakes, Blue Canyon Lakes, etc. - namely a time-honored traditional rebuilding of the same old sites. People who know these places and their relative remoteness (from rangers, etc.) will keep coming back and doing what they have always done. The actual "management" of these places may be next to impossible, but we can concentrate on as much coverage as possible.

I believe there is a gradual change in attitudes occurring and that backcountry visitors are slowly becoming more educated in the ways of wilderness etiquette. It is astounding the range of outrageous behavior and lack of training we still come across. Yet this slow education process is our best tool in the open environment and one-to-one contact of our wilderness visitor encounters. This long-term commitment and process far-and-away beats heavy-duty enforcement tactics in the backcountry setting and furthers us to the real goal of revaluation of people's values and the protection of the scared land.

STOCK USE

Stock use was fairly light in the area this year. No stock parties camped at Bench Lake. I am not aware of any staying in Upper Basin. Several did camp at South Fork Crossing, and there is evidence of some of these horse travelers attempting to ride down-river (down the old Cartridge John Muir Trail). Nobody gets far these days, though, except on foot. One fellow with two horses ended up at Lake Marjorie for some days, but this had to do with one of the animals being injured, and the man's camping was above average in integrity. The Trail Crew came through the area early on foot. I am not aware of any other park packers even being in the area. The biggest problem I was aware of was the impact to the Taboose Pass region, the worst of it being on the Forest Service side. There

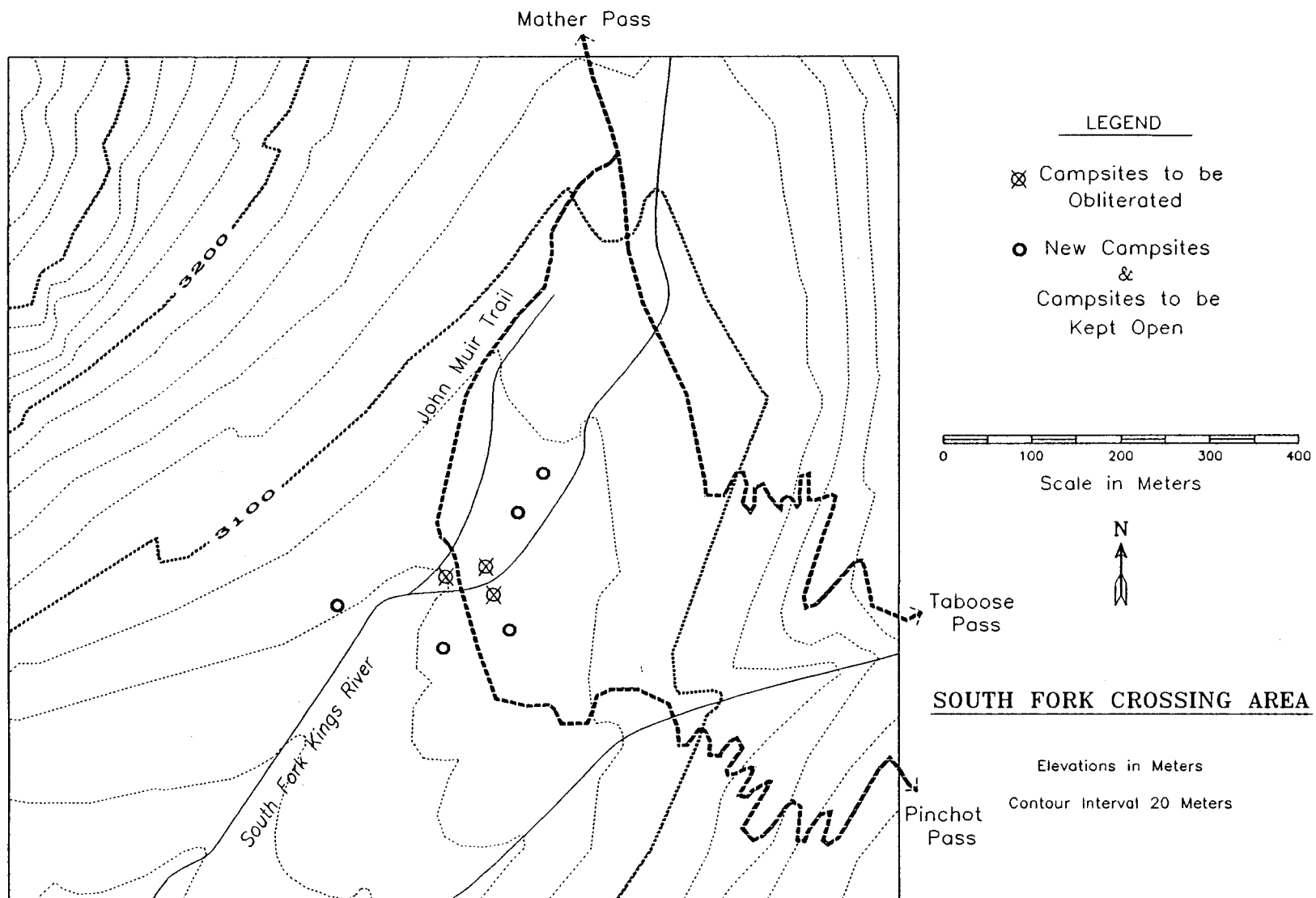


Figure 1. Map of South Fork Crossing area showing campsites (existing sites, proposed new sites, and sites to be removed).

may have been a half dozen or more stock parties over or just up to the top of Taboose Pass this season. The east side trail takes a heck of a beating, as do the animals. On the park side the main impact is seen on the stretch about one mile west of the pass where trail traverses wet and dry meadow for nearly a half mile.

All tolled it did not amount to much this season. This doesn't mean there are no problems. Most glaringly there is the fact that no great stock "pastures" exist in the entire area, except for the lower South Fork Kings River which stock parties can no longer reasonably access. This being so, on years of popularity surges, things can easily get out of hand with the parties ending up in inappropriate places (lake basins, high-wet meadows, etc.) or all going to the obvious but not-so-great destinations such as Bench Lake, South Fork Crossing and the meadow/lake country around the JMT/Taboose/Bench trail junctions.

Should any changes (closures or openings) be attempted in this zone for protection or management of the resource? Given the kind of use I saw this season I would say "No - no need". Let things go as they are. Watch where the people (and stock) go, and pay attention to the stock-users' needs and demands. I heard no complaints or interest from stock users about access to the lower South Fork Kings region. This is a unique, little-visited environment. Like in the lower regions of the Middle Fork Kings, one can enjoy a real feeling of the wild. The longer the trail is blocked (from the '86 avalanche), the deeper the wild aspect gets entrenched. If stock users (and others) are not in need of better access to the place, let us nurture it's going wild.

There is also the issue of stock in the lake basins. I do have the experience of five seasons as a stock ranger in these parks, and I can honestly recall that I never had the need or occasion or particular desire to camp with the critters in highcountry lake basins (alpine or subalpine). This is simply not the place to be with horses and mules. It does not take a highly developed sensitivity to see impact to vegetation, lake and stream banks, and water quality in these fragile places. I do not at all think we should deny stock users access to these spots, but usually there is no good reason they should be setting up stock camps here. Actually most lake basins have already been made off-limits to stock camping, but gaps yet exist. In my current work-zone I see the Palisade Lakes and Marjorie Lake areas in this light. These are not appropriate outlets for stock camping. They could be closed with little hardship on users.

If we carry these themes further, though, what happens when the stock travelers are denied camping priveledges in the high alpine country? They will, in all fairness, need the access to the lower country. If we are seriously pursuing this course of discouraging stock use in our fragile basins, deciding that stock more appropriately belongs in the lower canyons and plateaus, etc., then we probably had better let them get into these places. This is where some serious balancing and judgment will be called upon.

It has always been a problem to foresee problem situations with stock groups because we (those stationed in the backcountry) rarely get advance notice of impending stock trips into our areas. I do not think it is our duty to get into serious spying on every stock trip in the woods. But - we know from experience there are certain packers who have more trouble grasping certain rules. And we need to have some input as to camping destinations. Therefore, it would really help if some system were devised whereby plans of stock groups could be routinely relayed to us. It has always been difficult to get this information, even when we make a special effort about it.

TRAILS & STOCK USE

The notion of either maintaining trails to a minimum condition or closing them to stock use seems totally justifiable. We have a number of rustic trails and adjacent areas that suffer by being marginally kept open. However, I recognize in the Blue Canyon area one place which may be the exception to the rule. The trail into and up Blue Canyon, which is in considerable stage of degradation, does not seem to degrade further by the few stock trips per season. The trail is bad enough to discourage most potential users. Near the end of the season this year, signs of use showed only one stock group having been there (though there may have been some early-season use). Last year - maybe three or four. The Big Meadow, at around 8500' elevation, has a good old packer camp and is not a bad area for grazing. Riders do contrive to get their ponies up to the small lake basin just above 10,000', but the "feed" is too limiting to stay. In short, the trails appear to handle this magnitude of use without noticeable harm. I would recommend leaving the place be, with no new rules or limitations. (But always keeping our eyes open for changes in use patterns.)

RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

We always have resources projects in the backcountry which are not being dealt with. At this stage in the evolution of new plans and the reorganization of divisions, why don't the Resources Management people get a directive or create their own directive to get recommitted and involved in the problems of the backcountry? Why is it that we have all these knowledgeable people and field experts totally involved in the problems of the frontcountry while we try to figure out so many complex ecological issues of the remoter places by the seats of our pants and simple-minded common sense (not a bad tool though) and plain old opinionatedness?

It is a pretty interesting challenge to try to sort out what constitutes water pollution, vegetation damage, soil damage, meadow overgrazing, trail erosion, camping impact, too much burning of firewood, changing wildlife habits and any other manner of resource degradation without much in the way of technical backup or expertise. While this is not in our job description as backcountry rangers, we are certainly expected to recognize problems when we come across them and to recommend remedies to particular situations. Yet there are few monitoring programs to look to for confirmation of our intuitions. I think we have the level of competence to be involved in this work, but the overall direction and planning and programming ought to be spelled out and implemented by Resources. A cooperative effort between Sierra District and Resources Management could result in a lot of work getting accomplished (in the nature of ongoing monitoring of various ecosystem sub-systems). Actually these divisions do cooperate fairly well as it is, but it is usually on a hit-or-miss basis where we do some field work with the RM people if we happen to be in the same place at the same time. If there were a Resources Management program for the backcountry, and if it were recognized as part of our jobs to be plugged into it, it seems like some real progress could be made.

I have heard the idea proposed that certain pristine and remote areas be set aside in a special category for the purpose of protecting them from future human inroads of any kind. This seems like an excellent idea, assuming these kinds of places are not yet totally protected (from future trail-building, etc.). There are a number of side-canyons and drainages in the Kings Canyon backcountry that could be so-classified.

EROSION, REVEG, TRAIL REROUTING, ETC.

The basin just to the west of Taboose Pass is a unique, large, wet and dry meadow.

Unfortunately, trails coming off of Taboose Pass traverse this wetland in two different directions. This is the kind of trail/vegetation problem that would be strongly eligible for rerouting if it were part of a major piece of trail. But what if more and more people are coming in over Taboose, and the impact is increasing? I think this is happening to some extent. The trail rut is occasionally knee- and thigh-deep in the meadow sod, and parallel tracks are developing. (I don't know what it used to be like 10 or 20 years ago.) I am surprised at the numbers of comers and goers over Taboose, so maybe there is more pressure on this stretch of trail than we realize. The situation may not be worsening very fast, but no doubt it is slowly declining.

The trail up to Woods Lake Basin seems to be pretty badly eroded and also the stretch most of the way up to Sawmill Pass. I think this problem is being dealt with in the new Wilderness Management Plan, so I won't go into it.

VEGETATION MAPPING

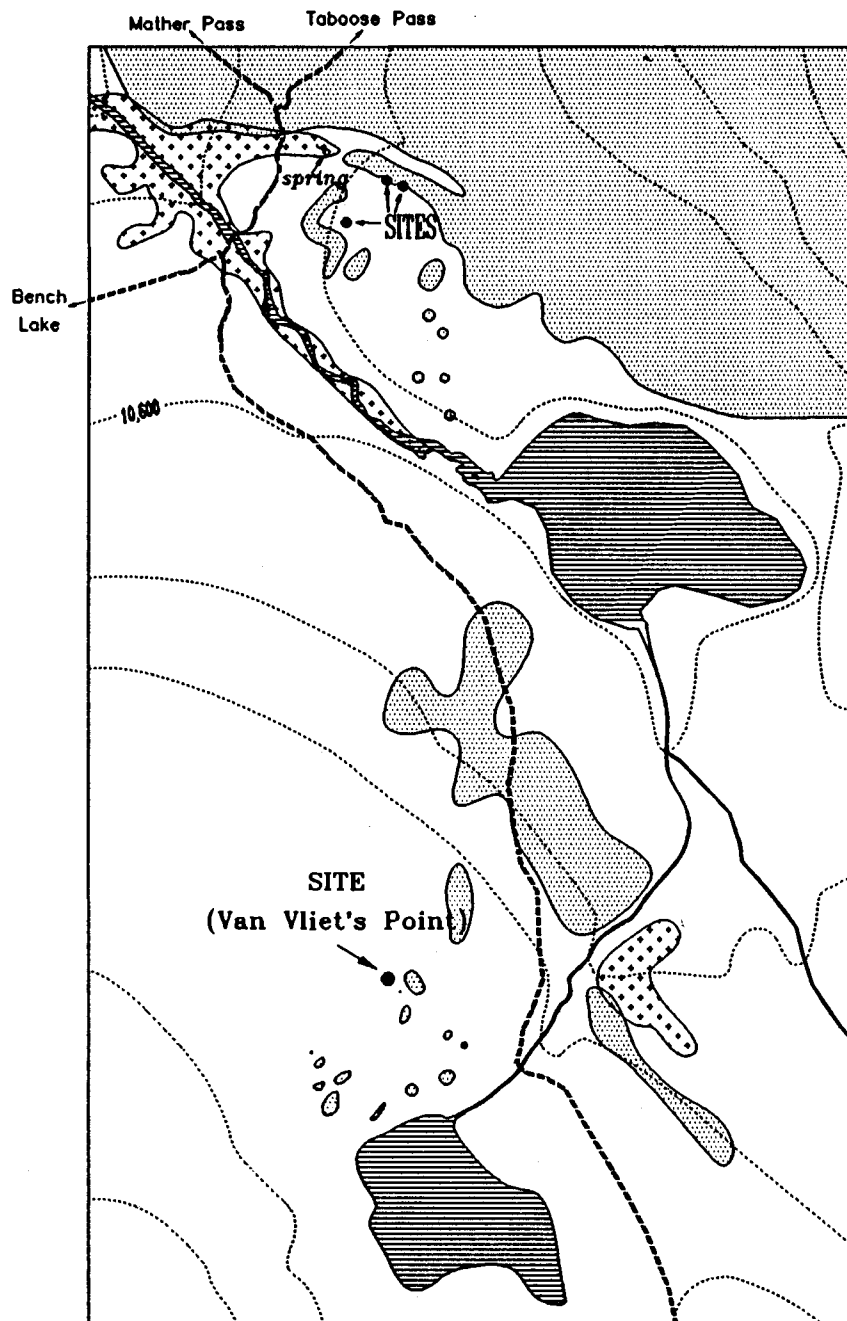
I continued to carry on the work of vegetation mapping in the areas of Bench Lake and the South Fork Kings, Cartridge Creek, Windy Ridge and up the Middle Fork Kings, Horseshoe Creek, Upper Basin, Palisade Lakes, Tunemah, Goddard Creek drainage, and some other side drainages.

RARE & ENDANGERED PLANTS

I searched for rare and endangered plant species in the Middle Fork Kings River area and in Woods Lake Basin to Sawmill Pass. A good-sized population of Muir's Raillardella (*Raillardella muirii*) seems to be thriving in the Tehipite area. Also the Kings Canyon Sedge (*Carex tompkinsii*) appears in healthy clumps in the Tehipite area and in isolated spots up the Middle Fork Trail toward Simpson Meadow. I was not able to locate the Kings Canyon Jewel Flower (*Streptanthus fenestratus*) which has also been identified in the Tehipite area. Apparently it is harder to find on dry years, so the drought could be responsible. I searched for, but was unable to locate, the Sweetwater Mountains Mild-vetch (*Astragalus kentrophyta* var. *dabaus*) in the area of Woods Lake and Sawmill Pass.

MAINTENANCE

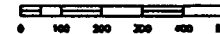
The Ranger Station was moved to a new site with a fair amount of effort involved. The decision has been made to move the station again next year to be closer to the Bench/JMT Junction and closer to a decent helispot. Figure 2 shows site possibilities in the junction area. The new situation will call for a new room-sized tent (for some degree of privacy), a natural-colored (anything but blue or yellow) large tarp, and a heating stove of some kind (small pellet stove might work).



RANGER STATION SITES

New Site Options
in the Bench/JMT Junction Area

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SCALE IN FEET

CONTOUR INTERVAL 66 FEET

LEGEND

- TRAIL
- TREES
- WILLOWS
- LAKES

Mapped by Sandra Graban October 1991

Field Map by Dan Durlesco

Figure 2. Map of the John Muir Trail-Bench Lake Trail junction area showing potential ranger station sites.