

**OBSERVATIONS FROM LITTLE FIVE LAKES**  
**1995**  
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**USE PATTERNS**

The four feet of snow present at the Little Five Ranger Station on June 19th altered typical visitor use patterns in the area this season. Early season hikers and skiers were few in the high lake basins in the patrol area from Nine Lake Basin south to Forester Lake as snow persisted on the passes until August. Stock was nearly absent from the area until the beginning of September. Subsequently, the lower elevation sites saw more use including Chagoopa Plateau and Big Arroyo.

As the area became accessible for the average backpacker in August, use once again concentrated at the high lake basins and sites with food storage boxes.

**BEARS**

*Ursus Americanus* was rarely seen in the patrol area in early season. Any bear in its right mind was down in the Kern Canyon foraging. Shortly after hikes began coming over Sawtooth, Glacier and Black Rock Passes, reports came in of food being taken and persisted until I left the station on the 16 September. Bears were observed crossing Glacier Pass and Black Rock Pass. There was a sow with two cubs working the Cliff Creek drainage (Cliff Creek Crossing, Pinto Lake and Spring Lake) and in late season one of the tagged bears from Mineral King (unknown which bear) moved into the Cliff Creek Drainage and took food regularly. There are food storage lockers at both Pinto Lake and Cliff Creek Crossing and a sunken food storage barrel at Pinto Lake. I found the primary reason for visitors having difficulty hanging on to their food was because they hung food rather than using the storage containers. In part visitors hung food because they did not want to walk to a storage container. These are minimal distances and my suggestion here is that we remind visitors at the trailhead that they are required to use the containers where they are present. Additionally, the Cliff Creek drainage was overtaxed this season because it was the only accessible pass out of Mineral King for much of the

season. Hikers would travel as far as Pinto Lake and use it as a base. Coupled with spot trips to Pinto Lake from the Mineral King Pack Station the storage capacity of the area was outstripped. This is due to the unusual dynamics of the snow and I do not feel additional storage capacity is warranted here.

On the east side of the Divide a sow with three cubs and an adult (perhaps last years' juvenile) were successfully obtaining human food primarily at Nine Lake Basin and in Lost Canyon. At present no food storage boxes are placed in off trail areas such as Nine Lake Basin. Camping is limited at Nine Lake Basin and trees for hanging food are absent, though it is a popular area for backpackers to visit. I continue to maintain that the way to manage this area is to require use of food storage canisters. Use of Nine Lake Basin is almost exclusively originating at Lodgepole and Mineral King trailheads where food storage canisters may be rented. Nine Lake Basin has been an area of human--bear conflict for many years though we have yet to adequately address the problem. One visitor demanded to know who is in charge of killing bears in the park as he wanted the bear who took his food at Nine Lake Basin to be shot.

Bears had stayed out of the Little Five Lakes Ranger Station for the past two years until late this season when both of the aforementioned groups repeatedly entered the station. After several marmots and a bear pushed through the electric bear wire, mocking the weak pulse charge, the fence was removed. The electric fence is visually unappealing in the wilderness setting and has demonstrated itself as ineffective. Thoughts for keeping bears out of the station include investing in a more powerful electric fence or moving all food storage outside and leaving the canvas open so bears can wander in. I am inclined toward the later. See section on "Station."

### **FOOD STORAGE BOXES**

There are rumored to be two of the large sized food storage boxes slated to replace the boxes at Pinto Lake and Big Arroyo Crossing. I was not the ranger at Little Five Lakes when these boxes were requested though my observations confirm they will be put to good use. We need to secure funds to send them in.

## THOUGHTS FOR OLD BOXES

Lost Canyon A box is warranted in Lost Canyon as this is a camping destination on the two main loops from Mineral King. It is also an area that hikers have difficulty keeping their food from the local bears. I have checked the Canyon extensively and find the site at the Big Five/Lost Canyon Junction to be most appropriate. There are several well spaced sites in the area so little development of new camp sites is necessary. The area is well below tree line so that firewood is adequate and soil is appropriate for human waste disposal.

Forester Lake While food storage has not been problematic here, placement of a box would complete the high circuit along the Western Divide. This is where most visitor use occurs in the western Kern Sub-District. Rather than push bears to the next area without a box, this move may eliminate the human bear conflict along the Divide and encourage bears to move to lower and more suitable habitat. Forester Lake is a heavy use area with a pit toilet. A box is not likely to dramatically change use here. The strategy of multiple box placement seems to be successful in the eastern Kern Sub-District along the John Muir Trail.

## TRAILS

Despite high snow this season the trail crew was able to cover the entire western Kern for routine maintenance including the Big Arroyo which had not been logged in a few years. I completed a couple trail reroutes out of bogs this season including rerouting the trail around lower Little Five which was submerged in the lake. No trail crew projects were conducted in the area this year due to lack of time though I am told by the trails foreman that reworking the trail between Big Five Lakes and Soda Creek remains a priority. Following is a list of trails most in need of work in the Little Five patrol area. The list is prioritized on the basis of condition of the trail combined with amount of visitor use.

1. Sawtooth Pass Where to begin? This trail is among the most heavily used in the parks and it is a disaster. There is resistance to building an actual trail over the pass and realistically there is not money for this type of project. At present I suggest we sign both sides of the pass as a cross country route and discuss the route as such at the trailhead. We need to

let visitors know what they are getting into. Regularly I field complaints from disgruntled visitors who came over Sawtooth Pass and were frustrated or "lost."

2. Big Five Lakes to Lost Canyon Steep, unstable, eroded. High use.
3. East side of Franklin Pass Same terrain as Sawtooth, steep, unstable. Spur trail near pass is confusing and proved problematic for hikers. Lower section suffered a washout with this year's snow melt. High use.
4. Upper Lost Canyon There are still a couple bog reroutes left here. This can be completed during regular trail crew maintenance visit to Lost Canyon, which did not happen this year.
5. Soda Creek/Lost Canyon Steep, slick rock. High use.
6. East side of Black Rock Pass Trail nearly completed a few years back however the top section is still overly steep and rock is unstable with mini rock slides through summer. High use.
7. Little Five to Big Arroyo Few obvious sections as the trail switchbacks down to the Big Arroyo Patrol Cabin which are steep and subsequently unstable. A couple washouts occurred with this year's snow melt.

## SIGNS

I removed several signs from the patrol area (1994 Mineral King Fire, 2 bulletin boards, out of date trail signs, restoration area signs) and installed a park boundary sign at Shotgun Pass. A few signs are cached at the trail crew camp in Lost Canyon. When they move into the camp next summer the signs should be flown out. A sign is needed at the Forester Lake/Rattlesnake Junction and at the Willow Meadow cut-off (sign requests attached).

## PEAKS

Climbed a few local peaks. Registers show about 50% use by NPS personnel. The register on Sawtooth Peak has been removed, could be replaced next season.

## RADIO/COMMUNICATIONS

With the repeater out several times during the season and a faulty radio--communications were inadequate. We should come up with a standard plan of action when personal radios or repeater are down.

## AIRCRAFT

Military aircraft flying below 3,000' AGL are as active as ever. We seem to have stalled in making progress on this issue. A new strategy is called for: as Edwards AFB has given as much credence to "wilderness values: as they seem capable of. Two thoughts: address as a safety issue for our helicopter, stock, Mt. Whitney area hikers--produce quality video/audio document of what it is like on the ground when there are low flyers. Also support Ralph Moore's efforts to get a few military commanders into the backcountry. To that the excursion doesn't result like the last, the dates should be undisclosed. Some days this season in the Kern Canyon felt like Dresden must have been during WWII.

Almost daily and sometimes multiple times a day there were low flying private fixed wing aircraft over the Little Five Area. They are obtrusive and probably more of a hazard to the park helicopter. I am curious to know if they are commercial "scenic" overflights. This strikes me as having the potential for increase.

## FIRE LIMITS

Fire limit of 11,200' in the Kern Drainage is too high. We still know that. The current fire closure network is piecemeal and confusing. In evaluating fire limits for our new Wilderness Management Plan it is important to acknowledge differing conditions on the east and west side of the Kern. Tree line along the divide is generally at 10,500. Let's start at tree line and work down. In the interim before coming up with a new standard in conjunction with the Wilderness Management Plan:

1. Close Little Claire Lake. This was set to happen last year but did not? It is set in a foxtail pine forest with no dead and down wood. The present regulation "No fires within 1,200' of the lake" skirts the issue. Little Claire Lake sits in a granite bowl with no camp sites 1,200' from the lake.
2. Close Forester Lake. It is at the same elevation as Little Claire with comparable absence of fuel. Found several standing trees chopped and sawed here this year.
3. Close Upper Big Five Lakes, Upper Lost Canyon and Long Lake (or all Little Five Lakes). They are at or above tree line. Trees at established camps have freshly sawn and broken off branches this year.

\*\*There are slides illustrating this when developed.

## STOCK USE AND MEADOWS

Due to snow there was no stock use in the area until late August when the Mineral King Pack Station (MKPS) seemed to be making up for lost time. I was at Forester Lake over Memorial Day weekend and four separate groups had been packed in. Despite hitching rails at Forester Lake, animals had been tied to trees and done a fair bit of damage. New branches and snags had been sawn though I did not observe it occurring. This year the MKPS used only the bench meadow above Forester Lake and it show. Previously when they used the area they would rotate meadows in upper Rattlesnake. With new packers this year they were not informed about the area meadows until the end of the season.

The one MKPS trip to L5/Long Lake arrived after I was out of service but still at L5. I drew maps of where the animals should be turned out so that they would stay in the Long Lake drainage. My instructions were not followed and I awoke the following morning to find 17 animals in the closed meadow next to the Ranger Station.

If there continues to be a Pack Station in Mineral King, it is of great value to meet the packers at the beginning of the season (schedule into backcountry training) to discuss the area so we start out on common ground.

Big Five Lakes did not open due to wet and snow covered meadows. I question whether this is an appropriate grazing area as the meadows stay wet even in "dry" years.

In planning for the future: there are meadows in the Little Fiver area which are appropriate for stock use--good feed, resilient meadows, ample firewood, early opening dates. Chagoopa Plateau, Lower Lost Canyon, Big Arroyo, Lower Rattlesnake. We should redirect use here.

## STATION FACILITIES

PERMANENT STRUCTURE It was a trying year with the tent cabin at Little Five Lakes. With the snow holding at the Ranger Station well into the season the marmots were chewing on everything in site. When I would walk out of the cabin the marmots would race to the door. When I returned from patrols during the first half of the season I usually found the interior of the cabin littered with marmot droppings and shredded papers. I lost two pairs of shoes, two radio holsters, clothing and many papers to marmota flaviventris. Mice and mosquitoes were persistent throughout the season. The wire screening I installed helped quite a bit. I rebuilt part of the tent frame which made the structure sturdier. The bears in the neighborhood have once again been entering the station. My thought on this is to move food storage boxes outside. The food storage boxes serve double duty as a bed. Acquiring a cot would facilitate moving all food out of the cabin as would a set of durable shelves so that when/if a bear came in it would be less likely to knock down the furniture while sniffing around. There is continued commitment to maintaining a Ranger Station at Little Five Lakes. Presently we have permanent camp here with the tent frame, platform and storage boxes. If we are serious about a permanent

backcountry structure here, I am willing to pursue funding over the winter.

I spent time at the Big Arroyo Patrol Cabin this season exploring its usefulness as a Ranger Station. The appeal of the Big Arroyo site is that a building already exists. The site is otherwise less effective as a Ranger Station. Visitor use is not concentrated at the Big Arroyo Crossing which is primarily used as a stop over point for High Sierra Trail Hikers. It is not a destination site like the lake basins at Little Five and Big Five. It also lacks a good water source. The cabin was built at a time when most visitors travelled by stock using the Big Arroyo and Chagoopa Plateau. As use patterns have changed, so has the sensibility of placing a Ranger Station where visitation is more concentrated.

### **RESTORATION WORK**

I spent the early season in the Kern Canyon and reworked all sites at the Kern Hot Spring and river sites down to Laurel Creek. Campsites at Big Arroyo Patrol Cabin were moved from the immediate vicinity of the cabin and from between the river and the trail. The sites were pulled back into the trees where disposal of human waste is practical and erosion less problematic. I carried out the rehabilitation work on several "restoration sites" within the area and removed associated signs.

### **LENGTH OF SEASON**

Visitor use of the Little Five area remains steady well into fall as it is easily accessed via Mineral King. I remained at the station for over a week beyond my COB date though I was no longer patrolling the trails and seeking out visitors to give them information. During that time the Chief Ranger requested that I meet with a group of Park Service visitors travelling through the area, the fire monitors requested that I check fuel moisture sticks at Sky Parlor Meadow, I observed two illegal campfires built at the Ranger Station (the first in two years), stock grazed in the closed meadow next to the Ranger Station and visitors who were unaware of the food storage box hung and had food taken at the Ranger Station Lake. It is busy enough in the Little Five area to warrant keeping a ranger stationed there into the fall. Additionally the quality of visitor information fell markedly when the Ranger Station at Mineral King Closed after

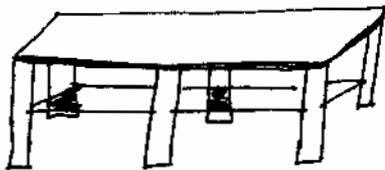


Labor Day weekend. Visitors who were not intending to be mischievous were doing all sorts of things wrong because they had received no information at the trailhead.

### EQUIPMENT FOR STATION

- Propane--there is one small tank 3/4 full at station. Send in one full tank in the spring and it should last all season.
- Clear wood finish to coat floor and walls at beginning of season.
- Shelves--sent out metal shelves. An improvement and good for a season but they will not last. Plastic or wood shelving. Also a sturdy table or shelf for the wood stove would help.

3' high x 2 1/2' x 5'



- Cot--LL Bean has a good one, 800-221-4221, "Swedish Cot" item #17592, \$85.00.
- Stainless bucket
- Stainless ladle
- Giant wash basin (like horse water trough)
- Solar battery charger
- Climbing rope