

BEARPAW END OF SEASON REPORT 1996

The summer of 1996 was a relatively quiet one for this area. The snowpack this winter was not excessively heavy so visitors were able to cross creeks and passes early in the season. There were many fires in the area that affected visibility and air quality. I believe that visitation may have been down because people heard about the fires and chose to go to other areas for their vacations. There also were a few trails closed due to fire activity that limited access between Bearpaw and the Mineral King backcountry. The ranger station was staffed from June 23 to September 28 and the High Sierra Camp was open from June 21 to September 21.

Incidents

There were five medicals this season that required evacuation. The first one necessitated a helicopter and the other four were able to go out on stock. The first was a severe bladder infection with dehydration and the others were two bad knees, one bad ankle, and a minor heart problem. There was also another helicopter evacuation for a suicidal man. He had tried to starve himself to death in the Big Arroyo but when it started raining he decided to hike out. Ranger Fox and I contacted him in a weakened state on Kaweah Gap in a lightning storm and hiked him to Hamilton Lake where he was picked up and flown to VMC in Fresno.

Law Enforcement

The above incident with the suicidal visitor was the most serious all summer. Other than that, I wrote one citation for no permit and gave some warnings for sloppy food storage and unattended fires. In the backcountry, we have a tremendous opportunity for education and I have found that spending twenty minutes explaining the reasons for certain regulations does more good in the long run than a \$25 citation (in most situations).

PATROL AREAS

Bearpaw

The Bearpaw area gets a lot of use, both in the campground and where the trail goes through the station and camp area. Spending time talking to visitors in the campground really helps keep it clean. The fire rings stayed relatively small and there were only two stashes of trash left in the bear boxes all summer. Next year, the trail crew plans to remove the one remaining bear cable and cut up some trees that have fallen across campsites. The pit toilets are in good shape but they might

need the floors painted next year. So far the bear boxes are holding up but they are showing signs of future hinge failure.

Hamilton Lake

Hamilton Lake continues to get heavy use. Amazingly, there were no fire rings built there this summer. There is a problem with the number of campsites available. The six numbered sites are not enough for the heavy weekend use this area gets. The three bear boxes have enough capacity to support a couple more sites. I am considering creating one or two more sites away from the lake to reduce the current impacts of overflow camping. One of the bear boxes could be moved to support these sites. Some possible locations are below the outlet just outside the revegetation area or up on the hillside between the pit toilet and the existing campsites. Hopefully, next season after more study, this can be implemented in an area with a minimum of impact. The pit toilet at this area is holding up well. I added some more wood to the side to make the screen bigger. The revegetation sites look good with quite a few plants that are successful.

Tamarack Lake

This beautiful lake gets used frequently, even though the trail ends at the lake. Many people doing cross-country trips to Lion Lake and beyond camp here. Illegal fire pits cropped up all summer. There was a persistent bear here, too. I strongly advise all visitors to use canisters in this drainage and all permit issuers should do the same. Almost every group that hung food here lost some or all of it.

High Sierra Trail West

This popular trail continues to get heavy use. Fortunately, creeks were passable early in the season so campers didn't get backed up behind bad crossings like last year. Buck Creek camping area gets very little use and was not a problem to keep clean. It can be hard to see so a sign was ordered for next year. Nine Mile Creek gets a lot of use (the bear box is visible from the trail). Occasionally, fire pits were enlarged and trash was left but routine cleaning was all that was needed. Human waste is starting to be a problem there. It may be necessary to consider installing a pit toilet in that area. Mehrten Creek camping area continues to be difficult to find. Most of the camping violations are due to this problem. A temporary sign was installed this August and a new one was ordered for next year. I believe when people can find the legal camping area, they will comply. This area is also starting to have a human waste problem and should be monitored to see if a pit toilet is needed. The Panther Creek campsites were patrolled by the trailhead staff and looked good every time I passed. Note: The plan to create designated campsites along the High Sierra Trail will be facilitated by signing the legal campsites. From interviewing campers in this area for the first time, it was obvious that most new campsites are used by people who weren't able to find the proper areas. If we make it easy and obvious to follow the rules, most people will. This summer, there were few illegal fire rings and even fewer new campsites. I think that this was due to the efforts of the trailhead and possibly a more educated public. From past experience in Paradise Valley with designated sites, I found that after signs were

Bud is
STILL
waiting on
signs from
Hendry.

installed directing people where to camp, there were many fewer incidences of illegal camping. The situation should be monitored next season after the signs are installed to see if conditions improve and if more action is needed.

Redwood Meadow

This popular meadow was closed to grazing all summer and was closed to campers for much of the summer due to fires. In the first week of July, I assisted Charlie Schelz, the meadow specialist, the trail crew, and others on the coneflower reduction project. This was an experiment to see if removing the cone-flowers would help restore the species composition to more natural levels. Normally, cone-flowers occur in small percentages of the meadow but here they covered the meadow. They can do this as a result of overgrazing. We removed as many plants as possible and the area will be monitored in the coming years to see the results. Later in the season, the Castle Creek Complex fires crossed Cliff Creek and the whole area became a fire personnel base camp. They left quite a mess. A memo was sent to FMO itemizing what needed to be cleaned when they send a crew back in. There again was water available all season at the meadow. There was very little in the system in September, but the creek that drains the meadow was running.

Cliff Creek

The trail up Cliff Creek from Redwood Mdw. to the Timber Gap trail was closed most of the summer because of the fire so I was not able to patrol the area for a long time. I finally did a trip through Little Five and came down from Spring Lake to patrol the area. Luckily, the Little Five ranger and the Mineral King trailhead rangers get to that area often and take good care of it. Due to the trail closure, it did not see as much use from loop trips out of Mineral King as it usually does.

Pinto Lake

Unfortunately, I was only able to patrol this area once this season. The lack of access from below made it a multi-day trip and I felt unable to leave the water system that long until later in the season. 3-1-4 and I did the residual biomass sampling and had the new bear box flown into the area. The campsites are all heavily used and it is obvious that there is a lot of stock use there. Horse manure and trampled ground can be found near many campsites. 3-1-4 and I searched the area for dead and down wood and found that there was virtually no dead wood larger than 1 inch in diameter laying on the ground unless it was a downed tree. In those cases, every limb possible had been broken or sawed off. The whole area has been completely denuded of wood. After looking at past reports, I noticed that other rangers had the same comments for this area. I will submit a proposal to close the area to fires as the only trees for miles around are in this one area and they aren't able to supply the demand for wood. Also, many reports have suggested moving the trail out of the meadow. This still hasn't been done and should be as soon as budget and time allow.

Spring Lake

I was able to patrol this heavily used lake only once. There were a few illegal fire rings and some trash. It is on the cross-country route from Mineral King to Little Five Lakes and 3-1-4 and the Mineral King trailhead people are able to patrol it much more frequently than I can.

Middle Fork Trail

Very few visitors use this trail. This season, many firefighters used it but I only talked to one group of visitors planning to go down it. It is overgrown but is a good shoulder season trail.

High Sierra Camp

As has been the case in past years, there was an excellent staff working at this camp. Carolyn Pistilli was the manager and she is knowledgeable, competent, hard-working and a pleasure to be around. The other employees were Paul Bischoff, Rebecca Green, and Sherry Liscious. They were all excellent and ready to help with anything at a moments notice. Paul did a great job volunteering with Outward Bound groups. He supervised a trash cleanup over the edge of the cliff below the camp and taught a group how to chop wood safely. The visitors that stayed at the camp always had good things to say about the employees and would often send them pictures of their visit. The camp itself needs quite a bit of work and the kitchen needs to have hard sides installed to replace the canvas. The Wolverton Pack Station brought the weekly supplies and I was able to have mail go both directions. Occasionally I could also send out small amounts of trash. The camp did have a problem with the pack station sending enough mules to backhaul their linen and trash but by the end of the season it was all taken out. One problem with the camp is that the visitors are not required to check in anywhere nor are they required to get wilderness permits. All backcountry visitors are required to know the regulations, whether or not they sleep on the ground. It should be mandatory for these visitors to receive permits and hear the minimum impact regulations. They would not, however, need to be included on the trailhead quota.

RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

Bears

I observed many different bears in this patrol area. There seems to be a healthy population. Most are wild and run whenever they see people. There continue to be a few bears that know about human food and find the campers that don't store food properly. The Bearpaw High Sierra Camp had two incidents, one where a visitor left food in his open cabin and a bear discovered and ate it, and soon after, a bear broke into the kitchen tent and got some backpacking food. This was the first time in the past four years that a bear broke into the kitchen. Considering how flimsy the building is, I was surprised it hadn't happened sooner. The camp employees were excellent at chasing the bear away after this incident and it didn't happen again. A bear was commonly seen at Hamilton Lake and obtained food there at least once. It could have been the bear that I saw crossing from Nine

Lakes Basin into the Hamilton drainage. Nine Lakes Basin had continual problems all summer long and both 3-1-4 and I advised against camping there without canisters. Tamarack Lake had many problems. When people hung food there, a bear invariably spent all night trying to get it down, usually successfully. It was a pleasure to hike past Lower Bearpaw Meadow where you could almost always see a wild bear grazing.

Meadows

Redwood Meadow was closed to grazing this year so the residual biomass monitoring only had to be completed on the Pinto Lake meadow. With assistance from Erica Jostad, that was completed on schedule and returned to Charlie Schelz. I think that this meadow should be monitored closely as it gets very heavy use.

Ozone

This year, an ozone sampling apparatus was installed near the Bearpaw Ranger Station. It was installed about 100 yds. south of the junction of the HST and the western campground spur trail. There is a nice clearing there with a view of Moro Rock. The samples are switched every week and returned at the end of the month to Resource Management. It will be very interesting to see the results of this sampling.

STOCK USE

There was very little stock use in the patrol area this season, due to late opening dates and fires. There was a group of stock that grazed one night in Lone Pine Meadow, another that grazed one night at Bearpaw Meadow, and two llamas and one burro that stayed overnight at Hamilton Lake but did not graze. There was evidence of much stock use at Pinto Lake but I did not contact any parties that stayed there. I recommended to the meadow management specialist that the opening date for Lone Pine Meadow be delayed because the meadow stayed wet for a considerable time after its opening date this year.

TRAILS

Overall, the trails were in good condition. At the beginning of the season, the Buck Creek bridge was almost impassable and needed a lot of work to clear it. There was also a big slide just west of Hamilton Falls which took two crews over a week to fix. The Kaweah crew did a beautiful job fixing a dangerous slickrock area at the top of the switchbacks on the way to Hamilton Lake. Some work that should be completed next summer includes building a retaining wall above Buck Creek where rocks and debris continually fall onto the trail. Many trails need brushing and the Elizabeth Pass "Trail" continues to be a problem. It's hard to find the trail and it is very steep. Unfortunately, the budget cuts have made it very difficult for the trail crew to do many projects. They have done very well considering the size of the crews.

SERVICE PROJECTS

Many Outward Bound groups came through the Bearpaw area this year and most

performed service projects. Two groups brushed the Over-The-Hill trail, two chopped wood, one retrieved trash from over the cliff in front of the High Sierra Camp, one group did trail maintenance, and others helped pick up trash. These groups are very environmentally aware and clean up wherever they go. The coordinator was very good about arranging convenient times with me. With a better knowledge of the area now, I plan to attempt more challenging projects in the future.

WATER SYSTEM

This year, the water system was able to be kept within legal limits for most of the season. The filtration now consists of a 42 unit gang filter and a bag filter. These needed to be changed often because the inflow turbidity is very high in this system. As the season progressed, the turbidity increased considerably and it was necessary to shovel out the springbox and clean the settling tanks more often. This often still didn't improve the turbidity that measurably. One of the Anderson chlorinators didn't work most of the season and it was necessary to manually dose the final tank. This involves climbing up a ladder with a measuring cup of liquid chlorine and pouring it into the tank. This isn't a very safe procedure so I was hesitant about asking the GSI staff to do this in my absence. I therefore didn't go on many trips that involved me leaving the area for more than one day. The chlorinator has since been fixed so I look forward to being able to leave more often next year. After much study and discussion this year, I have discovered that this system is going to be dirty because of its design and there aren't too many options for changing that. Filtration seems to be the variable we can control in this situation. I changed the filters many times this season to keep the turbidity down. Peggy Hunt and I kept track of how many filters were used and she is going to order plenty for next season and get them to the station early so they can be on hand when needed. This season, they had to be reordered and I sometimes had to wait to receive them. I spent quite a bit of time on this system. The minimum amount per day was about 20 minutes but at least once a week I spent a few hours. A couple of times it took six hours to fix a problem. The most limiting factor by far was the daily dosing but after discussing the system with Peggy, I think that some of the problems can be fixed next season and I won't need to spend as much time on it. Both times she came out were very productive and we were able to brainstorm and come up with some things to try next year.

CABIN MAINTENANCE

The ranger station is badly in need of some maintenance. The exterior looks very bad and needs to be painted. The roof shakes are missing in places and the ones still there need to be oiled or treated. The screen door needs a new screen. I think the most pressing problem is the shutter situation. Planks of plywood are being used as shutters and are nailed into the window frames. Each year new holes are created in the frames and they look horrible and are not going to last much longer. Worse is the difficulty of placing and removing the upper boards. This is a very dangerous task and takes more than one person. Someone needs to build shutters that don't damage the building and can easily be used. Hopefully some money and

personnel can be assigned to this problem in the near future. The interior of the station is in good shape. There are no mice problems as long as the doors are kept closed. The carpenter ants still can be heard chewing 24 hours a day and I expect the whole loft area to collapse into the kitchen eventually, although the reports from at least the last ten years mention the same condition. Is there some environmentally safe way of eliminating carpenter ants?

TRAILHEAD

The trailhead operation continues to be a crucial link in the wilderness education of the public. For many backcountry users, a trailhead ranger will be their only official contact their whole trip. I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to have knowledgeable, experienced people issuing permits. This year there was a good regular staff but there were problems when too many different people were writing permits. Consistency and thoroughness of information are very important and that is difficult to obtain with numerous permit issuers. I was very troubled by the suggestion that the trailhead operation be cut because of budget constraints. Many people don't realize how important this function is. There is a direct, observable correlation between quality of permits issued and cleanliness and impact in the backcountry. I urge that a fully staffed, experienced trailhead staff be a high priority.

COMPLETED PROJECTS

Revised Bearpaw Manual written in 1978.
Verified inventory and inspected equipment.
Ordered signs to clarify designated camping areas along HST.
Installed informational signs and maps in bear boxes along HST.
Routine cleaning of all campsites and firerings in patrol area.
Water system routine maintenance and some advanced work.
Rehabilitated picnic table at station.
Added wood to pit toilet at Hamilton Lake.
Installed map with bear box locations on station window.
Many smaller maintenance projects in area.
Many signs including informational ones for all camp cabins.

PROJECTS FOR NEXT YEAR

Make fishing regulation display for Hamilton Lake.
Supervise service project to clean up Lower Precipice Lake.
Get wire flown out of helispot in River Valley.
Install new signs along HST and improve bear box info sheets.
Implement addition of overflow sites at Hamilton Lake.

NEEDS FOR NEXT SEASON

2 new pit toilet seats

1 box propane canisters
solar radio recharging system
small frame backpack
!! 2 5-51 keys!!
7 propane tanks
mountain maytag (clothes washer)
box of lamination sheets
moleskin and bandaids
lots of p-cord
dictionary (from warehouse)
Weeden plant tax book
label stickers
large wirecutters
red dot stickers
scale (for helicopter stuff)
broom
duct tape
white out
belt weather kit (with min-max thermometer)
good bivy sack with mosquito net and poles
100' tape measure
strike anywhere matches
glass propane lantern cover

Nina Weisman
1996 Bearpaw Ranger