

Charlotte R.S. Year End Report—2001

George Durkee

STATS:

Visitors Contacted	1200
Miles Hiked	680
Citations in area	8 (2 Fire; 1 no permit; 1 Cutting switchbacks; 1 improper food storage; 1 fire (313.); 1 Dog (111); 1 false info. to officer)
Warnings	45 + (camping on veg.; bears & food; close to water, etc..)
Firings utterly obliterated	75
Medivacs	3
Searches	1 (MORSAR3)
Medicals	2

SUMMARY

We arrived at the station on 6/21/01. The cabin was in good shape and clean. There was, though, sign that someone other than the snow survey had used the cabin – more wood, fuel and food used than is normal. No sign of who it might have been, but they must have had a key. We painted the inside of the cabin on arrival—the first painting since our last rotation 15 years ago. The cabin itself is in fair shape, but is almost 50 years old and could use a check-up.

Snow melt was about 3 weeks ahead of a normal year. Kearsarge Pass was snow free and Glen and Forester were passable to most hikers without much trouble.

Resources

Park archeologist Tom Burge came into Kearsarge basin and spent a week looking at Native American sites. I showed him several that I knew of and he pointed out the significance of various types of projectile designs. Based on preliminary observations, he believes that Native Americans might have been using the area as long as 4,000 years ago.

In August I visited 60 Lakes Basin and spent time with Harold Werner's crew trapping fish from several lakes in the basin in an attempt to restore the native yellow-legged frog population. Results were encouraging: as the larger fish (capable of eating YLF's) were trapped out first, the frogs came back immediately. I have been talking to interested backpackers about this project and, when it's explained fully, there have been no objections raised. This project will continue next year and likely be expanded to the basin immediately south of the Vidette Lakes basin.

In addition I contacted researchers working with Vance Vredenberg who are doing work on frog population dynamics; a fungus affecting YLF's; and on an unusually large population of the rare Mt. Lyell Salamander – all in 60 Lakes Basin.

Stock Use

Stock use seemed slightly down this year in the Bubbs Creek drainage. This year, the meadow immediately above the lower Vidette drift fence was temporarily closed to stock to allow time to recover from heavy grazing and potentially irreparable damage to an associated fragile sphagnum meadow. As the regulation is written, though, camping is still allowed at the nearby stock camp. Stock users must then take their animals about 2 miles up the trail to the upper drift fence, releasing them above this fence. This is a serious burden on the stock users, likely reduces compliance and, essentially, is unenforceable by the area ranger. As a result, the closed meadow was grazed by several parties – whether accidentally or on purpose is unknown. Stock just tend to drift back down to this camp when released. The problem is similar to the fragile sphagnum meadow at Big Pete meadow. No substantive action has ever been taken to protect it, yet meadow ecologists have been concerned about it for over 50 years

(Sumner (1940), Thede (1961) Neuman and McClaren (1987)). At Vidette we have a chance to protect the meadow immediately now that the problem is recognized. I strongly recommend moving the existing lower drift fence to a place somewhere just above this stock camp. The camp is a good one for stock users – hidden and with already impacted dirt areas where animals can be tied. The animals could then be led a couple of hundred yards to the new fence and released above, thus protecting this meadow entirely. The upper fence should be left in place so as not to move the impact problems higher up into the more fragile alpine meadows. The area thus enclosed by the existing fences is sub-alpine and montane meadow as well as scattered forage under a Lodgepole canopy—all of it much more resistant to stock foraging than the alpine meadows several miles up. If it's felt necessary, the upper fence can be dropped experimentally to see if it can lessen impact between the fences without significantly affecting the upper alpine meadows. Until use patterns can be observed, the upper fence should remain.

I talked about moving the fence with Tim Loverin. He would prefer that alternative over using electric fences to protect the area or hauling feed in. Combined with taking out the old lower fence, it would be a major project and obviously Jerry Torres should be consulted about the best placement and when manpower and budget might be available to accomplish it.

In the absence of a General Management and a Wilderness Plan, we have been dealing with grazing problems (i.e. sudden deterioration of meadows as shown by biomass data) on a crisis basis. Area managers, in consultation with Sylvia Haultain and the local backcountry ranger, need to start looking at stock use patterns within an entire drainage so that solving one crisis area doesn't just move the problem to another area. Solutions might involve removing fences; having permittee stations begin to carry feed as an area shows sign of severe use (as well as allowing a storage place for the feed – e.g. a Knack box) and consider electric fences at some locations, either to protect a small meadow or to hold stock at a temporary camp.

Logistics and Support

I am increasingly concerned about the apparent dwindling of support for backcountry operations in the years since we were split into two districts. This is especially noticeable when Kings and Sequoia backcountry operations are compared. Several problems are of immediate concern:

1) The Sierra Crest Ranger has insufficient time to deal with the logistical and administrative needs of the backcountry rangers and of the permittees and Forest Service. When rangers show up for duty in the spring, it's critical that equipment has been repaired and cleaned from the previous season; that new equipment, signs, and consumables have been ordered and distributed to go in; that pack stations and the Forest Service office have been personally briefed on the requirements and needs of the Park Service and that their needs are passed on to the backcountry rangers; and that the sub-district ranger has met with each Park department to coordinate and pass on their needs for the upcoming season. In addition, more attention needs to be paid to backcountry boundary patrol during hunting season and after the seasonal rangers are gone. Having done some of the pre-season work myself, I firmly believe the sub-district ranger needs a minimum of 6 months – from May 1 to the end of October – to adequately address the needs of the backcountry.

The Sierra District Ranger for Sequoia is able to devote the entire year to logistics and support and I believe it shows in their organization and equipment.

2) The amount of time we spend in the backcountry is being slowly whittled away. This year, all Kings rangers were out of the backcountry by the first week of October. Until a few years ago, several stations were manned until the 15th or 20th of October. There is still a mind-set among visitors and, apparently, the NPS that somehow the backcountry season stops on Labor Day. In my years as a backcountry ranger, this has never been the case. Visitation is still quite high through the end of September and even into October. A number of schools use that period for “orientation” trips; many hikers know that's often the best time to hike and come then; and, more critically, there is a disproportionate number of violations during the fall.

Many hikers don't expect a ranger to still be in the area (though several stations have had rangers well into October since the early 70s) and seem to feel they can ignore regulations. This year, 5 of the 7 citations I issued were in September. Nor is that unusual in my experience.

In addition, scheduled 6th day overtime was dropped after mid-September both this year and last year. This meant I ended up working 2 days off to accomplish end of season tasks: this year it was meadow monitoring and helping the State Snow Survey replace their snow pillow—both were 10 hour days and could not be rescheduled to meet my work days. I strongly urge that 6th day overtime continue to the end of the season as has been the case since the 1950s. Again, backcountry rangers in Sequoia haven't been changed to a 5 day week during the Fall. In addition, 3 of their stations are manned well into mid-October as has always been the case.

3) Finally, there's been an annual problem just getting our gear into the mountains. For several years now, we've been told that we'll be limited to one flight. Depending on the station and weather, this limits us to 400 to 600 pounds of food and gear. I think no one but a backcountry ranger is aware of what's involved in putting together 4 months of food and gear. If we can plan for another resupply, we can prioritize our food and have the remainder sent in, but we have to know when that will happen. The last several years there's only been a vague promise of "sometime later in the season" which makes planning absolutely impossible—nor has a resupply ever happened. So far, we've been able to work around the problem, but it makes packing and planning unacceptably problematic.

It's been over a decade since a scheduled resupply has been available to Kings backcountry rangers. To a certain extent, this has been OK, but at the very least every effort should be made to get our gear in so that we don't need a resupply. Again, our brethren in Sequoia seem not to have this problem and are routinely scheduled for 2 flights per station. Also, Sequoia backcountry rangers, because of the location of the Sierra District office, seem to do much better at taking advantage of flights and trail crew resupplies to get fresh food and mail into their stations. Although a number of other departments have operations in the Kings backcountry (radio repeaters, trail crew, resources management) none seem able to inform the Sierra Crest ranger that they'll be in the backcountry and offer to take supplies in if space is available.

I realize, of course, that much of this is forced by overall NPS and Park budget cuts but, as former Superintendent Tom Ritter used to point out, 80% of the park is being taken care of by 12 backcountry rangers, and he considered that a cheap investment. I also now feel that the increasing cuts are seriously affecting our ability to adequately protect and patrol backcountry resources.

Law Enforcement

Backcountry rangers have the luxury of having considerable time to educate individual visitors about park regulations. As a result, our statistics reflect far fewer citations than might otherwise be the case. There is no question that education has had a major impact over the years in moving backcountry users to a very high degree of minimum impact compliance. Things are much better than they were even 15 years ago. I have mixed feelings, though, about moving towards non-LE rangers for some backcountry positions. There are many times when a citation or similar action is absolutely necessary to gain compliance or emphasize the serious nature of a violation. A clear method to ensure citations be issued needs to be preserved.

Before commissions were required at all stations (about 1993), it seemed to work fine for non-LE rangers to take names of violators and either the nearest backcountry ranger could issue a citation or even contact the party in violation or the sub-district ranger could later issue a citation. This could still work, but I believe we need more formal procedures and training for non-LE rangers so that enforcement of regulations is more consistent and not dependent on whether the ranger is commissioned. For the proposed non-LE rangers, policy needs to be more clearly defined as to what violations are almost certainly a citation in the backcountry (e.g.: dogs, fires, certain stock uses) and what violations could most

likely benefit from education. It has been my experience that, over the years, citations have worked to reduce certain types of violations in the backcountry. Dog and fire violations seem to be on the increase and should be consistently cited to reduce them again. Managers also need to consider ranger safety where non-LE's get names from violators. Backcountry visitors are pretty benign, overall, but there's a number of twitchy people wandering around. In addition, serious attention needs to be given to ranger safety where a non-LE ranger is asking for identification without training or defensive equipment.

If more non-LE rangers are to be used, the LE rangers might be designated as either "lead rangers" or even some type of seasonal training officer for the, presumably, less experienced non-LE ranger. Such rangers could be responsible for a certain level of field decisions and advice to the non-LE rangers.

It would also probably be a mistake to assign certain stations as either stations requiring or not requiring a law enforcement ranger. Use patterns change constantly and, in my experience, there is no predicting which areas in a given year might have more violations. It should be up to the district ranger to decide how to best use the personnel for a district.

Trails

The trail crew was in and, in addition to general maintenance, repaired the Junction, Upper & Lower Vidette, and Charlotte drift fences. Because of time constraints, only the Upper Vidette, Junction and Charlotte fences received a major amount of work and are now in excellent repair (though maybe just a teensy bit more is still needed at Charlotte). Another crew also had to come back to rehab the Upper Vidette camp a previous trail crew had left in poor condition. The rehab was excellent and the trail into the temporarily closed meadow was also rehabed.

Superintendent Dick Martin hiked in over Kearsarge Pass and suggested both a new sign for Kings Canyon entrance there and that the upper section of trail be improved. Debbie Brenchley brought a temporary sign in for the pass and will coordinate with the USFS to combine signs for next year. Unfortunately, someone apparently removed the new NPS sign sometime in the last two weeks of the season. Jerry Torres should look at the upper section of Kearsarge Pass to see if improvements are possible given the existing grade. It's likely a few large boulder "steps" could be removed.

District Equipment Needs (for all stations, should our ship come in):

new binoculars

digital cameras

full set of good quality kitchen ware—pots & pans—(Ecko brand, like the Sequoia b/c sets recently bought invertors (approx. 140 Watt) for all stations (the current ones draw too much power just to operate)

15 watt flourescent lights rather than the current 30 watt ones—significantly reduces power drain on solar systems

Aluminum ladders