

SEASON END REPORT
CRABTREE MEADOWS
JUNE 7-OCTOBER 20, 2001

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A. GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

CONTACTS

Backpacker/Day hiker—3,476

Stock—258 animals contacted though more used the area. This number included pack and saddle horses, mules and burros. No llamas were contacted.

Commercial 58% (Rock Creek Pack Station, Cottonwood Pack Station, High Sierra Pack Trains, Bishop Pack Outfitters, Cedar Grove Pack Station, Mineral King Pack Station), Administrative 29% (Kern Trail Crew, Hockett Trail Crew, Kern Ranger, Military Overflight Trip), Private 13%. These numbers are comparable to past few years.

START OF SEASON—Rangers arrived in the backcountry in late June after two and a half weeks of training. Snow pack was reported as near normal for the eastern Kern River drainage (76%). Temperatures in the Owens and San Joaquin Valley topped 100 degrees in early May. Passes were reported snow free and creek crossings low by this time. These conditions allowed for early access into the backcountry by hikers and stock parties. There was significant evidence of hiker and stock use in the park prior to arrival of Rangers, which included garbage in area food storage boxes, newly built illegal fire rings. And stock use of meadows prior to opening dates. Reports were taken by hikers who met a stock party with 26 animals and also a stock delivered food cache left unattended prior to arrival of Rangers.

LAW ENFORCEMENT—Violations addressed in the patrol area included improper food storage, vegetation damage, abandoned property, pets on trail, garbage left in campsites and fire pits, feeding wildlife on Mt. Whitney, construction of illegal fire pits, resource damage by hikers and stock parties. Citations were issued to a BSA group travelling with a dog, a high school football team who built a fire in a closed area and left garbage in a campsite (Scott Munson, coach Julian High School football team. This party has made an annual trip from Cedar Grove-Forester Pass-Mt. Whitney-Colby Pass-Cedar Grove in late July. There have been problems each year this group is contacted), a hiking party who abandoned garbage and food in a food storage box. I continue to utilize on the spot service project where applicable to remedy a violation or compensate for damage. Evaluations of Incidental Business Permit holders continued in the field and warnings for violations were registered with the Concessions Office. Dogs continue to sign into the Mt. Whitney summit register.

Nearly 150 pounds of garbage were abandoned at the Crabtree Ranger Station and area food storage boxes.

ASSISTS—Visitors were assisted throughout the season with calls made via Dispatch and the Wilderness Office to alert families that hikers would be delayed. Deliver message to hiking party about a death in the family. Equipment was loaned or given to ill prepared hikers including sun screen, first aid supplies, menstrual supplies, stove fuel, insect repellent, sleeping bags, tarps and water bottles. Several times weekly during July, August and September food was given to long distance hikers who had not planned appropriately.

MEDICALS—Many minor medicals were treated in the field and at the Ranger Station which included blisters, foot, ankle and knee strains, local reactions to wasp stings, minor lacerations, insect bites and many suffering altitude illness. First aid supplies were distributed facilitating many hikers continuing their trips.

TRANSPORTS—A woman with severe altitude illness was treated overnight with the Gamow bag at Wallace Creek/JMT and evacuated by helicopter the following morning to Southern Inyo Hospital. A young man with altitude illness was evacuated by helicopter from Crabtree Ranger Station and to Southern Inyo Hospital. A man with asthma (but no medication) was evacuated by helicopter from Crabtree Ranger Station to Southern Inyo Hospital. A woman with a dislocated elbow was evacuated by helicopter from Wallace Lake to Southern Inyo Hospital. A man with a knee injury was evacuated by stock to Horseshoe Meadow trailhead. A man with chest pain was evacuated by helicopter from Junction Meadow to University Medical Center. A trail crew worker with appendicitis was evacuated by helicopter from Lost Canyon to Cawed Delta Hospital.

FATALITIES—A man climbing on the Mountaineer's Route on Mt. Whitney was fatally injured in a fall on the north slope of the mountain.

SEARCHES—The above climber was the subject of a search for several days conducted by Inyo National Forest. On my first day of the season patrolling in the backcountry the National Park Service was brought into the search and the climber was found dead on the north slope of Mt. Whitney. A hasty search and aerial recon was conducted in the Guitar Lake/Mt. Whitney area for a possible missing hiker who had abandoned her backpack near Guitar Lake. No missing person report was ever made to the Park and no further evidence was discovered. Participated in a search along the length of the High Sierra Trail in late September for a Czech national who was reunited with his party after two days. Conducted two hasty searches and reunited parties, one near Charlotte Lake and one at Crabtree Ranger Station.

WEATHER—Winter snow pack was trending to low end of "normal". Snow began accumulating late and melted early. The summer was mostly warm and dry

with one monsoon period in early July. Conditions were snow free as of October 17.

FIRES—A fire was ignited by monsoon activity in early July along the trail to Crabtree Lakes. Rain was heavy in the following days and extinguished the fire. Large wildfires burned north and west of the Park during August bringing smoke into the Kern drainage for several days. Three abandoned campfires were extinguished.

B. USE PATTERNS

BACKPACKERS—Access into the area went into January (as evidenced from the Mt. Whitney summit register) and began in late spring when passes became snow free and creek crossings were safe. The John Muir Trail/Mt. Whitney corridor remains the focus of the patrol area with more visitors venturing cross-country each summer. Nearly all backpackers are carrying food storage canisters in response to regulations in surrounding areas (east side Mt. Whitney, north of Forester Pass), though they continue to camp primarily at established sites with food storage boxes. I climbed Mt. Tyndall in late July and found 129 entries into the summit register for the previous month. Many who attempt this peak do not make it to the summit.

STOCK—Meadows opened as scheduled (“normal” year opening dates). Use was concentrated at Upper and Lower Crabtree Meadows for commercial and private stock and Sandy Meadow for administrative stock. Significant use was observed at Tyndall Creek and increased use at Wright Creek. Wallace Waterfall Meadow was open to only commercial and private parties with 6 animals staying one night. Lower Whitney Creek remains open to commercial and private parties. Temporary exclosures were erected in both meadows. Lower Whitney Creek saw no use and continues to improve. Wallace Waterfall saw possible “drift” use from a party camped below the meadow and also continues to improve though soils were still saturated at the end of a normal/dry season. Cottonwood Pack Station used the area primarily for spot trips. We still need to work on camp procedures and the condition it is left in.

ADMINISTRATIVE—The Kern Trail Crew stayed with 12 animals at Sandy Meadow for approximately a week and a half. An administrative/military overflight trip spent two nights at Lower Crabtree Meadow. The party included the Superintendent, Chief Ranger, personnel from Departments of Interior and Defense and Kern Ranger. The ongoing work toward resolving the Parks’ military overflight problems was discussed. The Meadow Monitor spent three days in the area visiting meadows and stock camps. Worked with the Plant Ecologist for four days in the Rock Creek area assessing meadow health.

COMMERCIAL—In addition to the aforementioned commercial pack stations contacted in the field several guided trips used the Crabtree area including

Southern Yosemite Mountain Guides, REI, A-16, Sierra Club, SNHA, and Mt. Whitney guides. These groups are typically in compliance with regulations and well organized with the exception this season of Southern Yosemite Mountain Guides who had to remedy problems in their camps on a few occasions. These were documented with the Concessions Office.

MILITARY OVERFLIGHTS—Few flights were observed to be technically low over the patrol area though the flight volume continues to increase. This was confirmed by visiting military personnel. Complaints were taken from visitors during the course of the season. Following September 11 and the multi-day closure of the U.S. airspace a quiet pervaded the area as I have never experienced in the Sierra Nevada. The sounds created in nature were all that could be heard. It was different. It was very good.

C. NATURAL RESOURCES

BEAR ACTIVITY—A bear obtained food in the Whitney and Crabtree Creek drainages for one week in mid-summer after which all bear activity ceased. The bear obtained food hung in trees and also emptied the contents of an improperly locked food storage canister. Second hand reports came throughout the summer of food being obtained by bears north of Forester Pass and in Rock Creek including three instances of bears scratching people who were either sleeping with their food or attempting to retrieve food that had been taken. Many backpackers used the URSACK which “failed” on numerous occasions though this news was slow to get to backpackers. More packers were observed using bear proof panniers and food storage barrels.

WILDLIFE—A credible wolverine sighting was reported 2 miles south of Forester Pass on the Tyndall Plateau. Trail crew workers saw an adult and juvenile beaver at the Kern River log jam/Chagoopa Falls confluence and a fisher in the lower Big Arroyo. Raptors were plentiful particularly in late season.

VEGETATION—Recent pine bark beetle damage was observed in all drainages between Rock Creek and Tyndall Creek. Trees appear to have been damaged in the past 1-3 years with significant die off this year concentrated in Rock Creek. 1-5% of lodgepole pines are affected in some areas. Limber pines were found growing in several “new” locations on the rim of the Kern Canyon and in middle Rock Creek. Residual biomass sampling was conducted with the Plant Ecologist in Rock Creek and with the Meadow Monitor in Whitney and Wallace Creeks. Conducted ground truthing of aerial photographs taken for Park vegetation map being created. The Kern Trail Crew camp was moved to the north end of the meadow. The new camp is located in an area more sensitive (above several seeps) than the previous location however the crew was diligent about keeping the stock on the hardened areas both in camp and when entering and exiting the camp. If the stock continues to be kept out of the seeps (an electric fence may help) the new camp will work well. A camp at the hidden meadow at Upper

Crabtree may be a more permanent solution and put the crew closer to the work of the area (vicinity of Mt. Whitney).

D. CULTURAL RESOURCES

PREHISTORIC SITES—Site visits were made in the Crabtree Meadows area, Chagoopa Plateau and Sheep Camp on the Tyndall Plateau. These sites consist primarily of obsidian flakes and were found to be intact. Also visited sites at Bullfrog Lake, which consisted of flakes, pottery, beads, and midden soils. The Archaeologist was conducting an assessment of the site and removed many artifacts.

HISTORIC SITES—The Mt. Whitney shelter had repairs made to a hinge on the public side of the building, which had come out of its socket.

E. BACKCOUNTRY FACILITIES

CABIN—A visitor requesting emergency assistance carved a message into the Ranger Station door (rather than using the pen and paper next to the door). The damage was repaired and the door repainted. New mattresses were flown in for snow survey beds. A good wooden chair was obtained for the Station.

SIGNS—Temporary signs were installed during searches and regarding bear activity. All signs were removed in the fall. The new location of the sign at Trail Crest has proven successful in keeping visitors from coming down the wrong side of the mountain.

F. TRAILS

TRAIL ACTIVITIES—The Kern Trail Crew spent much of their time in the patrol area removing rock fall and defining the route on the Mt. Whitney trail and filling some wet areas low on the approach to Mt. Whitney.

PROBLEM AREAS—The trails through Crabtree are among the most heavily used in the Parks' backcountry at the terminus of the High Sierra and John Muir Trails.

1. Mt. Whitney switchbacks—two rockfalls over the past three summers have eroded parts of the trail. Good work has been initiated to keep this trail passable however the switchback ends need rebuilding.
2. John Muir Trail between Crabtree Ranger Station to above Guitar Lake—areas of erosion due to water flow on trail, deep gullies and two sections with triple trail from steady erosion.

G. CAMP AREAS

CONDITIONS—Visitors continue to use the camps with food storage boxes and the Guitar Lake area even though canister use has significantly increased. Impacts in these areas are apparent in loss of vegetation, compacted soil, rocks and soil blackened by fire rings, garbage, feces, absence of dead and down wood. Three dry seasons in a row have made impacts even more apparent. There are thousands of campers using only a handful of sites at the Crabtree Ranger Station and Guitar Lake and it shows. Rock walls above treeline were again aggressively removed with some success in that they return slowly and do not reach monumental proportions. The assistance of several Boy Scout troop was enlisted in this endeavor as service and remediation for not following regulations.

SANITATION—The pit toilet at Crabtree Ranger Station continues to contribute to improve sanitation at the area camps. The current pit is large and should continue to be functional for several years. The Mt. Whitney honey bucket was emptied in early August and was full again by the end of the season. The cone was frozen solid in October and weather conditions would not permit emptying the bucket at that time. It will need to be emptied early season and again in mid-season in 2002. Human waste continues to be a problem at Guitar Lake with feces and toilet paper accumulating on the surface. There are more overnight users of the area than the number of "bathroom sites" can accommodate. This situation needs to be addressed beyond having the Crabtree Ranger making patrols to rebury human feces. Numbers have been collected for the past 3 years for users of the area. The number of backpackers camping on the west side of the Mt. Whitney should be reduced to mitigate these impacts. We are not adequately equipped to handle these impacts while protecting Park resources (such as permanent toilet facilities, designated campsites, ranger staff to enforce designated camping and maintenance for the toilets. Nor would this necessarily be the appropriate means of addressing impacts. If numbers are not reduced in the area we need to reconsider installing a toilet and finding funding to keep it operational.

FIRE RINGS—Three sided fire pits are maintained in most areas and continue to collect garbage.

FIREWOOD AVAILABILITY—Firewood availability is low in all camps with food storage boxes. Visitors cut down trees at Wallace Creek/JMT and Lower Crabtree Meadow (digital photos taken). This has become an annual occurrence. Because fires are not permitted above 10,000 feet in areas surrounding the Kern drainage (Kings Canyon, Inyo NF), visitors continue to be surprised that fires are permitted.

FOOD STORAGE—Most backpackers use food storage boxes in the patrol area and many carry food storage canisters also. URSACKs were popular even though they were found to be ineffective. There are still gaps in food storage north of Forester Pass and I receive several reports weekly of food being obtained by bears from Vidette Meadow to Wheelbarrow Camp.

H. PERMIT SYSTEM

TRAILHEADS—Permit quotas do not effectively protect the Crabtree area from the impacts of excessive use. The numbers are too high to provide sustained use over the years and protect Park resources.

ISSUING OFFICE—NPS Rangers stationed on the east side participated in backcountry Ranger training in the spring which enabled them to learn about pertinent issues from the Park perspective. Both east side Rangers were new to the Park. Neither of the trailhead Rangers made trips into the Kern backcountry this season. They reportedly spent the bulk of their time issuing permits at the USFS office in Lone Pine and making patrols on the Inyo NF. They were never able to become familiar with Park terrain and regulations.

I. COMMUNICATIONS

Radio communication is adequate in the patrol area. The return of the parkwide backcountry round-up was welcome. This facilitated improved communications between backcountry sub-districts.

J. NEEDS FOR NEXT YEAR

--Wire brush	--Wire dish scrub
--Wildlife observation forms	--Strapping tape
--Duct tape	--Menstrual pads for visitors
-- <u>Place Names of the Sierra Nevada</u>	--2 sponges
--Matches, strike anywhere	

K. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Meet with pack stations and Subdistrict Ranger at beginning of season to discuss conditions and concerns.
- Reduce number of overnight campers at Guitar Lake or install toilet.
- Empty Mt. Whitney honey bucket once in spring and again in late summer.
- Continue to do one "round up" for all backcountry personnel.
- Remove Mt. Whitney shelter.
- Lower fire limit to 10,000' in Kern drainage so it is below treeline.
- Require stock users to carry bear proof panniers or metal drums for food storage.
- Meet with NPS and USFS trailhead personnell at beginning of season to coordinate activities.
- Training with IBP and concession pack stations on the "why" of minimum impact regulations.

--Restore the permit issuing process to the USFS for visitors taking trips with Cottonwood Pack Station (better yet, all pack stations) so that visitors may receive accurate minimum impact information.

- Training conducted at Pear Lake provided a valuable forum for discussing issues among rangers who rarely meet. Continue this format for training.
- Schedule east side trailhead rangers to make patrols into the Park throughout the season so they are familiar with Park resources and regulations. They should not spend the majority of their time issuing permits to visitors entering USFS areas only and patrolling USFS areas.