

## LECONTE CANYON END SEASON REPORT: 2001

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### VISITOR USE, PATTERNS, PROBLEMS, ETC.

#### Visitor Use

The season struck a moderately busy pace and basically stayed that way until a week after Labor Day. I got in late and missed the storm that chased many away. But after that main glitch, along with September 11, there was a steady rhythm to the summer. The worst crowd scenes were Dusy Basin weekends. I missed the main body of the PCT'ers. I was amazed by the high percentage of travelers who were doing the John Muir Trail. It appeared to be somewhere around 70%-80%! I doubt if it was really that high, but that was the impression. A theme within this group was experimentation with the ultra-light fad. Fortunately it was a benign season weatherwise, so most of these folks probably didn't find out if their minimal gear works or not.

There were a fair number of hikers doing some version of the North Lake/South Lake Loop; too many, apparently, using Lamarck Col, with all those medevacs. Dusy Basin is a really popular weekender destination-site for hikers and climbers as well as people getting packed in to high camps. Off-trail hiking appeared to be on the decline with the exception of the well-used Dusy Basin-to-Palisade Lakes high route. I ran into very few people, for instance, who had Ionian Basin, Lake Basin, Ladder Lake, Lower Middle Fork of the Kings, Blue Canyon, etc., in their plans. Party size was generally fairly small. One Sierra Club party come through with 11. (Leader: David Roberts of Santa Cruz, CA. They had originally planned a trip to Ladder Lake with layover there, then the high crosscountry route to Upper LeConte. I discouraged them from this because of the roughness of the route and the fragility of Ladder, and after the leaders did a reconnaissance, they concurred and rerouted their journey.) I saw no church groups and few scouts. One pattern that appeared to be developing is an increasing number of hikers coming in over Taboose and even Sawmill passes to avoid the bear canister regulations of Bishop Pass and Kearsarge Pass areas. There were a surprising number of international visitors - from Ireland, Scotland, Japan, Russia, Germany, Australia and so on.

#### Campsites, Firerings, Problem Sites, etc.

I think the fire closure above 10,000' has taken hold in the consciousness of many backcountry users. Hikers, for the most part, are not expecting to have high-elevation fires. Stockusers seem to be more attached to the fire ritual. Firerings and trash dumps I cleaned up this season in Dusy Basin were mostly old, as were those in Upper LeConte Canyon. Palisade Lakes area was the worst in terms of illegal firepits. I worked a number of sites, old and new, at the upper lake, and I know Bob Kenan worked the basin as well. The distance from ranger stations makes this a problem area and also that the upper lake

has pretty good tree cover and at least one old stock camp that still gets occasional use. The weather was affecting use to some extent. It was balmy, dry and warm, and fires were not a big temptation. On the other hand, the old habit campers have of adding a few rocks (or multiple tiers of rocks!) to existing pits doesn't seem to be changing much at all. Dismantling rock layers is still a big job, and probably we need a little more education on this issue. Another ongoing problem is the toilet training and toilet paper issue. A lot of people have just not figured it out yet.

The worst problem camping area of the summer was in the vicinity of the lake in Dusy Basin at about the 11,300' elevation, the first obvious camping grounds for people coming off Bishop Pass. The amount of really creepy trash close to and in the lake was amazing. Toilet paper and non-decomposing, marginally buried feces were common within 20 feet of the lakeshore. Old towels, clothing and all type of food packaging had been flung into the lake. The lake was also the site of a number of incidents, including one death (heart attack), 2 (or 3?) medevacs and a day-long search for a missing person.

Muir Hut still has problems. Trash, toilet paper and human feces are still to be found near the hut. The new sign has some class and may encourage people to treat the area with more respect. We'll see. All in all, it's an improvement over conditions of 20 years ago. It appears that less people are actually camping there. It smells a lot better inside the hut, and people are rarely burning things. The rock fireplace helps.

### Incidents

There was one death, due to heart attack, in Dusy Basin. There were 5 medevacs: 3 by helicopter and 2 by stock. I conducted one day-long search for a missing party and assisted peripherally in 2 other searches. I had several other instances of caretaking individuals who were sick or otherwise in trouble. There was one instance of a food cache being stolen from barrel at ranger station.

### Bears

A medium-sized cinnamon bear made half-hearted attempts on two different nights to get into the station. Bear got no food and didn't come back after second try. There were no bear incidents reported in LeConte all season, although there were periodic sightings on Dusy Creek. I encountered a bear at Deer Meadow in mid-September. It acted wild and looked a lot like the bear at the cabin. There were lots of fresh bear tracks and scat in Lower LeConte and Palisade Creek areas in September. A very high proportion of hikers were toting the food canisters. Also a large percentage of them claimed that they did not mind doing so because it took so much stress off their trips. (Apparently there was one incident: Trail Crew had a tent ripped into by a bear. I didn't even hear about it until season was over. Hopefully this was same bear being curious and did not involve food.)

## GRAZING, MEADOWS, DRIFT FENCES, STOCK USE, ETC.

### Stock Use

Even with the dryness of the season and early access to the mountains, the stock users did not arrive early or stay long. The major amount of use continues to be from NPS and commercial packers, so the lack of heavy use reflects the fact that neither of these groups had a large amount of business in LeConte Canyon this season. Also, the few instances of unnecessary impacts I did note were not from NPS (Trail Crew) or from the local packer (Rainbow) but rather from private users and commercial packers out-of-area.

Rainbow Pack Outfit was a benevolent presence this season. Greg Allen, new owner and manager, is very interested in establishing a good relationship with the National Park Service, and he is going out of his way to foster a cooperative working environment. He was always open to suggestion about changing drop-off or rendezvous points or campsites. He had his packers always stop for trash, and he was helpful with medevacs. Rainbow's pack trips into the LeConte area were typically with two to four head of stock; occasionally, five or six. This was partly due to forest service restrictions (limitations on number of head kept at pack station, plus limitations on number of animal-days traveling through forest service land) but also due to Greg Allen's preference of doing support trips for people (gear and resupplies) rather than traveling or all-expense-paid kind of affairs. Greg discussed with me the possibility of having a cache box at the ranger station to leave resupplies. The resupply business is the source of a large number of his trips. As is, Rainbow has to meet the parties in person to deliver the goods, and that often involves a 2-day pack trip to carry in a few small boxes. I think the cache box idea is a good one because they could consolidate and do less short trips into the area. It would be a convenience for Rainbow, and for us it would mean less resource impact.

Rainbow's main "deep country" packer this summer was Sam Houschaur. He is young and fairly inexperienced but has the exceptional qualities of high intelligence, open-mindedness and an environmental background. He never had a problem with doing a chore the hard way or going out of his way to do things right, and he always stopped for trash. So, I would say it was a pleasure to work with Rainbow this season. Not just because their stock numbers were down, but also largely because Greg Allen and Sam made such a big effort.

Trail Crew had only 3 scheduled work days in LeConte area, so even with their 10-14 traveling head, little impact occurred. Luke is obviously a good packer, and they use hide-away camps, and they leave everything clean when they go.

It was not until mid-August that any sizable stock groups showed up. This made it an optimal season to observe the differences in visual impacts created by small packtrains (2-6 head) versus medium-large packtrains (10-14 head). The small strings (Rainbow) had been coming and going for a month, and there were very marginal observable effects. As soon as a few bigger trips came through, visual impacts were apparent. This is not to say

there was instant resource damage from the larger trips - just that there is a big difference, visually and aesthetically, to casual observation.

There were a couple instances of unnecessary and inappropriate impacts caused by stock groups. One was a private group (Tom Beverly of Mammoth Lakes, CA). They kept 8 head of stock for an entire week at a camp below Grouse Meadow. I checked with them early in the week, and they had a good camp and seemed to know what they were doing. After they had left, though, the land looked pretty devastated from lower end of Grouse on downstream for a couple hundred yards. They used a highline and free-grazed most of the animals, but the grazing was much too concentrated. They could have done more to ensure dispersal. The other bad situation was due to a stock group winding up at Little Pete Meadow late in the day and finding the only acceptable stock camp already occupied by backpackers. (Actually there is no decent stock camp at Little Pete. The camp that works for stock is also the main backpacker camp.) So this stock group took the next camp they could find at lower end of the meadow. The core of the camp is small and is surrounded by shorthair-grass community. These people did a very bad job of protecting the meadow area. They set up tielines but did so on vegetated ground. Tents were also obviously staked out on meadow grasses. I believe the responsible party was a packer from Woodlake and his party, with 14 head of stock, but I did not see them on site and can't say for sure.

#### Drift Fences

There are four drift fences in the LeConte area. Two are functioning pretty well, and two are not.

1) *Dusy Basin drift fence* is located near ranger station at the base of the Bishop Pass Trail where it intersects the JMT. Gate is functional but needs new logs for cross beams. Half a dozen posts are rotten and need replacing. A roll of wire is needed at station or near fence.

**Stockusers' perspective:** this fence keeps stock in LeConte Canyon and prevents them from heading out over Bishop Pass. Especially helpful for Rainbow Pack Outfit since their stock would be the most likely to take this route back to the barn. **Management perspective:** fence prevents stock from roaming in Dusy Basin. Encourages stockusers to let stock graze freely and not tie animals up for extended periods of time, and thus prevents resource damage. Current location of fence is fine.

2) *Big Pete drift fence* is located 1/8 mile below Big Pete Meadow on the JMT. Gate was barely functional this season. (Packers had to use lash ropes to tie gate closed at night.) Fence has a number of rotten posts. Gate needs to be completely rebuilt. A roll of wire is stashed at this location.

**Stockusers' perspective:** fence keeps stock in Big Pete grazing area (although there is no longer a fence on upper end). For those camped at Little Pete or below, prevents stock from heading north to Muir Pass. **Management perspective:** Encourages stockusers to

loose-graze their animals above fence in Big Pete area or below fence in ranger station to Little Pete area. Does nothing to discourage stock from hanging out in the sensitive, closed part of Big Pete Meadow. Location of this fence is problematic.

3) *Ladder drift fence* is located halfway between LeConte Ranger Station and Grouse Meadow on the JMT. Gate was rotten at beginning of season. I rebuilt it with the help of Steve Essen and Rachel Mazur. A number of fence posts are rotten, and quite a bit of wire needs replacing. A roll of wire is needed near the fence.

**Stockusers' perspective:** Keeps stock in the Grouse Meadow and Lower LeConte Canyon areas. For those camped above, prevents stock from wandering down the Middle Fork or up Palisade Creek. **Management perspective:** Deters stockusers from tying up their animals in the Grouse Meadow area. Encourages people with stock to utilize Ladder Camp, which is a good stock camp, located near and below the drift fence location. Helps to spread out grazing in LeConte Canyon. I think the fence is in a good location, but there are differing opinions on this one.

4) *Stillwater/Deer Meadow drift fence* is located in Palisade Creek drainage between Stillwater and Deer Meadows on the JMT. It is in bad condition and was barely operational at beginning of season. By end of season, one of main gate posts had rotted and collapsed. Need to be taken down or rebuilt and/or relocated.

**Stockusers' perspective:** As the only fence in the Palisade Creek drainage, it keeps stock in upper Palisade Creek/Deer Meadow area and prevents them from taking off down the Kings River toward Simpson or upward toward Grouse. Helps stock groups camp closer to Mather Pass if they are coming or going that way. **Management perspective:** Encourages stockusers to utilize the upper Palisade Creek/Deer Meadow area for camping and grazing, and this takes some of the pressure off LeConte Meadow areas.

#### Meadows and Stock Camps

The Big Pete question is tricky. There is new talk about closing the entire Big Pete Meadow to grazing. The upper section of Big Pete, with sensitive sphagnum, sundew and heather community, is officially closed to grazing, but the rest of Big Pete is open. Drift fences have always been located above and/or below the entire meadow, so there has never been a fencing solution to this situation. The tools for keeping stock out of the closed area have been: the nature of the terrain, which is boggy and full of avalanche debris; and, simply telling packers to do so. Rangers and others have been complaining about this for years because, in heavy-use years, that closed section does get grazed and trampled. The section of Big Pete that is open to grazing is usually wet all year, even in the driest of seasons.

On the other side of the question, we need to consider the larger ramifications of closing the whole of Big Pete, and we need to leave the stockusers some decent places to go. Rainbow Camp, at Big Pete, is probably one of the best actual stock camps in the whole area. It is well-hidden and non-intrusive to backpackers and is situated on hardened

ground up out of the meadow. It's at the opposite end of the meadow from the closed area. Shutting off Big Pete would have to put more pressure on Little Pete and Grouse areas, and use could shift to Upper LeConte Canyon as well. Stock wandering a couple miles above Big Pete to the 9600'-9800' elevation would probably be fine, but above that would not. (We really do not want to encourage stock use in the fragile high meadow and lake basins although, since they are closed to fire, packers would not likely start camping there to any large extent.) Little Pete is the driest and probably the most resilient, in terms of soil-and-moisture and vegetation, of the LeConte meadows. However, Little Pete has no decent stock camp. The camp used by stock groups is also the most popular backpacker camp, and it is right on the trail. In fact, Little Pete is the busiest and most desired backpacker destination-site in LeConte Canyon - way more so than Big Pete. Skewing it more toward stock parties is not a good plan. The campsites alongside Grouse Meadow proper are also right on the JMT and are similarly highly favored by hikers and unsuited for stock. Grouse is also very wet the entire growing season, much like Big Pete. There are, at least, stock camps that work in the Grouse area. They are situated a mile above meadow near Ladder Creek confluence and below meadow within 1/2 mile or so. Both of these areas have decent forage away from the meadow proper, and they are beautiful camping spots.

Morgenson, in his old LeConte reports, states the idea repeatedly that packstock need not graze the meadows themselves of LeConte Canyon to find plentiful and good forage. This is probably true. There are good grass benches and woodland forage throughout the canyon and throughout Palisade Creek, and dispersed grazing could, and does, utilize this "feed" source. In fact, stock often ends up doing this anyway - wandering and eating on the dryer benches all night - where they can find tastier grasses and less sedges and be dryer and warmer. Randy calls it a "cultural tradition" that stockusers turn out their animals in the lush meadows and camp on the fringes. His idea was to reverse the legacy - to fence stock out of the meadows instead of in to the meadows - and that this would not pinch the stockusers in any serious way. There is merit in this idea, although fencing out the meadows entirely is not practical and probably wouldn't fly. Packers who are familiar travelers in LeConte Canyon do not tend to overly use the meadow-fringe camps. Trail Crew utilizes hide-away camps - mostly away from meadows. Greg Allen, when I quizzed him about why he didn't use Ladder Camp more, said he prefers Ladder to anything closer to Grouse, but that his clients want to be at the meadow. (Ladder is a good stock camp: it is not on a wet meadow; it's got good hillside dry forage; it's directly below drift fence: even has a fine view.) Rainbow packers and the Trail Crew both use Rainbow Camp at Big Pete, but I believe this is because it's a good stock camp - not because it's right on the meadow. The main people using meadow-fringe camps (other than the Rainbow Camp) were some traveling groups (Three Corner Round, Rock Creek Pack Station, a Woodlake pack outfit, etc.) and some private parties.

Debbie Brenchley's idea that we could somehow, non-intrusively, create more-defined, more-specific stock camps, that would be obviously for stock use and not for backpackers, alongside this idea that such camps need not be right on the edge of meadows, could be very workable. Packers themselves are most often looking for a camp

that works. The clients want the spectacular view. Rainbow's main packer often dropped the customers at one site and used a different campsite for himself and the animals. This is a little more work, but, unless it is one of those all-expense, daily-riding affairs, it is quite workable.

There are a number of challenges in all this. Maybe the first is to reverse our thinking, and instead of coming up with a longer and longer list of all the places we want to keep stock out of, rather identify certain sites that could work well for stock and then figure out the means to encourage stockusers to want to go there. We could make it easier for them to use these places - not harder. Drift fences really can be a tool, not just a convenience. Figuring out the most strategic placement of fences, without putting them everywhere, is a little perplexing but certainly possible.

Perhaps the closed area of Big Pete could itself be fenced (a very big undertaking, no doubt) and a new camp located upstream from the meadow, so at least stock would not get turned out right in the meadow, though they could still use the unfenced parts of it. I recall that the Soil & Moisture Crew, stock supported, used to have a long-term hide-away camp at the lower end of Little Pete, across the river from the main campsites. Maybe that would be a possible stock camp, though it's easy to imagine the development of stock trails across the meadow and river that might be unacceptable. It seems I've heard that trail crews in the past used a site slightly to the east and uphill from the current main campsite at Little Pete, but I'm not sure about that. In any case, these types of sites could be looked at as possible semi-designated stock camps. Drift fence locations, and any other enticements, would have to correspond with new patterns we want to encourage.

Going downstream, the use of Ladder Camp should be encouraged. (I think it only got used once this season by a stock group - Greg Allen on an end-of-season resupply.) From the lower end of Grouse Meadow going downstream about 1/2 mile there are some possible stockcamp sites that could be explored. (The site now being used is not great.) A little further downstream is Trail Crew hide-away camp, but that should be left for their use. At the Middle Fork/Palisade Creek confluence, on the south side of Palisade Creek and away from the JMT, there is big camping area that gets little or no use these days. It was the bridge-building site, among other things. But there is not an abundance of forage in the confluence area, and I saw signs of only one stock group camping at the confluence this season. The Palisade drainage has lots of forage and good sites, but Deer Meadow is the only spot that gets much use. Rainbow Pack Outfit does not use Palisade Creek because they cannot pack in there in a day. Other groups are usually traveling to or from Mather and beyond, and they just want to be as close to the pass as possible. It's too bad, in a way, that some of the grazing pressure from LeConte Canyon can't be dispersed into the Palisade drainage, but it just doesn't work well into peoples' itineraries.

This would be good timing to put some changes into effect. Existing drift fences are in bad condition and need to be rethought and rebuilt anyway. Local commercial packer is open to changes. And we are in a fresh, new and forward-looking management phase.

## TRAILS

Trail Crew had very little time in LeConte area this season. This was fine in that there was little logging or necessary rockwork to be done. Most of the trails are in pretty decent shape. The exception is the stretch of the JMF from Little Pete Meadow to Muir Pass, which has patches needing attention throughout. I tried to break it down into sections that need more or less attention, as shown on map. Starting from Muir Pass and going southward:

1) Muir Pass to outlet of Helen Lake: This stretch is pretty smooth and has good flow for hiking. The messiest parts are around the two intermittent inflows to Helen Lake where trail kind of disappears into the rocks and is jumbled. Otherwise, this stretch is good.

2) Outlet Helen Lake to inlet of little lake at about elevation 11,300': This is one of steeper and rockier sections. There is a fair amount of erosion and deterioration of rockwork and collapsing shoulders. The configuration of trail is good, though, for hiking. (Good flow with few giant steps. Would be a shame to see it replaced with stairsteps.) Reconstruction of walls, shoulders, switchback steps is definitely needed.

3) Little lake (11,300') to point where trail leaves creek: This small piece along creek is in good condition.

4) Previous point to river crossing (inlet of lake at 10,800'): There are various problems on this stretch, including eroding switchbacks, creek crossings with some meadow damage, embedded-protruding rock stretches that are hard to walk on (maybe no cure for this), and the river crossing which is a confusing and rocky jumble (maybe no cure for this either and it gives people a nice little challenge).

5) Upper river crossing to lower river crossing: Trail is decent around lake but deteriorates dropping down to the next crossing, getting rough with protruding rocks and some eroded parts along water seepage area.

6) Lower river crossing to lake 10,300': The switchbacks are in fairly decent shape. Deterioration is mostly at the lower end of switches near, and including, creek crossing just above lake.

7) Lake 10,300' to Big Pete Meadow: Descending down this steep terrain, with its many switchbacks and through the Barrier Rock area, there are a number of isolated spots (many at the turn of switchbacks) that need attention and some reconstruction. Steps need to be rebuilt, work put to disintegrating rockwork. The more level sections above Big Pete are basically okay.

8) Big Pete Meadow to Little Pete Meadow: At Big Pete there is that one bad rut section in the dry meadow where a double trail has evolved. There is a stretch right below the



drift fence that seems especially rocky, eroded and hard to walk on. The final drop to Little Pete, over rock outcroppings, seems fairly eroded.

After putting all that down, I want to emphasize that I like the whole configuration of this trail section. It is walkable and has flow for hiking. I don't think it merits a big construction effort that would replace the grade and ramps with many steps. (Would be nice to preserve some of these sorts of climbs for people with short legs and those with knees going bad, etc..)

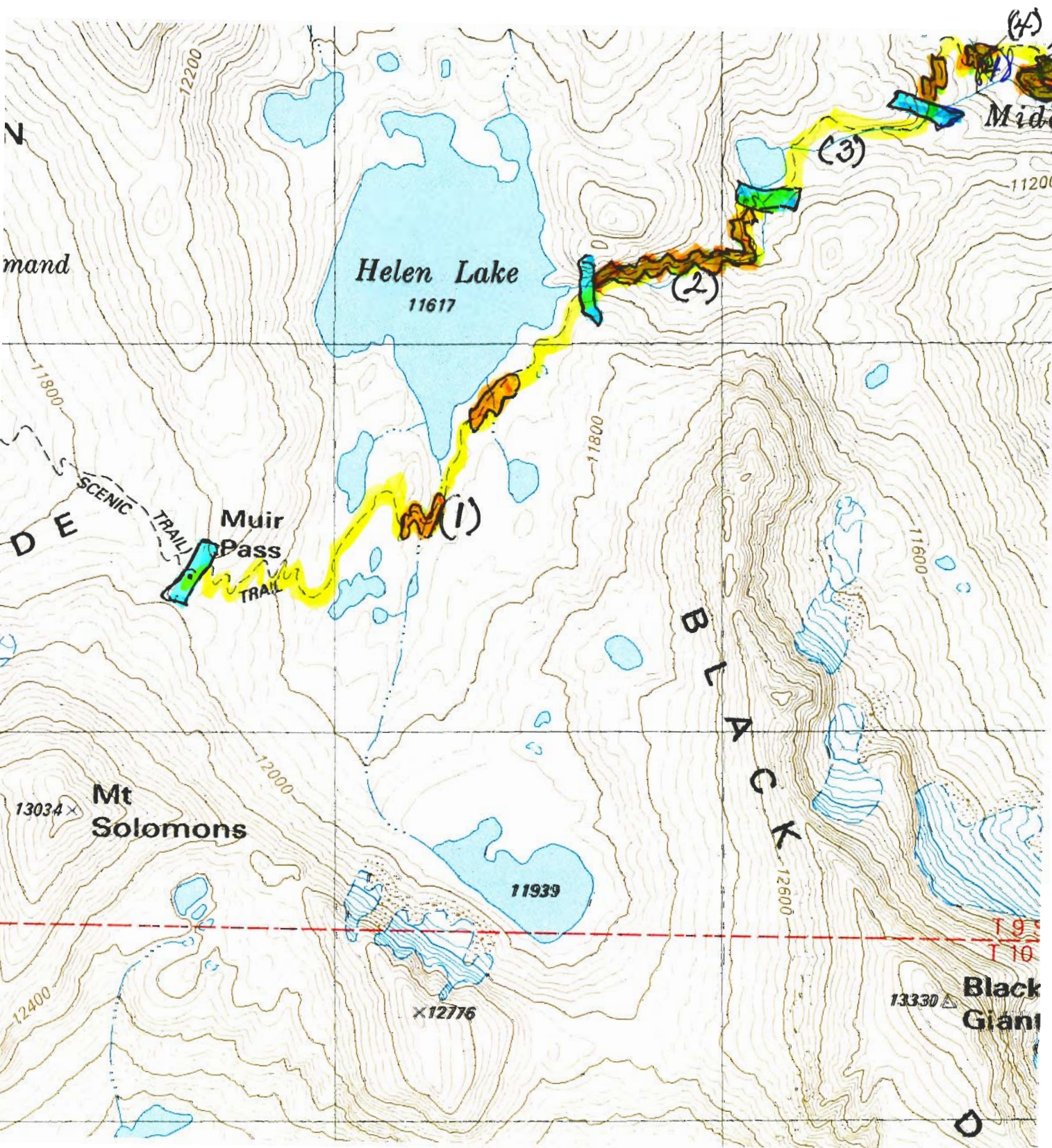
## FOOD STORAGE LOCKERS

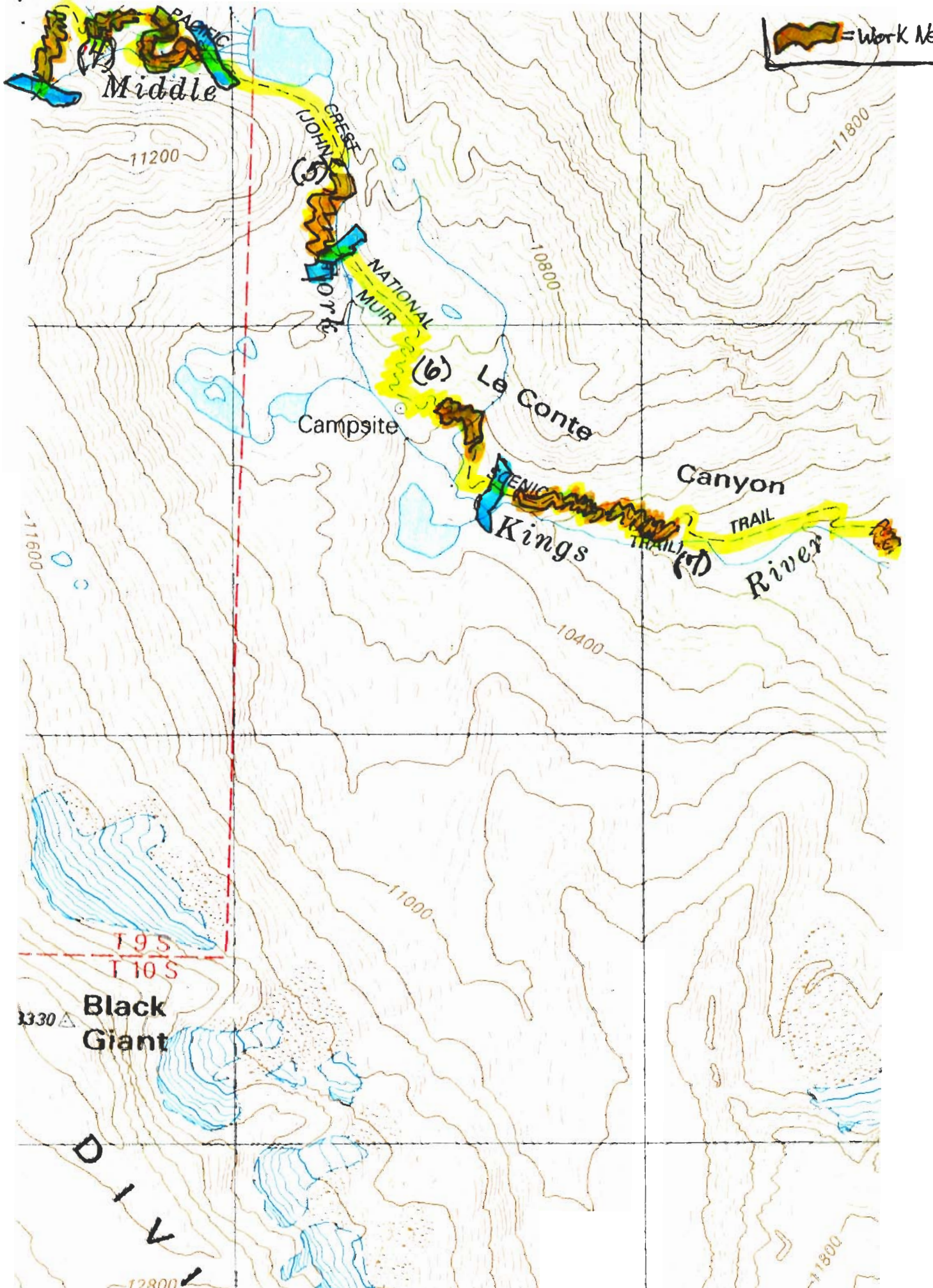
There are about half a dozen food storage lockers of various types in the LeConte area. These were all placed for use of NPS and are not for visitors. The trail crew lockers are mostly well-hidden, and they use them, and it's probably a good solution to their logistical problems and camp needs. Some boxes, though, do not get yearly use and are in plain sight of trails and campgrounds, and it's hard to figure why they got left there. These need to be taken out and a little more thought given before placing them in the future.

## SPECIAL USE AREAS

There was an idea kicking around 10 years ago or so of defining areas of "Special Use" that would encompass the wildest and most undisturbed parts of our backcountry. A large portion of these remaining wild places are in the Middle Fork Kings region and include: Lake Basin, Cartridge Creek, Simpson Meadow to Tehipite Valley, Blue Canyon, Ionian Basin, Goddard Creek drainage, and the Tunemah country. I don't know if this concept is still alive or not - probably best addressed in Wilderness Management Plan sessions. But we do have something unique in these life-abounding places. It would be good to have some kind of parameters in place that protect the integrity of these relatively pristine areas. Even though none of these localities seemed particularly popular this season, it is amazing how quickly fads and use-patterns can change. There have certainly been years in my experience when Lake Basin, Ionian or even Tehipite have hit the list of *the places* to go (mostly due to publications of various sorts), and it is bound to happen again.

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# GEOLOGICAL SURVEY

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