

Ann Gebhart

August 24, 2011

Karen Taylor-Goodrich, Superintendent
Re: Wilderness Stewardship Plan
Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks
47050 Generals Highway
Three Rivers, California 93271

Dear folks,

I recently learned that the Park Service intends to create a new Wilderness Stewardship Plan. This comes as very good news to me, since as a lifelong backpacker in the Sierras, I have become increasingly concerned about some of the changes I have observed while hiking the backcountry trails.

My husband and I backpack annually in the Sierras. He began when he was twelve (he celebrated his 60th birthday last year on the trail ascending to Silver Pass) and I have been enjoying those mountains with him for more than 20 consecutive years now, having begun visiting on my own when I was 18.

We have both become quite concerned about the increasing impact and destruction which we have observed as a result of heavy stock use, especially in connection with commercial pack outfits, on the trails and in the overall wilderness environment. We have stumbled over miles of trails, strewn with overturned rocks and manure, breathing dust mingled with dry, pulverized horse manure.

Often we have noticed that astounding numbers of animals are being used, not only to transport people, but to lavishly furnish their encampments with brightly decorated tables, chairs, extended kitchens, huge tents, inflatable boats, steak dinners, and even tiki torches on one occasion, arranged in front of each enormous tent! This type of encampment is sometimes hauled in and set up, at which time the horses depart, returning days later to collect everything and everyone. Thus they have actually made two round trips on the trails to allow a fairly small group of campers a bit of time "away from civilization", while being well supplied with a great many of the comforts of home. This sort of practice is destructive beyond all reason and it ruins the very simplicity and solitude for which so many of us venture into the wilderness.

Of course the horses don't always leave the scene, and on several occasions we have listened all night to the bells of horses approaching in the dark, eventually arriving in our camp to mill around our tiny tent. This is not merely unpleasant, but quite unsafe. After chasing horses from my camp, and getting back to sleep, I have been awakened again

in the early morning darkness, by the wranglers tearing off on horseback to find the wandering herd, later chasing them back along the trail in front of my tent. This is a ridiculous amount of chaos and disruption for people wanting a little peace and quiet.

For years, we have found that we must seek out cross country or primitive trail routes to find camps that are not polluted with manure and flies. While we find some marvelous country this way, we also must face much more difficult terrain than we would if we were able to use the marvelous network of long established trails. We are not getting any younger, so I don't know how much longer this particular alternative will exist for us.

A year ago when I backpacked in Glacier National Park, I was delighted to find that the trails were relatively clean and undamaged as a result of what seemed to be much lighter stock use than I notice in the parks and wildernesses of the High Sierras. I met rangers there who had worked for years in California parks and who seemed quite familiar with the relatively filthy and overused condition of the trails there. They seemed as relieved as I was to find themselves in better circumstances.

Having accepted for years the need to control access by backpackers with entry quotas and other restrictions on wilderness use intended to minimize negative impact, I repeatedly observe the passage of pack trains, any one of which rototills and soils the trail to an extent that could not be achieved by a thousand humans on foot. It is not fair for horse people to leave trails in a condition which makes their enjoyment impossible for anyone not riding a horse, but for large stretches of trail this has become the case.

I have met many delightful packers over the years and I sympathize with their need to make their livings in mountains that they, too, love. My concerns are focused, though, on situations where use becomes overuse, and on the need to limit the disproportionate impact of people with stock. Without believing that it is just to prevent all people with stock from using the wilderness, it is quite clear to me that all sane notions of limiting negative impact have at some point been abandoned.

I strongly urge you to take this opportunity to take extensive measures to reverse and limit the destruction of the Parks by stock overuse. Probably you are even more aware than I am of ways that this can be done. Certainly lower limits on the number and size of pack trains are very much in order. I face trailhead quotas on every trip I take, sufficient to preserve the quality of the wilderness experience, and packers need to do the same.

It would be very helpful to reduce the the number of animals allowed for the support of each person in a group, so that excessive and inessential goods are not transported. It would be beneficial to encourage people to walk the trails, perhaps with some support from stock, and to find a way to encourage packers to provide more expeditions of this kind for people who are not disabled.

Stock should not be running free at night, trampling and soiling camps, or wearing bells to disrupt the quiet.

Packers can find ways to clean up after their animals, both along the trails and where they are tethered. I have seen manure catchers and cleanups performed in cities, and don't see why this cannot be done in the woods. Certainly commercial stock operations can pay fees to have trails cleaned and repaired or dispatch people to do this.

Perhaps more trails could be designated as foot trails only, or new trail plans could reflect the need for these. Meadows and lakes need much greater protection in order to maintain water quality. Certainly grazing needs to be more restricted and not allowed at all in the higher reaches of the parks, perhaps above 9,500 feet or so. I would definitely expect that anyplace that is too delicate for a campfire is far too delicate for a horse!

I appreciate the opportunity to encourage you to create a new plan that will reverse some of the very destructive trends that have degraded the experience of those of us who venture into the wilderness on foot, carrying the few things that are necessary to spend days and weeks in some of the most magnificent mountains on earth.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ann Gebhart". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "A" and "G".

Ann Gebhart