

August 25, 2011

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

Dear Ms. Taylor-Goodrich:

I am writing to offer some ideas for incorporation into SEKI's Wilderness Stewardship Plan, which I understand is under development at this time. As a backpacker who has completed one or more extended trips in at least one of these parks every summer for the past 28 years, I have a great deal of love for SEKI's wilderness areas and a keen interest in their preservation for generations to come.

First and foremost, this plan must identify and assess the impacts made upon park lands and resources by an ever-expanding population, and devise effective means of mitigating these impacts in the long-term. I urge you to think in terms of decades, not years, as you assemble this management plan.

I also urge you to drop the "we've always done it this way" attitude, which only serves to stifle rational thinking and favor a permissiveness toward flagrant violators of good ecological practice. We tend not to question that which has always been, but I think this attitude needs to change now.

I am referring to the high impacts made by large animals--horses, mules and cattle--owned by commercial enterprises which appear to have carte blanche to do pretty much whatever they want, and are never, ever expected to pay for damages inflicted on the ecosystem. While backpackers are strictly limited by trailhead quotas and taught to bury wastes to keep streams clean, horse packers currently have no real limits on the number of stock they can take in (20 is hardly a "limit"), or where they can go. Their animals litter the trails with large amounts of manure, often unavoidable by hikers, which draw flies and pollute streams. They trample meadows and campsites, giving the backcountry the feel of someone's ranch. I see this scenario every time I go out, so it's not a small problem, but a big, disgusting one, involving the entire Sierra Nevada. Yet, I have never read an EIR from any national forest or park that made any more than a passing reference to it. This is incomprehensible to me.

So, in order to mitigate the obvious impacts made by stock of all kinds, I urge you to:

1. Establish limits on the number of animals per party for commercial packers, ideally 10 or less.
2. Establish trailhead human quotas for packers; or alternatively, require their clients to compete with everyone else for wilderness permits in a single system. It's only fair.
3. Require stock animals to stay on designated trails, and disallow any off-trail stock use.
4. Require packers to clean up the manure dropped by their stock; this alone would serve to limit their numbers.
5. Require commercial packers to pay sufficient fees to cover trail maintenance & repair, monitoring of impacts, invasive weed control, and enforcement of regulations.
6. Designate a network of trails as "foot only" so that hikers can enjoy a wilderness experience free of the "barnyard effect" created by stock animals.
7. Prohibit any and all grazing in wilderness areas, including cattle. The pollution of streams and the introduction of invasive weeds is the concern here. Require the use of weed-free feed for all stock.
8. Be strict and proactive about controlling the introduction of invasive weeds by stock animals, i.e., establish a requirement for cleaning of coats and hooves prior to park entry, and enforce it.

9. Consider phasing out the use of horses and mules in favor of smaller animals such as llamas, which would lessen the environmental impact in many ways.

In short, I feel that this management plan should face the real environmental costs of stock use in the backcountry, and take definitive steps to both limit that use and place those costs on the shoulders of the users, where they belong, rather than on the hiking and backpacking public, and the parks. With the diminishing financial resources of our parks, including SEKI, this makes even more sense now.

I very much appreciate the opportunity to comment on this project and thank you for your consideration of my views.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Ellen Holden".

(Ms) Ellen Holden