

College of Liberal Arts & Sciences
Department of Languages, Literatures and Cultures

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

27 August 2011

Dear Superintendent Taylor-Goodrich,

- I am writing to comment on the impending “Wilderness Stewardship Plan” of the Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks.

I am an avid supporter of the national wilderness treasures that lie within the Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. A former resident of California, over the past twenty years I have spent many priceless, inspiring and even life-changing moments hiking (day and overnight) in both of those parks. To describe the preservation of their wilderness integrity as important to me would be an extreme understatement. In my mind the very meaning and value of “wilderness” for our natural heritage rests first and foremost on the natural integrity of these two national parks.

- It is self-evident that the Park Service faces an enormous challenge when trying to balance the need to make the parks accessible to the public, while at the same time limiting the inevitable harm and impact that increased visitation causes to the parks. At the same time, in my view it should be equally self-evident that some park visitors cause incomparably greater harm and impact than others and should be managed accordingly. The most obvious example of this, in my SEKI experience, has been the ongoing (if not growing) entry into the backcountry by large parties with pack animals. While one can still — thank heaven! — hike mile upon mile of trail in the SEKI backcountry without noticing foot-hiker impact beyond the edges of the hiking trail itself, the destructive impact of pack stock is immediately and glaringly evident. On many segments of trails in SEKI I have had to walk through and around mound upon mound of manure, with its stench and lingering flies. On multiple occasions I have had to forego an important source of streamwater for drinking — even with filter and iodine pills — because countless hooves of pack animals had transformed it into a shallow, stagnant (and thus unsanitary) puddle. And I can’t count the number of times I have arrived with camera at a long-anticipated meadow setting — even at high elevation — only to find it trampled and scarred by hoof-prints, sometimes beyond recognition.

I completely understand the need for pack animals to carry an individual or park employee who is incapable of reaching a point in the backcountry without a supplementary means of transport. It is not only harmful for the wilderness, however, but blatantly unfair that pack stock be allowed to enter the parks—particularly the backcountry—without the same rigorous assessments of impact that apply to foot hikers, whose impact is incomparably lower, even in large numbers. As a regular hiker on the Appalachian trail, I can say that perhaps its greatest, most foresighted regulation is the prohibition of horse-riders, who — incidentally — happily make their way into many parts of the Appalachian mountains along primitive roads without ever touching the AT.

I therefore ask that you consider and/or count my support for the following proposals for regulation:

(1) Most important for the long-term protection of SEKI wilderness is a limitation of the use of pack animals exclusively to park employees, law enforcement, emergency medical personnel, or individuals who are legally handicapped. If pack animals are to be used solely for the sake of increasing physical access, speed or comfort for an individual who is, in fact, fully capable of entering the backcountry on foot like the majority of foot-hikers, then they should be considered excessive and unnecessary for an outing in the SEKI wilderness.

(2) There should be one *single* reasonable, fair and “democratic” system of providing entry permits to park visitors in light of a *single* criterion — the amount of minimal physical impact that visitors will inevitably cause. Because visitors on pack animals cause far greater physical impact (principally through far greater body weight and volume of excrement and urine) than a visitor on foot, the limitations placed on the number and rate of pack-animal visitors on pack animals allowed into SEKI should be much stricter than those placed on the number of foot-only hikers.

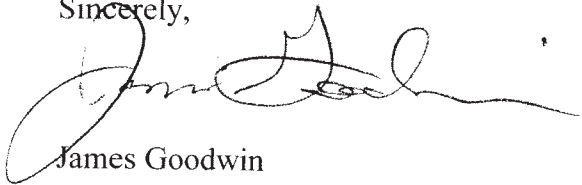
(3) Also in the interest of reasonable fairness, when arriving at a maximum number of individuals for a group permit (i.e. who can all enter the backcountry on the same day), any individual on a pack animal should count for at least three individuals (six legs). Thus, if the limitation on group size is twelve applicants for a given day, then twelve foot-only hikers would be allowed to enter together on a given day, but pack animal hikers would be limited to TWO.

(4) For those few stock animals that are allowed into the backcountry, there should be much stricter limitations on their physical range. Specifically, stock animals should be kept away as far as feasible from hiking trails (especially from watersheds and meadows that lie near hiking trails), and should most certainly be prohibited from fragile ecosystems at high elevation. At the same time (and it should go without saying), limitations on the movement of animals should be regulated by strictly enforced rules, *not* by means of more physical obstacles (fences and the like) that merely infringe further upon the wilderness by threatening to turn it visually into a farm.

(5) Ideally, in the SEKI—as on the Appalachian trail corridor—there should be a sharp differentiation between paths for hikers on foot and paths for stock animals. Where there already exist fire roads, old jeep roads, etc. (i.e. that are NOT part of major hiking trails), stock animals should be compelled to use them instead of hiking trails.

(6) Finally, our National Park Service should treat (and budget for) the need to reverse the impact caused by pack animals at the same level of priority as any other aspect of park integrity. Preserving the natural condition of hiking trails and their environs will benefit the park’s reputation and encourage more citizens of this country to turn off their PCs and take a hike in the wilderness of two of our most spectacular national treasures!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James Goodwin", written over a horizontal line.

James Goodwin