

Wilderness Stewardship Plan: Mount Whitney Management Area

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks
California



The summit of the iconic and much heralded Mount Whitney lies in the wilderness of Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks. The mountain owes its popularity to being the highest point in the U.S. outside of Alaska -- 14,494 feet. A maintained trail to the summit makes for a relatively easy climb. As a result, Mount Whitney is the single most sought after destination in these parks' wilderness.

The multitude of people who wish to stand atop this peak leads to what are, at times, unacceptable impacts. Given impacts to vegetation and riparian landscapes, the volume of waste generated, and the social impacts of crowded trails and campsites, the conditions of the area are at times at odds with its wilderness setting. Mount Whitney has always been popular, but statistics show that its attractiveness may be increasing. In addition, people who are not successful in getting permits for Mount Whitney choose to visit areas as close to it as possible, such as Mount Langley, thus spreading impacts.

Desired Condition – Outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined recreation would be provided to support visitor use and enjoyment of the parks' wilderness areas in balance with the protection of other wilderness character qualities.

Objective for Visitor-use Levels – Visitor use and enjoyment of wilderness would be promoted while ensuring the preservation of wilderness character.

Status Quo (Alternative 1) – Current Conditions

Mount Whitney can be reached from a variety of trailheads, some relatively near the summit (11 miles) and many significantly farther away. Inyo National Forest (Inyo) administers most of the nearby trailheads and user quotas, including the Whitney Portal trailhead that allows 100 day hikers and 60 overnight users per day, and the North Fork Lone Pine Creek that allows 10 private and 8 commercially supported overnight users to enter per day. Additionally, trailheads on the Inyo within 2-3 days hike of Mount Whitney include Shepherd Pass, Cottonwood Lakes/New Army Pass, and Cottonwood Pass. These allow a combined 308 people to enter each day. Many other Whitney-bound travelers come from other points north, south, and west (including the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail [PCT], John Muir Trail [JMT], and High Sierra Trail [HST]). The result of this myriad access equates to more than 25,000 people in the area per year seeking to summit Mount Whitney (concentrated primarily in July through September). It is not uncommon for wilderness visitors to encounter 50 people per hour on the trail and more than 50 people on the summit on summer days, as well as more than 50 people camping at Guitar Lake (5.5 trail miles below the summit). This level of use can lead to unacceptable levels of biophysical and social impacts.

Current management actions have had limited success in reducing impacts, such as the use of carry-out waste kits, trailhead exit quotas on the main Mount Whitney Trail, closing some sensitive areas to camping (e.g., Timberline Lake), and not allowing stock on the last four miles of the summit trail.

What additional controls might be enacted by the Wilderness Stewardship Plan (WSP)?

Alternatives 2-5 call for a variety of NPS management actions to ensure that conditions in the Mount Whitney area retain wilderness character standards over the next 20 years. These may include:

- Establish a Mount Whitney Management Area (MWMA) where specific controls will be enacted. This 37,260-acre area would also encompass the Mount Langley area (see map on reverse).
- Focus educational efforts on proper low-impact wilderness practices and alternative destinations.
- Cooperate with the U.S. Forest Service (and Yosemite National Park in regard to JMT issues) to assess the area and adopt solutions as needed, including changes to trailhead entry quotas.

- Reduce party size for off-trail and Class 1 trail travel in the MWMA. Establish a Class 1 trail up Mount Langley. Apply party-size limits to day and overnight users.
- Establish designated campsites with camp-area quotas (e.g., at Guitar Lake).
- Reduce commercially supported visitor uses (see Appendix B).
- Reduce camp-night limits at some locations.
- Reduce grazing and stock party size. Limit grazing areas.
- Establish day-use quotas and special MWMA use permits.
- Consider closing additional areas to camping, and expand the carry-out-waste-kit program.

Where can I find more information?

Actions for the Mount Whitney Management Area are discussed in alternatives 2-5 in chapter 2, and management actions that may be taken are in appendix A and B. The effects of implementing actions are in the *Wilderness Character* and *Visitor Use* sections of Chapter 3: Affected Environment and Chapter 4: Environmental Consequences.

