

Yosemite National Park

Wilderness Stewardship Plan

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Visitor Use and Capacity in Wilderness

What is Wilderness?

The Wilderness Act was passed in 1964 and defined wilderness as an area that is “in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape,” and where “the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man...” and as “an area of undeveloped federal land retaining its primeval character and influence...which is protected and managed to preserve its natural conditions and which generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable.”

In 1984 Congress passed the California Wilderness Act. The Act designated 94% of Yosemite as wilderness and instructed the National Park Service to manage that land in accordance with the provisions of the Wilderness Act. The Act directs the agency to preserve wilderness character and leave wilderness unimpaired while realizing its recreational and other purposes. Wilderness areas within the National Park System are to be managed at the highest possible standard afforded by U.S. land conservation laws, for they have the protection of both the National Park Service Organic Act and the Wilderness Act. The preservation of wilderness character requires purposeful restraint on the part of both managers and visitors.

Visitor Use and Capacity

Managing visitor use and capacity provides a variety of benefits to wilderness. It allows for the opportunity for solitude by keeping trails and camping areas from becoming crowded. It can prevent excessive impacts to campsites, trails, lake shores and stream banks, problems with human waste disposal in the wilderness, and detrimental effects to flora, fauna, and cultural resources. The regulation of visitor use comes at a cost to the unconfined quality of wilderness by requiring visitors to plan ahead to secure permits for popular destinations. The goal of managing use is to protect the wilderness experience while preserving the natural quality of the wilderness, with as little regulatory constraint and administrative intervention as possible.

Visitor Use and Capacity in Yosemite Wilderness

The Yosemite Wilderness is one of the most visited in the country, with many trailhead quotas filled to capacity almost every day of the summer season. Changing use patterns, such as the growing popularity of the John Muir Trail, Pacific Crest Trail, and Half Dome, have resulted in significant increases in demand for some trailheads.

Visitor Use and Capacity in Yosemite Wilderness (cont.)

The Park Service employs a trailhead quota system to manage visitor use levels within wilderness zones. A trailhead quota is the number of visitors allowed to enter the wilderness at a given trailhead. Zone capacity is the maximum number of people allowed within a given area of wilderness. Research in the 1970s determined the current zone capacities based on the number of acres within each zone, miles of trails, desired visitor densities in campsites and along trails, and the sensitivity of the natural environment. The Park Service keeps use levels within capacity for each zone through a trailhead quota system that is based on typical visitor travel and use patterns. The framework allows managers to respond to changing wilderness conditions and use patterns by adjusting quotas as to remain within established capacities.

Current Management Strategies

Yosemite's wilderness permit system is the primary tool for managing visitor use and capacities in the wilderness. It allows visitors to access the wilderness while maintaining an exceptional experience for all overnight users. A portion of the permits are available through a reservation system while some are available on a first-come, first-served basis. Across Yosemite's trailheads, the quotas range from 10-40 persons per day. In addition to quota levels, the park has established group size limits for trails, off-trail travel and stock parties.

Over time, trailhead quotas by themselves proved insufficient to manage to capacity, resulting in the development of new types of quotas. As described below, different types of quotas have been established to allow managers to better manage to capacity and to address unacceptable impacts to wilderness character as they arise. "Trailhead" quotas help establish the number of users entering the trail system from any one point. "Pass-through" quotas allow for a greater number of entries from one particular trailhead while allowing for visitors to pass through a given zone enroute to their final destination. "Exit" quotas allow for the management of multiple zones when popular destinations outside of the wilderness begin to create concentrations of use within the wilderness. "Destination" quotas allow for the more precise management of a particular area.

Potential Management Issues

Changing use patterns (summer and winter), have increased use in certain areas leading to social and physical impacts in these areas. The level of use in these popular areas can also consume the entire zone capacity, thereby limiting access to the more remote locations. The NPS is considering changes to the current trail head quota system to address this problem.

Find out More

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Tell us what you Think

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Commercial Services in Wilderness

What is Wilderness?

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What is a Commercial Service?

A commercial service is one in which any work or duty is provided by one person or entity for another person or entity in exchange for money. It includes, but is not limited to guiding, packing, cooking, carrying, instructing, demonstrating, providing gear and food, navigating, and other services typically provided under the description of “guiding and outfitting.”

Commercial Services in Yosemite's Wilderness

The Code of Federal Regulations (36 C.F.R. § 5.3) states “Engaging in or soliciting any business in park areas, except in accordance with the provisions of a permit, contract or other written agreement...is prohibited.”

Commercial Use Authorizations (CUAs), which are not considered concession contracts, are permits authorizing suitable commercial services to park area visitors in limited circumstances as described below. A concession contract may be issued instead of a CUA when the Service determines that the services are necessary and appropriate, and/or provision of the services require certain protections such as legal, financial, and resource provisions that are more typical of a concession contract.

Commercial Use Authorizations may be issued only to authorize services that (1) are determined to be an appropriate use of the park; (2) will have minimal impact on park resources and values; and (3) are consistent with the purpose for which the unit was established, as well as all applicable management plans and park policies and regulations. They are typically only issued for 1 or 2 years and are intended to provide a simple means to authorize suitable commercial services to visitors in park areas in the limited circumstances in the legislation.

Commercial Services in Yosemite's Wilderness (cont.)

Concession contracts are issued for services determined to be necessary and appropriate for visitor use and enjoyment of the area. When planning and developing concession contracts, operations are based on a determination that the facility or service:

- Is consistent with enabling legislation;
- Is complementary to a park's mission;
- Is necessary and appropriate for the public use and enjoyment of the park in which it is located;
- Is not, and cannot be, provided outside park boundaries;
- Incorporates sustainable principles and practices in planning, design, siting, construction, and maintenance; and
- Adopts appropriate energy and water conservation, source reduction, and environmental purchasing standards and goals.

Approximately 95 Commercial Use Authorizations (CUAs) are issued park-wide to businesses operating in the Yosemite Wilderness. Some of these companies may conduct more than one activity. Activities currently provided include: guided hiking/backpacking, stock trips, photography workshops, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, winter camping, and fishing.

Other commercial activities include Commercial Filming, Still Photography, and Right of Way, and are authorized through special use permits which are managed under Directors Order 53 as special use activities in the park. Commercial Use Authorizations are managed under Directors Order 48B for commercial visitor services. In some situations there are visitor services which are commercial by definition but operate as non-profit entities. Section 418 of Public Law 105-391, the National Parks Omnibus Management Act of 1998 (54 U.S.C. 101925) states that a nonprofit organization is not required to obtain a CUA to conduct activities in a park area (even if the activities would otherwise be subject to authorization by a CUA) if the nonprofit organization does not derive taxable income from the authorized activities. As such, nonprofit organizations, such as private summer camps, schools, university recreation programs may be issued a special use permit to conduct activities in wilderness when an educational fee waiver is approved.

Finally, High Sierra Camps, Pack Stock Trips, Backpacking, and Mountaineering are authorized through a concession contract and operated by the park's primary concessioner.

Current Management

Section 4(d)(6) of the Wilderness Act only allows commercial services that are "proper for realizing the recreational or other wilderness purposes."

To date, the National Park Service has not quantified the extent to which commercial services are necessary in Yosemite's designated wilderness, but does authorize commercial services through a number of different legal authorities. These authorities include concession contracts, commercial use authorizations (CUAs), memorandums, and special use permits.

Find Out More

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Stock Use in Wilderness

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What is Stock Use?

Riding and packing stock animals has a long history and strong cultural legacy in the Sierra Nevada. Stock was used for early pioneer expeditions, the support of sheep and cattle grazing, U.S. Calvary Patrols, and Sierra Club expeditions. Using stock is an acceptable non-mechanized and primitive method of traveling in the wilderness and wilderness visitors use horses, mules, llamas and burros to assist them in their explorations along the park’s trails.

Stock Use in Yosemite Wilderness

Stock use in Yosemite National Park includes NPS administrative use, commercial use, and private stock use. The specifics for each of these types of use is explained below. Some of these activities occur as day use and some as overnight use. Not all overnight use employs grazing as a means to feed stock.

NPS administrative use consists primarily of re-supplying trail crew camps on a weekly basis; usually with one pack string per week and additional strings for establishing and removing the camps at the start and end of the season. These trail crew camps vary in number and location from year to year. Other NPS administrative stock use includes ranger patrols, support of scientific research, support of High Sierra Camp utilities and trail clearing operations.

Commercial stock use is provided by businesses that hold Commercial Use Authorizations (CUA's) and by Yosemite's concessionaire, currently Deleware North Corporation and starting in 2016, Yosemite Hospitality, LLC. The concessionaire operates the five High Sierra Camps and uses pack strings to supply these camps throughout the summer. Each camp is supplied by anywhere from 2-7 pack strings (6 animals per string) in any given week, with additional strings required for opening and closing of the camps at the start and end of the summer season. The concessionaire also provides camp to camp stock trips.

Stock Use in Yosemite Wilderness (cont.)

The CUA stock operators provide a variety of services to clients. They offer “spot trips” to haul mule loads of gear and food for hikers. They drop gear at a location in the wilderness some distance from the trailhead and then return to the trailhead. These trips usually do not require an overnight stay for the stock operator. “Continuous Hire” stock trips are those where the CUA operator hauls hikers’ gear for the entire duration of the trip, from campsite to campsite. CUA’s also provide full service trips where clients ride horses with a guide and where meals are provided and prepared for the staff.

Private stock use occurs both as day use and overnight use. Overnight use levels are measured through the wilderness permit system. Visitors camping with stock (private or commercial) account for 2% of the total overnight use occurring in the Yosemite wilderness. Day rides into the wilderness generally originate from front country campgrounds in Wawona, Tuolumne and Bridalveil creek. No formal mechanism is currently in place for measuring the level of private stock day use within the park.

Current Management

Stock is allowed on the majority of the designated trails in the Yosemite wilderness and on six non-maintained stock routes (see www.nps.gov/yose/planyourvisit/stock.htm for list of trails closed to stock). Wilderness visitors using stock may camp with their stock within ¼ mile of these trails (or routes) and are subject to the same general camping regulations and restrictions as hikers and backpackers. The group size limit for stock parties is 15 people and 25 head of stock. This limit is reduced to 8 people and 12 head of stock when traveling on the non-maintained stock routes. Administrative use to support wilderness operations may occasionally exceed these limits.

Commercial stock use is currently regulated through the Commercial Use Authorization permit process and the concession contract to establish specific terms and conditions of use. Commercial stock users are subject to the same general restrictions and regulations as private stock users, however they must camp at locations identified as traditionally used stock campsites.

Pack stock grazing as part of a recreational, commercial, or administrative trip is generally allowed in the Yosemite wilderness with the following exception: within 4 miles of a trailhead or paved road, immediately surrounding any High Sierra Camp, and in the Mariposa Grove. Grazing limits have not been established for specific areas, with the exception of Lyell Canyon stock sites and the Merced Lake Ranger Station administrative grazing area. The timing and location of grazing is also regulated in Kerrick Meadows for the protection of the threatened Yosemite Toad and other sensitive resources.

Potential Management Issues

The NPS minimally manages the location, timing, and amount of stock use. Each of these factors affects the amount of impact to soils, vegetation, archaeological sites, and meadow fauna. This plan will develop a framework to better and more consistently manage these aspects of wilderness stock use.

Find out More

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Trails in Wilderness

What is Wilderness?

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Wilderness Trails in Yosemite

Visitors have ample opportunities to explore the park’s wilderness via a system of more than 750 miles of maintained trails. Visitors can also choose to travel on unmaintained routes over vast areas of the wilderness where no constructed trails are present. Trails provide access for recreationists and help to concentrate use. Trails have a dual effect on the natural quality of wilderness: the trail itself is an impact, but concentrating use on a single track can prevent impacts from spreading.

Trail History

The Yosemite trail system began with post glacial travel by American Indians following wildlife trails to hunt and trade across the Sierra Nevada. By the 19th century trails were used by miners during the Gold Rush, livestock grazers, and the U.S. Cavalry. Over time, new trails, roads and other developments opened access to Yosemite which led to increased interest and visitation to the area. After Yosemite became a National Park in 1890, the U.S. Army began patrolling and maintaining these routes. Today, park rangers and trail maintenance crews complete these tasks. Today’s trail system in Yosemite reflects the skill and dedication of generations of trail workers. More than 61,000 backpackers and stock users stay overnight in Yosemite’s wilderness annually, totaling about 193,000 use nights a year. Day use levels are estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands annually and expected to increase over time.

Current Management Strategies

In Yosemite, the NPS generally follows the same maintenance standards for all trails in wilderness. Due to the extensive trail networks, heavy use on certain sections of trail, differences in terrain, severe environmental forces, and logistical challenges of reaching remote sites, not all sections of trail can be kept at the same standard each season. The NPS prioritizes trail work in areas with the highest use or most resource protection concerns.

NPS trail work consists of clearing of down or fallen trees from the entire trail system, repair and improvements to problem areas, occasional rerouting of trail segments for resource protection, and rarely, construction of new trails. Much of this work is accomplished by 8-15 person trail crews stationed at temporary camps in the wilderness and resupplied by weekly pack stock trips, and occasionally, by helicopter. The remainder of the work is done by front country crews hiking into job sites each day.

In addition to working on established trails, the NPS has also recently addressed the issue of unofficial, unmaintained social trails. Yosemite has many miles of these “use trails” that have been established by hikers using the same off trail routes to reach mountain peaks, fishing areas, remote campsites, etc. These routes can develop into visible trails, frequently with many branching routes and dead ends. While offering an excellent opportunity to reach places away from the established trail system, these use trails can also cause resource damage. Recently, the NPS has worked on three of the most heavily impacted, longer “use trails” (Mt. Hoffman, Cathedral Peak, and Mt. Dana) and channeled each of them into one improved and stabilized route to avoid greater resource damage. The abandoned sections of these routes have been restored.

Potential Management Issues

Changing travel patterns in the wilderness (on and off trail), are making it more difficult to effectively and efficiently manage and mitigate the physical impacts of wilderness travel. This plan will develop a framework to address the maintenance of existing trails. In addition, guidance will be provided on when to construct and how to manage new trails, and when to restore seldom used trails.wilderness stock use.

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Wilderness Stewardship Plan



Located in the Sierra Nevada Range in central California, the Yosemite Wilderness encompasses over 704,000 acres and accounts for over 94% of Yosemite National Park. Officially designated by the California Wilderness Act in 1984, the Yosemite Wilderness has long been a place for inspiration, wonder, and discovery.

Purpose and Need

The purpose of this planning effort is to review the management direction in the 1989 Yosemite Wilderness Plan and update it as necessary to better align with contemporary use patterns and National Park Service policy.

In particular, there is a need to examine and refine the existing plan to incorporate new information and understanding about changes in visitor use patterns, methods of managing visitor use, techniques for trail design and construction, and concepts for managing stock in wilderness settings. There is also a need to incorporate new policy direction and definitions for wilderness character into the park's wilderness management framework and

to review the status of potential wilderness additions. Finally, there is a need to determine the extent to which commercial services will be performed in the Yosemite Wilderness.

Once completed, the direction in the revised Wilderness Stewardship Plan will apply visitor, commercial, and administrative use in wilderness. While some site-specific actions may be necessary, the primary focus of the plan will be to provide a framework for measuring and monitoring wilderness character to ensure that future management actions will be taken as needed to adapt to changing conditions.

Public Scoping

Scoping is an important first step in involving the public in this planning effort. During this phase we are sharing a preliminary list of topics we intend to address and asking for your feedback.

As we prepare to revise the 1989 Wilderness Plan, we anticipate the need to address the following management issues: visitor use and capacity, trail management, stock use, and commercial services. We invite you to share your thoughts about these issues, alternative

ways to approach them, and other topics that you believe to be relevant to this plan.

For example:

What do you value about the way in which the National Park Service currently manages the Yosemite Wilderness?

What are the most important issues facing the Yosemite Wilderness today and how should they be addressed?

Potential Management Issues

Visitor Use and Capacity

Changing use patterns (summer and winter), have increased use in certain areas of Yosemite's wilderness leading to social and physical impacts in these locations. The level of use in these popular areas can consume the entire zone capacity, thereby limiting access to more remote locations. This project will consider changes to our current trailhead quota system and/or consider adding new types of quotas to address this situation.

Stock Use

The NPS minimally manages the location, timing, and amount of stock use. Each of these factors affects the amount of impact to soils, vegetation, archeological sites, and meadow fauna. This project will provide a management framework to better and more consistently manage these aspects of wilderness stock use.



Pack stock grazing in Yosemite's high country.



Popular trail through Lyell Canyon.



Backpackers on a guided trip in Yosemite's Wilderness. (Image by Keith Walklet courtesy Yosemite Conservancy)

Get Involved

Share Your Thoughts

Public scoping for this project will extend through January 15, 2016. This is an ideal time for you to share your thoughts, concerns, and vision for the future of the Yosemite Wilderness. Your input will help guide the planning team in revising the park's Wilderness Plan, including the development of alternative approaches for guiding future management. We intend to hold informational scoping meetings in the near future and the venues will be announced soon. We look forward to hearing from you and working with you throughout this planning process. For more information visit:
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Trail Management

Changing travel patterns in the wilderness (on and off trail), are making it harder to effectively and efficiently manage and mitigate the physical impacts of wilderness travel. This project will provide a management framework to address the maintenance of existing trails, when to construct and how to manage new trails, and whether to restore seldom-used trails.

Commercial Services

The Wilderness Act requires that the National Park Service evaluate the need for commercial services within wilderness (i.e. guided hiking, climbing, and stock use). This project will determine an appropriate amount of commercial services in wilderness.

How to Comment

Comment online:

<http://parkplanning.nps.gov/yosewild>

Comment by mail:

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Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment – including your personal identifying information – may be publicly available at any time.