

Wilderness Stewardship Plan: Visitor Capacity

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks
California



National Park Service *Management Policies 2006* defines visitor capacity as “the type and level of visitor use that can be accommodated while sustaining the desired resource and visitor experience conditions in the park.” The Wilderness Act does not have an express requirement to determine or establish visitor capacity. However, *Management Policies 2006* states: “The wilderness management plan will identify desired future conditions, as well as establish indicators [i.e., measures], standards, conditions, and thresholds beyond which management actions will be taken to reduce human impacts on wilderness resources” (6.3.4.2). The Act requires that wilderness be managed “for the use and enjoyment of the American people in such manner as will leave them unimpaired for future use and enjoyment as wilderness, and so as to provide for the protection of these areas, [and] the preservation of their wilderness character. . .”

Desired Conditions related to Visitor Capacity –

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:

- Visitors with diverse backgrounds and capabilities would have opportunities to use and be encouraged to enjoy wilderness.
- Visitors would have opportunities to experience solitude, a state of being alone or feeling remote from society. These opportunities could vary by location and time.
- Visitors would have opportunities to participate in a variety of primitive recreation activities, characterized by non-motorized, non-mechanical travel and reliance on personal skill. Primitive recreation activities would be managed to preserve other wilderness character qualities.
- Visitors would have opportunities to recreate in an unconfined, self-directed manner, subject only to those regulations necessary to preserve wilderness character.

A specific objective related to Visitor Capacity –

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

Visitor-use levels are managed through a variety of controls, primarily trailhead entry quotas, but also including “first camps,” destination camp areas, night limits, party size, and limits on commercial services.

Status Quo (Alternative 1)

Daily trailhead entry quotas were established by the 1986 Backcountry Management Plan and exist at most trailheads managed by the National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service. All overnight wilderness visitors are required to obtain a wilderness permit, year-round, and comply with the trailhead quota. Note that quotas are in place only from late May to late September. There are no day-use permits or quotas.

Average numbers of visitors to the parks’ wilderness (2010-2012) is 23,000, accounting for an average of approximately 111,000 visitor use days (VUDs).

Why take action on visitor capacity?

Visitor capacity, or use level, is established and maintained to ensure that the quantity and mix of recreation and other public uses can be accommodated while sustaining the desired resource conditions and visitor experience — the area’s wilderness character.

Alternatives – Visitor Capacity

Alternative 2 (NPS Preferred): Emphasize Site-Specific Actions to Protect Wilderness	Alternative 3: Emphasize Opportunities for Primitive Recreation	Alternative 4: Emphasize Undeveloped and Noncommercial Recreation	Alternative 5: Emphasize Opportunities for Solitude
Trailhead quotas would remain the same as alternative 1, or be slightly reduced in high-use areas.	Trailhead quotas would be increased by 10% over alternative 1 in some areas.	Daily trailhead quotas would remain the same as alternative 1 or be slightly reduced in highest-use areas. Trailhead quotas in low-use areas would be reduced.	Trailhead quotas would be reduced by 30% from alternative 1 wilderness-wide.
No day-use permits/quotas would be implemented but they may be considered in the future in the most popular areas.	No day-use permits/quotas would be implemented.	Same as alternative 2.	Day-use quotas would be applied in specific areas (e.g., Lakes Trail, Mist Falls, Monarch Lake, and potentially other areas).
Standards would be established for campsite conditions and trail encounters. Conditions would be regularly monitored and, if the standards are exceeded, management would adjust visitor capacity to achieve standards.			
Campsite Condition Standard (WVCM): High - 1000; Moderate -500; Low -250	Campsite Condition Standard (WVCM): High - 1300; Moderate – 650; Low - 325	Campsite Condition Standard (WVCM): High - 950; Moderate – 475; Low - 235	Campsite Condition Standard (WVCM): High - 700; Moderate – 350; Low - 175
Trail Encounter Standard (EPH**): Very High - 45; High - 25; Moderate -15; Low - 6	Trail Encounter Standard (EPH): Very High – 59; High - 33; Moderate - 20; Low - 8	Trail Encounter Standard (EPH): Very High - 43; High - 24; Moderate - 14; Low - 5	Trail Encounter Standard (EPH): Very High - 25; High - 18; Moderate - 11; Low - 4
Maximum VUDs: 134,000	Maximum VUDs: 175,000	Maximum VUDs: 127,000	Maximum VUDs: 93,300

*Weighted Value per Campable Mile (WVCM) is calculated by a formula that includes miles of campable area (which consists of lakeshores and water-course banks) and the numbers and class conditions of existing campsites.

**People Encountered Per Hour (EPH) as measured on select trail segments.

Where can I find more information?

Visitor capacity or quotas are addressed in Elements 1 and 7 in each alternative. Table 46 in chapter 2 includes specific trailhead quotas by alternative. Appendix A includes a full discussion of visitor capacity.

*... to secure for the American people of present and future generations
the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.*

