

Yosemite National Park
Merced River Plan
Outstandingly Remarkable Values Workshop
San Ramon, CA
June 28, 2010

Notes from the question and answer session following a presentation of the *Merced River Comprehensive Management Plan Outstandingly Remarkable Values Report, June 2010*, by park staff. *Italic type* represents NPS responses to questions and comments.

It is remarkable that there are so few people here. Where is NPS in this sequence of public workshops? *This was the second meeting of nine planned. The first occurred in Wawona.*

Are you primarily looking for help in identifying any gaps that may be unknown as this time, things you may have overlooked? *Absolutely.*

With regard to the condition assessment, how much has already been done? How many of the issues may be categorized as sociological, etc.? *Not much work is done yet. Park staff is beginning a cycle of newly-funded studies to address some of the issues related to ORV's. NPS will be using the information that we already have to formulate the "first cut" of the condition assessment.*

Looking at Yosemite Valley, there has been a lot of manipulation to the environment over the past 100 years. Now we need to clarify what these manipulations have done to hydrology, for example.

There is a set of experiences that are relative to social impacts and recreational impacts, but there is a lot that we don't know. We'll be adding to the existing base of knowledge as we move forward.

How did I get on the mailing list for today's meeting? *Have you attended a meeting or a special event in the park in the past?* I have lots of memories about "my river," primarily as a recreational user, and am grateful to be here at this meeting. *Have you ever boated the Wawona section of the river?* Just the Yosemite Valley portion. The approach to the park along Merced River Canyon is a reach that should be experienced by all visitors.

Can you talk about how you got to where you are with this information and what you've done here? How do you reconcile conflicts between the ORV's and other values that may not be represented here? *There are many things that NPS does to support rafting in Yosemite Valley: put-in spots, take-out spots, managing woody debris. These activities cause impacts on natural resources. There is conflict in these aims or interests, so the challenge lies in managing conflict within the planning process; constructively.*

As long as expressed values are being protected and enhanced, other activities can be permitted. Wild and Scenic Rivers do not belong behind velvet ropes. Conflicts will be managed through development of alternatives.

All recreation use has some impacts. What you need to do is define when certain impacts are acceptable and appropriate. There are two words that arise among discussion among members of the Interagency Wild and Scenic Rivers Coordinating Council: balance and conflict.

Tonight's meeting provides an opportunity to provide insight on how these conflicts may be resolved. The process will help us identify and resolve conflict through an open and transparent planning process.

Can you tell us more about the stakeholder process that you have in place and how it will help resolve conflicts and inform the planning process? NPS must get this process "started at the start." Stakeholders will participate in the alternatives development workshops. Can we figure out a way to identify conflicts and work toward solutions in this process? Let's think about ways to bring other voices to the table and how to be more robust in our interactions with stakeholders.

User groups and other representative organizations are contacted through the NEPA process. Federal Advisory Committee Act provides some limitation and guidance.

Since the new plan requires you to look at the impacts of existing development, you need to go back to a certain point to assess impacts. How do you do that? It's a tough assignment. What becomes your baseline? The interdisciplinary (ID) team is responsible for identifying what you know and how things changed, or conditions known at the time of designation. The date of designation "starts the clock" on the mandate to protect and enhance resources. As far as protecting natural resources and values, the obligation may be to look backward before the date of designation, then to consider optimum conditions that relate to ORV's. The court decision on MRP has changed the focus and does not allow the NPS to "grandfather" anything.

There is a range of approaches that one can take in developing strategies for restoration. Visioning exercises and other tools can be used to develop solutions.

We have good historic information, including a map completed by USGS in 1918, superintendent memos and photographs that indicate what conditions looked like 80 to 90 years ago. Integrity of the site is sometimes more important than specific dates because conditions have changed over the course of time. Federal guidelines are also a significant influence in the planning process, e.g., historic and cultural resources.

"Enhance" part of the act allows you to consider different futures and consider how to make things better. The ID team has broad discretion.

What are the applicable laws and policies that help you make decisions or manage resources? *Wild and Scenic Rivers Act, National Environmental Policy Act, NPS Organic Act, National Historic Preservation Act, Endangered Species Act, Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act; 2006 NPS Management Policies, Director's Orders, 1980 General Management Plan for Yosemite National Park (to be amended according to final MRP), the Wilderness Act. In the event of ambiguity or contradictions, the more stringent law will apply.*

It seems as though social issues are the essence of what we are dealing with.

Biological issues also have social, evaluative components that influence the outcome of the planning process.

Archaeological resources are also a significant component to the planning process and satisfying the park's obligations under the law.

Values are diverse over society and diverse over time. Some of the things that people do for recreation have changed over time and some have not.

Are air mattresses allowed on the Merced River? (Yes.) As a participant in historic and scenic tours, I got a different perspective of Yosemite Valley. We live in a world where different things happen to different people and they have a range of reactions, good and bad. Scenery, protection of habitat and history are important to me, but I can live without rafting if I had to. Visitors may be willing to cut back on some of their preferences in order to protect the resources that are important.

How can I provide comments in response to this information? What level of detail would you prefer (graphic or narrative, etc.)? *Anything with a level of detail or specific information is appreciated; anything where you can describe some tangible resources.*

If there are important values that you perceive to be at risk, the information will be appreciated. Anything that is linked to ORV's can help the NPS move forward in defining indicators and standards.

NPS cannot collect sophisticated or detail graphics through the web site, so people are welcome to submit written comments or documents.

There are many intangible activities and values that might be appreciated by park visitors. How can you develop some standards or metrics that measure the intangible qualities that come along with recreational values?

Psychological values have been measured as outcomes in studies of recreational activities and there is a new emphasis in collecting information that helps park managers understand what is measurable and tangible. This information has not been available in the past. These studies are correlated with satisfaction, to a degree.

As a counterpoint, this information is not always so helpful as discussion of values and development of values that help us manage conflict and develop alternatives that are acceptable to those concerned.

Hydroelectric projects provide a model for economic trade-off's, but even when the information is available, the numbers (or scale) are not always so helpful in formulating policy. There are numerous trade-off's to be considered.

The concern is that not all conflicts can be resolved through this process, or weighting one set of values against another.

Collecting quantitative information is the greatest task in sorting out values and conflicts. Tools and techniques have been attached to this task through the social sciences, but this task is not easily done.

NPS values are not so well known to those outside the NPS system. One of the management objectives of the NPS is to bring people into the park and into direct contact with resources and values. It's good to have people with long-term experience involved in this process. How do you weigh the values most appreciated by backpackers, for example, when compared to the commercial values of those who stay at the Ahwahnee Hotel?

Tangible and intangible values and experiences are difficult to separate, but the intangible values are more difficult to track and quantify. We need to be vigilant in identifying intangible values.

There are many recreational users who share concern for natural resources. The recreational experience can be affected when natural resources are degraded.

The sound of the Merced River is another intangible quality to park visitors. People have different priorities and everybody is in a different place, but the river sights and sound provide a common thread among all visitors.

Scenic Vista Management Plan is being developed in the park. Individual judgment plays a big role in guiding policy discussion.

Is soundscape considered part of the Scenic ORV? *Not presently. Why not? It could be included as a value in the plan. One example is the sound of the falls. Experience of the sights and sounds of the river is expressed within the Recreation ORV.*

What is the most comprehensive source of information that is available to people who may want to know more and stay involved?

Commenting on line, through the park planning web site, is the most effective and seamless method of submitting comments. Park planning web site includes an interactive compilation of planning documents, but Yosemite is shifting toward PEPC as the best venue for electronic information.

Closing comments: small audience, but there was a lot of valuable information.