

Yosemite National Park
Merced River Plan
Outstandingly Remarkable Values Workshop
Oakhurst, CA
June 30, 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.

Out of this process will you target a final number for the plan with regard to user capacity? Will there be some sort of implementation plan for the capacities targeted? *When you are looking at a plan you are talking about a range of possibilities. Each alternative is a suite or grouping of possible management actions. Capacities are one piece of the puzzle. The policy actions similarly amount to a suite of "management prescriptions" that can be considered in project alternatives.*

Where on the timeline (which is not provided in the ORV book) can people like us be involved in the discussions that you were just talking about (condition assessment, draft alternatives, etc.)? *Alternatives are published with a reasonable range. There should be a place for each group of people to comment, to be involved. In November, we intend to have workshops that get the public involved in formulating the alternatives, then once the alternatives come out there will be further opportunities to communicate. At that time, NPS will be inviting comments on the draft.*

With respect to the recreation ORV, it seems that this ORV is where battle lines will be drawn. In the report, the educational experiences should be de-emphasized because they seem broader and more formal, while interpretive experiences are less formal. Not every visitor experience needs to be a full-blown Yosemite Institute course.

The report characterizes ORV's as being close to the river. It seems that wilderness areas and wild river segments are quite specific, while some detail is missing in the description of Yosemite Valley. You need to tighten it down and be specific in defining programs in the future.

With regard to the Cultural ORV, there is controversy between Paiute and Miwok tribes and other Native American groups. Acting Superintendent Uberuaga once said there would be an independent study to consider how NPS represents itself or interacts with these groups. If you are representing cultural ORV's, the controversy needs to be disclosed. You have the tribal leader for the Miwok being part of the core team, which could be a flash point for development of the plan, as has been the case in other projects (El Portal sewer).

The park's General Management Plan states that the park is refuge from fragments of suburbia. Should the park include swimming pools and hotel rooms, or more play in the river and dirt experiences? What will characterize the park as a refuge?

The ORV's are not intended to provide specific direction, but planning efforts must become more specific in order to provide appropriate design alternatives. The topics are introduced within the ORV's but the specificity will come later.

Planners and consultants need to put activities on a range or within a spectrum from, for example, wilderness to Disneyland. But not at the ORV level. *There is a tendency to talk about or suggest actions at this point, but that is not really part of establishing the ORV's.*

Park management has recently re-aligned the planning team. We have had discussions and see conflict related to recreation and other areas identified in these questions, but the plan is about making a conscientious choice for the management of the future, so that we manage by design and not by default.

How active will the court be the decision-making process? *The settlement agreement puts an end to the court case, and the settlement agreement outlines some key things that we need to do, which provide us with a framework for the planning process. As long as we meet the conditions of the settlement agreement, the court will not be involved in the planning process, except that we intend to keep the court informed of key milestones.*

Yosemite Valley is fast approaching the crowds and daytime resort level of activity at Grand Canyon National Park. I came to conclusion after an April visit to Yosemite Valley that automobiles have got to go. ORV's are being impacted simply by congestion.

Park managers will have to look at range of alternatives, and some will be on low development, low density side of the spectrum.

Would you be willing to take the e-mail addresses of people to share information about the core team and team construction? This info may be posted on the park's web site, but the web site is not user friendly. If you make changes, you can post information and send e-mail out.

Planning question: what about other plans, e.g. Half Dome Trail Stewardship, that are intended to address user capacity? What is the interaction of other proposed actions with the Merced River Plan, or the impacts half dome capacity on Merced River planning? We don't want to see user capacity numbers for several minor projects being added together to determine the capacity of the whole.

There is a need for caution when suggesting one number for the entire park because the reality is that you have a bunch of different capacity issues throughout the park, overnight capacities, etc. There is unlikely to be a single big number to enforce at the gates. That number might not be where the argument will be for the park. The sub-total numbers all need to fit together, and they may vary based on conditions, but all park management issues will not be served by a single number.

Back to issue of urbanization: during that discussion everybody was talking about the settlement agreement and to what extent is there a need to consult the Ninth Circuit Court of

Appeals ruling as a reality check, especially the famous “Footnote 5” because every development in Yosemite Valley was called into question. But Footnote 5 is not mentioned in the settlement agreement, so has the settlement agreement replaced the opinion of the court?

This question is directly related to ORV’s because the footnote questions the level of urbanization that will be allowed in the park.

There was strong public opposition to the Yosemite Valley Plan, and the rescission of this plan left a lot of things unresolved. Is it the parks intention to put all of those things undone back into the plan? *No, not all. In contrast to the YVP, the Merced River Plan will not be a development plan, but we will have to deal with some of the same issues. We do need to look at the development that exists and ensure that it complements the river values.*

One of the key variables in the Yosemite Valley Plan was the transportation plan. Currently there is strong local opposition to YARTs on the Highway 41 (Wawona Road) corridor, yet there is evidence of NPS collaboration with Fresno to run YARTs along Highway 41 into the park.

As participants, our primary reason for supporting vehicle transportation is the protection of resources. Protection is better preserved by private vehicle access and use. The bigger discussion topic is the park service has removed 300 parking spaces. Not only are there issues with evacuation, but congestion management as well. (Moorehead report, feasibility study report to congress)

I was introduced to Yosemite 30 years ago and my first impression was looking up at the stars through a tent window. Maybe I am biased, but that is what I value, and the experience can be achieved by simply enforcing the laws and guidance that are in place today.

One thing that has become apparent is that by 2012, when this planning effort is settled, is that it isn’t going to go anywhere unless you have a transportation plan. You are going to hit a wall unless somebody gets started on a transportation plan. You can talk about capacity but if you don’t have a place to put people and cars, you don’t have much of a plan.

We have to start somewhere and ask, what is the current situation and what is realistic? If we want to go beyond that we need to develop a more robust and intelligent transportation system, so people know what is going on at the different nodes.

The Transportation Improvement Strategies Report has been mentioned. Is that something you will be doing? Also, I heard you say that you are not going to do a park wide transportation plan, yet it was announced as one component in the scope of the project. So if this is not part of the plan, what is being done? *The next step in the process is to analyze the condition of the ORV’s.*

The east end of Yosemite Valley is heavily impacted by visitor use. How will you distinguish where conditions have been allowed to deteriorate versus what it might have been if it were not allowed to decline in the past? For example, 30 people might use one campsite because

existing capacity rules are not enforced. Diesel buses are allowed to retrieve rafts and people at the “put out” area, and there are deteriorated conditions there. There is a chance that the public will feel that suddenly, they are being unfairly limited by restrictions intended to protect conditions that are the legacy of lax management practices.

The science (visitor impacts) symposium was announced to the public too late in the schedule. What similar opportunities will be provided to allow public interaction with scientists, so we are informed as the process moves along?

There are river people who say the river will do what the river will do but at the science symposium they said there is river restoration now occurring out to Pohono Bridge. How do those efforts impact the planning process? Are you containing the river or letting it flow?

The condition assessment will be a public document. The primary content will be peer reviewed. Public comments will not be invited until a draft document is completed.

There are “tragedy of the commons” situations occurring throughout the river corridor, and when restrictions come they hit some groups more than others, so you will have impacts due to something having not been properly enforced. *There will be a range of alternatives addressing a level of impacts. There are ways to address issues other than restrictions (e.g. build sites that will accommodate more people). The park will need to look at issues of equity too, to see if some groups are hit harder with changes than others.*

Page 21 identifies certain sites for their values. Will there be (or is there) a list of specific sites for the values, and is there a web site provided to share your ideas of the values and where they are best represented in the park? Are we not supposed to put all those ideas, places out on the table before the “prioritization,” or is that impression off base?

Whenever I come to meetings like this, I am flabbergasted. Parking, lodging, housing and wilderness permits work together to limit use. Since 1969, there are things happening in the park which have limited uses that used to be there. The hotel on Glacier Point burned down. Campgrounds washed out. Cabins were removed by Yosemite Lodge. Removing 6,000, or 3,000 parking spots; people say, remove the cars. I’m a photographer and I’m constantly looking for places that are new. I could take you to Bridalveil Fall and take you to places where it is clear that nobody has been. And then I hear comments about how crowded it is, and wonder where people are? People are concerned about congestion. When was the last time you walked to Mirror Lake? Every time I go there I feel wonderful. The east end of Yosemite Valley seems great to me. I don’t know what the complaint is. There are a lot of different people going into the valley and we need places like Ahwahnee or Degnans Café to address the needs of a lot of the people that come to the park.

Air quality is a fact of ORV values and hydrocarbon concerns are everywhere, increasing global warming, so an effective transportation system would be important.

Could you provide a definition of the word “enhance?”