



Addressing Visitor Use and User Capacity

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (WSRA) requires all comprehensive river management plans to address user capacity. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Ninth Circuit has interpreted this to mean that a comprehensive river management plan “must deal with or discuss the maximum number of people that can be received” in the river area, and that the NPS must “adopt specific limits on user capacity” that “describe an actual level of visitor use that will not adversely impact” river values. The Tuolumne River Plan has been developed to be consistent with WSRA and these judicial opinions.

User capacity: What is it and why is it important?

The Wild and Scenic Rivers Act directs managing agencies to develop comprehensive management plans for designated rivers and that these plans must address “user capacities”, defined as the amount and type of visitor and administrative use a river area can sustain while protecting and enhancing its Outstandingly Remarkable Values (ORVs), water quality, and free flowing condition.

In general, planning for and managing visitor use(including addressing user capacity) of a wild and scenic river must take into account what people do, where they do it, how many people can be accommodated, and what effects this use has on the river’s resources and other people’s experiences. It is therefore necessary to define how much change is acceptable while continuing to provide for high-quality recreation experiences and protecting ecological and cultural values.

Managing user capacity requires a variety of management strategies and associated tools. Use limits are one tool that may be appropriate for managing capacity in some situations depending on the management objectives and goals for the area. Where other strategies are effective, limits on visitor use levels may not be necessary.

Setting user capacities can help ensure that visitor use levels and activities are managed to keep impacts within acceptable levels while continuing to protect and enhance river values.

Important Questions

Is user capacity based on science or value judgments?

Both science and value judgment play a role in the development of user capacity. Several parts of the user capacity process involve decisions that include value judgments. While scientific inquiry can tell us a lot about the consequences of different choices, ultimately, science cannot tell us what the “right” choices are.

When determining user capacities, are biological values more important than other factors?

Some suggest that natural areas have biologically-driven user capacities that deserve greater consideration than other values, but the user capacity research indicates that all capacities depend on value judgments. If biological conditions are sensitive to the amount of use, they may be the limiting factor and determine capacity. In other cases the limiting factor for capacities may be some other factor such as transportation circulation, parking, or social conditions at attraction sites and beaches.

Important Questions (contd.)

Isn't there really only one capacity for an area that the plan should work around?

No, user capacities are an outcome of a decision-making process and part of a larger management program. They are the result of a series of judgments in the plan about the desired future for both environmental and experiential conditions. Managing user capacity requires a variety of strategies and tools to effectively protect river values from the kinds and amounts of use that take place in the river corridor. Use limits are one tool that may be appropriate in some situations depending on the management objectives and goals for the area. Where other strategies are effective, limits on visitor use levels may not be necessary. Because the Tuolumne River Plan alternatives employ different management strategies and numbers of campsites, parking spaces, lodging units, etc.; the alternatives can provide for different user capacities while still protecting river values.

Why does the plan have different user capacities in the alternatives? Do they all protect river values?

All of the Tuolumne River Plan alternatives protect river values, but they do so in different ways. User capacities, resource conditions, and infrastructure are foundational elements to the alternatives and changing one has implications for the others. User capacities in the different alternatives show how higher and lower amounts of use fit with infrastructure and other management actions to produce different resource conditions, protecting river values in different ways. These represent choices for the kind of place the Tuolumne River corridor will be and the experiences it will offer visitors in the future. All alternatives protect and enhance river values, as required by WSRA, while offering a reasonable range of choices about the Tuolumne River's future as required by NEPA.

How do I find more detailed information about user capacity in the Tuolumne River Plan?

If you're interested in learning more about user capacity and the proposed changes to camping, lodging, parking and more that were explored in the Tuolumne Wild and Scenic River Draft Comprehensive Management Plan/DEIS, you can begin with Chapter 6 - Visitor Use and User Capacity. This chapter describes the rationale for the development of the proposed management alternatives described in Chapter 7-Alternatives.

How to stay involved

Learn more about this plan, including open house dates and other information on the Tuolumne River Plan website at www.nps.gov/yose/parkmgmt/trp.htm. You can also follow this and other park plans on Facebook at www.facebook.com/YosemiteNPS.

Comment on this draft comprehensive management plan and environmental impact statement by visiting the Tuolumne River Plan Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website at http://parkplanning.nps.gov/trp_deis. Electronic comment submittal through PEPC saves resources and allows for direct entry into the NPS comment analysis system. Alternatively, your comments can be emailed to yose_planning@nps.gov, faxed to 209/379-1294 or mailed to:

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