



Backcountry Office & Permit System Restructuring Proposal July 27, 2011

Introduction

Park management is considering a proposal to improve visitor services by restructuring the park's backcountry reservations and permitting processes as well as assisted backcountry trip planning services. The purpose of this document is to brief park partners, cooperators and stakeholder representatives and to solicit feedback on this proposal.

Background and Scope of Problem

- The park consistently receives complaints about the amount of time and effort it takes for visitors to get a backcountry reservation and/or acquire backcountry planning information. This is a reflection of insufficient staffing for the volume of customers, both call-in and walk-in, requiring reservations and/or trip planning information.
- The park also frequently receives feedback from the public that they desire to see more rangers in the backcountry to address problems such as dogs on trails, and permit and camping violations. This includes overcrowding of backcountry campsites by non-permitted campers. A greater National Park Service presence is also desired in the Backcountry Information Office to provide trip planning services.
- Non-reserved sites currently comprise over half the park's backcountry campsite inventory. Because they are non-reserved, capacities are frequently exceeded, which results in food storage violations, increased wildlife encounters and the need to close campsites to protect visitors and wildlife. When the park needs to close one of these sites, staff must rely on closure signs at permit stations and at the sites themselves to notify campers, but this is not a reliable method of notification. A reliable system of notification is vitally important when closures are due to bears or other safety reasons.

Proposed Solution and Outcomes

1. Contract with Recreation.gov, an online and call-in reservation service, to which customers will have 24/7 access and can print their backcountry permit prior to arriving in the park. Recreation.gov is the official centralized reservation service used by all U.S. Department of Interior and U.S. Forest Service recreational areas offering camping reservation services. These options will reduce the number of reservation calls to the Backcountry Information Office and allow staff to spend more time assisting customers with high-quality trip planning services, both walk-in and by phone. Although park research suggests that 80% of reservations will likely be made online and almost 20% by phone, there will also be an opportunity for customers to obtain reservations or permits on a walk-in basis at the Backcountry Information Office and potentially at one or two other select visitor contact stations in the park.

The reservation system will dramatically increase reservation/permit customer service and ensure customers have greatly improved access to high-quality trip planning information, both through personal contacts and improved on-line planning tools. Customers will be able to make reservations and obtain permits at their convenience.

2. Create a cost recovery fee structure for reservations that will generate revenue to cover both the contractor cost of the reservation system and support an increased National Park Service presence in the Backcountry Information Office and in the park's backcountry.

Although Great Smoky Mountains National Park has been offering free backcountry permits for years, the park is in the minority when compared to other parks with comparable backcountry operations. Most other parks with similar backcountry operations charge between \$10 and \$30 per reservation, and many have additional per person or per person, per night fees. Parks use these fees in support of their backcountry operations programs and, in turn, offer improved services to the public. Similarly, beyond providing access to a more convenient reservation/permitting service, Great Smoky Mountains National Park proposes using these fees to increase ranger presence in the backcountry and improve customer access to trip planning services through the Backcountry Information Office.

Alternative fee structures that would allow the park to meet these objectives include:

- \$10 per reservation + \$5 per person; or,
 - \$10 per reservation + \$2.25 per person per night; or,
 - \$4 per person per night.
3. Require reservations for all backcountry sites. The reservation system will have the capability of notifying reservations holders of site closures, safety issues, or emergency information via phone calls, text messages or emails.

The park will be aware of, and have contact information for, users at each site. The park will be able to reliably contact each reservation holder with timely information about closures, safety issues and other important backcountry information.

By placing all sites on the reservation system and having an increased ranger presence in the backcountry, negative impacts to both the natural environment and to the visitor experience from overcrowding and other conflicts will be reduced.

Conclusion

Implementation of this proposal will result in an improvement to customer service that will make obtaining backcountry reservations quick, easy and convenient for customers, as well as increase their access to Backcountry Information Office personnel for trip planning. Additional rangers in the park's backcountry will improve visitor experience by actively addressing commonly reported backcountry camper concerns.

Additional Information & Comments

- Written comments regarding this proposal may be addressed to the Park Superintendent by August 26th. Comments may be submitted via email to grsmcomments@nps.gov or by mail to Great Smoky Mountains National Park, 107 Park Headquarters Road, Gatlinburg, Tennessee 37738.
- The park will also hold two informational open houses regarding this proposal to which partners, cooperators, stakeholder representatives and the general public are invited.
 - Tuesday, August 16: Old Oconoluftee Visitor Center 5:30 – 7:30 pm.
 - Thursday, August 18: Headquarters Lobby 5:30 – 7:30 pm.