

Ozark

National Scenic Riverways



Superintendent Bill Black

Monday, April 14, 2014

Riverways Reflections

I appreciate the positive feedback I've received about "Riverways Reflections." It is my hope that we can continue to keep the lines of communication open. If you have questions or concerns about the Draft General Management Plan (GMP) or about other things happening at Ozark National Scenic Riverways, I will continue to do my best to provide clear and timely information to address those.

We are still working through the 4,000 comments we received for the Draft GMP. Our goal is to have a final GMP completed later this year, which will include a summary of public comments and our responses. We will be using your comments to develop the final plan. In my last column, I addressed some of the proposals related to horseback riding. This week I want to clear up some confusion about the Wilderness Study that was included with the Draft GMP.

The National Park Service (NPS) is required to study the suitability of lands within the National Park System for preservation as wilderness (by the Wilderness Act of 1964). Wilderness designation means that an area will be managed for solitude and unconfined recreation in a natural, undeveloped setting. The wilderness evaluation was included in this GMP planning process to fulfill the NPS commitment in the 1984 GMP to initiate a formal wilderness study if "conditions precluding legislative wilderness designation change in the future."

The 1984 GMP identified three areas (Cardareva, Upper Jacks Fork, and Big Spring) within the park for assessment of their suitability as wilderness. All three areas were determined to have wilderness characteristics, but land ownership and nonconforming uses made them unsuitable for wilderness designation at that time. Since then, the radio equipment that had been installed on the old fire tower at Big Spring has been removed, which now makes the area eligible for consideration.

The Big Spring Wilderness Study Area is 3,434 acres located south of Big Spring and the Big Spring Lodge and Cabins, and is situated west of Highway Z. The area was part of Big Spring State Park and has been managed by the NPS in much the same way as it was then. It was included in the state park "wildlife refuge" and continues to be managed as a "no hunting" area, in consistency with the former State Park Refuge concept. Wilderness designation does not prohibit future hunting activities in the area, because the decision to allow hunting is independent of wilderness. Currently, there are some hiking trails that pass through the area, but the only roads are essentially just driveways to the fire tower and an old barn, which have been gated for decades and are used only occasionally by NPS personnel.

The NPS preferred alternative would recommend wilderness designation for 3,430 acres within the Big Spring Wilderness Study Area. The remaining four acres would be recommended for potential wilderness addition once the buried utility line is decommissioned. This eligibility assessment and wilderness study may eventually lead to a wilderness proposal from the NPS Director to the Secretary of the Interior, who may then make a recommendation to the President and, finally, Congress. We are required by the Wilderness Act to determine if the area could be a wilderness area, but it is up to the American people and Congress to decide if it should be a wilderness area. Only Congress has the authority to designate federal land as wilderness.

If the area is ever designated as wilderness, the fire tower would be evaluated for historic significance and either maintained or removed. The incinerator, barn, and Civilian Conservation Corp-era camp would be retained. The NPS shooting range would be removed and that area would be restored. Administrative vehicle use of the access roads to the fire tower and barn would be eliminated. The roads could possibly be restored as hiking trails. Aside from that, very little would change from the way the area has been managed for many years.

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Ozark National Scenic Riverways preserves the free-flowing Current and Jacks Fork Rivers, the surrounding natural resources, and the unique cultural heritage of the Ozark people. For more information, visit www.nps.gov/ozar or Facebook.

Comments? Write to:

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Riverways Reflections (*continued*)

There has been some confusion between the “primitive zone” proposed in the Draft GMP and “wilderness”, leading to the misunderstanding that “wilderness” could be established throughout the park. Primitive zones and wilderness have similar management objectives and desired visitor experiences, so that visitors can enjoy solitude and recreation in a natural, undeveloped setting. However, primitive zones are subject to fewer regulatory requirements. For instance, in a wilderness area wildfire suppression would require more consideration for firefighting without the use of motorized or mechanized equipment, unless a special exception is granted. Primitive zones do not have those restrictions.

I hope this helps provide an understanding about why we included the Wilderness Study with the Draft GMP. In my next column, I will discuss the proposals in the Draft GMP related to roads and access points.

For more information about the 1964 Wilderness Act you can visit www.wilderness.org. To learn more about the Big Spring Wilderness proposal, you can read the “Summary of Key Excerpts” from the Draft GMP by visiting the park website at www.nps.gov/ozar and clicking on the link to the Draft General Management Plan.

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