



Visitor Use and Capacity in Wilderness

What is Wilderness?

The Wilderness Act was passed in 1964 and defined wilderness as an area that is “in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape,” and where “the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man...” and as “an area of undeveloped federal land retaining its primeval character and influence...which is protected and managed to preserve its natural conditions and which generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable.”

In 1984 Congress passed the California Wilderness Act. The Act and designated 94% of Yosemite as wilderness and instructed the National Park Service to manage that land in accordance with the provisions of the Wilderness Act. The Act directs the agency to preserve wilderness character and leave wilderness unimpaired while realizing its recreational and other purposes. Wilderness areas within the National Park System are to be managed at the highest possible standard afforded by U.S. land conservation laws, for they have the protection of both the National Park Service Organic Act and the Wilderness Act. The preservation of wilderness character requires purposeful restraint on the part of both managers and visitors.

Visitor Use and Capacity

Managing visitor use and capacity provides a variety of benefits to wilderness. It allows for the opportunity for solitude by keeping trails and camping areas from becoming crowded. It can prevent excessive impacts to campsites, trails, lake shores and stream banks, problems with human waste disposal in the wilderness, and detrimental effects to flora, fauna, and cultural resources. The regulation of visitor use comes at a cost to the unconfined quality of wilderness by requiring visitors to plan ahead to secure permits for popular destinations. The goal of managing use is to protect the wilderness experience while preserving the natural quality of the wilderness, with as little regulatory constraint and administrative intervention as possible.

Visitor Use and Capacity in Yosemite Wilderness

The Yosemite Wilderness is one of the most visited in the country, with many trailhead quotas filled to capacity almost every day of the summer season. Changing use patterns, such as the growing popularity of the John Muir Trail, Pacific Crest Trail, and Half Dome, have resulted in significant increases in demand for some trailheads.

Visitor Use and Capacity in Yosemite Wilderness (cont.)

The Park Service employs a trailhead quota system to manage visitor use levels within wilderness zones. A trailhead quota is the number of visitors allowed to enter the wilderness at a given trailhead. Zone capacity is the maximum number of people allowed within a given area of wilderness. Research in the 1970s determined the current zone capacities based on the number of acres within each zone, miles of trails, desired visitor densities in campsites and along trails, and the sensitivity of the natural environment. The Park Service keeps use levels within capacity for each zone through a trailhead quota system that is based on typical visitor travel and use patterns. The framework allows managers to respond to changing wilderness conditions and use patterns by adjusting quotas as to remain within established capacities.

Current Management Strategies

Yosemite's wilderness permit system is the primary tool for managing visitor use and capacities in the wilderness. It allows visitors to access the wilderness while maintaining an exceptional experience for all overnight users. A portion of the permits are available through a reservation system while some are available on a first-come, first-served basis. Across Yosemite's trailheads, the quotas range from 10-40 persons per day. In addition to quota levels, the park has established group size limits for trails, off-trail travel and stock parties.

Over time, trailhead quotas by themselves proved insufficient to manage to capacity, resulting in the development of new types of quotas. As described below, different types of quotas have been established to allow managers to better manage to capacity and to address unacceptable impacts to wilderness character as they arise. "Trailhead" quotas help establish the number of users entering the trail system from any one point. "Pass-through" quotas allow for a greater number of entries from one particular trailhead while allowing for visitors to pass through a given zone enroute to their final destination. "Exit" quotas allow for the management of multiple zones when popular destinations outside of the wilderness begin to create concentrations of use within the wilderness. "Destination" quotas allow for the more precise management of a particular area.

Potential Management Issues

Changing use patterns (summer and winter), have increased use in certain areas leading to social and physical impacts in these areas. The level of use in these popular areas can also consume the entire zone capacity, thereby limiting access to the more remote locations. The NPS is considering changes to the current trail head quota system to address this problem.

Find out More

Learn more about the Wilderness Stewardship Plan, including public meeting dates and other information by visiting <http://www.nps.gov/yose/getinvolved/wsp.htm>. You can also follow this and other park plans and postings on Facebook at www.facebook.com/YosemiteNPS.

Tell us what you Think

Comment on the Wilderness Stewardship Plan by visiting the Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website at <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/yosewild>. 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 or mailed to:

Superintendent
Yosemite National Park
Attn: Wilderness Stewardship Plan
P.O. Box 577
Yosemite, CA 95389