



Stock Use 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 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.

What is Stock Use?

Riding and packing stock animals has a long history and strong cultural legacy in the Sierra Nevada. Stock was used for early pioneer expeditions, the support of sheep and cattle grazing, U.S. Cavalry Patrols, and Sierra Club expeditions. Using stock is an acceptable non-mechanized and primitive method of traveling in the wilderness and wilderness visitors use horses, mules, llamas and burros to assist them in their explorations along the park’s trails.

Stock Use in Yosemite Wilderness

Stock use in Yosemite National Park includes NPS administrative use, commercial use, and private stock use. The specifics for each of these types of use is explained below. Some of these activities occur as day use and some as overnight use. Not all overnight use employs grazing as a means to feed stock.

NPS administrative use consists primarily of re-supplying trail crew camps on a weekly basis; usually with one pack string per week and additional strings for establishing and removing the camps at the start and end of the season. These trail crew camps vary in number and location from year to year. Other NPS administrative stock use includes ranger patrols, support of scientific research, support of High Sierra Camp utilities and trail clearing operations.

Commercial stock use is provided by businesses that hold Commercial Use Authorizations (CUA’s) and by Yosemite’s concessionaire, currently Delaware North Corporation and starting in 2016, Yosemite Hospitality, LLC. The concessionaire operates the five High Sierra Camps and uses pack strings to supply these camps throughout the summer. Each camp is supplied by anywhere from 2-7 pack strings (6 animals per string) in any given week, with additional strings required for opening and closing of the camps at the start and end of the summer season. The concessionaire also provides camp to camp stock trips.

Stock Use in Yosemite Wilderness (cont.)

The CUA stock operators provide a variety of services to clients. They offer “spot trips” to haul mule loads of gear and food for hikers. They drop gear at a location in the wilderness some distance from the trailhead and then return to the trailhead. These trips usually do not require an overnight stay for the stock operator. “Continuous Hire” stock trips are those where the CUA operator hauls hikers’ gear for the entire duration of the trip, from campsite to campsite. CUA’s also provide full service trips where clients ride horses with a guide and where meals are provided and prepared for the staff.

Private stock use occurs both as day use and overnight use. Overnight use levels are measured through the wilderness permit system. Visitors camping with stock (private or commercial) account for 2% of the total overnight use occurring in the Yosemite wilderness. Day rides into the wilderness generally originate from front country campgrounds in Wawona, Tuolumne and Bridalveil creek. No formal mechanism is currently in place for measuring the level of private stock day use within the park.

Current Management

Stock is allowed on the majority of the designated trails in the Yosemite wilderness and on six non-maintained stock routes (see www.nps.gov/yose/planyourvisit/stock.htm for list of trails closed to stock). Wilderness visitors using stock may camp with their stock within ¼ mile of these trails (or routes) and are subject to the same general camping regulations and restrictions as hikers and backpackers. The group size limit for stock parties is 15 people and 25 head of stock. This limit is reduced to 8 people and 12 head of stock when traveling on the non-maintained stock routes. Administrative use to support wilderness operations may occasionally exceed these limits.

Commercial stock use is currently regulated through the Commercial Use Authorization permit process and the concession contract to establish specific terms and conditions of use. Commercial stock users are subject to the same general restrictions and regulations as private stock users, however they must camp at locations identified as traditionally used stock campsites.

Pack stock grazing as part of a recreational, commercial, or administrative trip is generally allowed in the Yosemite wilderness with the following exception: within 4 miles of a trailhead or paved road, immediately surrounding any High Sierra Camp, and in the Mariposa Grove. Grazing limits have not been established for specific areas, with the exception of Lyell Canyon stock sites and the Merced Lake Ranger Station administrative grazing area. The timing and location of grazing is also regulated in Kerrick Meadows for the protection of the threatened Yosemite Toad and other sensitive resources.

Potential Management Issues

The NPS minimally manages the location, timing, and amount of stock use. Each of these factors affects the amount of impact to soils, vegetation, archaeological sites, and meadow fauna. This plan will develop a framework to better and more consistently manage these aspects of wilderness stock use.

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