



Trails 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.

Wilderness Trails in Yosemite

Visitors have ample opportunities to explore the park’s wilderness via a system of more than 750 miles of maintained trails. Visitors can also choose to travel on unmaintained routes over vast areas of the wilderness where no constructed trails are present. Trails provide access for recreationists and help to concentrate use. Trails have a dual effect on the natural quality of wilderness: the trail itself is an impact, but concentrating use on a single track can prevent impacts from spreading.

Trail History

The Yosemite trail system began with post glacial travel by American Indians following wildlife trails to hunt and trade across the Sierra Nevada. By the 19th century trails were used by miners during the Gold Rush, livestock grazers, and the U.S. Cavalry. Over time, new trails, roads and other developments opened access to Yosemite which led to increased interest and visitation to the area. After Yosemite became a National Park in 1890, the U.S. Army began patrolling and maintaining these routes. Today, park rangers and trail maintenance crews complete these tasks. Today’s trail system in Yosemite reflects the skill and dedication of generations of trail workers. More than 61,000 backpackers and stock users stay overnight in Yosemite’s wilderness annually, totaling about 193,000 use nights a year. Day use levels are estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands annually and expected to increase over time.

Current Management Strategies

In Yosemite, the NPS generally follows the same maintenance standards for all trails in wilderness. Due to the extensive trail networks, heavy use on certain sections of trail, differences in terrain, severe environmental forces, and logistical challenges of reaching remote sites, not all sections of trail can be kept at the same standard each season. The NPS prioritizes trail work in areas with the highest use or most resource protection concerns.

NPS trail work consists of clearing of down or fallen trees from the entire trail system, repair and improvements to problem areas, occasional rerouting of trail segments for resource protection, and rarely, construction of new trails. Much of this work is accomplished by 8-15 person trail crews stationed at temporary camps in the wilderness and resupplied by weekly pack stock trips, and occasionally, by helicopter. The remainder of the work is done by front country crews hiking into job sites each day.

In addition to working on established trails, the NPS has also recently addressed the issue of unofficial, unmaintained social trails. Yosemite has many miles of these “use trails” that have been established by hikers using the same off trail routes to reach mountain peaks, fishing areas, remote campsites, etc. These routes can develop into visible trails, frequently with many branching routes and dead ends. While offering an excellent opportunity to reach places away from the established trail system, these use trails can also cause resource damage. Recently, the NPS has worked on three of the most heavily impacted, longer “use trails” (Mt. Hoffman, Cathedral Peak, and Mt. Dana) and channeled each of them into one improved and stabilized route to avoid greater resource damage. The abandoned sections of these routes have been restored.

Potential Management Issues

Changing travel patterns in the wilderness (on and off trail), are making it more difficult to effectively and efficiently manage and mitigate the physical impacts of wilderness travel. This plan will develop a framework to address the maintenance of existing trails. In addition, guidance will be provided on when to construct and how to manage new trails, and when to restore seldom used trails.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:

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